

VILLAIN 491

Chapter 491: The Witch and the Wounded Star (1)

The atmosphere of war was truly one of a kind.

It resembled an ordeal .. one that only a select group of humans experienced each time.

Some unfortunate souls were dragged into it more than once, while others had enough luck to escape unscathed every time.

The War of Shadows was still in its infancy. Many had yet to grasp the scale of darkness it would cast.

At least... not yet.

From the Empire's side,

the main forces had finally arrived, planting their feet on enemy soil—Ultras Continent.

A force of 70,000 warriors ..an army composed of the finest and fiercest.

An army like that spread across vast land, its spirit blazing high... fueled by people desperate to bring glory to their homeland.

But many of them were nothing more than naïve amateurs, lured by dreams and ambitions that made them believe war was a simple affair.

It was only a matter of time before they crashed headfirst into bitter reality... sooner or later.

Amid the Empire's encampments,

seated atop a tree stump with a small campfire flickering in front of him, Frey often caught glimpses of such soldiers.

People who would likely die without anyone ever knowing they existed.

But he didn't care much. There were very few souls he genuinely wished to see survive.

This was one of the rare moments Frey spent alone since returning to camp.

Most of the time, he remained close to the upper command, discussing his role in the war .. especially now that he occupied the vanguard position.

It wasn't uncommon to find Ghost, Snow, or even Phoenix around him. And when he returned to his tent, which served as his personal quarters, he usually spent time with Sansa ..who rarely left due to her demonic form.

All of that made his solitude feel both rare and cherished.

Frey had always lived alone .. dependent on no one, immersed in isolation.

And in such moments, he often drifted deep into thought, reviewing himself again and again, trying to reach the ideal version of who he should be.

Seated there by the modest campfire,

Lord Starlight looked like a seasoned warrior who had lost his way in endless battles.

No one dared approach him. Many eyes were fixed on him, but only a few had the courage to take the first step.

Yet that didn't apply to the old woman who approached from behind ..her steps light and almost inaudible.

But of course, Frey noticed her. There was no way she could slip past his senses.

"Forgive the intrusion, Lord Starlight... Tell me, would you mind if an old lady joined you?"

Staring at her and listening to her request, Frey naturally recognized her.

An elderly woman who looked to be in her seventies. Her face bore the marks of time .. deep wrinkles but her platinum-blond hair tied in a ponytail and her unique military outfit made her stand out.

Frey guessed her black uniform dated back to a very old era ...signaling that she'd been on the battlefield for quite some time.

The brutal scar cutting across the right side of her face was proof enough.

With a soft smile, Frey made room for her and said:

"Unfortunately, I can't bring myself to say no to you."

Hearing his words, the old woman chuckled and sat down beside him.

"Are you perhaps shy because of the age gap between us? How polite of you, Lord Starlight."

"Frey is enough," he cut in calmly.

She nodded.

"Then call me by my name too .. it's Zenith."

Frey nodded in agreement.

The woman before him was one of the Eight .. those who remained with him until the very end. One of the few who chose to face death by his side.

"So, Zenith... tell me. What brings you here to share my fire?"

Frey asked, seizing the opportunity to learn more about her. He had already decided to study those Eight more deeply ..to understand the pieces he held in his hands.

Her coming to him alone had saved him the trouble.

Zenith sat silently for a moment, gazing into the fire, before she pulled out a fine cigar from her military coat.

"To be honest... I came to see what kind of person you are."

Upon hearing her answer, Frey smiled faintly .. he had already guessed it.

"I assume your head is already full of ideas."

Zenith didn't deny it.

"Of course. You're unlike anyone else. Not even your father... Abraham Starlight."

As soon as she uttered that name, Frey found himself interrupting.

"Did you know my father?"

"That's right," she replied.

"Impressive," Frey said sincerely, giving her his honest praise.

A faint glow lit up his eyes ... he had already guessed the level of power this old woman possessed.

Her aura was at least SS-.

Her strength was not something to take lightly.

And Zenith hadn't bothered to hide it from the start.

"At times, you feel like a radiant star sent to revive an age of miracles...

At others, you seem like a wounded beast thirsting to spill as much blood as possible on the battlefield.

Sometimes, I even sense a strange hunger for death within you... a hunger that makes you want to kill others .. and eventually, yourself."

Hearing Zenith's strange assessment, Frey let out a dry laugh.

"You've got the strangest ideas about me, Zenith... but some of what you said is true."

Frey offered a vague reply, leaving her to wonder which part she had gotten right.

But Zenith didn't seem bothered.

With a light snap of her fingers, a small spark of blue electricity danced in her hand, softly illuminating her worn face.

"My name is Zenith. Just Zenith. I have no title, no one to claim me, Lord Frey... I'm a woman who's already lost everything. Everyone dear to me is dead, and all I have left is emptiness."

"They all died... while I somehow survived through all these long years. To be honest, I no longer know why I even keep fighting."

Gently extinguishing the spark, Zenith turned her gaze back to Frey.

"Lord Frey, I'm sure you're wondering why I've chosen to fight this war at your side so willingly.

Let me be clear .. I don't have a reason. I have nothing left to lose. And that's what makes me useful to you."

"An SS- class witch, with no ambition, no desires... just an empty vessel looking for a fitting end."

With a cold smile, she stared at Frey.

For some reason... his gaze had locked onto the gruesome scar carved across her face.

"And for that reason, I feel like I might find what I'm looking for by following you into this war... Lord Frey."

Zenith ..

A witch who left nothing behind but corpses.

A soldier who had spent most of her life drifting from one battlefield to another, appearing when war broke out, disappearing quietly once it ended.

You could sometimes find her wandering through the alleys of the capital, or through the larger cities ... sometimes even the smallest villages ... drifting without purpose.

She rejected people. She had already lost too many.

In Frey's eyes, she looked like a woman carrying the weight of all those dead souls, continuing to live in their place.

Maybe all she really wanted was to die.

To die in a way that would make those who'd gone before her proud of the way she ended.

That was why she chose to follow him .. because death always followed Lord Starlight wherever he went.

Understanding all of this, Frey... in some way, saw himself in the old woman sitting beside him.

She was just like him .. burdened by the weight of lives that were lost for their sake.

She had lost her right to die a long time ago. Now all that remained was a worn-out body searching for the right place to fall.

Chapter 492: The Witch and the Wounded Star (2)

Zenith was not weak. In fact, she had been a fierce presence during the first battle in the Demon Sea.

Frey would most definitely benefit from having her at his side.

He knew she wouldn't hesitate to throw away her life for the right cause.

That didn't seem right .. taking advantage of a broken woman like her.

But Frey didn't see it that way.

"Then let's give death a story worth writing in its records, Zenith."

He didn't try to stop her.

He didn't try to convince her to keep living.

That wasn't his role.

The only thing he could offer was a path to fight fiercely .. until the day life left her and she finally attained the death she longed for.

At the very least, her tale would be one worth remembering... if she followed him. That much was certain.

Zenith accepted his words with silent satisfaction.

He had given her exactly what she wanted to hear.

"I look forward to fighting by your side, Lord Frey."

"Then we're looking forward to the same thing."

After reaching their unspoken agreement, the two of them laughed quietly, sharing a moment of conversation.

The entire exchange seemed unnatural, considering the vast difference in age between them.

And yet, they understood one another perfectly .. more than either expected.

Without even realizing it, Zenith found herself talking far more than usual, sharing stories from her long life.

Frey listened patiently and intently, learning more and more about the witch who had decided to serve under his command.

Zenith would no doubt become his personal spellcaster .. his weapon against those who stood in his way.

That was why he gave her such attention, deepening his understanding of her.

It raised his affection score in her system significantly.

Then, just as Zenith was about to launch into another story from her distant past, they were interrupted..

A group of knights approached without warning, cutting through the silence of the camp.

It wasn't hard to guess who they were here for.

Every one of them had their eyes locked squarely on Frey ... and he, Lord Starlight, understood it instantly.

"Gentlemen, what do I owe the pleasure of your visit for... to bring such threatening auras with you?"

Frey asked with a calm voice, as the knight at the front stepped forward to speak.

He looked like a seasoned warrior, framed by a broad figure and a chiseled physique that radiated strength.

"Frey Starlight, we've heard many strange rumors about you ..

Rumors of miracles... unbelievable miracles."

"Forgive our insolence, but we wish to see those miracles for ourselves.

That is why I, on behalf of my men, challenge you to a friendly duel."

Studying them with a single sharp glance, Frey quickly assessed their power.

They were six warriors in total...most of them likely duelists or spearmen.

Their leader was the strongest among them. He seemed to have only recently broken into S-rank.

That probably explained his overconfidence .. the reason he dared to request a duel.

The old woman, Zenith, was about to rise from her seat and burn them alive...

But Frey stopped her at the last second, his smile widening.

"Very well. Let's do it.

Come at me ..all of you. At once."

A strange silence fell over the camp.

The six knights exchanged glances, struggling to believe what they had just heard.

One against six?

It had to be either pure arrogance... or terrifying confidence.

But a single look into Frey Starlight's eyes was enough to silence any doubt.

He wasn't joking.

"Come on. I'd like to finish this before my fire grows cold."

He rose from the tree stump slowly, like a man waking from a nap ..

not someone about to face six of the Empire's finest warriors.

His steps were calm, deliberate.

With each pace forward, the pressure around him thickened ..an invisible weight choking the air.

It felt like an unseen blade was slicing through the space around him.

One of the knights instinctively took a step back.

But their leader raised a hand and gave the order:

"Full assault. Don't give him a chance to control the field!"

At his command, the six surged forward at once ..

their bodies flickering with speed, their auras flaring like compressed flames.

A spear.

A sword.

Dual blades.

A heavy axe.

A coiling whip...

Each weapon launched with one shared goal:

To shatter the myth of Frey Starlight before it could begin.

But what happened next flipped that notion on its head.

In the blink of an eye, Frey vanished from sight.

A burst of compressed air echoed through the field ...

and the first knight found himself hurled into the sky before even realizing he'd been struck.

"One."

Frey's voice was calm as he appeared behind the second opponent.

A sharp roundhouse kick crushed the man's ribs, sending him crashing into the axe-wielder ..

both of them falling in a tangled heap of steel and limbs.

"Three."

Time itself seemed to slow.

Frey moved through their attacks like he was reading a script ..

his eyes tracking every shift, every intent, countering them a heartbeat before they even happened.

He stopped the twin-sword wielder's strike with a palm thrust,

releasing a compressed aura burst that knocked the man back as if a tempest had erupted point-blank in his chest.

"Four."

Only two remained.

The whip-wielder and the commander.

The first hesitated, while the other lunged in with a sweeping strike of his whip—

its dark brown aura twisting like a venomous serpent aiming for Frey's neck.

But it found nothing.

"Behind you."

Frey's voice came from directly behind.

The man turned ..

only to catch a glimpse of Frey's face before collapsing, unconscious, to the ground.

"Five."

Now only the commander remained.

He hadn't moved once from the beginning.

His grip tightened on the shaft of his spear, his eyes narrowing,

and the aura around his body began to thicken with intensity.

"I knew you weren't just a rumor."

He spoke softly,

then planted the spear into the ground and activated his combat stance.

His aura turned crimson ..

and with each breath, his body radiated waves of searing heat.

"Flame Sky Style... First Phase."

Frey didn't flinch.

Even when the commander split the ground open with a molten slash—

Frey simply twisted his torso slightly, letting the attack pass within inches without touching him.

And then ..

In a flash no one could track,

he appeared right in front of him.

"Six."

One word.

Then Frey's fist sank into the commander's stomach with incomprehensible force,

driving the air from his lungs and lifting his body at an awkward angle...

The man crashed down, barely conscious, gasping to stay awake.

Frey didn't pursue.

He stood still, calmly adjusted his coat, and began walking back to his seat beside Zenith, who had been watching the entire fight with a subtle gleam of amusement in her eyes.

"Apologies for the delay. Where were we?"

He sat back down ..

as the broken bodies of six elite knights lay scattered around him.

Chapter 493: This Is Not the Boy You Once Knew (1)

"Apologies for the delay. Now, where were we?"

Frey said that to Zenith as he calmly sat down beside her, having just taken down six of the Empire's finest warriors in mere seconds ..barehanded.

Zenith was impressed by the display, but not surprised.

She had already seen what Frey was capable of.

His effortless victory was expected.

What the old witch didn't anticipate, however, was what happened next.

Just as Frey turned back to resume his conversation, they found themselves suddenly surrounded.

Dozens of knights ..both men and women .. appeared seemingly out of nowhere, their threatening auras unmistakably brimming with eagerness for battle.

"What's the meaning of this?"

Frey asked, glancing over the large crowd that had gathered around him.

One after another, the requests came flooding in:

"Lord Starlight! Allow me the honor of dueling you!"

"Me too!"

"Wait! I asked first—get in line!"

"Fight me, Frey Starlight!"

Challenge after challenge rained down, so many that Frey couldn't even make sense of what was happening.

Zenith, seated beside him, couldn't help but burst into laughter at the absurdity of the situation.

"Seems like everyone was curious about you, Lord Frey. And the moment they saw that fight, they all pounced at once."

Ever since the strange rumors had begun spreading about him .. his feats, his alleged miracles, even comparisons to Abraham Starlight ..countless eyes had been locked onto Frey.

Yet none had dared take the first step.

But the moment those six earlier challengers broke the barrier, the rest wasted no time in seizing the chance to test the man whose blade was said to be godlike.

Realizing this, Frey sighed in frustration.

"I'm supposed to be the one watching you fight so I can evaluate your strength, Zenith... not the other way around."

Hearing that, Zenith slowly leaned away and pulled out another luxurious cigar, lighting it with amusement in her eyes.

"Unfortunately, you'll have to wait for my debut until the next real battle.

For now, they're all yours, Lord Frey."

Seeing her deliberately distance herself to avoid being dragged in, Frey stood up again with an annoyed huff.

"What a dependable subordinate you are..."

Turning back toward the soldiers who had come for him, Frey briefly considered his options.

Should he just release a wave of killing intent alongside his aura and scare them all off in one blast?

He was confident it would work.

But he quickly abandoned the idea.

He had other plans for the Empire's soldiers, and if he pushed too hard now, it might backfire later.

So, with a resigned sigh, he stepped forward ..

and stood calmly in the center of the crowd.

"Gentlemen, you came seeking a duel, and that is what you shall receive.

Come at me, one by one ..don't hold back.

Fight me with the intent to kill, not to spar."

He declared as he assumed a relaxed stance ..full of gaps and openings .. without even summoning the blades he was famous for.

It left many in the crowd wondering if he was even taking them seriously.

Clearly, he wasn't.

And that offended quite a few.

The first to step forward was a towering soldier with a massive greatsword resting on his shoulder.

He had long black hair, a muscular frame, and a giant scar running across his chest and neck.

He looked like a true battle-hardened warrior.

"Frey Starlight... I know there's no smoke without fire in this world.

If the rumors say you're strong, then you must have something to back it up."

He wasn't the Champion of the Victoriad for nothing .. many had already witnessed his feats.

Gripping his greatsword, the seasoned warrior stepped forward.

"My name is Davos of House Sunlight. Allow me to test the strength that makes you stand so casually in front of me!"

With that bold declaration, Davos lunged forward at a shocking speed ..surprising some, considering his massive build.

Swinging his sword in a powerful vertical arc, he aimed straight for Frey's head .. intending to cleave him in two.

The strike was incredibly fast, and out of nowhere, his blade ignited with flames,

turning the attack into a blazing catastrophe meant to erase Frey from existence.

But Frey barely needed any effort to see it coming.

At the very last second, he shifted his body to the right by mere centimeters,

letting the flaming greatsword crash into the ground where he had just stood.

Seeing his blade miss its mark, Davos gathered his strength to attack again ..

Only to find he couldn't move his weapon.

Trying to pull the sword free, he realized ..

Frey was stepping on it.

Just one foot ..casually pressing down on the blade.

Davos pulled with all his might, veins bulging across his muscled arms,

but no matter how hard he tried, the sword didn't budge.

He had lost a contest of raw strength...

to a lean young man who wasn't even trying, merely resting his weight lazily on one leg.

What stung Davos most wasn't just the power .. it was that Frey hadn't even taken him seriously.

"Davos of House Sunlight... you place too much trust in your physical strength.

And that puts you in a terrible spot when your opponent is stronger than you."

Frey said as he moved for the first time since the duel began.

And with that motion ..

Davos suddenly saw the world flip upside down.

He was slammed into the earth with a single blow.

"Find your true weapon, Davos.

This world is full of monsters far beyond what brute strength alone can overcome."

Frey ended the match with those words,

as Davos remained sprawled motionless on the ground.

He hadn't even seen the last strike coming.

It wasn't a duel . it was a one-sided demonstration of power.

With his arm raised over his face, hiding it from view, Davos slowly stood up and dragged his greatsword away.

"Thank you for the match, Lord Starlight."

He said it quietly, but it was loud enough for everyone to hear in the silence that followed the earlier display.

Frey, on the other hand, simply nodded indifferently and announced:

"Next."

Sure enough, a second challenger stepped forward ..a swift assassin specialized in speed and precision strikes.

But Frey brought him down easily—with a single blow, once again.

"Your stealth technique is useless once I've already sensed your presence.

Hiding your aura isn't enough.

Stealth extends to your breathing, your heartbeat, and every sound your body makes."

Frey ended the second duel with another piece of advice, then raised his voice again.

"Next!"

And so it continued ..

duel after duel, challenger after challenger.

Dozens upon dozens of soldiers stepped forward to face the young prodigy who had stirred their curiosity.

Frey faced every kind of warrior,

but not a single one lasted more than ten seconds against him.

He was terrifying ..a true martial artist of the highest caliber.

It seemed like no matter what kind of opponent or situation he was placed in,

Frey adapted flawlessly.

Unbeknownst to them, his Shadow Adaptation ability was at work ..

and one by one, the soldiers began to see him in a completely different light.

Slowly, cheers began to erupt across the training grounds.

The area was no longer filled with dozens, but hundreds of soldiers, all watching in awe.

Bit by bit, the atmosphere shifted.

They no longer challenged Frey to shatter his legend,

or to test his strength out of skepticism.

They fought him simply because they wanted the honor of standing before a great warrior ..

to see how far they could push themselves.

Frey ended every duel with advice.

And strangely, those small insights always seemed to be the missing piece in the challengers' combat styles.

The nineteen-year-old looked less like a peer...

and more like an ancient master who had lived for centuries,

versed in every combat style under the sun.

It didn't make sense.

But Frey was called a miracle for a reason.

And miracles were never meant to make sense.

His knowledge came from more than just experience ..

it came from countless life-or-death battles, and from the insight he'd inherited through the Nameless Mask.

Lord Starlight had far exceeded their expectations.

And that's why the crowd kept growing...

more and more filled the grounds, eager to watch, eager to learn.

Hours passed ..one after another.

So much time went by that Zenith had already left, leaving Frey to face the endless stream of challengers alone.

But contrary to what one might expect,

laughter began to fill the air.

The soldiers were enjoying themselves, cheering every time Frey brought down another opponent with effortless grace.

And before he even realized it...

Frey had just defeated challenger number one thousand.

Chapter 494: This Is Not the Boy You Once Knew (2)

The clock now read 4:00 AM.

It had been four hours since the first "friendly" duel began.

And for the first time,

Frey felt a faint burn in the muscles of his arms .. just a touch of strain.

'It seems I'm starting to grow weary.'

He sighed, turning toward the crowd that still surrounded him.

Despite all the time that had passed,

the number of spectators hadn't decreased in the slightest.

Which made sense.

There were over seventy thousand soldiers stationed at the camp.

But Frey saw no point in continuing this any further.

"That's enough for today, everyone.

The next one will be the last."

He announced with finality.

The crowd instantly erupted into protest.

"Huh? Why?!"

"Wait! My turn's still far off! I've been waiting forever!"

"Please, Lord Starlight .. we need your insight!"

One after another, they pleaded,

and Frey frowned reflexively.

'Are these really the Empire's strongest soldiers?

Because it feels like I'm surrounded by a bunch of kids.'

He didn't understand it.

But what Frey didn't realize was that he had already earned their admiration.

He hadn't seen himself fight.

He didn't know how mesmerizing his combat style looked to others.

Thanks to Shadow Adaptation, Frey had become immune to most combat styles in the world ..

especially now that he had nearly mastered the first phase of the ability.

He might still struggle against truly complex techniques, but the soldiers before him were far too basic.

Dealing with them had been effortless.

Despite their insistence, Frey had already made up his mind.

"One last duel."

One more match, then this was over.

Because if he gave in to their demands now, he'd be here until sunrise.

Faced with his firm stance, the soldiers could only accept it.

One duel remained ..

and the lucky challenger was just about to step into the ring...

But at the last moment,

someone unexpected stepped forward,

his voice ringing out loud and clear:

"Would you allow me the honor, Lord Starlight?"

It was a voice most had never heard before .. but to Frey... it felt familiar.

The surrounding soldiers turned in frustration, wondering who this arrogant newcomer was that dared to cut in.

And then they saw him.

His presence alone ..along with the escorts that flanked him ..caused the air around them to grow colder.

A stunning young man stood there ..

with long, sky-blue hair, a light beard that hinted at maturity, and a body that radiated crushing pressure.

He had arrived.

Many recognized him instantly ..he was one of the commanders selected to lead the Empire's massive army.

All eyes were now fixed on him ..and on the entourage that followed.

He hadn't come alone. Dozens of beautiful women accompanied him.

Frey showed little reaction, but it was clear from the look in his eyes—

He wasn't pleased to see this man.

"Frost Moonlight..."

The current Lord of House Moonlight, accompanied by several sons and daughters of his bloodline.

Beside him walked Seris Moonlight as well.

It seemed the Church had restored her severed arm.

Unlike Frost ..who had refused such intervention and continued to live with one arm since the tragedy that struck House Moonlight two years ago.

Seris looked far more stunning than she once had ..

maturity now graced her features.

"It's been a while, Frey... I see you're still as radiant as ever."

She initiated the conversation herself ..

something highly uncharacteristic of her.

Frey responded with a calm smile.

"I'm nothing compared to you. Your beauty alone has stolen the spotlight from me."

He motioned toward the soldiers whose jaws had collectively dropped at the sight of her.

He realized he was no longer the star of the show.

The soldiers instantly caught on that he was referring to them, and many of them straightened up awkwardly ..

prompting a round of unexpected laughter from both Frost and Seris.

House Moonlight, once known for its icy detachment, suddenly seemed... warmer.

That surprised Frey more than anything.

Turning his attention back to Frost—who had been staring at him since the beginning—Frey finally gave his answer.

"I don't mind dueling you, Lord Frost.

But the decision isn't mine to make ..it belongs to the soldier whose turn you're trying to steal."

Frey gestured toward a middle-aged man standing in line ..a commoner with no known background ..

a man who had been waiting patiently for his long-awaited chance to face him.

If Frost wanted to fight Frey,

he would have to ask that man for permission.

Frey had no intention of yielding ..

even to the lord of a great noble house.

It might have seemed disrespectful,

but Frey didn't care much for titles or noble lineage.

Surprisingly, his words didn't provoke any offense from Lord Frost Moonlight.

Instead, the man nodded with a faint smile and walked straight up to the waiting soldier.

Then, without hesitation, he bowed his head.

"Forgive me, brave warrior.

Would you allow me to take this duel in your place?

Do me this favor, and I will never forget your kindness."

Frost's words ..his tone ..his humility in addressing a mere foot soldier...

left the crowd stunned.

Even Frey's expression shifted slightly.

The arrogant lord of noble blood ..Frost Moonlight ..bowing to a nameless commoner?

Frey never imagined he'd witness such a thing in his lifetime.

The only ones who didn't look surprised were Frost's family members.

They had known for a long time that something inside him had changed.

With her eyes closed, Seris nodded softly,

a satisfied smile on her face at her cousin's gesture.

As for the soldier, he could only nod repeatedly in flustered agreement,

still overwhelmed by the situation.

"Thank you."

Frost expressed his gratitude before turning back to face Frey.

"Will this do, Frey Starlight?"

He asked, meeting his eyes.

Frey nodded and gestured for him to step forward.

"Then let's begin, Lord Frost Moonlight."

Frost returned the gesture with solemn weight ..

then took his first step into the arena.

"You won't be able to beat him."

Those were the words Seris spoke as he passed by her.

Frost didn't deny it.

He simply kept walking... with a soft smile.

"I know."

He knew very well ..

The Frey standing before him now...

was nothing like the reckless boy he had once faced two years ago.

Back then, Frey had been immature. Powerless. Insignificant.

But now... when he looked into those black eyes, deep and hollow like an abyss ..

Frost realized he was facing a monster.

A beast powerful enough to shake the world.

"Come to me... Spear of Ice—Reimshard."

Summoning his radiant weapon, Frost's body erupted with a terrifying aura of frozen power ..

so cold that the air around them began to freeze over.

The current Lord of House Moonlight had become far stronger than before.

Frey could sense it clearly ..

his opponent's strength had reached the peak of S+ class.

He had climbed two full ranks since their last encounter.

Facing an opponent unleashing his full might, Frey raised his hand as well.

"Come to me... Demon-Slayer—Dark Sister."

Gripping the black katana in his right hand,

Frey responded to Frost's freezing aura with one of his own ..

then pointed the blade toward him.

"Let's begin."

Chapter 495: The Distance Between Us

"Let's begin," Frey said bluntly, summoning the Demon-Slayer—Dark Sister—and assuming his usual relaxed stance, one riddled with openings.

Yet, despite Frey declaring the start of the duel, Frost didn't move.

He stood there, still as ice, almost as if he were waiting for something.

"Aren't you going to use your other sword? If I'm not mistaken... you fight with two."

Frost asked calmly, noting the absence of the sword Frey had used against him in the past.

"Ah... you mean Balerion."

Frey scratched his hair with his free hand, then leaned lazily on his blade.

"Apologies, Frost. It's not that I'm underestimating you, truly ..

I just don't see a need to use it against you."

He paused for a second, as the two locked eyes ..

cold mist beginning to spread between them.

"Dark Sister will be enough."

As those words left his lips, the air around them grew tenser.

The soldiers surrounding the field stared in silence, sensing a strange, suffocating pressure taking hold of the arena.

Frost showed no emotion. He simply nodded.

"Understood."

That's what he said.

But the sharp glint in his eyes told a completely different story.

No matter how much Frey denied it,

he had clearly just looked down on him.

Fighting with one sword instead of two ..it was like saying he could defeat Frost using only half of his strength.

And his casual, lazy stance?

It looked like he wasn't even taking the fight seriously at all.

His posture was full of weak points, as if he were begging Frost to strike.

But the Lord of House Moonlight wasn't a fool.

He knew better—he knew it was a trap. Appearances could be deceiving.

'What I want to know is... how big is the gap between us?'

That was what Frost was thinking.

He had survived by sheer luck when he was once imprisoned inside the prison Cube alongside Maekar Valerion.

That experience had stolen more than two years of his life.

Before that, he had devoted himself to training ..

Especially since the incident involving his father ..

Since that day, Frost had worked relentlessly to grow stronger ..

day and night, without rest.

That drive had allowed him to leap two entire ranks in a relatively short time.

He truly was talented.

But the one standing before him now wasn't merely talented ..

He was a monster.

A prodigy beyond comprehension.

A miracle that appears only once in a century.

Frost wanted to measure that distance ..

the distance between himself... and the man called Frey Starlight.

And so—without warning—

Frost launched forward, shattering the ground beneath his feet as he surged ahead faster than the speed of sound.

The sheer force of his movement created a sonic boom that exploded through the air ..

and in less than a second, he was in front of Frey.

Wielding his great spear, Reimshard,

he thrust with blinding speed, aiming straight for Frey's face.

But Frey bent backward at the last moment.. dodging the strike by a hair's breadth.

Frost immediately vanished from sight .. reappearing behind him.

This time, he didn't stop at a single attack ,

he unleashed a torrent of spear strikes.

So fast, it looked like he was wielding dozens of spears instead of just one.

On the other side, Frey dodged everything with terrifying precision,

his body glowing with a deep, violet aura.

"All you're doing is running from my spear."

Frost said coldly as he channeled his aura into the weapon, Causing the air around it to freeze over.

"Fight me seriously!"

He thrust again.

But this time... the spear unleashed a monstrous blast of frost,

a massive attack that threatened to engulf Frey entirely.

Frey stared at the incoming wave ..then at the soldiers standing behind him.

They had gathered around the arena to spectate ..

which meant that if he dodged, they would be caught in the blast.

'I can evade this... but if I do, they'll get hit.'

With a bitter smile, Frey realized what was happening.

'So you did it on purpose, huh...'

Fully aware of Frost's intent,

Frey's blade ignited with a surge of shadowy aura.

Then without warning .. his hand moved like a living creature, with intelligence of its own, slashing dozens—no, hundreds—of times in less than a second.

He intercepted the icy blast with ease ..

shattering it into harmless shards of frost.

But just as he neutralized the attack ..

Frost appeared right in front of him again, using the previous explosion as cover.

His spear .. now massively enlarged by his freezing aura looked less like a weapon and more like a missile made of ice.

Frey raised Dark Sister and blocked.

Metal struck metal.

The resulting clash created a high-pitched shockwave so intense

it made the surrounding soldiers clutch their ears in pain.

Frost didn't relent .. he continued attacking without pause, While Frey remained on the defensive, parrying each strike effortlessly.

Both of them became streaks of light, dashing across the arena.

Their battle was so fast and brutal

that the sparks from every weapon clash erupted like wildfire across the field.

Frost was giving it everything he had—

it was safe to say he was fighting at full power.

As for Frey...

He remained on the defensive, calmly deflecting the relentless onslaught of spear strikes.

For a few brief seconds ..

Frey's face showed something rare:

Surprise.

Inside those abyss-like black eyes of his,

everything was moving in slow motion.

What the soldiers couldn't see... what they couldn't even feel... Frey saw clearly.

His enhanced senses could pick up on the subtlest details ..

they had been sharpened long ago to exceed all natural limits.

Still watching Frost's spear, Frey continued to block his attacks.

"Heavy."

That was Frey's thought as he took on the full force behind the current Lord of House Moonlight's strikes.

Frost's spear was heavy.

Powerful.

The young lord had nearly perfected his spear style.

There were no wasted movements.

His control was impeccable.

Though Frey had parried every strike, he could feel the weight behind them with perfect clarity.

While Frost panted, fatigue beginning to creep in, Frey kept watching him a little longer ..

then stepped back lightly.

He glanced down at his sword, then toward the opponent standing across from him on the battlefield...

And finally spoke.

"Frost Moonlight... I'll admit this much:

There was a time in your life where you gave more effort than anyone else.

I can't begin to imagine how many hours you poured into refining your spear."

The level Frost had achieved was one many warriors would willingly give their lives to attain.

And Frost had reached it in barely two years.

His talent was undeniable.

Frey's sincere words made Frost's eyes widen for a moment ..

before he gripped his spear tighter and scowled.

"Are you praising me now, Lord Starlight?

Or insulting me? I honestly can't tell."

He asked through gritted teeth.

Frey answered instantly.

"The first one.

I truly admire the distance you've traveled, and the level you've reached."

Frey was being genuine ..

but Frost didn't like what he heard.

"I don't want praise from you, Frey Starlight.

Especially not from you.

You're the very monster who makes all this effort I've put in... all this progress I've made... feel meaningless."

Who was he lying to, really?

After everything he had done ..

all the training, the sacrifices, the progress...

He still hadn't touched Frey once.

While Frost gasped for air,

Frey hadn't shown the slightest change since the duel began.

He had blocked everything ..

making all of Frost's efforts seem like a child's attempt to scratch a wall of steel.

And now here he was...

praising him.

Praising what, exactly?

"This is the level I've reached after doing nothing but train since the last time we fought.

I... the one they called a prodigy..."

Frost's voice grew bitter.

"But compared to you... I'm starting to wonder if I even deserve that title."

He had trained in the best environment possible, received the finest resources the Empire had to offer, and been mentored by the greatest warriors from every corner of the land.

He was the Lord of House Moonlight—blessed with status, privilege, and opportunity.

He had spared no effort.

And yet the man before him had already surpassed him .. by a terrifying margin.

If Frost was talented...

then what was Frey Starlight?

While Frost mocked himself, Frey's expression darkened.

And for the first time since the duel began...

Frey took his first step toward his opponent.

Up until now, he had only defended.

"You've misunderstood, Frost Moonlight."

The moment Frey moved, A sinister pressure exploded from him ..

The full weight of his SSS-rank aura.

An overwhelming force crushed down on the entire battlefield ..

soldiers all around collapsed to their knees, unable to withstand it.

Even Frost could barely stay standing, his face frozen in horror as he stared at Frey.

Frey Starlight looked like a completely different person.

"This power you see before you...

is not something I attained through training alone."

Chapter 496: A Glimpse of the Abyss

A man could dedicate his entire life to training if he wished.

But there are realms of strength that no amount of training could ever reach.

If training were enough,

everyone would become a legend in their time.

"This strength...

is the result of everything I've endured.

Every life-and-death battle I've faced, every collision I've survived,

every ounce of pain, and all the suffering I've borne."

The life Frey Starlight had lived was anything but easy.

The fate he had been forced to carry.

The tragedies he had been thrown into.

All of it...

had shaped the Frey who stood here now.

Those abyss-black eyes of his had seen too much.

Far too much.

He had only lived for three years in this body with full awareness.

But in those three years ..

he had experienced more than most would in a lifetime.

"This... is not a level you reach through training alone, Frost Moonlight."

Frey declared, pressing forward ..

his aura alone forcing Frost backward.

Frost couldn't bear it anymore.

He launched himself at Frey, losing control.. desperate to fight, to prove something.

But Frey was behind him before he even realized it.

And in the next instant ..

dozens of deep, surgical cuts appeared across Frost's arm ..

the one holding his spear.

Wounds that could've been fatal ..

if Frey hadn't deliberately held back.

He had cut just enough .. to make Frost drop his weapon, unable to hold it any longer.

The sound of the great spear clattering to the ground echoed across the arena.

Moments later, its wielder collapsed as well.

Falling to his knees before Frey.

Frey stood over him ..

Dark Sister held at his cheek.

"Thank you for the match."

That's all Frey said before withdrawing his aura and stepping away ..

bringing the spectacle to an end.

Everyone instinctively made way for him as he passed, still shaken by the overwhelming power they had just witnessed.

Seeing the aftermath of what he'd done, Frey sighed with mild irritation...

And just as he was about to leave,

he saw Seris Moonlight standing in his path.

It was almost laughable ..

of all directions he could've chosen to leave from, it just so happened to be the same spot where Seris had been watching the duel.

As he passed his former Temple companion, Frey muttered an apology under his breath.

"Sorry... I might've gone a little too far."

It had been a duel, after all.

But Frost was still the head of a noble house. There had been no need to humiliate him.

Yet Seris shook her head.

"It's fine. It was necessary."

She saw it from a different angle ..

as a vital lesson for Frost's growth.

Something essential if he were to truly be worthy of leading House Moonlight in the future.

With a rare smile, Seris looked ahead with newfound clarity.

"Your current level is... astonishing.

You looked like a true warrior ..like a living legend whose history is still being written before our eyes.

If you don't mind... may I have the honor of dueling you next time?"

Frey was caught off guard by the sudden praise and request.

The Ice Princess ..the famously emotionless girl often likened to a lifeless doll .. was showing a side of herself that felt fully alive.

It was as if, at long last, Seris had begun allowing her true feelings to surface.

And as she did,

Frey found her... breathtaking.

His eyes then drifted downward...

falling on Seris's restored arm.

She wore a black military uniform bearing the sigil of House Moonlight.

And despite the long sleeves, a portion of her right forearm was visible ..revealing a strange, intricate tattoo.

A frost-marked symbol, icy flowers etched like thorned vines crawling across her pale skin.

Seeing that design, Frey's smile deepened as he walked past her.

"It's an honor to witness your growth with my own eyes, Seris...

But I'd prefer to stand beside you on the battlefield...

destroying our enemies .. rather than face you as one."

Frey declined politely as he passed her.

Seris nodded without complaint.

"Then I'll see you on the battlefield, Frey Starlight."

With that brief exchange, the two of them nodded and passed by one another.

After all those years,

there was no longer any bitterness between them.

Both had moved past what once was ..

and looked forward to what could be.

For the first time...

fighting side by side felt like a real possibility.

At least for Seris, who didn't hesitate to show Frey her back.

Frey Starlight had changed.

From the arrogant young lord he once was...

to someone mysterious and unreadable...

then the cursed champion of the Victoriad...

and now ..

the miracle-bringer.

It was only natural for her perception of him to change after all that.

And as these thoughts passed through her mind, they walked shoulder to shoulder .. each going in a different direction.

But then...

At the exact moment they brushed past each other ..

A strange phenomenon erupted from nowhere.

From Frey's shoulder, a violet spark shot out.

A bizarre bolt of electricity slithered like a serpent .. leaping from Frey...

and striking straight into Seris Moonlight's body.

She froze in place the moment it touched her ..

her entire being trembling as the world around her flipped upside down.

It felt like someone had torn her from her reality...

and thrown her into a completely different one.

A dark one.

A reality that sent shivers down her spine.

She was no longer surrounded by soldiers.

No longer in the camp she'd just been standing in.

She now stood in a battlefield ..

a vision of carnage unlike anything she had ever seen.

Flames raged across the land.

Flames blood-red and crimson,

as if even fire itself had been tainted by the amount of blood spilled.

And when she turned around ..

She saw him.

The man responsible for it all.

He stood behind the chaos ..

a figure wearing a strange black mask, surrounded by a bizarre group of individuals.

They looked like his followers ..

and they stared at him with devotion.

A cursed gathering, led by one man who made her very soul tremble.

And when she looked closely...

he was familiar.

That white hair...

those features...

There was no mistaking it.

It was Frey.

The same man she had just spoken to only moments ago.

But... what had happened?

What was she seeing now?

Where even was she?

Seris tried to move ..

to react, to scream, to blink .

But her body wouldn't respond.

This masked Frey wasn't the man she knew.

She didn't know him intimately ..

but even she could tell this... this wasn't the same person.

And yet, for some reason,

she couldn't look away.

Then suddenly ..he turned toward her.

Their eyes met ..

and he reached his hand toward her.

A hand soaked in blood,

a hand that had caused all of this destruction...

And yet... strangely...

Seris found herself reaching back.

Taking that hand without hesitation.

In that moment,

she realized ..

She, too, was no longer the same person.

And just like that ..

The world flipped again.

And Seris returned to reality ..

as Frey passed by her, silently walking away.

At that moment, she turned toward him immediately, shock etched across her face from the horror of what she had just seen.

Her hand reached out, instinctively ..

trying to stop him.

But before she could take a single step in his direction ..

A sharp voice echoed in her mind.

"Do not move. Take one more step and you'll regret it."

It was the voice of a woman . old, gentle...

yet cold and commanding.

Seris obeyed instantly.

She didn't dare go against it.

"My Lady... what just happened?

What did I just see?

And what does it have to do with Frey?!"

She asked, bewildered.

Silence followed ..

until the strange, thorned tattoos along her arm began to faintly glow.

"I do not know what that was...

But something foreign invaded your body just now.

A force born from that young man."

The voice spoke again, clearly referring to Frey.

"That power... I've never seen anything like it."

An aura... ominous.

And deeply unnatural.

"Even someone of your level couldn't identify it...?"

Seris was stunned by what she heard.

Even her Lady... couldn't see through Frey.

"Stay away from that boy, Seris...

Whatever lies inside him is not something that should be awakened."

The voice was firm. Final.

Seris slowly nodded, unwilling to defy the command.

She cast one last look toward Frey's back as he walked away.

She couldn't stop thinking about the vision ..

about how he had looked in that twisted reality.

What exactly had she seen?

Seris had no answer.

But the future...

would give her one.

Chapter 497: Path of Blood (1)

— Frey Starlight's POV —

Slowly, the morning sun rose, marking the cursed beginning of a new day.

In the continent of the Ultras, it was rare for one to catch a breath of fresh air, with death and desolation having long consumed the land.

But here, on the shores of the Demonic Sea, the air was still almost the same... causing me to inhale deeply without meaning to.

A refreshing winter breeze filled my lungs to the brim.

I had already distanced myself from the gathering of soldiers and was heading toward the tent that now served as my temporary home.

I had spent far too long sparring with them barehanded, to the point where my muscles started to feel slightly fatigued. It wasn't anything serious ..just a dull, lingering ache from throwing punches nonstop. But still, it was annoying.

If this was enough to wear me out, it only meant one thing.

I still had a long way to go.

Today, the army would begin its advance again, and the main assault on the continent of the Ultras would commence. In other words... the real war was about to begin. Naturally, I'd been chosen to lead the vanguard.

That meant I'd be on the move today, and before that happened, I had only a few short hours to rest.

Silently, I stepped into my tent.

It was quiet inside—bare, really—just my gear and a wooden bed I rarely used.

Standing still, I spread out my aura to scan the area out of caution, but sensed nothing.

"...Sansa didn't come today."

Or perhaps she came earlier and didn't find me here.

A shame, really.

We didn't even get to spend the final night together before the next battle began.

With only a few hours remaining, and complete solitude surrounding me, I figured this was the perfect time... to sharpen my awareness.

Sitting on the edge of my bed, I reached inside my garments and pulled out a certain item.

Without warning, I placed the Nameless Mask over my face and closed my eyes, allowing it to pull me inward .. into that surreal, imaginary world housed within.

The reality around me twisted upside down in an instant.

When I opened my eyes again... I was already standing in that bizarre library space.

This place no longer felt strange to me ..I'd spent enough time here during my early training.

So, with steady steps, I ignored the chaos of books strewn all around the ground and headed straight to the second floor without delay.

That floor wasn't much better.

Unlike the early days when every book was neatly aligned, practically begging to be read, the place was now a disaster zone.

And honestly... I was the reason.

At some point, I'd grown tired of returning books to their place and began tossing them aside once I finished them.

I did it so often that it became a habit. I never bothered organizing this damned imaginary space.

So, like always, I made my way to the middle of the pile I'd last been reading and picked up the last book I touched:

"Path of Blood."

Seated among the clutter, I resumed reading .. diving deeper into the twisted training methods of that man.

Nameless.

The warrior who built his legacy through the burial of countless souls.

In order to create the ability that shattered the very limits of the world—the power that defied the laws of life and death—he had to study every form of life this world held.

He slaughtered every race imaginable and conducted sickening experiments on them, one after another, until he attained enough knowledge to understand their origin... and essence.

That maddening obsession drove him to kill more than anyone else... to sow more destruction than anyone else.

A monster among monsters, Nameless was the only one truly worthy of the title "Death."

If death itself had a king in this world, it would be him—without a doubt.

In any case, even though his main goal had been to break the cycle of life and death, what Nameless accomplished had other... unintended side effects.

Additional results that only amplified his power further .. pushing him to a level where he could challenge beings like Agaroth.

This was what came to be known as the Path of Blood.

A unique method of training that Nameless discovered and refined over countless years on the battlefield.

By walking this twisted and dark path, Nameless found a way to grow stronger with every life he took.

The more he killed... the more his hands were soaked in blood... the more his power surged.

In other words, he didn't just gain combat experience from each battle.

He ascended to higher realms every single time he fought.

A sickening method of training .. one fitting only for a beast like him.

And here I am... following in his footsteps, continuing down the very same path.

The path that drowns you in blood, in death... in endless, savage killing.

Yet, even as I say this, what I've achieved so far is nothing but a drop in the ocean compared to what Nameless accomplished.

Since the start of the war, I've killed a total of 27,000 Ultras soldiers.

Before that, I wiped out thousands of Nightmare Creatures in the eastern territories.

But in the end, those numbers are meaningless. Tiny, insignificant... compared to the legacy Nameless left behind.

I found myself laughing unconsciously as I continued reading about the Path of Blood and that nameless monster's past.

I've killed so many .. humans and beasts alike and as a result... I'm starting to feel like I can't breathe anymore.

I've hidden it well until now, but these stains of blood... the crimson marks that won't wash off my body...

They've grown too numerous.

And now... it feels like I'm sinking into this red swamp .. one I might never crawl out of.

I've killed many...

And I'm still ready to kill far more than that .. all for the sake of power.

The overwhelming strength I needed to achieve my goal... I was willing to go much, much further to obtain it.

But somewhere along the way, I began to lose myself.

My sword started craving it...

Blood. Death.

My body, my soul, my very existence... became incomplete unless I was on the battlefield.

That bloody smile .. it would form on my face without me even realizing... whenever I was about to slaughter my enemies.

Today, I'm returning to the battlefield.

That thought alone made my body tremble .. not from fear... but anticipation.

I've become someone who craves the battlefield... someone who welcomes war.

I...

"I'm slowly losing myself..."

It's only been eight months... and already, I've reached this state.

I reached it after killing what now feels like a mere handful of people. And because of that, I couldn't help but wonder...

"What... exactly are you, Nameless?"

How did he kill so many... so many souls...

Innocent or guilty, it didn't matter.

How did he stay sane all those years... drenched in death and bloodshed?

"Was it because you felt nothing? Were you always that heartless monster from the beginning?"

Gazing upward... toward the library's upper floors, I asked:

"Answer me, Nameless."

Chapter 498: Path of Blood (2)

My voice echoed across this cosmic library .. but as expected...

No answer came.

So, with a long sigh, I returned to reading the book in my hands.

The Path of Blood demands countless sacrifices...

I need to kill more... and more enemies. I need to spill their blood until it forms rivers.

Only then will my body evolve on its own and ascend to new heights... far faster than any normal method could ever offer.

Nameless once used that very method to push himself to the peak of the SSS-rank.

It's astounding how he surpassed every stage of that rank this way.

There are seven stages within the SSS-rank, listed as follows:

1. Throne Beyond Existence

The first and hardest stage. It's considered the ceiling most can never break through.

2. Pulse of Chaos

The stage where raw power begins spiraling out of control, far beyond one's limits. Reaching this stage often results in gaining entirely new abilities... abilities that transcend human comprehension.

3. Origin Revelation

A mysterious stage where one reaches the full potential of their race. It's an anomalous phase .. one that varies from species to species. Because each race holds unique traits, it's impossible to predict what kind of power a person might awaken upon reaching this level.

4. Aura Boil

A stage that affects one's aura specifically.

To put it simply — SSS-ranked warriors wield an aura fundamentally different from all other beings.

Their aura is exponentially more powerful than the norm.

It erupts with volatile, boiling force. The way it functions is akin to the concept of literal boiling .. making every attack they unleash feel like something from another world entirely.

...

As I read these details — most of which were still new to me — I began to understand just how far away I truly was...

From the power I sought.

I hadn't even reached the bare minimum required to attempt stepping onto this path.

And the biggest issue?

The books I'd read so far only detailed the first four stages.

As for the fifth, sixth, and seventh... I knew nothing beyond the names I'd once scribbled onto a piece of paper, back when I was still just an author.

An author... who lived his life inside a fantasy.

"I really believed I was the one who created this world..."

But the deeper I dove into these books .. into the long history of this world .. the more I realized...

I was nothing but a single piece within this vast universe.

All that prior knowledge I had... the story I once wrote...

They were nothing more than coincidences.

Easily explainable in a dozen different ways.

I wouldn't even be surprised if the Engineer had a hand in it all.

To be honest, that sounded like the most logical scenario to me.

But then... when I think like that, I can't help but remember what Agaroth — the Demon King — once said to me, during our very first meeting.

"My creator... the one who made me."

That's what he said.

The great Demon King claimed that I was the one who made him.

His words... completely contradict everything I've been trying to convince myself of.

Was Agaroth lying?

Was he just trying to manipulate me?

For some reason...

I didn't feel like he was the type to say such things lightly.

He didn't strike me as someone who would lie just for the sake of it.

Closing the book in my hands, I laid back on the library's white floor and stared up at the countless floors above...

"Which one is true? I wonder..."

Closing my eyes, I sank deeper and deeper... into the void of my consciousness.

I still know so little .. about myself, and about this world I now live in.

Am I merely a vessel for some cosmic being far greater than I can comprehend?

Or am I... something else entirely?

What is it that the Engineer truly wants from me?

And what did Agaroth desire?

I had no answer to any of these questions.

So I rose once more, preparing to leave this imaginary space.

"There's nothing I can do but keep moving forward."

I won't lose. I won't fall again.

I made that vow to myself long ago ..

The next time I'm defeated will be the day I die.

And that's a fate I cannot allow.

So I'll keep moving forward, no matter how much I change...

No matter how drenched these hands become in blood...

I will never stop ..

Not until I kill all of my enemies.

...

...

...

The long-awaited day had finally come.

The day the Empire would launch its first campaign on the continent of the Ultras.

The atmosphere was thunderous. Morale had reached its peak as an army of 70,000 soldiers prepared to march.

To lead such a force, the Empire had entrusted several seasoned veterans with command.

Foremost among them was the current Lord of House Sunlight ...

The old warrior, Iris Sunlight.

Both Ser Allon and Aegon Valerion had granted him full authority over the army, placing their faith in his decades of experience.

By his side stood his brother, Gal Varion, as well as Raphael Bloodmader, commander of the Vanguard, and the Grand Warden himself ..Oliver Khan.. who had joined the war effort personally.

These four were the direct commanders of the army.

Each of them led a designated number of elite warriors under their command.

Among them, Bloodmader retained command over the special Vanguard forces, the very first to engage the enemy.

Those forces were divided into squads ..

Each assigned to powerful warriors who were granted the title of "General" in this war.

Among them stood Phoenix Sunlight.

But what drew the most attention...

Were the two squads placed under the command of young men who hadn't even reached the age of twenty.

One squad was led by Snow Lionheart—

And among his ranks marched the Saintess Yurasha herself.

The other followed the modern miracle ..

Frey Starlight.

It was he who requested to be the very first to face the enemy head-on.

Was it courage?

Or was the Dark Star of House Starlight simply insane?

Frey Starlight's squad consisted of one thousand soldiers, including eight elite warriors from the previous vanguard who had chosen to follow him.

Most notably ..

Sansa Valerion and Ghost Umbra had joined him of their own free will.

And so had someone else.

As Frey donned his armor, a figure approached him in the ceremonial robes of a battle priestess..

Her radiant blonde hair glowing more brilliantly than ever.

It was Uriel.

Chapter 499: Path of Blood (3)

Frey greeted her with a smile.

"Uriel. I didn't expect you to join me. Shouldn't the Saintess be chasing after the prophesied hero?" he asked.

Uriel nodded.

"You're not wrong. The Saintess does follow the hero...

And that's exactly what Yurasha is doing.

There's no need for two saintesses, so I chose this side instead."

"I see," Frey nodded, walking alongside her toward the army's front lines.

"Your presence will be a great support for the troops. Just stay behind me and try to keep up."

His words made Uriel blink, surprised by his strange demeanor.

"Frey... am I imagining it, or are you actually excited?"

That eerie grin carved across Frey's face didn't seem natural..

And he himself appeared unaware of it.

Trying to adjust his expression, he offered a soft apology.

"Sorry. That was... unseemly of me."

Uriel quickly waved her hands.

"Not at all. No need to apologize ..

It's only natural for warriors to fight for those they love."

She tried to justify his behavior with kindness.

But Frey chuckled bitterly.

"You're right.

Still, I didn't want to show you that side of me.

You've been avoiding me lately because of it... haven't you?"

His words made her face twist in visible surprise, Before transforming into something else .. A quiet confusion.

'Was I the only one who saw it...?'

Uriel had genuinely believed that Frey shared the same strange vision.

She'd been waiting for the right moment to talk to him about it.

It had taken her time to overcome the fear that gripped her heart—

After all, she'd seen herself die by his hand.

But it seemed...

He hadn't even realized it.

Which made her question what kind of power it truly was.

Still ..

There was no time to dwell on that now.

Clearing this misunderstanding was her priority.

"...That's not why I was avoiding you," she said.

Frey raised an eyebrow.

He truly believed Uriel had grown to hate his bloodlust.

"If that's not the reason...

Then why?" he asked, genuinely curious.

But Uriel shook her head.

"I can't talk about it here.

If you're willing, after our next battle...

Please give me a little of your time.

I'll tell you everything then."

Uriel had already made up her mind to tell him everything.

She saw no point in keeping it to herself anymore.

But she couldn't bring it up here, not in the midst of the army. They were about to march into enemy territory, and Frey was their commander. She couldn't pull him aside.. all they could do was wait.

"After the battle, then."

Frey's smile deepened.

"Then we both have to survive. Is this your way of asking me to protect you, Uriel?"

Frey misunderstood again, which made Uriel part her lips, trying to clarify ... but he suddenly burst out laughing, cutting her off.

"No need to make that face, I'm only teasing. Besides... I was planning to do that anyway."

There was no need for her to ask .. he simply wouldn't let her die.

Frey was direct like that, and Uriel found herself at a loss for words.

In moments like this, he felt like the older one .. not the other way around.

The Saint Candidate lowered her head, seemingly lost in her own thoughts, eyes drifting to the shadows spreading beneath her feet.

That darkness reminded her of something.

"Will that demon girl be joining us?"

Frey turned to her, following her gaze to the shadows below.

"You mean Sansa? Yes, she's with us as we speak."

It wasn't easy to sense Sansa's presence, but Frey had no trouble with it.

Seeing Uriel's grim expression, Frey sighed, well aware of her deep hatred for demons.

"Sansa is an ally. And someone dear to me... Uriel, I want you to trust her."

It was a rare request coming from Frey, but Uriel gave no reply. And he didn't push her. He already knew her past.

Still, he wanted to plant the seed — perhaps one day, Uriel could come to accept the demon who walked among them.

Frey and Uriel couldn't talk much longer. The noise of marching soldiers, the thunder of war drums, and the trembling earth beneath them drowned out everything else.

As Iris Sunlight ignited the air with a rousing speech, the troops roared in unison, ready to launch the first assault of this war.

Unfortunately, Frey paid the old man's speech little attention and missed it entirely...

His focus was drawn entirely to what stood ahead of him.

As he looked toward what was coming, Frey was caught off guard by the approach of a large figure from the right flank.

A towering man, scarred and rugged, with reddish-brown hair tucked beneath a dented helmet.

A massive greatsword was strapped to his back, and his merciless eyes gleamed with something unsettling.

"You..."

Frey recognized him immediately.

One of the eight who had chosen to follow Frey to the bitter end.

"So you still remember me. I'm honored... Lord Starlight."

With a grim, gravelly voice that made many avoid him instinctively, the man introduced himself.

"My name is Morval Nox. A lone mercenary who's spent his life wandering through warzones."

A twisted smile curled across Morval's face .. one eerily similar to Frey's own.

"Morval, huh? That's quite the bloodlust radiating from your body..."

Hearing that, Morval let out a loud, guttural laugh.

"Isn't it obvious, Lord Starlight? That's precisely why I chose to follow you."

"Oh? And how so?" Frey asked, though he already had a feeling.

"I won't lie to you, Lord Starlight..."

I'm here to kill. I want to tear and spill the blood of as many people as I can. I've spent my whole life drifting from battlefield to battlefield for that reason alone."

Morval looked exhilarated. It was clear he wasn't a normal human being.

He was... wrong — in a way that made him love the act of carving through flesh.

"By your side, Lord Starlight, I feel I'll finally be able to satisfy that hunger .. the hunger for slaughter."

Morval laughed again, so loudly and violently that the soldiers around him instinctively stepped farther away.

He was already infamous.

Not a warrior who fought for kin or country .. but a mad butcher who found his purpose in carnage and ruin.

There, and only there, could he be his true self.

One could argue he was more wicked than the Ultras themselves...

He had a dark history.

Frey knew all this .. and yet, he showed no disapproval.

In fact, he welcomed it.

"Excellent, Morval Knox. Then prepare to stain your hands in blood... because we won't be sparing anyone."

With that, he moved to the frontlines and surged forward.

Moments later, the first assault force scorched its way into enemy soil .. under his lead and no one else's.

The scouts and assassins had already returned, and Frey now knew the position of many of his enemies.

And he had made up his mind:

He would kill them all .. to the very last one.

Chapter 500: Intervention of Faith

The world was undergoing many upheavals.

Soon, kings would clash, and all cards would be revealed.

The war that pitted humans against humans had, ironically, drawn the attention of all powers. And now, at this very moment...

It had become impossible to predict what might happen in this war that had yet to truly begin.

The War of Darkness.

...

...

...

The Holy Island — Sicily —

A paradise for the church's followers, blinded by their faith for far too long...

It truly was a heaven on earth, a miracle where a waterfall descended straight from the sky, nourishing its land and people with divine grace.

Since the return of Ser Alonne and his surprise assault on the central cathedral, the Church's activity had diminished drastically .. to the point where it now seemed entirely subordinate to the Empire.

The capture of both High Bishop Michael Platini and Ramiel Calestis inside Beatrice's prison cube had only worsened the situation.

Church followers were everywhere ..in noble houses, in major guilds.

It was an entity with roots so deeply embedded that it had long been considered the cornerstone of the Empire's very foundation.

Their complete submission to the returned Emperor from beyond the grave—Ser Alone—was something few had foreseen.

And now, with the War of Shadows begun, the Church had dispatched its most powerful asset: Saint Eurasha, marching to battle alongside their chosen Hero.

One could say the faction loyal to the Lord of Light had shown their true allegiance to the Empire they belonged to.

Especially against their one sworn enemy—the Ultras.

The Church's desire to annihilate the filthy demon-worshippers surpassed all else. Cleansing the world of their schemes had become their holy mission.

That much was undeniably true, but...

Were the Ultras truly the only enemy?

The truth ran far deeper than most imagined.

On the sacred grounds of Sicily,

a group of men carved their way across the holy land, heading toward a place that few had ever dared to approach.

Led by the Three High Bishops, they moved swiftly, accompanied by a select unit of elite ranks from within the Church.

Their destination was the base of that magnificent waterfall descending from the sky.

At the head of the group walked High Bishop Blatter, the aged man who had guided the Church for decades.

"Any news from the war?"

he asked, his face void of emotion. The man to his right responded:

It was Ramiel KmCalestis, the youngest and only black-haired High Bishop among the three.

"According to the reports, the first clash occurred today. Although the main armies have yet to mobilize, the vanguard fought a difficult battle. One could say the current situation favors the Empire."

Hearing this, Blatter gave a silent nod.

"The Hero is among the vanguard. There's no room for defeat .. The Lord of Light would never allow His chosen to die on this earth."

Besides that, Saint Eurasha was with him. And in this world, very few could hope to kill her.

"We've sent many forces alongside the Hero and the Saint. Things remain stable for now, and the Royal Family hasn't requested further reinforcements—but the likelihood of them summoning us personally in the future is high..."

This time it was the man on the left who spoke ..High Bishop Michael Platini, also known as the Church's Executioner.

His harsh expression and severe gaze had long made him the least liked among the Bishops.

Staring at Blatter, he brought up a critical point.

"The Royal Family believes they have us under control. And that's fine—this situation works in our favor."

As he said this, Blatter came to a halt, having finally reached their destination...

The base of the miraculous waterfall that split the skies.

"The Iron Emperor is extremely dangerous. I never expected him to attack us alone upon his return. That old man places absolute faith in his strength..."

Ser Alone was but a single man, yet his power and experience were vast ..enough that even Platyr hadn't dared to oppose him openly.

"But even he... failed to discover this place, despite standing so very close."

With a sinister smile that didn't match his noble aura, Blatter and his team advanced toward the waterfall.

As they stepped forward with unwavering confidence, their bodies glowed with the brilliance of Holy Aura ..light so bright it illuminated the path ahead.

Then, without warning, something inexplicable occurred.

Blatter and those with him had entered the waterfall from one side...

But they never emerged from the other.

It was as if the waterfall had swallowed them whole.

Yet the truth was far more bizarre.

The land their feet touched was still—undeniably—part of Holy Sicily.

And yet, at the same time...

It was not.

Beyond the waterfall, the island's terrain remained the same .. but the atmosphere was completely different.

The sky in that place was pitch-black, adorned with stars that shone like lanterns overhead.

Even though, moments ago, it had been bright daylight on the other side...

This hidden realm was blessed in ways the outer world was not.

The greenery and nature asserted their dominance in breathtaking beauty.

The earth itself pulsed with aura,

and the very air they breathed made everyone who set foot there feel...

As if they had been reborn.

On this forsaken side of the world, there wasn't much to speak of...

Only lush greenery and a few scattered structures ..temples erected in honor of the so-called gods worshipped by the Church's devout.

Before Blatter and his entourage, another group appeared, every one of them clad in pure white from head to toe...

Elderly men, women, and old priests ..their eyes brimming with unwavering faith.

All of them bowed respectfully before Platyr and his companions.

"We welcome the High Bishop to the Land of Eternal Night... Nocthera."

The sealed land that only a chosen few had ever been allowed to enter.

The secret the Church had hidden for centuries.

Blatter gave a nod as his deep eyes examined the sacred grounds.

"Is the angel ready?"

He asked the question that truly mattered—the reason he had taken the risk of entering this place.

The old man standing at the front of the welcoming crowd smiled deeply, eyes still shut, and nodded.

"Give the order, Blatter... and our greatest weapon will march at your command."

"Excellent."

Platyr replied as he ventured deeper into the Land of Eternal Night alongside those white-robed strangers.

"The War of Darkness has begun. The Ultras and the Empire will destroy each other."

In a war of this magnitude, both sides would reveal their full arsenal. No one would hold back their trump cards.

They would clash with everything they had, and though there would surely be a victor, that was of little concern.

"The Starlight family has sent its most elite forces to the front lines, with that monster Frey Starlight at their helm. The Imperial family is conserving its strength for the Masters of the Ultras. Sooner or later, both will suffer devastating losses."

As all eyes turned toward the continent of the Ultras, and the war reached its boiling point, no one could imagine what was quietly unfolding on the other side of the world.

"The time has come."