

VILLAIN 511

Chapter 511: The Nameless Slaughterfield (2)

It didn't take long for the world to hear the news and realize what had happened.

As a result, all major factions began moving accordingly.

To the Empire, it was the birth of a miracle.

To the Ultras... it was a curse unleashed upon them.

A curse of Abraham Starlight's caliber.

Frey entered the war with one thousand elite warriors. In the end, only seven remained .. including him.

Yet those one thousand managed to obliterate the entire vanguard force of the Ultras—more than 30,000 soldiers, along with 10,000 nightmare beasts.

And if one counted the earlier losses at the Bay of Shizclar...

The Ultras had already lost over 50,000 troops.

An enormous loss. A catastrophic blow.

And so, all the major figures of the Ultras gathered in a single place.

Inside a grand chamber built for kings, the true ruling power of the Ultras held a summit unlike any before.

At the center stood Mergo, Lord of the Dark Hive, commanding everyone's attention.

Clearing his throat, he spoke with the relaxed tone of an old drunken man.

"Gentlemen, thank you for answering the call."

His words were mostly directed at Beatrice, who stood elegantly with her arms crossed, and Dragoth, the beast seated calmly behind her.

"We've gathered today in response to the complete annihilation of our vanguard at the Bay of Shizclar."

Mergo sighed with genuine irritation—only to be interrupted by Beatrice, who arrived using one of her dolls.

A beautiful puppet with flowing black hair, pale white skin, and bright green eyes... a mischievous smile gracing her face.

Tilting her head, she calmly said:

“So what? Everything that’s happened is still within expectations. The vanguard was meant to die there.”

The moment she said that, the pressure in the air grew abnormally heavy.

Its source? Dragoth.

He stared at her in silence from across the hall, his eyes slaughtering her a hundred times over—but he did not move.

Standing beside him, Gavid Lindman made sure Dragoth didn’t act recklessly. Even if Dragoth had grown more composed since his return, the madness was still there.

Whatever had happened to him during his long imprisonment in the Empire remained a mystery—one even he couldn’t recall—but it left its mark.

Due to the nature of their pact, Gavid couldn't allow Beatrice to die.

He had to keep Dragoth in check.

Mergo quickly stepped in to close the matter.

"I know this was within our expectations. But it happened far sooner than we planned. And more importantly—the Empire suffered no losses."

The vanguard was supposed to inflict massive damage on the Empire and hold their position longer.

Yet despite their overwhelming numbers, they achieved next to nothing.

"A variable has appeared .. one we didn't anticipate," said Mergo.

To which Beatrice replied with a smirk:

"Frey Starlight, correct?"

Mergo nodded. And Gavid confirmed.

“We can’t allow him to continue growing. If he does, he’ll become an obstacle to our greater plan.”

Frey Starlight had already shown power rivaling the top of the SS+ tier.

His explosive and rapid growth wasn’t natural—it was insane.

All of them could feel it...

If left unchecked, he might evolve into something far beyond their comprehension.

“He must die in the next battle,” Gavid Lindman declared.

At that moment, Dragoth stood.

“Abraham’s son...”

Clenching his fist, his eyes glowing blood-red, he finally moved.

“I’ll handle him myself.”

And so .. without warning ..the true power of the Ultras decided to step onto the battlefield.

They seemed determined to repay the debt.

Faced with such unwavering resolve, Beatrice could only sigh and shake her head in pity, somewhat impressed by their ignorance.

“Frey Starlight...”

She whispered his name with a faint smile, her fingers toying in the air.

“There’s no need to worry about him... he’s already fallen.”

The witch chuckled softly as she turned to leave, abandoning the others in complete ignorance of what her words truly meant.

...

...

...

At the same time as the Ultras' gathering...

Something strange was occurring—on the Empire's side.

Inside a sealed room that now served as his cell...

One person sat hunched over on his bed, his body trembling uncontrollably.

Frey Starlight ..the miracle-born monster.. was alone, suffering from something he could not comprehend.

From out of nowhere, violet sparks began to explode around his body. The tremors intensified.

Frey—his eyes tightly shut—tried to suppress the phenomenon by force.

Activating Shadow Adaptation, he focused on manipulating his Aura with absolute precision, forcing it under his control.

Lately... his power had been increasing without end .. especially after slaughtering all those souls.

It felt as if he was slowly becoming something entirely different...

A monster of a caliber unlike anything else.

He had spent his recent days in this cell trying to assimilate the new power within him.

But now, that power had broken free of his control.

No matter how hard he tried to subdue it, it raged harder, threatening to consume him entirely.

Even with Shadow Adaptation, it never calmed.

The violet sparks of Aura continued erupting more violently, destroying everything around him. A thick, black, viscous substance began crawling from beneath his skin, spreading through his bloodstream like a cocoon.

Frey noticed it immediately.

Thanks to his full-body awareness and intimate understanding of his internal structure, he realized— that blackness was foreign.

Something that wasn't there before.

Whatever it was... it was the source of the frenzy within his power.

He cursed under his breath, completely unaware of what was happening to him—

until, without warning, his eyes widened.

A voice whispered right beside his ear.

“Return it.”

The voice was strange... yet oddly familiar.

His power surged, threatening to engulf the entire room.

And Frey—more lost than ever—could only sit in silence.

“Return it. It belongs to me.”

In that very instant...

Hearing that voice...

He began to understand.

At the same moment...

The system’s interface flared to life.

—

Final Mission

Mission Description:

Wesker's Shadows have swept across the world. The hunt has begun. It's a race against time .. who will hunt down whom first?

Disaster is inevitable. And your blade may very well determine the outcome of the coming war.

Before it's too late... eliminate Wesker's Shadows!

First Shadow: The Eternal Witch, Beatrice.

Second Shadow: The death King, Thanatos—also known as Gepetto.

Third Shadow: The One-Man Army, 10th-ranked High Demon—Zibar.

Fourth Shadow: Frey Starlight.

Chapter 512: The Curse Within

Imperial Camp...

Late that moonlit night, most soldiers had already fallen asleep, preparing to march out again soon.

Despite the camp's massive size, it remained eerily quiet. The only sources of light were scattered campfires. The only ones awake were the unlucky soldiers assigned to patrol duty, in case something unexpected occurred.

Deep within the camp, there was a simple cell ..

A temporary prison, holding one specific individual.

The man whose name had become the talk of every mouth.

He was the hero of the war, and because of that, no one dared overstep their bounds with him.

Since being locked up in that cell, he had only spoken to a few high-ranking officers who came by occasionally to question him—hoping to understand his motives.

Lord Starlight's behavior had baffled many.

No one could say for certain whether he was a hero... or a monster.

The answer remained unclear.

But so far, he had remained quiet ..

And that, at least, had given them some comfort.

Which is why only a single guard had been assigned to watch over him.

And even that guard... had dozed off that night.

It was a calm, silent night.

But inside that prison cell... things were anything but peaceful.

There, in that dark and desolate space—his violet Aura blazed violently, crackling with bursts of purple lightning.

Frey, eyes shut tight, was doing everything he could to suppress it.

But the longer he tried, the worse it got.

His power raged .. shattering the floor beneath him and obliterating everything nearby.

Realizing he was still losing control despite all his efforts, Frey clenched his teeth in fury.

“What the hell is happening to this cursed body?!”

A thick black substance began to creep beneath his skin. His eyes glowed with violent intensity, and his Aura looked ready to explode at any second.

Beside his ears, strange voices began to whisper .. demanding he return what he had taken from them.

“Return it. It belongs to me.”

“Return it.”

“Give it back.”

Forced to endure the violent surge of his power, the crushing headache from trying to suppress it ..

And now those eerie voices whispering right beside his ear ..

Frey finally snapped.

Veins bulged like writhing worms across his body as he let out a furious roar so loud, the guard outside jolted awake in panic.

“Give it back?! The only thing I’ll give you is my dick!”

The moment his furious scream shook the cell, the guard burst in ..finally reacting to the chaos.

“What the hell is going on in—”

He didn’t finish the sentence.

Frey knocked him out cold with a single strike.

His power was now completely out of control.

He had no choice but to move.

“If my Aura explodes here... they’ll all die.”

Frey’s Aura wasn’t a joke...

It was the only stat of his that had reached SSS rank.

It was impossible to predict the destructive range of such an overwhelming force.

That's why he gathered his strength into his legs ..

And leapt, blasting through the roof and soaring away from the camp as far as possible.

His steps were so fast, they were nearly invisible to the naked eye.

But his surging Aura betrayed his position ..

He looked like a violet meteor tearing through the sky, destroying everything in his path.

Crackling lightning danced around him like serpents escaping their den...

Frey barely kept it under control ..

Until he finally collapsed in a distant mountainous region.

Unconsciously, he had crossed dozens of kilometers away from the camp.

Now lying among the jagged rocks and towering peaks, his Aura erupted with even greater fury, destroying everything around him.

The whispers grew louder by the second.

The black substance crawling beneath his skin burned like molten lava injected straight into his veins.

He no longer had the mental strength to even open his system ..

His entire focus was devoted to holding back the madness.

“You’ve got to be kidding me...”

Collapsed to the ground, consumed by chaos ..

Frey had become a violet sun lighting up the entire mountain range.

“As if dealing with all those bastard enemies wasn’t enough...

Now I have to fight myself too?!”

He rose again—his body glowing relentlessly.

Frey took a deep breath, pulling out Nameless’s mask and placing it over his face.

“I didn’t come all this way just to be messed with like this.”

And the moment he put it on ..

It was as if a spell had been cast over him.

His mind stilled.

Like a raging sea whose waves had been crushed by force,

He returned to stillness. To focus.

Opening both arms wide ..

He embraced his power once more, and dragged it back in by force.

“Just who do you think I am?”

Resisting the pain.

Confronting whatever had invaded his body ..

Frey’s power ignited with even greater fury.

It was a breathtaking display of raw might.

The very strength he had spent years building...

Even if it tried to escape, it could never defy him.

“Don’t think for even a second that you’ll bring me down that easily.”

Bit by bit, the frenzy subsided... and Frey finally began to regain control.

He had demonstrated incredible growth and composure ..staying centered even in the face of the unknown, even when his own body threatened to betray him. He neither panicked nor lost his grip for a moment.

It took him a full hour to stabilize, but in the end... he collapsed onto the cold ground, gasping for air.

“Finally... that cursed voice is gone.”

The damn thing had tormented him until the very end .so much that Frey had been tempted to rip out his ears just to make it stop.

But the screaming had echoed inside his mind... so there was no escape.

Sitting on the frozen earth with his knees pulled close, Frey let out an irritated sigh.

“What kind of disaster landed on my head this time...?”

It had come out of nowhere ..no warnings, no signs.

This was the first time his own body had refused to obey him.

He cast a glance at the very body he'd shattered and rebuilt over and over again—until it had become this.

A body forged like steel to perfection... the vessel that made him something beyond human.

And now it wanted to betray him?

Frey was confused, and in hopes of dispelling that ignorance ..of finding some clue to this new dilemma ..there was only one thing he could turn to: the system that had been with him since the beginning.

He was about to open the interface when he froze ..hand suspended mid-air—as a voice he hadn't expected to hear again anytime soon interrupted.

“Seems my intervention wasn't necessary after all. You handled it better than I expected.”

That cold, cryptic voice ..the one that had haunted Frey's nightmares.

Despite his sharpened senses, Frey hadn't felt his presence at all.

Lowering his hand slowly, Frey narrowed his violet eyes and turned toward the figure who had appeared here, among the mountain's desolation.

Leaning casually against one of the massive boulders, wearing his tattered black cloak, the man hadn't changed at all.

Only his eyes... those radiant, piercing blue eyes—like lamps piercing through the darkness—shone through his obscured features.

Blue eyes that now reflected their glow against Frey's violet ones.

Frey stood up, facing him directly.

"As usual, you only show up when you feel like it."

Chapter 513: The Architect of Ruin

Step by step, he approached.

"So? What is it this time? Some entity trying to hijack my body? A parasite? A demon seed? Or maybe it's your precious king? Heh... I doubt that."

Ignoring the sarcasm laced in Frey's words, the Engineer simply shook his head lightly.

"Neither of those. It's... more complicated."

Hearing that, Frey burst out laughing.

"Of course it is! When has it ever been simple? That's just how our twisted little game goes, isn't it?"

"..."

The Engineer said nothing for a few seconds, merely staring at Frey. His face betrayed no emotion, but something was definitely churning inside his mind.

"Why are you just standing there, staring at me like an idiot? Spit out whatever you came here to say. I don't want to look at your damn face any longer than I have to."

It was clear Frey had neither the time nor patience for the Engineer's games. He had already guessed this would be yet another setup—another step in some pre-planned future.

That's just how the blue-eyed manipulator worked.

"I see... You've changed," the Engineer said suddenly, prompting a raised brow from Frey.

"Changed? Didn't expect to hear that from you."

The Engineer gave a rare, faint smile as he stepped away from the cliffside.

"Usually, by now, you'd be screaming at me.. charging straight in, trying to kill me."

"Ah..."

Frey exhaled, a strange feeling washing over him.

He couldn't quite put it into words ..like the feeling you get when your father reminds you of something stupid you did as a kid.

"Let's not do this now," he said.

But the Engineer pressed unexpectedly.

"Why not try attacking me? You've grown so much since the last time we met. You might even land a hit."

"What are you, some kind of masochist who enjoys getting punched? If that's your thing, those statues of yours are probably more experienced at it than I am."

Frey chuckled dryly, recalling for a moment his time with the likes of Smiley and Sad... Definitely former torture experts, judging by the way they treated him.

Bringing his attention back to the Engineer, Frey's violet eyes lit up with an even fiercer glow.

"There's no point fighting you in my current state. I still can't see your true level."

Frey hadn't attacked simply because he had no chance against someone like the Engineer. Besides, he had now gained full control over his emotions... emotions that had grown colder recently, making it easier to stay calm—even in front of this man.

The Engineer looked like he was about to say something.

But Frey moved first.

With no warning, he unleashed a powerful wave of aura ..

"That said, let's see what kind of face you're hiding under that damn hood, Engineer !!"

Frey's attack wasn't aimed to hurt him .. it was simply to knock off the hood he always used to conceal his face.

"I've grown tired of staring into those damn blue eyes all the time."

He still couldn't fight him... but he could at least achieve this much.

And for the first time—he did.

For the first time ever... Frey revealed the Engineer's face.

He had expected to see some kind of old man, or perhaps a grotesque entity that would make anyone avert their eyes.

But what stood before him... froze Frey in place for several seconds.

"I see some things never change," the Engineer said, after the hood covering his face was completely destroyed.

As for Frey, all he could do was curse.

"What the hell? Why do you look better than me?!"

The Engineer's features were not at all what Frey had imagined.

His face bore a pale, sickly complexion, like a man plagued by some terminal illness. His skin was lined with cracks—though oddly, they resembled tattoos that matched the mature air around him.

He looked to be in his early forties, with long, sky-blue hair and radiant eyes that once signaled doom, now suiting him perfectly.

No matter how long Frey stared... the Engineer looked like a nobleman from another world .. an air of royalty surrounding his every expression, his serious features making it nearly impossible to look away.

"Ah... So this body is just a vessel, isn't it? I assume it was crafted to look beautiful and hide your hideous original form."

Frey sneered, but the Engineer shook his head.

"Sorry to disappoint you, but my King made this vessel to resemble my original body as closely as possible. What you see before you is what I looked like for most of my life."

Frey was visibly stunned.

'Should've left the damn hood on...'

Regretfully, he stole another curious glance at the strange man standing before him.

"Now that I've seen your face, I'm genuinely curious .. who are you, Engineer? You were once the second strongest under your King, so I assume you were well-known... A presence that must've carved a name for itself up there, in the higher realm."

The Engineer now stood as a broken vessel, worn by time. He had lost a great deal of his former strength—to the point that comparing his current state to his peak would be nothing short of insulting.

And yet, even now, he remained a force strong enough to defeat most early-stage SSS-rank fighters.

Frey hoped to peel back some of the mystery surrounding the man before him...

But the Engineer showed no desire to answer any of Frey's questions.

"I'm not the one whose secrets you should try to uncover," he said. "Your body—that body you're beginning to lose control of—is."

Frey groaned in frustration.

"At least tell me your name."

"I abandoned that name a long time ago. I believe I've told you this already."

Such was the price of being one of the Nameless.

Frey didn't look convinced, but he saw no reason to press further.

It was a rare kind of conversation they were having ... one that, oddly enough...

Made Frey feel some strange connection to the man he had always hated. His perception had broadened. He was beginning to see things he couldn't before.

He felt it clearly now .. his fate was entirely entangled with this man... with the Engineer.

"Speak. What's happening to me this time?"

Frey finally asked the most important question, and the Engineer gave a subtle nod.

"What's happening to you... is a mistake. One caused by me.. and Abraham."

The mention of his father made Frey's eyes widen involuntarily.

"A mistake caused by you and my father... I can only think of that day."

"I'm glad you're finally connecting the dots. You're right," the Engineer admitted, walking alongside Frey through the barren mountains.

"One of that demon's shadows is sleeping inside you."

"Wesker..." Frey muttered, his expression darkening.

"That damned demon's been circling me forever, even though I haven't clashed with him directly yet."

"He's closer than you think. But even I can't detect him .. his King's Eye blocks me completely," the Engineer said, clearly irritated at the mention of that demon.

"Wesker is incredibly cunning. He doesn't act without reason. On the day of our battle—mine and Abraham's—he could've killed you easily. You were right there in his arms."

"But he was forbidden from ending your life. His King didn't want you dead. So Wesker chose to play a different game."

As the Engineer laid out the situation, he showed a rare sense of dread. Wesker was a schemer on his level .. or perhaps even beyond it.

"Before we reached you that day, while you were still in his arms... he planted something inside you. Something that wouldn't awaken unless certain conditions were met. And it seems... you've now met those conditions."

Nineteen years ago, Wesker emerged into the world and fought a colossal battle against the strongest humans .. and the Engineer himself.

Chapter 514: The Saint Who Bleeds

He held Frey in his arms for only a brief moment...

But in that fleeting instant, he concocted a plan—one born in mere seconds—and cast a shadow that would fall twenty years later.

He planted his shadow inside Frey, then hid it perfectly... until the right moment.

The Engineer turned to Frey, his expression grave.

"The awakening of that shadow inside you... You know what that means, don't you?"

Frey wasn't an idiot. He already understood where this conversation was heading.

"Whatever plan that Rank 4 Demon set into motion that day... It's finally begun, hasn't it?"

The future—the fate that Wesker wove through his King's Eye on that day—was finally beginning to unfold.

"There are many forces on the verge of colliding... and the reappearance of high-ranking demons is proof enough."

"Brace yourself, Frey Starlight. You will soon have to fight them—face to face."

Upon hearing that, Frey let out a forced chuckle.

"I know. I've been thinking about it day and night, and I don't expect any help from you, naturally..."

Staring at his open palm .. the same hand that had wielded the sword all this time .. Frey clenched his fist tightly.

"So? What exactly is Weskhar's Shadow, and how can I deal with it?"

Fighting enemies was one thing. But facing himself... that was an entirely different battle.

Fortunately, the Engineer answered.

"Weskhar's Shadow is more like a fragment of his being—a piece of his existence. A replica of himself that he plants inside his targets... in order to completely control them."

"Sometimes, the shadow fuses entirely with the host's soul, becoming something akin to a demon seed. Fortunately for you, your soul is fundamentally different from all other beings. It cannot merge with you... but it will try to take control of your body."

"As a result, your powers will become unstable, and that instability could affect those around you..."

At the time, Frey wasn't even aware of what had happened between him and a certain group of individuals who had already been affected .. people who were now seeing the future through him.

"That's the shadow. As for how to get rid of it... let's see."

The Engineer paused for a few seconds before giving his answer.

"Let's say... your saintly friend, Uriel Platini, is the one who'll show you the way."

Once again, Frey couldn't hide his confusion upon hearing a name he hadn't expected.

"There you go, speaking in riddles again..."

"Uriel? How exactly is she supposed to help me?"

'What, is she going to pour her holy power into me until the shadow suffocates or something?' Frey thought, then sighed in defeat.

"I'll find out when the time comes... won't I?"

The Engineer nodded.

"Exactly," he said, then added hesitantly,

"My ability to intervene is fading by the day... Frey Starlight, this appearance before you .. and this information I've just given you are likely the last pieces of help I can offer. There's an unspoken pact between those of us who pull the strings from the shadows... a pact that prevents us from playing this game ourselves."

"Until one of the sides breaks that rule, you're on your own... Frey Starlight. You've no choice but to carve your path through blood and overcome whatever obstacles stand in your way."

The Engineer spoke more than usual this time.

That had been the case even before Danzo's death. Frey didn't know what that blue-eyed seer had seen with his power to glimpse the future...

But the paths had entangled far too deeply with the Eye of the King, making the future something no longer predictable.

"The future you want, and the fate Wesker has designed..."

Frey chuckled lightly.

"Nothing's changed. All I have to do is keep fighting until I shape my destiny with my own two hands."

Big words for someone who stood no chance against the likes of Wesker and the Engineer.

But without a doubt, he had the potential.

Potential great enough to climb to the very top...

Yet the path before him was one paved in blood .. harsh, brutal, and not meant for the sane.

"I'll endure it to the end... the Path of Blood," Frey muttered, placing the Nameless mask back over his face, hiding his expression once again.

Standing beside him...

The Engineer stared at him for a while. This was the first time they'd ever spoken face to face.

He had witnessed Frey's journey all along. He'd seen every rise and fall, every triumph and tragedy. In many ways, he understood Frey better than anyone in this world.

Though he appeared emotionless, the Engineer was not truly Nameless...

Somewhere behind those glassy blue eyes... something far greater resided.

Turning his back to Frey, the Engineer began to walk away.

"You asked me for my name earlier..." he said, drawing Frey's attention one last time.

"The name is... Gehrman."

With that, he vanished completely .. leaving Frey alone in the wastelands.

Frey etched the Engineer's image deep into his mind... and engraved that name into his memory.

"Gehrman..."

That was his name.

A name he would never forget for the rest of his life.

Frey turned and made his way back to the camp, even as the road ahead grew darker and harder...

Back at the camp ..just as Frey's turmoil reached its peak ..

Inside her tent, sitting alone and reciting her prayers...

Uriel clutched her arms tightly, as if trying to hold onto something that was slipping away.

She had remained like that for hours.

Then, after what felt like an eternity...

She finally stood, preparing some cold water and setting up her bathing corner.

"Fate... I wonder, can we mortals ever escape a destiny written for us by our gods?"

As her mind pondered the answer to that question, she slowly began to undress.

Uriel was a girl who had revealed nothing but her face, her head, and her hands.

Everything else had always been hidden beneath the robes of a priestess.

Having now sealed off her surroundings with holy power, she was finally ready to unveil her body and take a proper bath.

Piece by piece, she stripped away her clothes, revealing her skin...

No one had ever laid eyes on her body—the body that so many men had dreamed of.

But the sight she revealed was nothing like what anyone might've imagined.

Uriel's body was indeed mature ..seductive curves, a full chest, and a flawless figure.

But on top of that white skin... there was another color ..

Red.

As she poured cold water over herself, Uriel stared into the small mirror that had been gifted to her.

She looked at her body—the body of a saint.

With a sorrowful smile, she closed her eyes and finished her bath quickly.

"How ironic... that those who are most revered for their purity are often the filthiest of all."

In the modest room, the sound of cold water splashing echoed faintly, revealing everything that had been hidden by those who served the Lord of Light.

Across her back, her arms, her neck...

Even on her thighs and legs...

Sins were carved into her flesh in ink that would never fade.

Strange letters that no one understood... they looked like ancient runes, etched deep into her skin, disfiguring her completely.

Those letters glowed with a crimson red light... and each time they did—

Uriel endured the pain in silence.

But her face didn't show the slightest reaction.

Sitting there, soaked in cold water... she hugged herself tightly.

"Ah... this brings back memories..."

In her clear blue eyes, fleeting images flashed .. of a little girl who cried and cried until her tears had dried up completely... until the only thing left to shed was red.

"...We're truly alike, Frey."

Chapter 515: Scars Beneath the Halo (1)

At the same time as Frey Starlight's sudden escape from his cell...

A particular group exited one of the command tents near the frontlines of the army.

There were five of them .. four humans and one demon.

"That old man's a real pain in the ass."

Muttering through bloodied lips, Morval—his body covered in bandages soaked red from fresh wounds—grumbled bitterly after being forced to attend a long, exhausting meeting.

"He's a sinner worthy of stoning. My Lord, forgive my weakness and helplessness," Grim muttered beside him, closing his one remaining eye in prayer. He was still cursing Iris Sunlight under his breath ..the man bold enough to criticize the executioner chosen to serve the Lord above all.

Alongside Morval and Grim stood Ghost Umbra, Sansa Valerion, and Celine.

Among them, Sansa stood out the most. Morval recalled her brutal fighting style .. like a true demon on the battlefield, showing no mercy to anyone.

"I look forward to fighting by your side again, Lady Valerion," he said, extending his one good arm in a friendly gesture ..but stopped halfway as he felt a suffocating presence engulf him.

"Don't touch me with your filthy hand, please."

The ground beneath her darkened as Sansa turned to leave first, refusing to draw more attention than needed.

"Fight alongside me? You call that fighting? All you did was get your ass kicked. And judging by the sorry state you're in, I doubt you'll be doing much more."

Waving him off, Sansa gestured for him to just go.

"Go die somewhere no one can see you. Your presence makes no difference."

Shadow swallowed her whole as she vanished, leaving Morval behind to stew in her cold scorn.

"What the hell? The boss's girl is so cruel! All I wanted was to praise the way she slaughters people! So unfair..."

Kicking a stone aside, Morval sulked away, shoulders slumped.

"She's a vile little devil," Grim remarked coldly. "But every executioner needs a loyal dog he can unleash when necessary."

With his prayers complete, Grim turned to leave as well. As a religious fanatic, the very presence of someone like Sansa was naturally unacceptable to him.

But Grim wasn't your average church zealot ..he was more of a hypocrite who wore faith as a mask to hide the demons within.

Sansa was too close to Frey, and Frey wouldn't let her die. So Grim showed up, hiding behind the flimsy excuse of faith.

That's what Ghost thought as he silently analyzed the deranged people who had fought beside him.

Morval: a bloodthirsty maniac.

Grim: a fanatic who used religion to unleash the darkness inside him.

And the third member... Celine.

She had been quiet for a long time.

Ghost couldn't understand why that girl wanted to stay by Frey's side until the end.

"Celine Veritra. A Wave Controller in her first year at the Temple. Currently at C+ Rank. Not bad for your age. You use water as your primary element. Come from a modest background."

As Ghost recited her profile aloud, Celine's blue eyes rolled toward the assassin standing beside her.

"I can understand why maniacs like them want to keep fighting..they were born to live on battlefields. But you're different, Celine Veritra. You went through hell with us and barely survived."

He stepped in front of her, completely blocking her path.

"Your desire to keep following Frey after everything that's happened is irrational. You should've realized by now that Frey isn't the hero you thought he was in the Battle of Shezklar."

Frey wasn't a hero—just another monster. A monster even more savage than the rest.

"So why?"

There was no place for someone like Celine by Frey's side. She wouldn't help him.. she would just die for nothing.

And if she got too close to him, her death would only become a burden he'd have to carry.

Ghost understood what Frey was going through. That's why he tried to carry some of that weight himself. It's also why he wanted to drive Celine away.

But no matter how much pressure he put on her..no matter the killing intent he radiated ..Celine didn't yield.

Instead, she smiled weakly at him.

"I want to be a witness," she said.

"A witness?" Ghost asked, confused.

Lowering her head, she replied softly, "You must've felt it. You're the closest one to him. Frey Starlight... he's someone born different. The miracles he's achieved until now... they speak for themselves."

Since the beginning of this war, it wouldn't be an exaggeration to say Frey had carried everything on his own.

"I want to witness his journey... all the way to the end."

Just as he once looked at her .. when she thought she'd die in a dark corner where no one could see .. she now wanted to be there, watching his path through the chaos.

But her words didn't sit well with Ghost.

In a flash, he slammed her against the wall, punching the stone just beside her head.

"A witness? To the end? What nonsense is this coming from a coward who can't even meet my eyes? Did your luck up until now make you cocky?"

Celine wasn't a fighter. She was just an ordinary girl who had barely seen anything of the world.

Her strength was average at best. Many soldiers stronger than her had already died.

Even now, she kept trembling in front of Ghost, unable to meet his gaze.

And yet... her smile never faded.

Summoning what little courage she had left, she raised her head one last time to meet his eyes.

"I won't die. Others might—but I'll stay by his side until the very end. Why? Because he showed it to me! He showed me what I could become one day. He showed me the future!"

Her voice was filled with conviction.

Ghost frowned instinctively.

"Hah? What kind of bullshit are you spouting now?"

"He chose me!"

She repeated herself, her voice steady, reaffirming her resolve.

Seeing the way she responded, Ghost couldn't help but wonder...

"Maybe you're the craziest one out of them all."

A sane girl... yet perhaps more unhinged than both Morval and Grim.

Ghost had hoped words would be enough to dissuade her, but Selene's conviction proved far stronger than he had anticipated.

"Fine, whatever. If you're so eager to die, I won't stop you."

Turning away from her, Ghost lost interest.

Given her modest level of strength, her death in the upcoming battle felt inevitable to him.

That was what Ghost firmly believed.

But for Selene .. the timid girl who once pissed herself from Frey's aura alone...

Those brief glimpses of the future he had shown her.. visions of her standing beside him .. had been enough to summon courage from within.

That was the kind of resolve Selene possessed.

And just like that, the squad finally disbanded after their heated meeting with Iris Sunlight.

Speaking of the Sunlight Lord himself—he was currently soaring through the sky, his body ablaze with furious fire.

He had just finished that exhausting discussion with the squad's mad survivors, and now, he was on his way to meet the one who troubled him the most: their even crazier leader.

It only took him a few minutes to reach the mountain range where said leader had retreated.

Iris descended like a meteor, violently crashing into the ground with blazing intensity.

Just a few meters ahead stood Frey Starlight, who showed no sign of surprise—almost as if he had expected this visit for a while.

"Frey Starlight... you truly love exhausting this old man," Iris said, stroking his fiery beard.

"I apologize for the chaos I caused," Frey replied with a smile. "Lately, I've been struggling to control my power. I had no choice but to retreat .. otherwise, I might've inflicted even more damage on the camp."

A brief silence followed as they stared at each other.

"Struggling to control your power, huh?" Iris muttered. "For a moment, I thought you were trying to escape—which would've forced me to waste time chasing after you."

"Haha... don't be like that, Lord Iris," Frey laughed softly, his violet eyes narrowing. "You can come up with a better lie than that."

"After all, you alone wouldn't be enough to catch me."

"You insolent brat..."

Chapter 516: Scars Beneath the Halo (2)

Iris chuckled, tugging his beard.

Unfortunately for him—Frey wasn't wrong.

Had Frey actually chosen to escape, it would've taken the combined force of all commanders to even try to bring him back.

Iris still remembered the trial where he once defended Frey.

Even back then, he knew that Abraham Starlight's son would eventually become the beast the Empire would depend on for its future wars.

His prediction had come true ..with terrifying accuracy.

Frey's growth had far surpassed all expectations.

A monster with incomprehensible abilities... and the Empire's deepest secret: his ability to break past the limits of talent itself.

"To be honest with you," Iris finally said, "I came here because I don't want you to return to that cell."

"I'm listening," Frey replied, still wearing that unreadable expression..as if he had already anticipated the course of the conversation.

At that moment, Iris was convinced—the leader was far worse than his squad.

"I just finished meeting your team... those who survived your madness and suicidal charge."

"And?" Frey asked, prompting him.

"They're all lunatics," Iris sighed. "I don't know what kind of brainwashing spell you've cast on them, but they all want to fight by your side again."

He gave Frey a meaningful smile before adding,

"All of them... except Uriel Platini."

Upon hearing that, Frey instinctively narrowed his eyes.

Uriel—the one who may hold the key to freeing him from his curse—no longer wished to stand by his side.

"I understand my squad's stance," Frey said. "Now I'd like to know mine. What's going to happen to me?"

Dodging the subject of Uriel entirely, Frey pushed for the real reason behind Iris's visit.

"Obviously, you'll continue to fight in this war. You're a force too valuable to lose... but from now on, you'll fight as a soldier.. not a commander."

"You'll be assigned to another leader's unit and will be expected to follow their orders. Your squad members will join you .. but only because they personally requested it. Sounds fair enough, doesn't it?"

Iris laughed.

But Frey was puzzled by how lenient it all sounded. Stripping him of a meaningless title was the only punishment?

"Fine... As long as I'm on the frontlines, I have no complaints."

"Good. Just don't go off charging alone again."

Frey nodded, and together, they began their walk back toward the camp.

Along the way, they continued to discuss the current state of things, and what direction the war was likely to take next.

"So?" Frey eventually asked. "Who's the commander I'm being assigned under?"

"You'll find out soon enough once we arrive."

"Always the fan of surprises, aren't you?"

"Aren't you good with surprises, Frey Starlight?"

Iris grinned slyly.

As for Frey, his expression darkened slightly.

"My history with her is... rather grim."

All his life, every surprise he'd ever encountered had been either a near-death experience or the death of someone close to him.

There had never been another outcome.

"No need for all that gloom—and don't belittle yourself, Frey Starlight. You are the main reason for our overwhelming victory thus far."

The current kill ratio stood at one to six—possibly seven—in the Empire's favor against the Ultras.

Their side had gained a tremendous advantage, and it was all thanks to Frey's efforts.

"This is just the beginning. What we've achieved so far... it's only a single victory."

Frey's point was clear. Even though he had slaughtered countless enemies and defeated many of their strongest warriors...

He hadn't truly landed a major blow yet. Aside from Gvardiol.. whose death was still uncertain ..he hadn't claimed a single "big fish."

"Even if it's only one victory... it will serve as our foundation. I'm grateful for what you've accomplished, Frey Starlight. But I hope you don't grow too used to blood and killing. Above all else, remember that you're human—don't lose yourself."

The advice made Frey smile involuntarily.

A bitter smile.

It was good advice ..truly ,But Frey no longer had the luxury of following it.

The path he walked was soaked in blood, and it would force him to kill again and again regardless of what he wanted.

At the end of that path... Frey had no idea what he would become.

"I appreciate the advice, old man. I'd love to follow it... once this war is over."

The War of Shadows had only just begun.

And both Frey and Iris knew that all too well.

Their journey back to the camp was completely silent afterward, each of them drowning in their own thoughts.

One was an old man burdened with the weight of tens of thousands of lives.

The other, a young man whose shoulders carried enough pressure to crush the will of even the strongest men alive.

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That night passed without incident.

And the next morning...

The camp was alive with activity. Some soldiers were training rigorously. Others were catching up on sleep. Still others were huddled in groups, mapping out every possible detail and plan.

Among them all...

The future saint, Uriel Platini, had remained isolated inside her modest tent.

She had placed a holy barrier around her space, keeping others from getting close—so no one dared disturb her.

She sat quietly on a wooden chair beside her bed, getting dressed in silence.

Her beautiful blue eyes ..despite herself—kept flickering toward specific parts of her exposed skin.

Scars. Ugly, painful scars.

Carved deep into her flesh, like the marks of a cursed dagger dipped in blood.

They hurt her terribly... filled her with self-disgust... and brought with them an unbearable itch, like a never-ending rash from some cursed affliction.

Uriel had grown used to the pain.

She never spoke of it. Never complained. She had long since accepted her fate.

But even so... just for a fleeting moment...

She let herself believe in miracles.

Miracles that might rewrite fate itself.

And that miracle had a name—Frey Starlight.

She had hoped for more time.

But it seemed that time had run out.

Without warning, someone else stepped into her sacred barrier—as if it weren't even there.

From outside the tent, a woman entered.

A woman who understood her pain far too well.

Saint Eurasha.

"Milady..."

Uriel quickly pulled her clothes on and stood to greet her.

Eurasha approached in silence, lifting a gentle hand to comb through Uriel's soft, golden hair.

Her face was calm. Composed.

But little by little... her mask began to crack.

The two of them looked so alike .. so much so that strangers often mistook them for sisters.

Between them, there was no need for secrets.

That's why...

Eurasha finally broke down in her successor's arms.

"I'm sorry... I'm so sorry, dear Uriel..."

She wept in Uriel's embrace.

Gone was the quiet, revered saint the world knew.

What stood there now was just a girl—crushed by the weight of it all.

Eurasha was still young. Not yet thirty.

She had always carried herself with a maturity far beyond her age.

But not now.

Not like this.

"I'm sorry... I've reached my limit. I can't endure this anymore. I can't carry this curse any longer..."

She kept apologizing, again and again, to Uriel .. who said nothing.

She just stood there, frozen, trying to process it all.

"I wanted to give you more time. I truly did. But I..."

Eurasha broke into sobs again.

But Uriel stopped her.

"It's alright, Milady. I understand."

With a pained smile... she said the words.

"I'm grateful for all the time you gave me. It was far more than I ever deserved."

Uriel said it to comfort Eurasha... and herself.

And in that moment, she understood ..

The time had come.

The Saint must now face her destiny.

Chapter 517: Ten Thousand Steps Into Madness (1)

Time moved fast ... so fast, one wouldn't notice until it was too late.

It had already been a month since the war began.

The Imperial camp had shrunk significantly as of late, with the main forces advancing deeper into enemy territory. One could say half the army had already moved, and it was only a matter of time before the rest followed.

Among the units selected to return to the frontlines, one stood out above the rest—Snow Lionheart's squad.

He led his team forward, accompanied by a familiar face .. a young man who seemed lost in thought most of the time.

In war, vehicles were of little use. Their effectiveness was nearly negligible, and so most soldiers preferred to move on foot—especially considering how fast they were.

That alone made the battles feel primitive, almost archaic, compared to the era they were living in.

Every now and then, Snow would glance at the newest addition to his team .. the one assigned to shadow and observe him.

He waved a few times, right in front of the boy's face, but the lack of reaction only confirmed his suspicions.

"Still lost in your own world, even though we're deep in enemy land? What's eating at you... Frey?"

Snow's voice brought Frey Starlight back to reality.

"Ah... sorry. I was thinking about last night."

As the two ran side by side, Frey pointed ahead.

"You mean the sudden withdrawal of the Saints?"

Frey nodded.

"Yeah. Since you're the Church's chosen hero, don't you know the reason?"

"Sorry, I don't," Snow replied with a bitter smile, his hand gripping firmly around Vermithor's hilt.

"I might be their chosen one—an important figure, sure—but my connection with the Church is paper-thin. I barely know a thing about them."

You could say Snow Lionheart was part of the Church in name only.

Saint Eurasha, along with Uriel, had both withdrawn from the frontlines, returning to the Empire under the pretense of 'urgent necessity.'

With pressure from the Church, the commanders had no choice but to allow it .. especially after the followers of the Lord of Light promised to dispatch their full forces in compensation.

Frey still remembered the last words Uriel exchanged with him in front of the teleportation gate.

She didn't say much—just apologized, told him she couldn't go on like this anymore... that her time had run out.

For a moment, her retreat from the battlefield seemed like the right decision. It meant she would be safe—on the other side of the world.

But the look she gave him, and his inability to read her thoughts, left Frey wondering if retreat really was the right choice for her.

Uriel had been one of the main heroines .. the kind Frey had once written about.

Each of them held buried potential, immense power just waiting to be unleashed. Uriel, in particular, had a lot... yet her strength had yet to awaken.

Frey recalled the strange angel she summoned during their last battle. He couldn't help but wonder if that was the real reason behind her sudden withdrawal alongside Eurasha.

"Is she going to pass on her title? A type of power, maybe?"

Frey thought, paying close attention to every piece of the puzzle.

According to the Engineer, Uriel was the key to dealing with the Fourth Shadow. That's why Frey had begun using the third-person perspective on her.

If anything were to happen to her, he was ready to teleport to her side instantly.

Since her Affection Points toward him were high, he could teleport to her exact location at any given time.

"For now, I'll monitor her quietly... It's still too early to leave the frontlines," Frey thought calmly, laying out his plans.

"For now, this war takes priority."

After the withdrawal of Saint Eurasha ..an SS+ rank hero ..there was a gaping hole in Snow's team.

Someone of comparable power had to be appointed, and the only candidate was Frey Starlight ..though the commanders were still unaware of the full extent of his current strength.

And he wasn't the only powerhouse in the squad ..Sansa Valerion was also among them.

That alone made Snow's squad even stronger than it was before—even without Eurasha.

They weren't the only familiar names, either. The team also included others from the elite class.

Selena the Witch, a heroine much like Uriel.

And another individual Frey had been keeping an especially close eye on:

Dawn Polaris.

The black-haired, red-eyed swordsman with an innocent face ..who waved at Frey cheerfully the moment their eyes met.

Dawn walked beside both Frey and Snow, appearing just as he had back during their days in the temple.

'Bearer of the Last Survivor ability... an ability no human should possess.'

Whatever the truth behind that ability was, Frey was certain of one thing ..

Something... some enormous being... was behind Dawn.

But Dawn himself was unaware, and so there was no point in questioning him. Even if Frey tried to kill him, chances were he wouldn't succeed—since that ability would save him one way or another.

To deal with a world-breaking ability, one had to possess a world-breaking power of their own.

Frey had met that condition. But he still couldn't fully control Shadow Adaptation, which meant he wasn't ready to face bearers of such powers—not yet.

That's why he had no choice but to wait and observe, reacting accordingly.

Uriel. The Fourth Shadow. Dawn. The demons...

So much to worry about ..so little he could do.

"I'll focus only on the enemy in front of me."

The Ultras... they were the clearest obstacle..

An obstacle his blade could reach.

And those were the kinds Frey preferred.

Frey drifted back into his thoughts once more... Until a familiar voice echoed inside his mind.

'Frey... can I have a moment?'

The voice rang clearly within his head. In other words ..telepathy.

'Sansa? Since when could you use telepathy?' Frey asked, glancing back at the shadow behind him ...

The one darker than all the rest.

'I can use telepathy with someone I enter through their shadow. The ability manifested naturally once I mastered control over my power.'

'Impressive... I really look forward to seeing just how far your strength will go,' Frey replied, genuinely praising her.

Sansa was both cursed and blessed.

Her transformation into a demon had significantly boosted her power. The demonic body allowed her to wield the power of the Seed freely—without restraint.

It was an automatic power, granted by the transformation. Not something Sansa had trained for or earned herself.

Sansa went silent for a moment, reflecting on what Frey had said.

'To be honest, Frey... I don't think my power will grow any further. I've likely reached my limit.'

That was exactly what she had wanted to say.

Frey hadn't expected her to say that—especially not now.

'I don't know much about the demonic path, but I do know that the true power of the Shadow King goes far beyond your current level.'

The training methods for humans and demons were vastly different. While humans advanced through meditation and spiritual cultivation...

Demons grew by consuming ..devouring life itself.

The greater a demon's hunger, the stronger it became.

That's why Agaroth, their king, was described as the monster who devoured everything.

Sansa may be a demon now...

But whether she could truly walk that path was uncertain. Her power was borrowed—not something she built with her own hands.

And yet, the Shadow of the King was no ordinary force.

'I know the Shadow King is a power beyond imagination... but I'm not it. I'm merely a copy ..an imitation with limited potential.'

Chapter 518: Ten Thousand Steps Into Madness (2)

At present, Sansa's strength rivaled that of a high-tier SS+ rank fighter.

And after mastering her ability, one could argue she had reached the peak of that tier.

But now that she'd absorbed all the Seed had to offer...

There was nothing left to awaken.

In other words ..her path ended here.

'Stronger battles await us... against monsters far more powerful ..like those of the Upper Seats, who have begun to emerge.

When that time comes... I won't be able to offer you much at my current level, Frey.'

Sansa was being completely honest—at least when it came to him.

She had no one else to confide in about these fears.

Ever since she sensed their enemies approaching for the first time...

She knew just how terrifyingly powerful they were.

And when the time came, Frey would be the one forced to face them alone.

If he did, he would die.

Sansa couldn't bear that thought.

But the weak had no right to choose in the world they lived in...

Frey understood her feelings perfectly.

She had slammed against her limit.

'Just my opinion, Sansa... but I think you're underestimating yourself—and what you're really capable of.'

'You have a body far beyond human. A monstrous strength at your fingertips.

That foundation alone puts your starting point lightyears ahead of people like me.'

While others had to claw their way up from the bottom...

She had been catapulted straight to SS rank, all because of the Seed.

Even Frey, with all the absurd tools he had access to, had to climb rank by rank, enduring endless suffering.

His current strength was the result of pushing himself through external means.

His base was still S-rank.

But Sansa's foundation had started at SS.

'The truth is, you've just gotten used to things being easy.'

To surpass SS+... it's something most believe impossible.

Breaking beyond that? That's on you ..and what your hands will carve. Not the Seed.'

If Sansa wanted to grow stronger...

There was only one path left:

'You'll have to live as a demon... and walk the demonic path.'

Become a monster that feeds on life and kills to survive.

A path not unlike Frey's path of blood.

'To be honest... I'm not sure I'm even qualified to be giving you this advice.

I'm not a normal human either, and my power... it's just the result of the chaos inside this body.'

But in the end, their truth was the same:

If they wanted overwhelming power, they had to become monsters worthy of it.

Whether it was the Path of Blood...which turned one into a slaughterer drunk on carnage...

Or the Demonic Path ..which forced its bearer to devour life and bring death wherever they went...

They all led to the same end.

Preparing for the battles ahead, both Frey and Sansa fell silent for the rest of the journey,

Each sinking into their own world.

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Far from Frey and his vanguard, who had borne the brunt of the war so far...

There remained a portion of the army that had yet to engage in battle ..those stationed at the rear under the command of the elderly Iris Sunlight.

In the previous campaign, over half the troops had been deployed to the front lines, leaving around 20,000 men behind. They were designated as the support force, meant to intervene only in case of emergency ..far removed from the chaos at the front.

Their swords remained spotless, never once tainted with blood. Perhaps that was why they grew lax, lounging around the camp as if they weren't part of a war to begin with.

At the edge of the camp, four middle-aged soldiers sat playing cards, wasting the hours in idleness.

"I wonder how long this war will last... I miss my kids and my wife," one of them sighed as he played his hand.

"Huh? Complaining already? Ha! We haven't even fought, and you're ready to go home?" another laughed, pointing out the obvious—that they'd yet to bloody their hands.

"I get it, but we'll definitely win! The enemy's suffered massive losses and been pushed back onto their own land. It's only a matter of time before the vanguard brings us good news."

"So what you're saying is, you want to win this war without actually fighting in it? You're an optimist, man! Hahaha."

Round after round, they played cards in a corner of the camp, utterly detached from the fact that they were soldiers, deep in enemy territory.

"But I have to admit... maybe it's naïve, but it would be nice to win this war without having to stain our hands."

"It's fine. We've got heroes who'll win glory for us... like Frey Starlight."

One of the soldiers scratched his nose, recalling that lone youth's feats.

"That monster won't stop until he's slaughtered every last Ultra. I still get chills when I remember those mountains of corpses."

"To be honest... he scares me."

The mention of Frey brought back grim memories ..of hills of bodies, of lakes of blood. None of them had ever seen that much death in one place before.

"Alright, alright. Enough with the bad vibes. Let's just be grateful he's on our side."

"You're right. Thank the gods...he's an ally."

For a moment... they imagined it ..the possibility of that monster being their enemy.

The thought alone was so terrifying they quickly changed the subject, doing their best to forget him.

The war was going well for the Empire, and hope began to creep into the soldiers' hearts.

Hope that they might make it back home alive.

The four soldiers continued their game until the sun dipped below the horizon and night began to fall.

At that point, one of them stood up.

"Where are you off to?" one of the others asked, prompting a groan from the man.

"Where do you think? To take a piss."

He grumbled as he walked away from the group, heading toward a dead forest nearby.

It was a field of rotting trees, their trunks split and their bark faded to a lifeless gray.

The place looked like it belonged in a horror film—but to the soldier, it was simply a convenient spot to relieve himself.

And that's exactly what he did, unbuttoning and unzipping his trousers.

"Aah... finally, I feel alive again."

He sighed with strange satisfaction ..until he heard footsteps behind him.

Still, he didn't stop what he was doing. Instead, he turned slightly, glancing over his right shoulder.

"What? You need to piss too?" he joked, assuming it was one of his comrades.

But he couldn't see the man's face at all—the stranger wore a mask.

A mask that became the last thing the soldier ever saw, just before his head was severed from his shoulders.

The masked figure didn't linger. He strode toward the camp, step by step, his eyes glowing crimson.

Back then, the imperial soldiers had no idea what kind of storm was about to hit them.

Chapter 519: Ten Thousand Steps Into Madness (3)

The Ultras ..fanatics in their own right. A cursed order, bound to endless suffering.

But just as the Empire had their heroes, so too did the Ultras.

And perhaps the clearest example... was that masked youth, the one in whom the common folk placed all their hopes.

"You're running out of time, V," Gavid Lindman had told him.

"From now on, every failure will cost a life. I'll kill them myself—so go. Don't come back until you've become like him... a monster on Frey Starlight's level."

"This is your last chance, Viny Sparda."

Lindman's words—his threat—never left V's mind.

That same young man now approached the main imperial camp.

Step by step, he passed through the outer barricades, encountering his first target.

"Huh? Who the hell are—?" the soldier began, but V cut him down in a flash.

As the man's blood spilled across the ground, the rest of the soldiers began to realize ..

An intruder had slipped past their defenses.

And they had never even noticed.

"A monster on the level of Frey Starlight..." V muttered, his eyes glowing red.

"That's what you meant, isn't it, Lord Lindman?"

To infiltrate the enemy camp alone, to drown it in rivers of blood and pile the corpses into mountains...

V was no tactician.

He was far simpler than that. The young man had never known kindness. He never lived the life others his age were supposed to live.

All he had done until now—was survive... and destroy.

He escaped the rat trap and carved out a name for himself, but it wasn't enough.

Now, as the soldiers of the Empire charged toward him, V drew the Moonlight Blade, his eyes flashing white ... surrendering himself to madness.

"Berserker Mode."

Out of nothing, a jet-black armor wrapped around his body, while black flames erupted all around him.

With a war cry that shook the skies, he surged forward ..ripping through dozens of enemies in a single strike, his dark flames devouring everything in his path.

The ground burned beneath him. Everything turned upside down as that berserk monster tore through the enemy camp alone.

He didn't speak. He just screamed like a mad beast ..like a predator unleashed for one purpose only: to kill.

Many tried to stop him. All of them died.

His destructive power was overwhelming. His sword was no ordinary weapon.

And those black flames... they were hell itself.

Flames that did not just burn flesh—but scorched the soul.

Alarm sirens blared, and chaos spread under the wings of night.

The signal was clear...a rabid beast had been unleashed among them.

He leapt from place to place, crushing anyone in his way. Body parts scattered. Blood painted the earth.

There was no pattern to his fighting. No technique. Just raw slaughter. A maelstrom of chaos and fury that struck down anything that entered his range.

Some attacks struck his body—but left no mark. The strange armor shielded him from everything.

The only sounds echoing across the camp were the brutal grinding of steel, his inhuman roars, and the dying screams of soldiers. Some fled. Others died trying to resist.

It lasted only minutes. But for those less fortunate...for those forced to face him

..those minutes felt eternal.

His sword had not stopped once since the slaughter began.

But now for the first time ..it was stopped.

By another.

A golden one.

Out of nowhere, she appeared. Completely blocking his path.

Crimson hair flowed beneath her golden helmet. Her greatsword blazed with radiance, brighter than ever.

"That sword... I see. So you're the one who attacked the temple that day."

Before V stood the wielder of one of the legendary swords..

Melina, bearer of the Claymore. The one who once trained both Snow and Frey.

She was never one for many words. And V, under the thrall of his berserk state, said nothing at all.

The two clashed immediately—exchanging blows at terrifying speed. Each time their legendary swords collided, the ground beneath them shattered further.

V fueled himself with black flames that surged to consume Melina's body..but she deflected them with her aura.

"You place far too much faith in your strength, boy... to dare storm our base alone like this."

Gripping the Claymore with both hands, she extended it ..lengthening it until it exceeded ten meters.

Wielding it effortlessly, Melina unleashed a blindingly fast horizontal slash toward V.

He tried to block...but the sheer force of it sent him flying, destroying everything in his path.

Melina chased after him without pause, her body glowing with brilliant golden light.

"Thank your own foolishness ..for thinking your meager power would be enough to survive here."

BOOM!

She slashed downward from above, aiming straight for V's head. He barely managed to raise his blade and block—but the weight of her blow drove his feet deep into the earth.

It was surreal...how someone like Melina could control a sword that massive so perfectly.

"Shrink—Claymore."

At her command, a strange phenomenon occurred: the gigantic sword vanished ..and in its place, a golden dagger, no longer than five centimeters.

Capitalizing on the shock, Melina landed directly in front of V ..who was still holding his blade aloft, unable to keep up with her speed.

Seeing the opening, she thrust the dagger at his chest.

"Extend—Claymore."

BOOOM!!!

On her command—like a merciless golden beam ..

The Claymore extended at blinding speed, piercing through V's chest and launching him into the ground with tremendous force.

It didn't stop.

The sword continued growing, dragging V's body across the earth ..grinding the land with his flesh.

Then, just as suddenly as it appeared, the Claymore vanished once more.

V struggled to rise, a gaping wound now torn through his chest.

Melina's technique was terrifying—and this was only the beginning.

"Extend—Claymore."

He heard her voice clearly ..and within less than a second.

V saw the golden beam once again ..piercing through his chest.

The speed of the Claymore's expansion bordered on insanity—practically instantaneous.

Melina alternated between shrinking and extending her weapon with expert precision.. displaying a duelist's mastery at the highest level.

After being completely cornered by a single woman, V let out a primal scream from the depths of his soul, unleashing a blazing bomb of black flames.

"You're holding a sword ..so I assume you're a swordsman," Milena said calmly.

Extending the Claymore once more, she cleaved the fireball in two and walked through it with unshaken confidence.

"But when I look at you closely, all I see... is a beast craving death."

Milena was a terrifying duelist ..so much so that not a single imperial soldier dared to interfere. They feared standing in her way.

In response, V unleashed everything he had. A tidal wave of black flames surged from his body—an overwhelming flood of destruction directed solely at Milena. She readied herself to take the full brunt of it...

But before she could even move, crimson flames descended from the heavens.

Fierce, volcanic fire clashed against V's dark inferno, neutralizing it completely.

"The Ultras must really be underestimating us... sending this whelp alone, hoping he'd make a difference."

Iris Sunlight floated in the air, his body ablaze, eyes locked onto the monster he was tasked with hunting down.

"Looks like they've run out of options, haven't they?"

Chapter 520: Ten Thousand Steps Into Madness (4)

With a savage roar, Iris threw a punch that materialized into a colossal flaming fist.

It shot forth with terrifying speed, crashing into V and burying him deep into the ground.

"Milena Maiden," Iris called out, "I'll deal with his flames. Don't hesitate—kill him with your next strike!"

She gave a sharp nod.

As soon as they exchanged glances, V burst out of the crater, targeting them both.

Milena immediately closed the distance at sonic speed, clashing with him in a frenzy of sword strikes. Their blades moved so fast, they left afterimages behind.

V's body spewed black fire without pause, but Iris was there to intercept and contain it all.

While V was distracted fighting Milena, Iris suddenly appeared on his right and delivered a blazing punch straight to his face.

The blow sent V flying ..only to be stopped cold by Milena, who slashed his chest with a swift stroke from her extending claymore.

"He's tough!" she muttered, the strange black armor dulling the blow's impact.

"Then don't stop! Let's crush him with everything we've got!"

Like a red meteor, Iris dove in, unleashing a relentless flurry of strikes upon V.

From the front and rear, V was completely surrounded.

He tried to react, but a piercing sonic wave suddenly struck his ears, scattering his thoughts into disarray.

The Empire's mages had begun chanting spells, while soldiers tightened the perimeter around the battlefield.

There was no escape for V...caught between two SS rank monsters.

His blood spilled. His bones shattered.

V's mind went blank.

"At this rate... I'll fail..."

He would fail again. And this time, he wouldn't be the only one to die—all the other rats would perish too.

His mind raced, desperate to find a way to survive.

Moonlight Blade couldn't save him—Milena had a legendary weapon of her own.

His black fire was neutralized by Iris. Even the Berserk State didn't give him the upper hand ..his opponents were monsters.

His armor held up, but it was slowly cracking. Their attacks were getting through.

All his power... felt utterly meaningless.

At this rate, death was inevitable.

Yet for some reason, his mind didn't formulate a strategy ..it wandered into old memories, fragments that never left him.

There was a saying among the Ultras. One known by all who belonged to that brutal world:

"Heroes aren't born out of nothing in the Ultras ..they are forged."

They weren't chosen by some divine being. They weren't like the Empire's champions.

In the Ultras, heroes were made from zero.

From the rat pit... a rat would one day become a hero. And that was V.

He had always been thrown into the pit, ever since he was a child.

Thrown in with monsters of every kind, locked in until only one remained.

And the one rat that survived... was always V.

Every time Gavid Lindman came to inspect the pit, he'd find V ..still breathing ..surrounded by corpses.

Why did V fight with such ferocity? Why did he always struggle to survive?

Why didn't he just die and end his suffering?

"Because he has a reason."

Sitting beside Mergo, Gavid raised a glass of wine ..poured by the drunken old man himself.

"Lindman, did you send your dog to die?" Mergo asked as they both looked up at the sky.

Gavid smiled absentmindedly.

"Maybe he really will die this time."

Hearing that, Mergo laughed.

"Maybe? You really think he has a chance?"

"He doesn't have a chance... but he has a reason to live. Everything that boy lives for... is right here in my hands."

Lindman stated with certainty.

"He doesn't have the right to die. Not yet."

"You seem to be placing a lot of hope in him," Mergo said, puzzled by Lindman's words.

"You don't know what that boy is capable of. V is the pinnacle of our kind ..of the Ultras. No one like him has emerged in three full centuries."

"It's easy for you to say that, considering you're his mentor," Mergo muttered, sighing, but Lindman chuckled.

"Mentor? What nonsense. I've never taught that boy anything."

"...What?" Mergo blinked in confusion, while Lindman smiled, eyes drifting toward the sky.

"He learned my style on his own. I simply let him see it once... and he mastered it. That's the kind of monster he is...one who will either die today or awaken and show this world a new kind of horror."

In this world, nothing mattered but strength.

There was no place for the weak. No place for cowards. No place for those who refused to fight.

Now, trapped between two monsters, V felt death crawling toward him.

His head was on fire.

No matter what he did, he couldn't turn the tide.

Iris and Melina were tearing him apart mercilessly.

'Why...?'

Bleeding profusely beneath his broken armor, V staggered as the thought echoed in his mind.

'Why can't I defeat them?'

'I made a pact with one of the strongest demons... I trained, survived monsters of every kind... they called me the greatest hero in the history of the Ultras... and yet I still lose. I keep failing!'

I'm going to fail again... and if I fail, everyone else dies.

All the other weaker rats..

every one of them...would die.

Everyone had placed their hopes on him.

"You're the hero, V. You're our best. You're the strongest. We're counting on you."

Heavy.

It was all so heavy. Every single burden thrown onto his back.

Do this. Do that.

Everything he had done until now was fulfilling someone else's desires.

And now, he was dying doing just that.

Why?

All that strength he'd built... was meaningless.

WHY?!!!

V screamed, unleashing everything he had. But despite his desperate struggle—

His enemies completely overwhelmed him.

In the end, he simply wasn't that kind of monster.

As his final moments neared, V trembled, remembering a feeling he hadn't felt in a very long time.

Fear.

"I'm going to die... and so will the others because of me..."

We're all going to die.

With trembling limbs, shattered armor, and eyes crying blood ..

V could barely stand against the merciless onslaught of his foes.

With chattering teeth and a terror that gripped his soul ...

V wept.

"We're going to die. We're going to die. We're going to die. We're going to die. We're going to die.
We're going to die..."

"I'm going to die..."

Not because it was his choice ..but because it was theirs.

His strength wasn't enough.

"I'm not that kind of monster..."

In his final moments, he realized how weak he truly was.

Melina's claymore was a breath away from severing his neck. Iris's fist, a heartbeat from piercing his chest.

And in that final moment ..V remembered only one thing.

Amid all the fear and dread of death ..

A single sentence resurfaced in his mind.

"Go ..and don't come back until you've become a monster on par with Frey Starlight."

That's what Lindman had told him. Words that echoed in V's ears over and over again.

Ah... I get it now.

With lifeless eyes, no one could tell what he was seeing.

V gripped his sword tighter.

"All I have to do... is become Frey Starlight."

Then ..everything would be alright.

If he were Frey, neither of those two would have ever trapped him.

That kind of strength... that's what he needed.

He finally understood.

And in that moment—V vanished.

Between Iris and Melina, he completely disappeared without a trace.

Neither of them even understood how he moved.

Far off in the battlefield, he reappeared ..his hand reaching down to pick up a second sword from the ground.

A completely ordinary sword, now held in his left hand.

His Moonlight Sword, in his right.

He hadn't done anything... just picked up another blade.

But somehow... his aura changed completely.

To veterans like Iris and Melina, who were finely attuned to such shifts ..

"His gait... his expression... his presence... everything's different."

"What... just happened?"

Even his very presence had changed.

It wasn't something that should have been possible.

That stance ..they had seen it before, both of them ..but neither wanted to believe it.

And then, V moved.

"Ten Thousand Steps of Shadow – Supreme art: Eternal Blackout."

With a single motion of his blades—everything around him was severed.

Thousands of dark slashes erupted from his body, consuming the battlefield in a merciless wave of destruction.

Melina and Iris immediately fell back, their faces frozen in shock.

But V had already appeared between them.

That speed...!

"Ten Thousand Steps of Shadow – Eternal Darkness"

BOOOOM!!

With a deafening explosion, V unleashed a flurry of lightning-fast strikes that overwhelmed his enemies completely.

His blades became heavier, faster...

His style transformed. His entire form of combat .. it all shifted.

He had become something else entirely.

"Frey Starlight..."

He had always been their ally. That's why they never truly considered it.

But how terrifying...

To imagine Frey as the enemy.

"Crush him! Use everything you've got!"

Iris roared, launching forward with all his might, followed by Melina in perfect sync.

Both lunged to end V before he escalated any further.

But they froze.

They froze the moment they saw the stance he assumed.

Augmenting his depleted aura with black flames drawn from his demonic pact—

V prepared to unleash the one attack that would make them regret stepping anywhere near him.

"Ten Thousand Steps of Shadow: Frey Starlight's Style—"

"Evade it! NOW!"

Iris shouted ..but it was already too late.

"Nameless Judgement."

In that moment ..everything went dark.

The gates of hell flung open, and a roaring torrent of black fire swallowed everything in its path.

The attack didn't just consume Iris and Melina..

It kept going ..ripping through ranks of the imperial army like a tidal wave of damnation.

A calamity.

A massacre that turned the battlefield into a living inferno.

In less than a second, thousands were incinerated ..mercilessly erased.

And there ..within the storm of black fire, death, and ruin..

Walked a single youth, wielding twin blades.

The sword he had borrowed had shattered under the force of the blow, so V replaced it..

His right hand still held the Moonlight Sword, and in his left...

He now gripped a golden claymore—taken from Melina's corpse.

There, in the heart of that cursed inferno...

The most terrifying monster among the Ultras had awakened his true potential.