

VILLAIN 541

Chapter 541: A Predator's Smile (1)

— Frey Starlight's POV —

"Ah... damn it. From my battered body that had just been mauled by five SS+ class fighters... straight into another one with a hole in the chest..."

It felt as if enduring this kind of physical torment was simply written into my fate.

I know I've become immune to every kind of pain, and that in itself is terrifying. What kind of level is this, where I can move without a care in the world while an enormous hole pierces through my chest?

"I guess my senses have gone completely numb... even switching bodies doesn't change the fact I can endure this much."

I muttered non-stop as I drove Vermithor's blade into my own chest, standing before Smogh, who circled me cautiously, unable to process what was happening.

This was Smogh, the Hollow—an SS-class fighter, yet his true level of strength remained unknown thanks to the absurd abilities granted by his pact with a powerful demon.

Earlier, I'd been observing the battlefield using Third-Person View, unable to reach Sansa—who I assumed was unconscious—but I was able to use the ability on both Snow and Ghost.

Snow, in particular, caught my attention. He'd been in the harshest and most brutal fight of all.

I hadn't planned to intervene. This was the first time I'd ever tested the Possession ability, and to be honest... it wasn't pleasant in the slightest.

But I couldn't just stand there and watch. Not when the opponent was Smogh.

I had driven Vermithor into Snow's body, which would accelerate the healing process—but even that wouldn't restore him to a state where he could face this monster. And I couldn't use my own abilities through this body...

This is a problem... Unconsciously, I took a step back as Smogh advanced toward me.

"I'm not sure what exactly is going on here. Maybe it's schizophrenia? I've heard Gavid Lindman's Empyrean can mimic other personalities. Your situation could be similar... or maybe you're simply someone else possessing his body..." Smogh's deep voice rumbled as his body began to glow, releasing a strange black metal that covered him completely.

"Either way... the result won't change." Gathering his strength, Smogh blew apart the ground beneath his feet and lunged at me instantly.

"You're coming with me."

"Damn it!"

Seeing the Hollow rush in, I cursed, yanking Vermithor out of my chest. I tried to draw out as much power as possible from Snow's body, but I barely managed to deflect that monster's fist before immediately retreating.

Covering myself with aura, I tried to put distance between us, but Smogh was already chasing me down.

There was no way I could beat him in my current state, so all I could do was avoid the worst-case scenario.

And to make matters worse, the system message kept hovering before my eyes—

> Affinity Points insufficient... Possession will be canceled at any moment now.

The clock was ticking, my opponent was a nightmare, and Snow's body was in shambles!

"Damn you, Snow! What kind of mess have you gotten me into?!"

If I were at least in good condition, I'd have run here using my real body instead of relying on this damned possession.

I tried fighting back, but it was useless—Snow's combat style was completely different from mine, even though I knew everything about him.

"Snow! Wake the hell up!"

To survive this, I needed the original owner of the body to fight.

If I kept this up, it was inevitable that Snow would end up in the Hollow's hands...

Fortunately, Smogh didn't seem intent on killing him, which was the only reason he held back—but even so, his attacks threatened to break this body beyond repair.

Vermithor flooded me with aura and holy power, but the damage far exceeded anything it could compensate for.

I was literally running with my internal organs spilling out, bleeding so much that I could feel dizziness setting in—even though I was just the intruder in this body.

"I know you can hear me, Snow. It's too soon to head into the darkness—your fight isn't over yet. Don't you dare run now!"

I growled, gritting my teeth through Smogh's blows.

"Have you gone insane, talking to yourself in the middle of a fight?" Smogh sounded irritated, continuing his assault while still trying not to inflict fatal damage on Snow's body.

"Shut your damn mouth—I'm not talking to you."

Swinging Vermithor, I fought with every ounce of strength I could muster, using the elemental powers I'd always dreamed of wielding.

Never in my life did I imagine I'd get the chance like this...

"Answer me, Snow... I'm begging you. I can't hold out much longer."

The situation was dire—the possession was on the verge of ending.

If Smogh got away with Snow, then even if I chased him down in my real body, I doubted I could find him in time.

If my suspicions were right... the reason Smogh was keeping Snow alive was simply to let him grow stronger.

To make him discover his talents, hone his abilities... and once he reached his peak—Smogh would come to take him back.

"You want to devour him, don't you?" I said mockingly as Vermithor clashed with the Hollow's massive fist.

He showed a flicker of surprise at my words, but wasn't particularly shaken.

"What are you getting at?" he asked, attacking with even greater ferocity.

"I already know your secret, Hollow. That's why you're so careful not to damage this body any further." I kept running, taunting him in an attempt to buy as much time as possible.

"That earlier strike that pierced his chest looked fatal, but you made sure to avoid his heart and vital organs, didn't you? I'd say that's the maximum damage you were willing to inflict—and that explains why you've held back until now."

Unleashing a wave of frost—the one I'd always dreamed of wielding—I froze his body solid, but he shattered free in an instant.

"You Yosefka followers are all the same. Your mistress... the Eighth High Demon, Yosefka, only grows stronger by devouring her own kind. Isn't that right?"

Hearing my last words, I saw Smogh's face gradually darken...

"Yosefka has to devour other demons to grow stronger. And likewise... those who form a pact with her are cursed like she is, forced to consume their own kind—humans. And I can't think of a human more appetizing than Snow Lionheart."

"The blessed hero born with so much in his hands... I bet he looks to you like a gourmet meal you can't resist, you damned hollow, Smogh."

I fired my last shot, laying bare all his secrets and schemes—just for one second.

Smogh froze, unable to process what he'd heard.

One second. That was all—the one moment he lowered his guard, and the moment I had been betting on from the very start.

"Sorry, Snow... but I'll have to push your body one more time."

Summoning all of Snow's elements, I instantly unleashed the only attack I could replicate using his body...

Snow's unique version of Ignition—the very move my own skill was modeled after.

Launching it from Snow's body wasn't too difficult...

Exploiting that instant of lowered defense, I swung Vermithor with every ounce of strength I had. I detonated everything in front of me.

"Great Cosmos Formation!"

A radiant light burst from my blade, a light that swallowed Smogh entirely at point-blank range.

BOOOOOOM!!

The Great Cosmos Formation shook the earth and split the skies, its pillar of light engulfing Smogh.

This strike carried every bit of strength I could wring from Snow's battered body—and the result was just as devastating to me as it was to my enemy.

I felt every cell in this body scream in agony.

Dizziness... crippling weakness...

But I forced myself to move, fleeing the battlefield at full speed.

I could endure pain—but this level of strain was too much. It threatened to make me lose consciousness at any moment.

Chapter 542: A Predator's Smile (2)

"Ah, damn it! These are the moments that make me miss my damn body!"

Unlike me, Snow didn't have the insane regeneration that patched up everything on its own.

I guess that's a gift the so-called 'chosen hero' wasn't granted—so that's a 1–0 in my favor, right? ...

Well, technically, he has dozens of other talents, so let's call it 1–100 or something.

As my thoughts drifted while I ran for my life, blood began pouring endlessly from my mouth—a clear sign I had pushed too far.

"Damn it, man..."

I laughed foolishly when I saw Smogh suddenly materialize in front of me, a terrifying black aura swirling around him.

I noticed the massive wound on his chest, but it wasn't enough to slow him down in the slightest.

Closing the distance in a single step, he reached out and seized me by the neck.

I tried to break free, but he caught my sword arm effortlessly with his other hand.

Lifting me high, I saw raw anger twist his features.

"Looks like I've been far too lenient with you."

With those words, I heard the sickening crack of bone as the bastard snapped my sword arm.

Vermithor clattered to the ground, the strength in my shattered arm fading away.

Smogh didn't stop—he broke the other arm just as easily.

"Let's make sure you can't try any more stupid tricks."

Smogh's hands were like weapons of mass destruction. Just as he'd done to Snow's arms, he crushed his legs as well.

"I see you're not screaming. Have you finally lost your grip on reality?"

Hoisting me like a corpse, Smogh grinned with a sinister smile—only for me to laugh in his face in return.

"Not at all. It's just that this doesn't even tickle. You really should rethink your torture methods." My taunt only made Smogh chuckle harder.

"Then let's break that annoying mouth of yours too."

One punch to the jaw—so heavy it felt like a mountain had smashed into my face.

He shattered my jaw, tearing my throat, forcing me into silence.

It hadn't even been five minutes since I possessed Snow, yet all this crap had already happened in that short time.

At this rate, I was making Snow's condition worse instead of helping him.

Throwing Snow's broken body over his shoulder, Smogh turned to leave.

If this continued, we were headed straight for a disaster that would mean the death of the Empire's so-called hero.

Return, Vermithor.

Focusing one last time, I did the only thing I could—calling the sacred sword back into Snow's body.

It would reduce some of the damage done to him... but it wouldn't change the outcome.

I couldn't save Snow in this state. The only one who could save him now... was himself.

How long do you plan to keep sleeping, Snow?

It felt like I was talking to myself—but I didn't stop. I knew he could hear me.

If Smogh gets any farther, there'll be nothing we can do. If you don't break this damn silence and do something, you'll end up eaten by the one person you hate most in this world.

Is this really how you want to go out? Answer me, Snow! I pushed harder and harder, resisting the hands that tried to eject me from Snow's body... until I finally touched his presence.

I couldn't put it into words—but it was a warm, gentle soul, unlike any other human.

Say something, you bastard. I sighed in irritation—then, for the first time, I heard his voice.

"I can't, Frey."

That was all he said.

"Can't? What the hell do you mean you can't?! Then who will?! Are you giving up before you even try?!" I barked back in anger, only for Snow to reply in a tone just as sharp.

"Before I try? I already did!"

"I fought with everything I had, but I was brought down with a single blow! I know I was born with talents far beyond my peers, but no matter how much I trained, I could never surpass my current level! I could never break the shackles wrapped around me!"

Snow let out a bitter, self-mocking laugh.

"Compared to me... look at you. With far less talent than I was born with, you've achieved power and greatness beyond anything I imagined. And now here you are, possessing my body somehow... there's nothing in this world you can't do, Frey."

Inside the corpse Smogh carried over his shoulder, a strange quarrel unfolded—one only the two of us could hear.

"Unlike me, you're used to breaking your limits. There's no chain in this world that can bind you. But me? I failed before the very first wall placed in front of me. So what's the point in trying?" Snow's voice dripped with bitter sarcasm.

"You are Frey Starlight, the great one. So just move forward and save me, isn't that why you came here and took my body in the first place?"

His words left a silence between us for a moment.

That was when I finally understood what Snow had been carrying inside.

Just as I had trained relentlessly over the past eight months... so had he.

But while my power had soared, his had remained stagnant, no matter what he did.

He had the talent. He had the potential. He had everything... but he could never grow stronger.

It must have eaten away at him, watching me fight in this war—someone with far less talent—while I left him miles behind.

His weakness, his helplessness, had driven him into this pitiful state I'd never seen him in before.

I stayed quiet for a while, then finally opened my mouth.

"You're right, Snow. I came here with the intention of saving you."

That had been my purpose when I possessed his body.

"But as you've seen with your own eyes... I failed miserably."

"I'm not the great, unstoppable force you think I am. Just like you, I'm struggling to shake off shackles and chains that have been gnawing at my soul for a long time. And no matter what I do... I keep failing."

Maybe that was why I understood Snow's desire to give up—because I was the same.

We had both suffered in different ways, but in ways that were eerily similar.

The only difference was that I had the System constantly feeding me hints... but Snow didn't. So I had to take on that role myself.

"Snow... those shackles that have kept you from moving forward—they're just barriers placed before you because you don't know your true self. You don't know your origin. You don't know what you really are."

As my soul began to glow, preparing to end the possession, I gave him one last push.

"What the hell... are you talking about?" He couldn't understand, but I understood him.

Chapter 543: A Predator's Smile (3)

"I told you before, didn't I? Back when we faced each other in the Victoriad... we're two sides of the same coin. Both of us ignorant of our origins... ignorant of our true nature in this world."

"Sword training. Absorbing Aura. Practicing combat techniques. Drinking elixirs. These are all methods for humans to train—the human path that allows them to grow stronger over time."

"But Snow... neither you nor I are truly human. Or rather... only part of us is human." I said it calmly, as if it were the most obvious truth, but Snow was shaken to the core, unable to even form words.

"The ordinary methods of human training will get you nowhere from now on, Snow. Those are the shackles you could never break—human limits."

Such methods only worked for those who were purely human.

But for me—and for Snow—that path had ended.

I'd reached my strength by following the Blood Path of Nameless, the most fitting route for me since I was made to be his vessel.

But Snow... he had never found his path, leaving him lost in darkness.

"I'm not qualified to tell you the whole truth, Snow, especially since your body is far more complicated than mine. You have a human side... and other sides as well. A side from beings far beyond human comprehension."

Unfortunately, I couldn't help him when it came to Lightbearers.

But I could give him another kind of hint.

"Don't forget, Snow... the same blood of that bastard runs in your veins. You know what that means, don't you?"

Besides his human side, and the otherworldly essence he carried...

There was a third, invasive element inside him—one he was very much aware of. He had been conscious when all that demonic blood was injected into him.

That was why Snow was so much more complicated than me—he was a storm of chaos bound together in one body.

"Get up, Snow. This isn't the hero I know."

As my consciousness slowly faded from his mind, I spoke my final words to him.

"You are not Snow Lionheart the human, nor the Church's hero... nor Kazis Valerion's heir. You are far greater than that. So don't fall in a place like this... the hero I once wrote about would never fall so easily."

I couldn't see his face now—this place we spoke in was nothing but a formless, colorless spiritual space.

But I had given him all I could give.

Whether he lived or died... whether he rose or fell...

It was all in his hands now. Only he could pull himself out of this.

And I prayed he would... as my body was pulled away.

[Possession Canceled]

"Good luck... Snow."

...

...

...

—Snow Lionheart's POV—

For what felt like endless seconds... maybe minutes, I just stood there, staring into the dark void before me.

The place where Frey had vanished... after spitting out his cryptic nonsense, only deepening my confusion.

I chuckled faintly, even as Smogh carried my body further and further away.

"What the hell are you talking about, Frey? You tell me I'm not human... then just leave, saying you're not 'qualified' to tell me the truth? Go to hell, bastard. That's not even funny."

I cursed under my breath, trapped alone in the emptiness of my own mind.

"But at least... I've finally started to see the color of these chains."

I stared at the shackles coiled tightly around my body.

For the first time... I could see their color.

The reason I couldn't grow stronger no matter how much I tried... was because the human path no longer suited me.

"If I'm not human... then what the hell am I? Why wouldn't you tell me, damn it, Frey?"

You throw me half the answer... and keep the other half for yourself?

There was no way for me to learn the truth now, and that burned me to the core.

But... that bastard did give me a different kind of answer.

"I don't know what difference this will make... but at the very least... I can stand again, and try once more."

Will it be another defeat? Or will I finally win?

I didn't know. But I was going to try.

"I'll unleash that ugly side... the side unfit for a hero. This is what you want, isn't it, Frey?"

I closed my eyes one last time... and stepped out from the darkness, into the light.

Outskirts of Old Yharnam

A certain man moved like a shadow, leaving behind the battlefield raging between the Empire and the Ultras.

Carrying Snow's body over his shoulder, he made it his priority to get as far away as possible—so he could begin his sick ritual, devouring the perfect prey he had let grow in solitude until now.

"By consuming the flesh and blood of the human destined to be the strongest... I'll gain the surge I need."

A twisted smile spread across Smogh's face as he moved forward, unable to wait any longer for the goal he had chased for countless years.

"You have no idea how long I've waited, Snow Lionheart."

Since the dawn of time, Smogh had wandered the earth.

He built orphanage after orphanage, gathering every kind of child with talent.

Some were destined to grow into the strongest... others, doomed to remain trash forever.

Among them, Smogh had always searched for the perfect human.

The one destined to reach heights no other could.

For those bound to the demoness Yosefka, strength only grew through the consumption of their own kind—human flesh and blood.

This was their demonic path.

The stronger and higher quality the flesh they consumed... the greater the power they gained.

In the distant past, his deputy— the woman Snow had once called his mother—Annalise, nearly ruined the plan when she couldn't resist her hunger and tried to eat Snow as a child.

But fortunately... the boy had exceeded all expectations, killing her with his own hands.

"You're the best there is, Snow. I can't wait until you and I... become one!" Smogh said with a sadistic grin.

But he froze—when he heard a voice right by his ear.

"Yeah... neither can I."

The moment those cursed words reached him, blood sprayed before his eyes, accompanied by the sound of a vicious bite.

Pain tore through him, forcing him to drop Snow's body without thinking.

Staggering back, sweat rolling down his face, Smogh clutched his shoulder—blood pouring freely from it.

In front of him... Snow slowly rose to his feet, having just thrown him off.

Blood dripped down Snow's chin... as he chewed something in his mouth.

"You taste like the rotten guts of a pig that's been dead for days... and your blood... like old motor oil with a foul metallic aftertaste. Ugh... disgusting."

Smogh's face twisted as the realization hit him.

"You... you ate my flesh."

"That's right." Snow's bloodstained grin widened.

"The blood of the demoness Yosefka flows in my veins... just like yours, right? Which means... I'll grow stronger... when I eat your filthy flesh! Isn't that right?!" Snow roared, summoning the Vermithor.

He had taken a massive bite from Smogh's shoulder—and despite the vile taste...

Snow's body welcomed the flesh, strength surging into his veins.

Alongside the human path... Snow had finally found another way to grow stronger.

Chapter 544: A Predator's Smile (4)

Fueled by the power now healing his body, he lunged at Smogh, unleashing the War King's Form.

Holy power... and newfound demonic might.

Inside Snow's body, the two clashed violently—sending waves of agonizing pain through him.

But Snow Lionheart didn't care about pain anymore. After all his wandering... he had finally broken the shackles, even if only a little.

He could keep moving forward.

"I can become stronger than I am now!"

He had found the way.

"This is what you meant... isn't it, Frey!"

Snow roared madly as he clashed with Smogh.

The latter unleashed his power, coating his body in the same iron-like material of extreme hardness.

"I won't let this happen again."

Smogh launched dozens of cannon-like punches, each one met by Snow's blade.

The War King's Stance had already pushed Snow's body to its very limits, but this time, he chose to wield the element of darkness—

an element he had rarely used in battle.

"We'll see about that."

Smogh had turned his body into a walking tank; there was no chance for Snow to repeat what he had done before.

But this battle was already nothing like their previous clash.

As if he had been waiting for this moment for a long time, Snow's body began to absorb the demonic power at an alarmingly dangerous rate—

and the strength he gained was far from insignificant.

Humans contracted to the Ultras grew stronger by consuming demonic blood, and as a result, many powerful beings had emerged—lords and Hollows alike.

They were the rare humans whose bodies could withstand such blood.

And now, the most gifted human in recorded history spread his arms, accepting and embracing that blood in full.

The result... was truly horrifying.

SLAASH!!!

Vermithor , now wreathed in a suffocating mass of dark aura, had become the very embodiment of a Reaper.

Smogh didn't even realize how it happened—

his titanic fists, his armored body...

Every inch of him had been carved with hundreds of cuts from Snow's blade.

"What's wrong? Didn't you say this wouldn't happen again?!"

SLAASH!!

In a blur of speed and unimaginable force—

Snow severed Smogh's right arm with a single swing.

Void Step.

Using his technique, Snow vanished from before Smogh and reappeared some distance away, gripping the severed arm in his own hands.

"Thanks for the free meat."

Without hesitation, Snow began devouring the arm like a wild beast—nothing human in his movements.

Smogh, watching the scene, felt a sickening realization claw at him.

"I... me, of all people... being eaten?!"

That truth alone was enough to make the Hollow snap.

He no longer cared.

Smogh unleashed his full strength, intent on killing his opponent outright.

"To hell with the ritual... I'll kill you and eat you right here, right now!"

From his massive frame, torrents of black matter poured forth, swelling his body at a monstrous pace.

From the stump of his severed arm, a new limb sprouted; his body swelled into a giant so large his shadow completely engulfed Snow.

Around him, dozens of black iron spikes erupted through the air, tearing through the void toward Snow.

But Snow had already finished eating the arm.

In the next heartbeat, he was gone, dodging the spikes that ripped the earth apart where he'd been standing.

Surging forward, trails of black aura streaked behind him—

Snow Lionheart circled Smogh's massive form, unleashing dozens of colossal slashes that tore into him.

"What now? Did you give me even more meat to work with? I appreciate it!" Snow mocked, only to be met with a rocket-like punch that sent him flying hundreds of meters.

Smogh leapt after him instantly, blotting out the ground below with his shadow.

"Massacre Dive!"

From above, hundreds of shadowy, berserk fists rained down like meteors, each packed with overwhelming power.

The assault resembled a meteor shower consuming the earth.

But Snow tore through the void itself, cutting down every incoming fist until his blade finally reached Smogh's massive body.

He carved through the hardened flesh with terrifying ease, leaving a bloody trail along Smogh's frame before appearing high above him in the sky.

Terrified by his opponent's strength, Smogh let out a beastly roar, unleashing all his aura into a roaring, sky-devouring beam of darkness.

"DIE!!!"

The raging beam slammed into Snow head-on, engulfing him completely—

Snow Lionheart, gripping his sword aimed at Smogh's neck, smiled wide.

He didn't care that his skin and flesh were evaporating under the attack, exposing bone in multiple places.

Pouring all his power into his blade, Snow unleashed a force so great it split Smogh's beam into four directions.

"One-Sword Style: Supreme Skill."

Drunk on his newfound strength, Snow finally released the strike he'd been unable to before—

"Infernal Ascension."

The heavens themselves ignited in blinding white light, coiling around a titanic shadow.

Channeling it all into his blade, Snow descended like a falling star, cleaving through Smogh's beam with effortless finality.

The Hollow screamed with all his might, desperate to repel his foe—

but Snow crashed into him, driving Vermithor deep into his flesh.

The impact hurled both of them downward at tremendous speed, their clash shaking the skies as they smashed into the ground.

The explosion overturned the land itself, swallowing them in a chasm of dust and ruin.

On that cursed day, the Ultras' continent suffered yet another quake as the war reached its blood-drenched peak.

Through the haze and devastation, one sword gleamed from afar—Vermithor, buried deep in the Hollow Smogh's neck.

The Hollow lay broken, unable to move, unable even to try removing the blade that pinned him.

Through Vermithor's power, he was completely bound.

Then, from behind, came the sound of footsteps...

Snow had fallen nearby as well, his body battered to the brink—

but he could still move.

And he was walking toward his opponent.

No.

Toward his prey.

Snow's eyes, the way he looked at him...

Smogh knew it well—

They were the eyes of a predator set on devouring its catch.

"No! Don't come!"

Smogh screamed, struggling to move—

but it was useless.

Vermithor's weight kept him crushed to the ground.

"You wanted to eat me, didn't you?" Snow said, gripping Smogh's face and slamming it into the dirt.

"You wanted to consume me—so why show me that face now, when I'm about to do the same to you?"

"No... NO!!" Smogh cried, thrashing uselessly.

"Lady Yosefka! Please! Give me strength!!!"

He sobbed without pause, but no one answered his call.

"It's no use. There's no one here but us," Snow replied with a chilling smile.

"All this time... I've lost, and lost, and lost again..."

"But today I've won. And from this day on..."

"I will win, and win, and win again. I will never lose again. So bear witness to my words... Smogh."

Those were the last words the Hollow ever heard—

before Snow Lionheart devoured him whole.

Chapter 545: No Victor, Only Ashes (1)

The Battle of the Fog.

That was the name given to the clash between the Empire and the nightmare creatures unleashed by the Ultras.

On the Empire's side, the soldiers suffered bitterly against the Mist Crawlers and other predatory beasts—creatures of overwhelming strength that no ordinary fighter could hope to survive against.

As expected, countless soldiers fell, and only a rare few managed to make it out alive.

And even for that small number, their survival had little to do with their own skill or power—it was thanks to the sudden intervention of Oliver Khan and his personal army.

The appearance of the Great Guardian of the Imperial Palace played a decisive role in suppressing and annihilating the nightmare creatures, ensuring that the Empire did not emerge from the battle in total defeat.

In the end, after long, grueling hours of brutal combat, they managed to wipe out every last nightmare beast. But Oliver's forces had also paid a steep price...

As the magical fog cast by those creatures finally dissipated, everyone could at last lay eyes upon the massacre that surrounded them.

Here, thousands of humans had been slain in the blink of an eye ..gone before their comrades even realized what had happened.

That fog had stolen their senses, stolen their grasp on reality itself. Fighting nightmare creatures was nothing like fighting humans...

The Empire had "won" the Battle of the Mist, but at a cost so great Oliver Khan doubted they could truly bear it.

The Great Guardian moved through the battlefield, checking the survivors—especially those under Snow Lionheart's command, who had been fighting since the very beginning.

The number of survivors from that unit was painfully small, and even the lucky ones had suffered injuries that would keep them from fighting further, even if they wanted to.

But the real surprise was this: the ones in the best condition weren't hardened veterans—they were young men and women who hadn't even reached the age of twenty.

Among them, Oliver recognized the son of Mist—Ghost Umbra—the witch Selina, and Dawn Polaris.

The three of them looked relatively unscathed, especially Dawn, who was so clean that anyone seeing him would never believe he'd just fought in a war.

It seemed the three had already noticed Oliver, as they greeted him with respectful nods.

"It's an honor to fight alongside the Great Guardian,"

said Dawn Polaris with a bow ..only for Oliver to stop him at once.

"There's no need for formalities. We are all soldiers fighting for the same cause."

Oliver was genuinely considerate, yet Ghost and the others could not read his true feelings at all, as his face remained hidden behind his mask.

"Since you're in the best condition among your comrades, I want you to brief me on the current situation. What exactly happened here? Where is your commander? And most importantly... where is Frey Starlight?"

There was a third name Oliver wished to ask about, but he stopped himself at the last second—assuming she would be with Frey.

The current state of the war was complete chaos. Every Imperial unit had been attacked simultaneously.

To make matters worse, Phoenix Sunlight—one of their strongest fighters—had abandoned his unit without warning, leaving everything behind.

And then there were those terrifying fluctuations of aura Oliver had sensed from afar ..an amount of power unlike anything he had ever felt before.

If things continued at this pace, it would not be impossible for the war to end far sooner than anyone anticipated.

With that in mind, it was critical to gather every fighter still capable of battle and reinforce those holding the vanguard in the most violent fronts.

Ghost Umbra took it upon himself to explain the current situation, and the more details he revealed, the wider Oliver's eyes grew.

Snow Lionheart had fought Cosmos, and both had vanished during the battle...

Sansa Valerion had faced the Eight-Limbed Lady alone...

And Frey Starlight had stood face-to-face with Dragoth, the Human Demon himself...

Three youths of the new generation, each pitted against ancient monsters that had roamed and terrorized the world for centuries.

Those facts alone were enough for Oliver Khan to rally the troops immediately, taking as many able-bodied soldiers as he could, and charging directly toward the locations of these prodigies who had shouldered the heaviest burdens of the war alone.

The situation was far from in their favor. Oliver Khan was the only first-tier combatant present ..there was no one else capable of matching an SS-class opponent.

Yet, to his surprise, the youngest among them ..Ghost and Selina ..were the first to volunteer to accompany him.

As they crossed the barren lands of the Ultras together, Oliver found his gaze drifting toward them from time to time...

'The greatest generation in the history of the Empire... warriors capable of surpassing their rank and displaying strength far beyond their level—all thanks to the talents and gifts they were born with '

' An assassin whose strikes can harm opponents above his rank. A witch who can multiply her power by inscribing spells upon her own body. A duelist with a miraculous ability to survive anything thrown at him.'

And these were only the simplest examples.

There was also Snow Lionheart ..the most gifted human in history, blessed beyond compare.

Sansa Valerion ..the only human to fully transform into a demon.

A terrifying prince who held the strings of everything in his grasp.

And Frey Starlight—the miracle destined to surpass his own father.

No matter how Oliver thought about it, no matter how many scenarios he ran through in his mind, he came to the same conclusion:

If not for this extraordinary generation, the Empire would have already fallen long ago. The scales had never once been even between them and their enemies.

That was why the Ultras had tried to kill them all when they were abducted—the enemy knew these were not talents to be allowed to live.

'No matter the cost, these children must survive. If they continue to grow at this pace, they will be the beacon of humanity'

With a generation like this, it was not unthinkable for humanity to one day reach the same level as the First Generation that had fought the original war against the demons...

No—perhaps they would even surpass them.

Oliver Khan had already made up his mind.

He would protect them with everything he had.

That resolve was the thought that stayed with him throughout the entire march, as they advanced together in search of their missing comrades.

It was only a matter of seconds before everyone froze in place—heads and eyes locked in the same direction, staring in awe, unable to comprehend what they were seeing.

Far ahead, several dozen kilometers away... they caught sight of it.

The corpse of a colossal monster that had struck fear into the hearts of mankind for countless years.

A creature spoken of by mothers in bedtime horrors, a living legend untouchable by mortals...

The Eight-Limbed Lady ..a being so vast her size dwarfed the tallest mountains—now lay dead, her massive body impaled by an enormous spear stretching hundreds of meters into the sky.

A black spear, forged from shadow that burned like black fire.

It stood tall and unyielding, hoisting the corpse of one of the Lords of Nightmare as though it were nothing.

All around it, a vast expanse of earth had been reduced to nothing but wreckage and ruin.

A crater more than ten miles across stretched in every direction, silently narrating the savage battle that had taken place here.

"One of the Lords of Nightmare... has fallen," Oliver Khan murmured, unable to grasp the reality before his eyes.

As they drew closer, Oliver and his men felt the Eight-Limbed Lady's blood pooling around their boots—the sheer volume spilling from her was enough to form a thick, red lake.

The nearer they came, the more overwhelming the sight became. The monster's body completely blotted out the sky.

And yet, as their eyes traced the shadow of that monstrous corpse, their thoughts drifted elsewhere ..to the one responsible for this bloody masterpiece.

The demoness who had conjured that towering spear of shadow.

Chapter 546: No Victor, Only Ashes (2)

The battlefield itself told a story. The destruction here far surpassed even the carnage of the Battle of the Mist.

It was hard to believe this was the result of a single battle—one against one.

The Eight-Limbed Lady was dead. But there was no sign of Aura. No trace of Sansa.

Signs that led most to believe she too had perished in the fight.

But Oliver Khan refused to accept that.

The Great Guardian found himself running across the battlefield, searching desperately.

Under rocks and rubble, above ground and beneath it...

He scoured every inch, the truth sinking in with every step.

What would he do... if she truly was gone?

Sansa Valerion—his only family—whom he had so carelessly cast aside not long ago.

What if she was dead, no longer in this world?

Most wouldn't care. To them, her death would mean nothing more than the end of another filthy demon—a monster unworthy of living among them.

But was that how Oliver Khan felt?

"Of course not!"

He dug through the debris, his arms and hands trembling.

Did I ever apologize to her... for treating her like a monster? His crimson eyes shook uncontrollably.

When Alon tried to kill her... what did I do for her?

Nothing.

Nothing at all. He had stood frozen, doing nothing, stunned by her demonic transformation. If not for the prince suggesting her life be spared, Sir Alon might have killed her on the spot.

Was her transformation enough of a reason for him to turn away, to stand idle?

She must have suffered immensely, behind that devilish smile she showed to the world.

Sansa Valerion had endured a lifetime of torment from her demonic power. Her transformation could only have deepened that agony.

She must have suffered in silence, hiding all her pain behind those acts of hers.

She had borne every disgusted gaze—eyes that saw nothing but a beast that deserved death.

And among the countless faces in that crowd, Oliver Khan had been standing at the front, taking his seat among them.

Instead of standing beside her... instead of protecting her... I was the one who hurt her the most.

When pain comes from a stranger, it wounds. But when it comes from someone close, it destroys.

And for Sansa Valerion, Oliver Khan had always been the closest.

The Great Guardian realized this too late—here, on a battlefield that could well be her grave.

From beneath the mask hiding his face... drops began to fall.

Tears Oliver Khan had believed long dried.

"I haven't told her anything yet... I haven't atoned for what I did to her!"

Sometimes, realization only comes when it's already too late.

Oliver Khan couldn't bear it—couldn't imagine seeing her lifeless body.

If she died, she would die believing she had been nothing but a burn mark on his heart until the end.

That was a sin the Great Guardian could not carry. So he kept digging, tearing through the ruins, ignoring the soldiers with him who tried to stop him.

"It must be easy for you... to turn your backs and leave, no matter if she's dead or alive..."

They hadn't cared about her in the slightest. In fact, they would have preferred her gone—welcomed it.

"That's cruel..."

Truly cruel. Some of those present were the very soldiers who had fought beside her—the same soldiers Sansa had fought the Eight-Limbed Lady to save.

"If Sansa Valerion hadn't stood her ground here against the Eight-Limbed Lady, then you would have been the ones forced to face that monstrous abomination," Oliver said sharply, his voice carrying a barely contained fury.

Most of those present unconsciously turned their heads toward the gargantuan corpse in the distance...

Had fate dealt them that battle instead, it wasn't hard to imagine the outcome.

It would have been nothing but a massacre .. a one-sided slaughter.

There wasn't a single person among them capable of fighting a creature like that.

Instead of one Lord of Nightmare, they would have been facing two... if not for her.

They owed her their lives—yet not a single one of them seemed moved. It was as if she hadn't chosen to protect them, but had been obligated to.

"She's a demon. This is the least she can do, considering we allowed her to live within the Empire's walls."

"We're human. She's not. We're not equals."

"Dying to save us is better for her than living to bring death to everyone around her."

From scattered corners, soldiers muttered, spitting their venom into the air—every word reaching Oliver Khan's ears.

They truly didn't care whether she lived or died.

To them, she was nothing more than a cursed demon, no different from the enemy they were fighting.

But they had conveniently forgotten that she had once been just a human girl—flesh and blood like them.

What happened to her could have happened to any one of them.

Sansa hadn't asked for a demonic seed to be placed inside her body. She hadn't asked to become a demon. She had been forced into it.

It was a fate any of them could have shared.

And yet, every last citizen of the Empire had been too blind to see this truth.

Looking at them one by one, Oliver finally recognized the poison hidden in their eyes.

'Sansa... did I really look at you with the same poisoned gaze?'

Not long ago, Oliver Khan had possessed those same eyes.

Sansa Valerion had always been a sensitive girl—one gifted with the ability to sense the emotions of others. There was no way she hadn't noticed.

Which meant... she had gone into that fight believing, to her last breath, that he still carried that poison in his eyes.

That was a cruel truth—and an ending far too unworthy for someone who had suffered for so long.

Now Oliver Khan was left with the certainty that he would carry this guilt for the rest of his life.

Sometimes, realization comes only after it's too late.

But Oliver was fortunate—Ghost Umbra's sudden call had given him another chance.

Ghost was one of the few who had actively searched for her alongside him. He knew how much Sansa meant to Frey, regardless of Oliver's feelings.

And because she, too, was a manipulator of shadows like him, he had been able to pinpoint her location after some effort.

Oliver sprinted without hesitation, treating Ghost's signal as if it were a sign from the heavens.

He ran like a madman as the assassin led the way—and within moments, they reached her.

Sansa was buried deep underground; the final clash between her and the Eight-Limbed Lady had torn the earth apart, swallowing her whole. But her shadows had shielded her until the very end.

Before Oliver's eyes, and before all those who had followed...

She sat quietly, encased in a cocoon of black threads that had sprouted from her back ..like a broken butterfly, dark and solitary, yet beautiful and cold.

The cocoon of shadow had crawled over and under the earth, holding it at bay to keep it from collapsing on her.

Her body was riddled with wounds, bleeding black blood that made some recoil in disgust.

But of all those present, Oliver Khan didn't care in the slightest about the color of her blood. He ran straight to her, clutching her cold body and pulling her into his arms.

As if she had been waiting for that, the cocoon slowly unraveled, letting her fall gently into the arms of the Great Guardian.

Holding her, drenched in her blood, Oliver's breath caught in horror at the sight of her back ..

There was nothing there but a vast, gaping, blood-filled hole from which the shadows poured.

Chapter 547: No Victor, Only Ashes (3)

Staring into that abyss in shock, he heard a soft whisper at his ear.

"Don't worry... my shadows won't hurt me. They... are my companion... and my ally in my loneliness."

Sansa's lips formed a faint smile, fragile and tired.

Hearing her voice, Oliver Khan could no longer contain himself.

"I'm sorry, Sansa... I'm sorry... sorry for everything."

The Great Guardian's words trembled, breaking as he repeated his apology over and over, holding her tighter.

Sansa, with what little consciousness she had left, hadn't expected to hear that. Slowly turning her head, she touched his face...

Specifically, his eyes.

One glance was all it took for tears to form at the corners of her own.

Because what she saw there, between the gaps of that mask, were not the eyes she despised ..

But the eyes of the man who had been by her side for most of her life.

The same man who had once tried to sacrifice himself for her.

"Uncle... Oliver, I..." She tried to speak his name, to say something—anything—but consciousness left her before she could.

She had fainted. But the final expression on her face allowed Oliver's heart to ease, if only a little.

It was a peaceful face... with a pure, sincere smile Sansa had not shown since her transformation into a demon.

She hadn't heard his reply, but it felt as though his emotions had reached her. And in that, Oliver found a sliver of redemption.

Perhaps Sansa was still hated and scorned by all of humanity.

But today, she had gained another person she could lean on ..besides Frey Starlight.

Oliver Khan... the only family Sansa had ever relied on in her entire life.

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The moment the search began, the Imperial forces led by Oliver Khan officially confirmed the death of the Eight-Limbed Lady—slain by none other than Sansa Valerion.

With that, she became only the second Lord of Nightmare the Empire had successfully killed since Abraham Starlight...

But Oliver and his men's work was far from over. The Champion of the Church and the Champion of the Victoriad were still missing, leaving them no choice but to press on with the search.

They moved quickly, led by the Great Guardian himself, who carried his niece in his arms with complete responsibility.

Her wounds were healing on their own, meaning her life was not in danger... yet still...

Oliver held her carefully, allowing no one to come near her.

And so, they continued forward.

After some time, they finally discovered signs of Snow Lionheart's battle against the Cosmos.

From the blood spilled on the ground and the bisected corpse of a Nightmare creature they found, they couldn't be certain of the battle's outcome...

Which meant they had no choice but to keep searching.

It would be a disaster if the crowned Champion of the Church had fallen so easily ..unlike what happened with Sansa.

This time, most present showed genuine concern.

Snow Lionheart was the ideal image of the promised hero—the most perfect of men, to the point where some called him flawless.

He was bright and dazzling, unlike that filthy, dark demoness.

They were determined to save him, no matter the cost. Their eyes shone with anticipation and a fierce will to fight for his sake.

But all of that dissolved instantly the moment Oliver Khan and his group arrived at a certain place...

Much like the battlefield where Sansa had fought the Eight-Limbed Lady, the destruction here was no less in scale—proof that another terrifying battle had taken place.

Yet the gaze of every single person present locked onto one spot.

A grotesque corpse lay there—its body torn apart, more than half of it devoured.

And atop that corpse sat a certain young man, chewing on human flesh... drinking its filthy blood.

He looked feral, his entire body smeared with blood, yet his golden eyes were unmistakable.

They recognized him instantly—and that only deepened their confusion and dread.

The only sounds in the air were the wet chewing and the crunch of teeth—until Oliver Khan broke the silence.

"...What are you doing, Snow Lionheart?" he asked hesitantly, drawing Snow's attention. The young man turned toward them, his mouth dripping with tainted blood.

"Ah, my apologies. I didn't notice you there."

Climbing down from Smogh's corpse, Snow walked toward them, wiping his mouth.

Neither Oliver nor Ghost knew what to say in such a situation.

Everything before them was in utter chaos.

Oliver decided to ask the most obvious question.

"What exactly happened here? And what the hell were you doing just now?"

Meeting Oliver's gaze, Snow replied with complete nonchalance.

"I took care of the Cosmos, but as soon as my fight with the Lord of Nightmare ended, the Hollow known as Smogh attacked me. Taking him down drained me completely—so I had to eat and recover my strength." Snow spoke as though this were the most natural thing in the world.

Yet every word that left his lips struck the listeners like a thunderclap.

Snow Lionheart had achieved a great feat—slaying both a Lord of Nightmare and one of the Hollows—but none of them could ignore the final part of his explanation.

"Eat... to recover your strength..." Oliver echoed, while the soldiers whispered among themselves, questioning the sight before them.

In his blood-soaked state, his body battered from countless battles...

Snow Lionheart looked far more monstrous and vile than Sansa Valerion, the one they called a demoness.

They had come expecting to rescue their pure, untainted hero—only to be met with a man who devoured human flesh and drank its blood.

Snow seemed irritated, muttering in complaint.

"I thought I could finish his whole body... but I couldn't get past half. How pathetic."

The Snow Lionheart before them no longer seemed in his right mind.

He was more like a beast—blinded by the power and the path he had just opened for himself.

A filthy path through which he could increase his strength in a way he had never been able to before...

But no matter how they looked at him, Snow's current state was unfit for the image of a hero—and what he was doing was undeniably wrong.

Even if consuming the flesh of his own kind made him stronger, it was not a path that should ever be walked.

At that moment, neither Snow Lionheart nor those around him noticed the filthy, demonic eyes watching from above...

The eyes of a cursed demoness who had survived on the flesh and blood of her own kind.

Snow Lionheart had awakened his demonic side ..in other words...

He had become a contracted human, just like the Ultras.

And demonic contracts always placed humans at the mercy of the demon they bound themselves to.

For that reason alone, Yosefka's shadows crept silently toward the promised hero, eager to make him her slave ..

A superhuman slave, far surpassing all his peers.

But the moment Yosefka's shadows tried to touch his body, a great light burst forth from deep within Snow ..

A holy light that burned the demoness's shadows and crushed them with an overwhelming power.

The power radiating from Snow Lionheart was utterly antithetical to demons and their dark arts. Yet, in some inexplicable way, it did not reject that strength—it embraced it, weaving it seamlessly into Snow's own might.

As it welcomed that power, Snow's light pushed away the demoness's chains that had been trying to coil around him.

And so, without even realizing it, Snow Lionheart shattered his demonic contract. He became a free contractor—fully liberated, with the absolute freedom to wield his power however he desired.

Chapter 548: No Victor, Only Ashes (4)

"We need to move. The real battle is still raging elsewhere as we speak," Snow said, turning toward a specific direction.

"I can sense an overwhelming aura emanating from over there... most likely, our main forces are locked in a life-or-death struggle against the enemy's leaders. I was planning to head there as soon as I'd recovered my strength, but now that you're here, we can go together."

"Wait. If what you're saying is true, there's no point in bringing the others," Oliver replied, handing Sansa over to Ghost and his men.

"It'll be just you and me."

Snow gave a slight nod.

"No objections. I think it's better that way."

In a battle of that scale, bringing along ordinary soldiers was pointless—they'd be annihilated before they even got close.

Oliver Khan was the bare minimum in terms of strength to participate.

Once they had made their decision, they prepared to move out immediately and join that final battle.

But just as they took their first step forward, they froze.

Every single one of them felt it—an overwhelming, crushing pressure descending upon them.

Their eyes turned skyward, only to be blinded by an immense, divine light that swallowed everything in its path, heralding the beginning of the true Disaster.

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— Frey Starlight's Pov —

The battle had devolved into complete chaos...

Collapsed at the fringes of the destruction's epicenter, I forced my battered body to knit itself back together, desperate to rejoin the fight as soon as possible.

Before my eyes, the fiercest battle of this entire war was unfolding.

Ser Allon.

Maekar Valerion.

Phoenix Sunlight.

Against Beatrice.

Belith, Demon of Rank 18.

Gavid Lindman.

And Mergo.

Seven SS+ monsters tearing into each other with savage abandon, destroying one another with everything they had.

Thanks to my earlier rampage against the Ultras, I had managed to heavily weaken their side, allowing ours to hold out and fight them on even terms so far.

But now... the battle's direction had become unpredictable. There was no telling how it would end.

They had all gone mad ..striking wildly, relentlessly, without restraint.

Phoenix clashed with Belith in a contest of raw might—the demon's overwhelming physique against Phoenix's flames that had turned the world into an inferno.

Beatrice faced Maekar Valerion, who pursued her relentlessly, raining down thousands of colossal spears and bolts of lightning.

Meanwhile, Ser Allon fought both Gavid Lindman and Mergo alone, providing support to the others whenever he could.

The fight was pure chaos, and both sides had suffered grievous losses.

This could very well be the decisive battle between the Ultras and the Empire. Whoever emerged victorious here would shape the war's outcome in their favor.

Knowing this, I strained every muscle, forcing my broken body forward. If I could just make it back into the fray... even a small contribution might tip the scales.

The clash had reached a level of madness I had never witnessed before.

Auras collided without pause.

The ground quaked again and again.

Blood poured in rivers—both crimson and foul black.

This was a battle to the death. There was no retreat.

Gripping the rubble for support, I dragged myself forward, step by step.

"We have to win this... no matter what it costs."

If we lost here, how could we ever hope to face those even stronger enemies lurking in the shadows?

"No matter what it takes... we must win!"

I had always trusted only in my own strength...

But for the first time in a long while, I placed my trust elsewhere ..

Maekar.

Phoenix.

Allon.

"Don't you dare lose..."

The moment I whispered those words, it was as if they had heard me.

The battle erupted in a final, cataclysmic surge.

They all unleashed everything they had left. Until the very end, they tore into each other without mercy.

I couldn't hear their voices, but their auras told me everything.

"Just a little longer..."

"They can't hold out much more—just a bit longer and they'll fall!"

"Fight! Harder! More savage!"

"Tear them apart! Kill them all!"

It was as if their thoughts and emotions were bleeding into me.

The fight had reached its absolute peak... and the result was moments away from being decided.

I couldn't tear my gaze away. My chest burned with anticipation, desperate to see the outcome.

"Will we win? Will we lose? What's going to happen...?"

I asked that question... and I wished I hadn't.

At the peak of the battle—at the very final moment that was about to decide the outcome ..

Whether it was me or the seven SS+ monsters locked in combat...

We all froze in place the moment that overwhelming, suffocating pressure descended, forcing me down onto one knee.

A crushing, terrifying power that surpassed everyone present.

The sky above us blazed with light, and something ominous descended slowly from it, gazing down upon us.

"What the hell is going on?!?"

Everyone shouted at once, staring through blood-filled eyes toward that descending figure.

"This..."

"An... angel?!?"

The word slipped from my mouth as I stared at that colossal being—eight wings unfurled, radiating a divine aura.

A white halo stretched from its back, and its skin was so pale it resembled sculpted marble.

But the pressure it exuded was no joke.

Both the Empire and the Ultras...

Each side glared at the other with bloodshot eyes, trying to figure out who was responsible for summoning such a thing.

Yet a single glance was enough to tell—the one intervening this time was a third force.

Completely separate powers.

Only a few moments passed before the voice that would answer all our questions echoed across the battlefield.

"O demons who dared defy the will of the Blessed Lord of Light... In my name and in the name of the Holy Church! I, Archbishop Joseph Blatier, hereby declare that I shall lead the purge of all our enemies!"

"Blatier?!!" Sir Alone roared in anger, as the entire world began to realize the church's true intentions.

"They've been waiting for this exact moment... the moment when both sides have crushed each other to their weakest point..."

Realizing what was happening, I immediately tried to sense Blatier's location, but he was nowhere to be found—only his voice was present, along with that ominous angel above us.

"People of the Empire, demons of the Ultras ..mark my words and engrave them in your memory, for some of you will hear them as the last thing in your lives... and for others, they will be a warning."

Across different parts of the world... flocks of strange angels emerged from nothing, flying high and releasing their ominous auras.

They were smaller than the one looming over us, but their numbers were terrifying.

Faced with this unprecedented intervention, we all stood frozen, looking up, as Blatier continued speaking.

"Number 1 on the Purge List: the Ultras."

At his words, the angels above all the Upper Blood Cities flared their eyes with light.

"Number 2 on the Purge List: the Valerion family."

Above the royal palace in Belgrad, and the command headquarters where most of the royal family ..and Ada Starlight alongside the other war leaders ..were gathered...

"Number 3 on the Purge List: the Starlight family."

Before the eastern Oklas Mountains, where the Starlight family's main stronghold stood, and in scattered locations across the battlefield...

Those ominous angels manifested.

"By the authority granted to me by the Great Lord of Light... I sentence you to death—and to be erased from the annals of history!!"

Blatier gave the order ..and every single angel opened its mouth, a blinding light radiating from within.

Then, without warning... the catastrophe began.

From the heavens, divine shells rained down like relentless storms, annihilating everything beneath without mercy.

The royal family... the Starlight headquarters... the Upper Blood Cities...

All erased from existence by the burning fire of light.

And at the same time ..

The colossal angel above us, the strongest among them, opened its mouth wide... unleashing the very gates of hell upon us all.

With a purifying beam of light, everything turned to white and black as that devastating force swallowed us whole.

It was a calamity beyond words—one that left neither the Empire nor the Ultras as victors.

No side won that day...

We all lost ..in the most agonizing way possible.

Chapter 549: Between Shadow and Light (1)

War has never been an event whose course could truly be predicted.

There is no way for ordinary people to foresee a sudden, devastating turn of events.

When the war reached its peak, with the Empire and the Ultras shattering each other into ruin, a third force emerged, declaring its presence to the entire world.

The Church possessed enough power to stand alone as a completely separate force, exploiting the current state of exhaustion shared by both the Empire and the Ultras.

From nothingness, flocks of strange angels materialized, blotting out the sky over every wretched soul whose name had been marked on the Purge List.

With Plattier's message as the signal, the entire world heard his voice—a divine decree that marked the beginning of the cleansing.

As if they had been waiting for his command, the angels' eyes ignited with a blinding white light before they rained down their sacred fire upon the earth.

Aura bombardments fell without pause, burning and annihilating everything in their path. In mere seconds, the Starlight family's main estate and the royal fortress of House Valerion were reduced to ashes.

The sound of collapsing stone and tearing steel drowned out the screams of the unlucky souls caught within those holy flames.

Both the Starlights and the Valerions had sent their strongest warriors and soldiers to the frontlines of the war, leaving behind only women, children, the elderly, and the defenseless.

They had no means—none at all—of resisting such a ruthless assault.

The angels' power varied; aside from the colossal, towering angel that appeared before Frey and his companions, the rest were strong but not beyond the means of families like the Starlights and Valerions to handle.

But the timing was perfect, and the Church played its cards flawlessly.

In mere minutes, thousands of innocent lives were wiped out—condemned as guilty without any crime—only because some unknowable, unseen "divine will" had decreed it so, and the Church's followers were blind enough to obey without question.

Among the targeted sites, the primary command headquarters—where Ada and Carmen Starlight were stationed—was also struck, erased from existence along with everyone inside.

Some brave souls fought back against the angelic swarms, even managing to bring many of them down, but their efforts were in vain before such a coordinated assault.

Within moments, several areas inside the Empire's walls—places that had remained untouched by the horrors of war until now—were engulfed in flames.

The Empire's civilians were now forced into the war whether they wished it or not.

The lucky few spared by the cleansing fled to hide in their homes, peering out their windows at the angels soaring endlessly through the skies, hunting for more victims from the Purge List.

Their eyes functioned like unerring scanners, seeking out anyone connected to the Starlights or Valerions ..whether by blood or by the faintest tie.

Even if these people tried to hide among the crowds, the angels would pick them out instantly and slaughter them, even if it meant killing everyone nearby.

And so, most members of two of the Empire's great ruling houses—families that had reigned for centuries—were wiped out.

On the other side...

The Ultras fared far better, benefiting from the presence of their main forces nearby, allowing them to fight back and repel the assault.

The Imperians were there ..figures like V and Maria ..personally cutting down many of the attackers.

Even so, the higher Blood Cities suffered greatly, their losses heavy regardless of strength.

Perhaps what enraged them most was that their foes were not flesh and blood, but mechanical in nature ..destroyed completely the moment they were defeated.

The Blood Cities were not the only ones attacked; even the Empire's scattered armies stationed across the Ultras continent were struck by the fires of cleansing.

In the continent's western front—where most of the Valerion family resided—Aegon sat atop the corpse of one of the angels, prying into its secrets.

Around him, the Knights of the Round Table cleared the battlefield of the strange creatures that had attacked without warning.

They had been brought down thanks to the combined strength of Ivar Valerion and Luc Valerion ..the younger brothers of Emperor Maekar.

Aegon's forces had halted their advance for now, taking position in a closed mountain range, remaining on high alert in case of another strike.

Their formation was disciplined, their command wise, their warriors capable—so much so that their casualties were minimal. Out of the thirty thousand men who followed Aegon, only a few hundred had fallen.

Still, the prince was forced to halt, with both Ser Alon and Maekar Valerion far away, engaged in a decisive battle against the Ultras' elite.

Aegon examined the angel's corpse with unwavering interest, while Ivar—the current head of the Temple—stood nearby, holding a magic crystal that allowed him to communicate across the world.

One grim report after another poured in, describing the massacres wrought by the Church in their absence.

Their families had been slaughtered.

Their lands reduced to smoldering ruin.

Ivar Valerion was at the peak of his fury, his rage palpable ..manifested in the crackling arcs of electricity dancing around his body.

"Control yourself, Uncle Ivar. Losing your composure now won't help us," Aegon said, his tone calm, not even looking up at him.

The prince's focus never left the angel's corpse, prompting Ivar to step toward him in anger.

"Control myself? How can I, knowing that our family—centuries old—is facing extermination? We marched to war, blind to the serpents of the Church lying in wait behind us! Now they control the Empire entirely, meaning we have no home to return to! We are surrounded by enemies here in the Ultras continent, and more enemies await us in the Empire!"

"We don't know the state of our armies. We don't know the Church's true strength. We don't know the Ultras' current situation. We are in complete darkness—so tell me, Aegon, how exactly am I supposed to keep calm?"

"How can you remain so calm in a situation like this—knowing full well that the Empire you're so eager to rule is being annihilated?" Ivar demanded, his voice sharp.

Aegon answered with the same unshakable composure.

"There's no use crying over it, Uncle Ivar. The Church played their hand well. No one could have predicted they were hiding a weapon like this up their sleeve. They now have enough power to become a third force in this war. Considering their strength and the timing of their strike... this outcome was inevitable.

Or rather... I thought they would have caused far greater damage."

"If I were the one leading the Church, I would never have attacked now. I would have waited until the war between the Empire and the Ultras ended—then struck the victor directly. And this blind massacre they call 'cleansing' is foolish. It would be far better to keep some alive, use them as hostages, and bait those of us here into reckless action.

These are simple tactics—just one among countless worse scenarios," Aegon said with a faint smile.

"When you think about it that way, our current situation isn't all that bad. Uncle Ivar... we should be grateful to the Church for showing restraint."

Hearing Aegon's twisted logic, Ivar found himself at a loss for words.

No matter how he looked at their current position, to him it was catastrophic in every sense.

But the prince before him was so optimistic, he treated the situation as if it were a blessing. That way of thinking alone was enough for Ivar to regard his nephew as a madman.

"Tell me, Aegon..." Ivar's expression darkened, his words weighted by a certain possibility.

"You've always been the most perceptive among us—nothing that happens within the Empire's walls escapes your ears. And I doubt the Church is an exception. Are you truly telling me you knew nothing about this attack?"

This suspicion had taken root in Ivar's heart the moment he'd regained his composure. He was one of the few who knew the prince's true nature.

Aegon let out a quiet sigh at his uncle's accusation.

"Uncle Ivar, you're letting your imagination run wild..."

"I won't deny that I was aware of the Church's ambitions. But their hatred of us—and their desire to see us fall—was no secret. That's why my grandfather attacked them in the first place, isn't it?" Aegon asked, pressing his point.

"As I've already said, there was no way we could have known they possessed such a weapon. They deliberately lowered their heads to us and waited patiently for the perfect moment to strike... and that moment has come. That's all there is to it."

Aegon's words sounded convincing .. almost self-evident.

After all, Ivar himself was still shaken by the angels that had descended upon them out of nowhere.

Chapter 550: Between Shadow and Light (2)

That weapon was not made by human hands—that much was certain—which meant it was impossible for Aegon to have known about it beforehand.

Yes... that was the truth. And yet, for some reason...

Ivar Valerion could not rid himself of his doubts. He simply could not believe every word his nephew had just spoken.

The prince rose to his feet, his interest in the angel's corpse now spent.

"Tell the troops to prepare to move. We're leaving this place," Aegon ordered, prompting a frown from Ivar. Their current position was the most defensible if they were attacked again.

"Where are we headed?" Ivar asked.

Aegon answered with his usual smile.

"We're going to regroup with the rest of our soldiers... and prepare to strike back at the Church."

"Strike back? And how exactly do you intend to fight them in our current state?"

"It's quite simple. But first, we'll need some strong men to execute the plan... chief among them, Frey Starlight. He is the key."

In his mind, Aegon Valerion had already begun weaving the strategy that would bring the Church down.

The first step was to unite their forces with the soldiers fighting in the east.

Taking advantage of the fact that the Ultras had also been attacked by the Church, Aegon and his forces moved unhindered, following in the footsteps of Maekar Valerion and Ser Alon—both of whose fates remained unknown to this hour.

No one knew what had happened on the fiercest battlefield—where the strongest of each side had clashed—until that angel had appeared in the end, suppressing them all without exception.

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The cleansing had begun all at once, as thousands of winged angels swept across the entire world.

But for the main battlefield, only a single angel was needed.

A towering angel radiating a sacred aura, its pressure crushing down on every soul present.

It opened its mouth wide—so wide that a radiant pit of light formed above its face.

From that pit erupted a colossal beam of holy power.

An overwhelming force that swallowed the battlefield whole, engulfing all in its blinding light.

The strike covered a vast range and was so fast that every combatant had to race against time itself to avoid it.

That beam carried such a dreadful pressure that even those at SS+ rank were certain it could kill them.

The demon Beleth instantly appeared before Beatrice, shielding her with his body. Elsewhere, Gavid Lindman shifted into his Ghost Form, while Mergo teleported away.

Maekar Valerion and Ser Alon moved at their maximum speed, attempting to evade, while Phoenix Sunlight cloaked himself in fire to block the attack.

Within moments, the aura's explosion shook the entire continent, consuming seven SS+ ranked combatants.

The angel let out a deafening, mechanical roar, continuing to pour holy light from its mouth, unleashing a staggering torrent of aura.

Its assault lasted for what felt like an eternity—minutes that burned into the minds of those trapped within, as if they had been cast into hell for endless hours.

For a moment, they feared the cursed angel would never stop, but at last it closed its mouth and eyes, raising its hands to form a strange symbol.

At that instant, a bizarre dome formed around its body—just as the aftermath of its savage attack was finally revealed.

The angel's light had carved a long trench through the battlefield, splitting the earth in two.

At the heart of the destruction, the first to emerge was the demon Beleth—still standing, shielding himself with his massive arms.

But his state was dire. His coarse, black skin had been charred to a horrific degree, and he bled profusely, the stench of his foul blood filling the air.

His arms, in particular, were in a ghastly condition. Beatrice, whom he had shielded, fared far better thanks to his protection, but even she had not escaped unscathed.

That light emitted by the angel was a direct bane to demons.

Ser Alon and Maekar had barely avoided the attack, along with Mergo and Gavid Lindman. Yet all four wore grim, shadowed expressions. They knew—taking that attack even once would be fatal.

Beleth had endured it because he was a living fortress. They lacked that kind of physical resilience.

This realization turned all their eyes toward the other tank on the battlefield—Phoenix Sunlight.

He had only recently reached SS+ rank, and without the protection of his Ember Form, he would have never survived this battlefield at all.

But right now, he was certainly the weakest link .. wounded heavily from his prior battle with Beleth. Everyone wondered if he had survived.

It took only a few seconds for the answer to appear before them.

The greatest talent of his generation—Phoenix Sunlight—stood revealed, and his appearance was so ghastly that both Maekar and Ser Alon immediately averted their gaze.

Burned black. The man who wielded fire himself had lost both arms entirely.

His hair was gone, his face stripped of all features save for his dimmed crimson eyes.

He collapsed to the ground, breathing raggedly, coughing up an alarming volume of blood.

With a single attack, that strange angel had reduced him to such a state.

An angel capable of unleashing an aura beam strong enough to wound SS+ rank fighters this badly...

The winged monstrosity hovered above them, encased within a circular, heavenly dome.

Slowly, it began to open its eyes again—blazing orbs of blinding light—while its mouth widened, as if preparing to open the gates of hell itself.

Sensing the aura building around the angel, everyone present understood what was coming.

"He's preparing to attack again!!!"

An angel capable of releasing an aura beam with that level of destruction against SS+ combatants...

"Three minutes... He can keep his mouth open and pour aura for three full minutes..." Ser Alon muttered, his bloodshot eyes fixed on the foe.

In that moment, realizing the magnitude of its power, everyone moved with a single thought in mind:

We have to stop it. No matter the cost!

If the angel opened its mouth again, who knew what would happen?

Men like Ser Alon and Maekar didn't even know if they could avoid the attack a second time.

Gavid's Ghost Form had already reached its limits after being used throughout the battle.

And the tanks—Beleth, and especially Phoenix—wouldn't survive another strike.

Knowing this truth, everyone launched themselves at the angel with everything they had.

It was a rare sight—fighters from the Empire and the Ultras joining forces without a word, driven purely by survival.

They all crashed into the dome shielding the angel, hammering at it in an effort to break through. They nearly succeeded—

But then the ring behind the angel's back flared with light, and its body released a violent shockwave of aura, blasting them all away.

The moment they were pushed far enough, the barrier around the angel vanished.

Its eyes and mouth opened again, casting all their faces into darkness.

That thing was about to unleash the same devastating attack again—an attack that would end most of them.

And indeed, the angel's aura beam roared forth once more ..but in the instant it fired...

They all heard the strange sound of shattering glass, and reality twisted violently.

Gripping her magic staff, Beatrice had finished casting her spell, tricking the angel into firing in a completely wrong direction—while they stood in the exact opposite one.

"Now! Hit it with everything you've got!" Ser Alon shouted, charging forward alongside Maekar, aiming for the angel's back.

On the Ultras' side, they did the same.

Exploiting the opening Beatrice had created, they sought to end it with one overwhelming strike.

But what happened next was so absurd they could hardly believe their eyes.

The Angel head twisted at an impossible angle with blinding speed, redirecting the beam back toward them in a wide sweep.

To take that attack at such close range...

Everyone present knew exactly what it meant.

There was only one outcome—death.