

## VILLAIN 631

### Chapter 631: The War of Three Fronts (2)

“Welcome back!!”

“Hail the heroes!!!”

The mood was nothing like what we faced when we ran into Aegon earlier.

Despite the horrific outcome and the millions dead in the Empire,

it didn’t stop those here from clapping for what we’d achieved.

“You’re popular here ..like some kind of superheroes,” Daemon scoffed, striding past everyone.

I didn’t miss my chance to ask him something that mattered.

“What about you, Daemon? Do you share their opinion?”

There was a hidden edge to the question, and Daemon caught it at once.

He turned with a smile, golden light flickering in his eyes.

“Your question’s stupid, Frey Starlight. I don’t harbor the sappy fantasies those pitiful soldiers do. To me, you look more like a hungry monster than a gallant hero.”

Joking, he jabbed a thumb at Snow.

“But our flamboyant friend here ..that’s another story, if you catch my drift, heh-heh-heh.”

“Don’t forget you lost to me, Daemon Valerion,” Snow said, annoyed. Daemon stuck out his tongue.

“It was a draw. If we hadn’t been interrupted, it wouldn’t have ended like that.”

“Shall we resume now, then? I’m ready whenever you are,” Snow needled him on purpose ..knowing full well that with his current strength he’d win, no question.

Daemon waved a hand and kept walking.

“We can have our rematch after this war. There’s too much to do right now.”

Unusually for him, Daemon kept a tight rein on himself as he led us to the place he’d made his base.

“Welcome to my office!” he said, spreading his armored arms ..though the “office” was just a shabby, threadbare tent.

“What office...” I muttered with a chuckle, while Uriel sat off to the side, keeping out of the talk. I figured her mind was crowded .. especially after what happened between us earlier.

I set it aside for now. I was honestly glad to see Daemon the same as ever.

Snow, though, looked doubtful.

“Daemon... aren’t you a Valerion?”

“Of course I am. What’s with that damned question?” Daemon pulled a ridiculous face. Snow sighed.

“You’re part of the ruling house ..and as you can see, your family doesn’t like us right now.”

He had a point, and Daemon's expression turned serious.

"Well, that's only natural. According to Aegon, our friend Frey Starlight here plans to kill the ruling family and rebel against them," Daemon said ..and we started to grasp what Aegon had done.

"Rebellion, then..." I murmured, and Daemon nodded, stepping closer.

"They're saying you intend to kill Aegon first ..then Maekar, his brothers, and their father by the end of the war. They call you a monster of uncontrollable power."

Circling us, Daemon went on.

"A monster who wants to wipe out the Ultras and the Empire alike, to become the sole ruler."

Aegon had used two things...

People's fear ..specifically their fear of me, after everything they'd seen me do ..

and my behavior toward him and the ruling house, which looked like a plain attempt to rebel.

Aegon had always been a deft manipulator, good at steering people's feelings and making fools of them.

This time, he'd taken his game wide.

"What about you, Daemon ..what do you think of all these claims?" Snow asked, wary. Daemon shrugged.

"What do you mean? I don't have an opinion. From the start I don't care what Aegon says. He's a trick-loving pest ..I prefer the direct approach."

Hearing that, I smiled for real, satisfied with his intent.

“You’ve got a unique way of thinking, Daemon ..and I don’t dislike it. In fact... I think I like it.”

In response to my honest words, Daemon looked disgusted.

“Are you turning your twisted tastes on me now, Starlight? If you’ve got fancy lines, save them for your demon sweetheart...”

He said then turned his head toward Uriel.

“Or the saint who’s been staring at you for a while now... planning to build yourself a harem?”

Daemon stepped in and set a hand behind my back.

“I’m starting to believe what Aegon said .. you’re definitely trying to sire a cursed bloodline here. A demoness and a saint... what kind of imperial family would that make for us, Starlight?”

At his casual talk about making babies, Uriel’s face flushed, and Snow wore a strange look.

As for me, I just laughed and brushed his hand away.

He was still an ally ..his affection points toward me hadn’t changed .. and that honestly made me happy.

“Enough nonsense. Our situation comes first.”

I pushed Daemon to the point we’d come for.

“What happened in the war? Where are the others?”

By “others,” I meant the rest of our comrades ..our Elite Class and the rest of the vanguard.

“Filling you in on everything would take forever and be a pain in the ass... so I’ll keep it short.”

Daemon led us to a rickety table inside the tent and gave us the gist.

A few minutes later, we were fully up to speed on what we’d missed.

“The moment you left for the Sacred Island, the Ultras started hitting us hard, exploiting your absence and the Church’s focus on you.”

“That’s why we’ve been fighting them nonstop ..and the sons of whores have killed a lot of us.”

Taking advantage of my absence and the Church being tied up...

the Ultras hit hard this time.

“Their offensive splits into three fronts,” Daemon said, pointing at the map.

Three colors marked the Ultras: black, blue, and red.

“The way they’re attacking is very organized ..means a military expert is leading them. He’s divided them into three factions.”

“The ones you just fought are the blue.”

Blue represents the force formed by an alliance of two Hollows:

Simon Manus with the puppet army, together with the Cursed Knight, Pontiff Sulyvahn.

The first is a mysterious man said to worship strange entities other than demons;

the second, a mindless SS+ ..tier beast ..

and with them, an endless army of puppets.

“They say the Hollow Ludwig also shows up with them from time to time.”

At Ludwig’s name, Snow’s eyes lit up ..the one who killed his mother and slipped away recently.

In short, the blue side has seen all the Hollows except the Blood Queen, Evelyn.

Daemon continued.

“The red side is the one that’s done us the most damage: Lord Gavid Lindeman.”

“Those who fought him say he’s got a masked warrior of the same caliber as you, Frey Starlight,”  
Daemon added ..almost certainly V.

I’d ignored him till now, but the time to deal with him was close. I intended to do it myself.

Daemon moved to the last front.

“Last but not least ..the black side: the mildest of the three, Lord Mergo’s forces. He only kills when necessary, so they’re the easiest to handle, even if many there are strong. And they say an ancient lord has reappeared among them.”

Finishing his annoyed briefing, Daemon summed it up.

“I’ve been stationed here with a unit to hold Simon Manus’s puppets. There are several squads nearby, and the rest of our forces are split across the other fronts.”

In other words... we’re up against blue right now.

Taking that in, Snow looked to me.

“What now? Do we head out and find the others?”

It was a good idea ..find Sansa and Ghost and team up.

I simply shook my head. “No.”

I set my priorities.

“We’ll join Daemon’s team and finish the blue front,” I said,

“We’ll kill every Hollow and end them, then regroup with the others and crush the remaining fronts. That’s my plan.”

I was here first and foremost to fight and end the war ..so hunting the enemies down one by one was the clearest path. Along the way, I could work out a plan for the prince, or whoever lurked behind him.

Snow and Uriel didn’t seem opposed, so I nodded to them and turned to Daemon with a wide grin.

“I hope you’ve got room for three more soldiers.”

I said it lightly ..Daemon scowled, then opened his mouth:

“I quit.”

## Chapter 632: Glimpses of a Doomed Future (1)

—Frey Starlight’s POV—

Our meeting with Daemon ended in a blink, light on details ..muscle-brain was never suited for briefings or leadership to begin with.

He led us to a corner of the camp and handed us a place to sleep.

“We move at dawn. Until then, do whatever you want ..sleep, train, have sex... I don’t care. Just don’t make too much noise,” Daemon said, waving as he walked off.

He was still wearing the Golden Dragon armor that now seemed part of his body. From the way it looked, I doubted he could take it off even if he wanted to.

Seeing him like that made me wonder what exactly he’d done to end up this way.

Watching his broad back recede, he reminded me a lot of Danzo.

Danzo died some time ago, but I still find myself remembering him; his shadow forms before me often ..especially in the moments when I lose myself.

With Daemon here, that shadow felt alive again.

Even so, I was genuinely glad to see Daemon. These simple feelings are something I want to cherish as long as I’m able ..they mean a great deal to me.

Seconds later, Daemon vanished into the camp, leaving the three of us alone.



"So we're back to the battlefield tomorrow..." Uriel said softly.

"We're already back," I answered with a slow nod.

It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say we hadn't even had time to catch our breath. I'm used to that kind of pressure ..but it's different for Uriel.

She'd seemed a little flustered lately .. especially after Daemon's bold talk.

She's innocent. And to be honest... given my current relationship with her, I wouldn't have much trouble taking advantage if I wanted to.

But I didn't want that. Uriel is too pure ..like a living, spotless white canvas.

I, on the other hand, am closer to a bottomless black abyss. If I touched her, my darkness would seep into her and rob her of that purity.

The thought of defiling something so pure was tempting, if I'm honest. I'd be lying if I said I hadn't pictured it.

But I wouldn't do it. What little feeling remains in me dwindles by the day; my heart leans toward nothing in this life.

Not to mention Sansa ..I don't even know what I feel for her. Uriel is... similar.

Both of them, and the others with them, are people I treasure ..people I want safe.

But do I love them?

Do I love Sansa?

Do I love Uriel?

...

"Maybe."

And maybe not.

I can't give an answer ..or even think straight about it ..in the middle of war and all its nonsense.

So if we win the war, and everything ends well...

maybe then I'll have an answer.

Until then, whatever feelings they hold for me are fated to hang in the balance.

Catching Uriel's eyes ..she's been looking my way a lot lately ..I could only feel sorry for her... because she loves someone like me.

Those were my thoughts about such things .. until Snow pulled me back to reality.

"Are you sure? About not wanting to see the others now...?"

He meant Sansa and Ghost, most likely.

I wasn't worried about them. "They're strong. They'll be fine."

There aren't many Ultras who can truly threaten Sansa; as for Ghost, he always finds a way.

Snow nodded ..agreeing, at least to that extent.

"So we'll be fighting the Hollows from here on..."

"Yeah. They're very strong, but at our current level it won't be difficult to handle them ..that is, as long as it's just Pontiff Sulyvahn and Ludwig."

"Then Simon Manus is the most dangerous? Isn't he SS, while Pontiff Sulyvahn is SS+?" Uriel asked, uneasy.

She was right ..there's a full tier between them.

But Simon's danger lies elsewhere entirely.

"Simon Manus is unique. He's neither contracted with demons nor one of their followers. His threat is in the puppets he wields. In the past he used against me a puppet of an ancient lord ..SS tier." I said it plainly, remembering that fight.

Simon controlled Lord Val's puppet ..along with thousands of others ..at the same time.

"In wartime, Simon Manus and his puppets are a real catastrophe .. an army you can't underestimate. He's the main reason I prioritized this front over the others."

Understanding Simon's threat, Snow and Uriel both nodded.

"Then let's deal with him quickly and rejoin the others," Snow said with a confident smile.

Honestly, with me and Snow on the field, there's nothing about the Ultras to fear.

The real danger would be a third, anomalous force stepping in .. but the stronger demons haven't joined the war yet, so we're safe for now.

Who knows when that balance will break. Until then, I have to be ready.

"Let's get some rest, you two. We've got a long day ahead." I motioned for them to turn in; it was already late.

Snow and I would sleep in the same space, while a separate place had been arranged for Uriel at my request.

"Good night to you both. Try to rest and recharge .. even people like you have limits."

Uriel insisted we rest, and I could only agree.

"Good night to you too ..and don't worry, I'm not planning to sneak out and pick a fight," I joked, but her scowl said she took me seriously.

Snow stepped in, slinging an arm over my shoulder and hauling me toward our tent.

"Don't worry. I'm not letting him go anywhere," he said, dragging me along by force.

"I get it, man. No need to pull ..I can walk on my own," I sighed as we ducked into the tent and waved to Uriel.

She waved back, and in a blink... quiet settled over the place.

The tent held two simple cots.

Snow took one, I took the other, and we lay down in silence.

For all our bravado, we were both exhausted.

We hadn't slept properly in days—days spent fighting battle after battle.

This is what it means to shoulder a war from the front.

It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say I've borne most of the war's horrors alone so far .. everything that came with them.

There isn't an enemy I haven't faced among the Ultras' elites and the Church. I did it alone, but now Snow had shown he was ready to stand with me and carry the fight.

Chapter 633: Glimpses of a Doomed Future (2)

"You know, Snow... I'm really grateful to you.

"I never trusted anything on the battlefield except my own strength... but you've grown strong enough to keep pace with me.

Watching you soar honestly made me happy. For the first time... I can give someone my back without worry. I don't think I've thanked you properly—and I might not get the chance later, so...

thank you."

Snow Lionheart's presence .. and his willingness to give so much for my sake .. made me genuinely grateful, so I made sure to say it right.

But no reply. Only silence, broken by the steady rhythm of his breathing.

I turned his way to find he'd already passed out, mouth open, gulping the air around him.

Seeing how fast he crashed... I didn't know what to say.

"Weren't you the one who said you wouldn't let me go anywhere? In that state, you couldn't stop a fly," I muttered, lying back again.

I stared up at the tent's tattered ceiling.

I closed my eyes slowly, and the sound of my thoughts echoed in the dark.

"The war is entering its final stages now .. and the outcome will soon be revealed..."

We were close ..so very close to the end of the War of Darkness.

Since the beginning, I've fought like a madman and butchered thousands with my own hands.

From time to time, I used the system's future-vision, unable to kill my curiosity about how it would all end.

But even after burning all my Achievement Points, after doing everything I could...

I saw no happy future .. only murky visions.

Visions of a future where I stood among corpses, with the Empire lost ..completely, miserably.

It was a horrific vision that tightened my nerves further and further.

Worst of all, no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't see how we lost .. like something was blocking the truth from me.

Whatever the cause, it was terrible enough that I couldn't change the future, no matter what I did.

If things kept going like this, we would lose .. inevitably.

Future-vision...

For all the dread it showed me, the vision felt strange this time...

as if it lacked... detail.

As if something were interfering.

Thinking it over, I opened my eyes again and brought up the system interface. There my odd ability gleamed:

Snapshot of the Future.

An ability that shows me what's to come .. truly powerful.

Power of that caliber... it's surely world-breaking ..

akin to Shadow Adaptation.

In other words, as the Engineer, Gehrman once said:

"The system is nothing but a manifestation of my own power and abilities."

If that's true, then Snapshot of the Future is itself an ability ..and likely a world-breaking one.

If this ability showed interference ..was obstructed ..doesn't that mean it collided with another ability of the same class?

I sat up on the cot again, thinking it through.

"When it comes to abilities of inevitability-law, there are very few on Earth who wield that kind of power."

Me... and the Engineer, Gehrman.

And...

"Rank Four Demon—Wesker."

Could it be... that the reason I saw nothing but defeat was because the final enemy on the other side is Wesker?

Will an opponent of his caliber appear at the end?

Against whom?

A handful of humans ..none of whom have even reached SSS-tier?

"If that happens... that's the end."

Unless someone intervenes, we'll die in disgrace.

The thought gnawed at me ..and just imagining it summoned nightmares.



"What would I do if I found myself against him? Against Wesker?"

Eyes on the system interface, I checked all my stats.

...

Host Name: Frey Starlight (Dual Soul)

Class: Duelist

Talent: SS+

Current Rank: SS-

Strength: SS

Speed: SS

Agility: SS

Endurance: SS

Aura: SSS

Magic: —

[Dueling Art Lv. 7 (max)]

Talents: {Dueling}, {Aura Manipulation}, {Poison Immunity}

Combat Style: Ten Thousand Steps of Shadow

Skills:

Hawk's Eye (A class)

Phantom Steps (A class)

Seduction (D class)

Ascension (S class)

Ignition (SS class)

Screenshot (SS class)

Abilities:

Spatial Manipulation.

Shadow Adaptation 4/7.

Stage One: Adaptation to all combat styles, generating counters to any technique.

Stage Two: Adaptation to all bodily injuries, granting extreme regeneration that repairs the body autonomously.

Stage Three: Adaptation to all Aura types, granting perfect control and absolute command over both ambient Aura and the Aura within the user.

Stage Four: ???

..

Anti-Magic: Level Two.

Current Achievement Points: 0.

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"I'll have to break my limit again... if I want to become stronger than I am now."

But to do that, I needed Achievement Points.

And those had become hard to get—the quests rarely appeared anymore.

Only the final quest remained ..

the one that would let me master Shadow Adaptation completely.

I had reached Stage Four.

To be honest, I still had no idea what this stage actually granted me...

I hadn't felt any real increase in power—so much so that for a moment I thought nothing had happened.

But somewhere inside... I was certain.

Something had changed.

Something... was waking up.

I didn't know exactly what was happening, but the deeper I sank into Shadow Adaptation ..into mastering its stages ..

the more it felt like I was unlocking shackles around something sleeping deep within me.

A vast, overwhelming power.

But it came with something else ..something I might not be ready for.

"Maybe... if I master all seven stages, will that mean my existence disappears entirely?"

Do I become nothing but a distant, thinning shadow... while the true owner of these powers awakens?

And then... Nameless might truly return to life.

"Ah... this is not the time for an existential crisis," I muttered with a laugh, lying back on the cot.

With thoughts this dark circling me constantly, there was no way I could sleep.

"Sleeping with Uriel might not have been the worst idea..."

At times like these, I needed something .. someone to throw my consciousness far away.

Unfortunately, I no longer knew how to do that on my own.

And so, I ended up staying awake until morning broke and it was time to move ..

toward another battle... another war that would bring me one step closer to the end I was desperately trying to escape.

## Chapter 634: The Plague of War (1)

—Frey Starlight's POV—

"Man... I slept like a baby" Snow yawned and stretched as he walked beside me.

Morning had already broken, and we were pushing toward the next battlefield.

"You definitely did," I said, sighing.

Just as I'd expected... I hadn't slept a single minute. I spent the whole night scrolling through the system, drowning myself in every scenario and possibility.

"Frey... don't tell me you didn't sleep at all," Uriel asked, worried. I shook my head.

"Not a minute. Terrible insomnia, as you can see." I gave a faint, self-mocking laugh .. but Uriel took it seriously.

In a blink, she reached out, and her golden, sacred power flowed through me.

It was soothing; the fatigue and heaviness melted away as if by magic.

"It won't make up for the sleep you missed, but at least you'll be able to fight at your best."

"Ah... thanks."

I thanked her honestly; she waved it off. I didn't know what to say after that.

There was a strange, awkward air between us ..honestly harder to manage than fighting the Ultras.

Thankfully, Daemon cut in as usual ..as he strode near.

"Quit loafing and get ready .. from here on we move at full speed."

His voice carried, hard and commanding, to every soldier present.

"Our goal is to link up with our comrades on this front! Reports say they're facing the Hollows head-on right now, so we move fast!"

"Sir, yes sir!!" the soldiers roared as one. Aura flared around them, cloaking their bodies as they broke into a full sprint.

Our feet hammered the ground, shaking it as we tore across the barren wastes at staggering speed. Up front, the three of us ran with Daemon, leading the entire battalion.

"Daemon, which Hollow are we facing?" I asked.

"Pontiff Sulyvahn. And there's a chance Simon is nearby as well."

"Two Hollows at once, then."

"What's this? Is the great Frey Starlight afraid of a few Hollows?"

At that, a frightening smile crept over my face before I noticed ..enough to make Daemon freeze for a heartbeat.

"The opposite, Daemon. Better this way—I won't have to hunt them one by one, and we'll finish fast."

"That's a scary thing to say... but I won't comment," he muttered, then glanced at me, serious.

"I don't mind you butchering our enemies however you like, Frey ..but remember, your enemies are everywhere. We're about to join the rest of our forces, and who knows—some among them might want you dead."

They might not be the same ones Aegon whipped up against me before, but the odds that some answer to him are high. I'd already accounted for it.

"No need to worry. We'll handle it if it happens," Snow cut in.

"Fight the enemy in front and watch your back for a knife ..annoying, but within what we can bear."

Snow wasn't wrong—but I couldn't help prodding him.

"You sure you can manage that? At the rate you sleep, the war might end without you noticing."

"You're not going to let that go, are you?" he sighed, annoyed.

"No."

...

Under the morning sun, with a chill in the air reminding us winter had only just passed, our march lasted a few hours ..yet at our pace we reached our destination quickly.

"We're here," Daemon said as we halted beside him atop a low ridge.

From there we had a clear view of what lay ahead: a wide, barren plain—the kind you see everywhere on the Ultras Continent. A brutal battle raged below; we could hear its echo and feel the Aura shockwaves.

"Looks like we made it just in time ..the fight's about to peak," Snow said, scanning the field.

A force far larger than Daemon's was deployed there thousands strong ..

and facing them stood an army that outnumbered them by far: the puppet host, backed by Ultras fighters. Among them, I sensed several strong presences in the distance.

"Let's go," I said, and leapt from the ridge with the others.

"Our aim is to support and cut down as many enemies as we can! Prepare for battle!" Daemon barked as we plunged into the fray.

The field was chaos. Aura shells detonated from every direction without pause.

With each passing minute the sky filled with thousands of element-laced arrows—fire arrows, lightning arrows, every kind of projectile. Parrying them was easy for me... but dozens of soldiers died with every volley.

"Let's see what the Ultras have to offer this time."

Their numbers were massive, as always, and I had to resist the urge to erase them all with Nameless judgement. No one knew what might surface among them, and I had no desire to repeat what happened with Blattier.

So I took the hard way ..cutting them down one by one.



Slash!!

We punched through the Ultras' flank, and Snow, Daemon, and I drove deep into their ranks. Most were metal puppets, but my blades slid through them with ease.

The Ultras noticed us and prioritized our elimination, turning their full aggression our way ..yet it didn't slow my pace in the slightest.

The heat of battle. The echo of war.

Those moments ..the press of blades from every side, enemies racing to cut me down ..

I realized I'd missed this feeling. This was real war.

The Church had been strong, but the Ultras were different...

It's like playing a war game and having a favorite kind of enemy you love to kill every time.

The Ultras were that kind of enemy for me.

Without noticing, that same terrifying smile crept back onto my face ..the one that planted fear in the Ultras' hearts and plagued them with nightmares.

"He's back..." one of them gasped, shock plain on his face.

"The Black Death has returned..."

So that's what they call me? The Black Death?

Am I some kind of plague?

Hearing the nickname they'd given me, I laughed without meaning to.

"What a damned title."

Slash!

With a quick sweep of Dark Sister, a dozen heads spun away ..among them the unlucky fool who'd just announced my title.

Beside me, Snow Lionheart unleashed natural disasters of destructive elements, wreaking havoc among the Ultras.

Likewise, Daemon handled anyone foolish enough to lay a hand on him.

His power had surged to a shocking degree; I saw him laughing like a madman as he crushed enemies with his bare hands.

"I am the pinnacle of human evolution!"

That's what he said.

I still don't know what exactly he did ..or how his armor became part of his body—but among our generation, he was truly evolving the fastest.

Seeing the two of them hold their own, I decided to push ahead and target the Ultras' strongest rather than waste time on common soldiers.

Unleashing SSS tier Aura,

I spread a colossal violet dome across the entire battlefield, sealing everyone inside.

Within this field, I could see and hear everything.

No one could escape me ..and needless to say,

finding the Hollows wasn't difficult.

Deep in the far lines... a brutal fight raged, imperial soldiers being crushed beneath the savagery of one of the most vicious Hollows ..Pontiff Sulyvahn.

Locking onto him, a wide smile tugged at my lips as I triggered teleportation.

"Found you."

...

...

...

Deep within the battlefield ..on the front where the violence burned hottest ..

a man ran like a beast on three limbs, dragging a massive greatsword behind him with his one remaining hand.

He was unique ..matchless in all the world.

A man whose face no one knew, clad in broken black armor from which black, rotten blood seeped.

From behind his shattered helm, he spoke no words ..only a beast's howl tore out of him,

a howl stitched to a scream that spelled madness.

## Chapter 635: The Plague of War (2)

The Hollow ..Pontiff Sulyvahn.

A knight whose origin was unknown, whose lineage was no one's guess.

All anyone knew: he appeared from nowhere and drank deep of demon blood—so much that it drove him mad.

His body had never been fit to bear that blood, but he resisted on will alone—until the blood broke him, and he became a monster:

a mindless, superhuman knight who rips apart anything that comes near.

Now the entire Empire had heard his voice ..and felt the weight of his blade.

“Aaaaarrrrrgh! Aaaaarrrrrgh!”

The feral scream carried for miles, the Pontiff a walking nightmare on the field.

Many strong fighters tried to stop him ..to no avail. He butchered them all.

This section of the field was under Gal Varion Sunlight, younger brother of Iris Sunlight ..

a warrior of SS tier.

He was suppressed and crushed when he faced the Pontiff head-on.

Gal had brought several fighters of SS- and S+ ranks, thinking with their help they could pin down that mindless beast.

Reality proved far crueler. The Pontiff slaughtered them.

The battle was so brutal Gal lost an arm when he tried to wound and kill the Pontiff.

From the start, they erred in treating him as human; the Pontiff was closer to a demonic nightmare than a man.

Gal's overwhelming defeat drew most capable fighters to his side to try and rein the Pontiff in ..

to no effect.

The Pontiff tore about like a rabid dog, carving through soldiers.

From the sky, dozens of ice lances rained down on his head ..but he shattered them all with a single sweep of his sword.

Seris Moonlight was there, wings unfurled as she kept to the air, pelting him with every kind of strike ..no use.

"Stop!"

From afar, someone shouted, sending a sonic wave that stunned the Pontiff for a heartbeat. In that brief opening,

Frost Moonlight lunged, driving his great spear Rimeshard for the Pontiff's chest ..

but the ice Aura was completely blocked by the Pontiff's armor, swathed in darkness.

The Pontiff snapped free at once and struck again ..

Frost was too weak to take the blow from that colossal blade, and luckily

he vanished from before the Pontiff as if by magic, the greatsword slamming into the earth instead.

In a blink, Frost reappeared behind him, teleporting to safety.

"Damn it! How are we supposed to kill this thing?!"

The one who teleported Frost wasn't anyone but the witch Selena, wrath-cursed.

Raising her hand from afar toward the Pontiff, she gathered all her power.

"Aura Amplification: x30!"

All across Selena's body, sigils she had carved into her own skin flared to life...

Among the marks, the number 30 burned.

Power multiplied thirtyfold.

That vast force coalesced before the witch as a colossal blue flame, turning every head on the battlefield for a heartbeat—awed that a single girl could marshal so much Aura.

“Burn in hell!” Selena screamed ..

and with her cry the fire swelled monstrously, then shot forth as a titanic beam.

A torrent of flame that devoured everything in its path until it reached the Pontiff, swallowing him whole.

BOOOOOM!!!

The blast echoed across the field, pillars of blue fire climbing into the sky in a breathtaking sight.

“Did it work?”

Many asked the same ..only to get their answer when the knight strode out of the flames, dragging his sword.

The blue fire burned over his armor, but did nothing except make him more terrifying.

Pontiff Sulyvahn turned this time toward Selena; her multiplied power had piqued his instincts.

Seeing those red eyes flare her way, fear seized Selena. She stumbled back and grabbed Dawn Polaris, who was near her, shoving him forward.

“Do something, good-luck charm!”

“Huh?!”

Dawn was there too...

Flustered, the “lucky duelist” had no idea what to do.

Selena hid behind him while the Pontiff broke into a run straight for them.

The mad knight’s speed was horrifying; in seconds he was on them.

“Quick! Do something!” Selena shrieked, smacking his back.

That only rattled him more.

“Even if you tell me to ..what exactly do you expect me to do against a monster like this?! He’s SS+!!!” Dawn blurted, sweating, as the Pontiff’s Aura pressure crashed down on him like thunder.

Clutching his sword, Dawn’s face turned to stone.

“Enough of this nonsense ..ready up!”

Beside them stood a short girl with white hair and green eyes ..

a familiar presence: their older former classmate, Ellen White.

She had helped a lot with her sonic abilities, but against someone like the Pontiff, her role was very limited.

Frost gripped his spear, ready to fight, and Seris backed them from the sky.

They were all gifted ..but against a beast like this,



it looked like they were going to be butchered today.

Gal Varion Sunlight watched from afar and tried to aid them ..

only to collapse, bloodied, after being crushed by the Pontiff.

“Damn it...”

Death was closing in fast.

“Come on, Dawn! Do it!” Selena shouted again.

“Do what, you damned bitch?! What do you think I am?!” Dawn snapped back, losing control.

“Huh?! Aren’t you the one who bragged you’d survive no matter what? Why are you acting like a cowardly gigolo now?!”

“It’s not up to me! I can’t control this ability!”

“Then make it happen! You’re out of time!”

While they bickered, the Pontiff had already arrived.

Frost and Seris tried to strike him, and Ellen bought them a few seconds more ..

but that was all they managed, and the Pontiff tore through everything they threw at him.

Charging like an animal, he leapt high and brought his colossal greatsword down toward them ..

a blow carrying the full might of a mindless SS+ knight.

It could easily have killed them both at once:

Dawn was weak, and Selena was a mage.

Even multiplied, her body was as fragile as Dawn's.

All of it pointed to one outcome if they took the hit ..

death.

Death raced toward them.

"A miracle... we need a miracle," Selena whispered.

"The age of miracles ended a long time ago," Dawn answered, the Pontiff's blade filling his eyes.

On the battlefield, there is nothing but death.

—or perhaps not.

Before Dawn and Selena's widening eyes ..

and the shock of everyone nearby ..

the Pontiff's massive sword stopped a few centimeters from Dawn's face.

A heartbeat later, they realized a jet-black blade had caught it ..and not merely caught it.

SLASH!!!

With a stunning surge of violet Aura, the Pontiff was blasted backward, forced to stab his greatsword deep into the earth to keep from toppling.

He found himself right back where he'd started ..after taking a strike he hadn't sensed and never expected.

Before Dawn and Selena, he appeared out of nowhere:

a man with long white hair and violet eyes blazing like coals.

After batting the Pontiff away, he turned to Dawn.

"What the hell were you two arguing about with the enemy in your faces?" he asked, baffled by the pair.

They both shouted at once, startled:

"Frey!"

The miracle had come.

"Back up, you two ..things are about to get violent," Frey said with a wide smile that bared his thirst for blood.

With heavy steps, he started toward the Pontiff ..

and the real fight was about to begin.

## Chapter 636: Dance of the Broken Knight

—Frey Starlight's POV—

"Fall back, all of you. I'll handle him."

Advancing step by step, I said it curtly and pushed everyone away.

I hadn't expected to see so many familiar faces here .. nor to find them taking on the Pontiff alone despite the gulf in tiers. That was reckless enough to get them killed...

At least I'd arrived in time to keep that from happening.

Most of them looked stunned to see me; no doubt everyone here still thought I was fighting on the Holy Island, unaware of what happened there. I'd explain later. For now...

that broken knight took priority.

"Face to face at last... Pontiff Sulyvahn." I spoke clearly, and got nothing back but a scream.

"Raaaaghhh!"

He howled and charged me in rage.

"I see you can't understand a word I'm saying."

BOOOOM!

The Pontiff was blindingly fast; he reached me in a blink.

He tried to split me with a single swing, but I caught it on my blades, steel shrieking as metal ground against metal.

The moment I parried the first strike, he began windmilling that greatsword like a madman, trying to pulp me by brute force. There was no technique to it ..no swordsmanship ..just pure savagery.

He was strong, yes, but I met everything he threw at me without trouble.

Standing toe-to-toe with him, I caught the faint glint of his eyes behind a dented, shattered helm.

“Demon blood has done a lot to you—rotted your mind and left you little more than an animal.”

BOOM!

The Pontiff flooded his blows with Aura, trying to force me back. I matched him, and the pressure between us blasted the ground apart.

In that clash of fields it wasn't hard to tell who held the upper hand ..my Aura is SSS-tier, after all. But I kept it leashed; we were fighting in the middle of two armies tearing each other to pieces.

Normally, fighters at our level would clear the crowds to keep allies out of the splash zone. The Pontiff had no such thought... in truth, he had no thoughts at all—only instinct.

Every collision between us sent out shockwaves that chewed up anything too close.

Thankfully, my allies knew the score and supported from range.

Seris raised towering ice walls around us, turning the ground into a frozen arena. The walls weren't strong enough to withstand our strikes, but she rebuilt them the instant we shattered them, shielding the soldiers outside.

"Good. I can cut loose a little without worrying too much."

Leaving the side matters to the others, I drove at the Pontiff on his terms:

raw brutality, raw strength.

Pontiff Sulyvahn is an oddity even among SS+ fighters. No flashy techniques, no exalted forms ..just a beast relying on his body.

That made him far simpler to fight than most, his wild, savage swings easy to read.

Letting Shadow Adaptation absorb his patterns, I met him head-on with ease, my blades biting deeper into his guard with every exchange. He swept at me with that darkness-coated greatsword, trying to crush me ..but I turned him aside each time, sparks flaring as steel screamed.

"To be honest, Pontiff... I could end you with one sweeping strike. But somewhere in me, I find myself pitying you."

Dodging his blows, ignoring the animal bellow in my face, I carved more and more into his armor.

For every strike of his, I answered with ten .. in speed and in force alike.

He couldn't match me. I've climbed too far, and anyone beneath the absolute peak of SS+ no longer poses much danger.

Today, I'll kill Pontiff Sulyvahn and rid the world of another Hollow.

But first, I wanted at least to try to reach the person buried under that monstrous shell.

“Lately, the lives around me don’t mean much ..least of all my enemies’ ...”

Slash!

“If I claimed I cared now, I’d be nothing but a damned hypocrite.”

SLASH!!!

A brutal cut opened a huge gash across the Pontiff’s chest, filthy black blood oozing out.

“I know how hypocritical this sounds—but I can’t help asking, Pontiff... is there truly nothing left inside you but the beast you’ve become?”

This shattered knight this feral Hollow he was singular. I remembered him clearly; I’d even written about him once, and his story had stuck with me.

Seeing him here brought those memories roaring back.

I tried to reach him. He answered fast:

“Arrrraaaaghhh!”

A bestial howl, a suicidal charge, a rabid need to kill me.

The Pontiff had been busy these past days, set loose on the battlefield like a rabid dog ..the Ultras’ blunt instrument for slaughter and ruin.

In recent days he’d taken scores of imperial lives and cut down many S-tier and above.

Simply put... ignoring him was no longer an option.

He screamed in my face, and I found myself smiling, almost understanding.

“I get it. So there’s no point in trying, huh?”

In that case...

“Let’s end this.”

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Midway through the clash between Frey Starlight and Pontiff Sulyvahn, for a heartbeat it felt as if the very air had grown heavier.

“Let’s end this.”

That’s what Frey said ..and with those words, everything changed, as if he had become someone else entirely.

He narrowed his eyes, tightened his grip on Balerion and Dark Sister, and let his true power surge.

Under that ominous pressure, even the Pontiff faltered ..his senses and instincts shrieking at him to flee from the man before him.



But it was too late. There was no turning back now.

“Ten Thousand Steps of Shadow: Supreme Art : Echo of the Abyss.”

Faster than sound, Frey hewed into the Pontiff, tearing open the knight’s chest.

His blades were wreathed in a baleful violet flame that pierced the Pontiff’s armor with ease.

Frey didn’t strike once. He moved again at the same blistering speed, trailing a violet afterglow behind him.

In the same manner he cut the Pontiff again, and again ..then a third time, a fourth, a fifth ..

until Sulyvahn hung caught inside a spider’s cocoon of violet Aura trails.

With his body taking the brunt of that devastating assault, blood erupted everywhere ..and the Pontiff bled hard.

But the blood that spilled wasn’t red at all. It was black, foul and rotten.

Slash!!

Frey kept carving, his speed climbing with every blow. The web thickened and thickened, its strands multiplying until they all converged on a single point:

the Pontiff’s body, which took everything.

Frey kept driving through him, too fast to stop.

Hemmed in, the Pontiff slashed wildly right and left, his bestial scream echoing across the field and dragging every gaze his way.

It was a scream of desperation and grief ..

the sound of a beast torn apart by a worse beast.

Slash!!

In a flicker, Frey severed the Pontiff's right leg, sending him reeling, scarcely able to stand.

Frey was moving so fast that, from afar, he was a violet bullet circling his prey,

punching through him with every pass.

Slash!!

Another cut—and the Pontiff's left hand fell away. The shattered knight's appearance turned pitiful, and even his howling dwindled as he collapsed and writhed in the dirt.

Even down, Frey didn't stop ..he kept running his circles, driving through him again and again.

Then, with one quick stroke, the helmet the Pontiff had worn for years spun away, revealing what lay beneath that iron shell.

In that instant, those close enough to see his face were stunned by what they saw.

Chapter 637: From Knight to Nightmare

Pontiff Sulyvahn ..that colossal monster who had killed so many and filled their hearts with fear ..was nothing but a plain man whose features were carved with suffering.

His hair was ash-gray, devoured by age. His skin was ghastly pale and hideously darkened from years of living on nothing but tainted blood.

His eyes were wholly red, as if he had wept blood; his bones jutted under shriveled, ulcerated skin.

Those mad eyes of the Pontiff that had terrified so many no longer looked frightening now that their cover was gone ..

they were merely eyes steeped in deep sorrow and utter despair, the eyes of a man whose story few knew.

“Pontiff Sulyvahn... you are living proof the clearest example ..of the demons’ crimes and what they did to humankind,” Frey said, voice cold, as he kept breaking the Pontiff down.

“I know there’s nothing left in those dead eyes but despair and hatred... rage, and suffering.

“You’ve been through so much, and there’s nothing I can give you now but my regret—by ending this wretched torment of yours.”

“So... forgive me.”

SLASH!!!

With a final blow carrying all of Frey’s might, the black blood sprayed more fiercely than ever.

The Pontiff dropped his sword at last and crumpled, no strength left to stand.

His chest cleaved wide open, his eyes gone lifeless.

He looked up at the sky one last time. Its light fell across him, and a glimpse of the past passed before him ..

enough to bring those monstrous eyes back to what they once were, for a single heartbeat.

One second only ..yet it was enough to draw one last tear.

A tear of blood, a farewell that freed him from the curse laid upon him ..

the curse of demon blood.

“Ah... Maria...” From the Pontiff’s lips slipped a whisper ..an old name no one recognized but him, and Frey standing at his side.

“Farewell, Pontiff Sulyvahn.”

To the world ..and to the Empire in particular .. that was the end of a monster who had terrified so many.

Even the Ultras felt much the same toward him; he had butchered countless of them, too.

But only a few knew the true story of the man behind that broken armor.

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The demons have always been the vilest and most terrifying race of all.

And humans may be their most prominent recent victims.

Humans are... different marked by a strange capacity to adapt, able to endure and live through whatever conditions they're thrown into.

That made them the perfect testing ground .. fertile soil waiting to be violated.

And that is exactly what happened, decades ago, when second-generation demonic contracts first appeared.

Where the first generation had been limited to transferring Aura from demon to human, this time they granted blood—

tainted, poisonous blood that amounted to a slow death for humans.

Some died the instant it was injected. Others turned into nightmare creatures. A few survived, adapted, and became powerful demonic contractors.

At the start of the second generation, the Ultras forced their citizens to have that blood injected into their veins for testing. Only a few were spared.

At that time there lived a taciturn, upright knight in an old city called Vekor.

Vekor was a lively city with a name and standing among the Ultras.

Its people were civilized—no different from the Empire's humans, perhaps even better off.

Pontiff Sulyvahn was the foremost of the knights who guarded that ancient city's peace.

He was a good man, with a wife and a single beautiful daughter ..a family of three.

Everything was calm. Ordinary. Until the day the second-generation contracts appeared and Vekor's citizens were forced to have that poison pumped into their bodies.

It was a brutal process. In those dark days, women, children, and men alike were dragged from their homes and hauled to filthy laboratories brimming with that thick, black substance.

Many died.

Others became misshapen, foul beings now known as nightmare creatures.

In those days, Pontiff did everything he could to save his family—and because of his rank in the city, his wife and daughter were exempted from the injections.

In exchange, he was forced to bear their share .. living with an even greater quantity of demon blood rotting in his body.

It was pain. It was hell.

But Pontiff was a warrior with iron nerves, and he endured, even as the process cast its shadow over him, tugging him apart bit by bit.

Later he and the remaining city knights were ordered to hunt the nightmare creatures that kept appearing in greater numbers as the injections continued.

With his own hands with his sword—Pontiff Sulyvahn killed those monsters who had once been people.

People he had lived among. Grown up with.

Night after night he went out to hunt until late, drowning himself in killing and in the reek of foul demon blood.

Sometimes he was so late his wife would go searching for him.

She was clever, and she always found him always calmed him ..

and she never once failed to bring him home.

Despite the demon blood invading his body, Pontiff held on. For his family.

But the killings kept repeating, and every time...

he was made to inject more demon blood.

Pontiff Sulyvahn was not "chosen." His body was never suited to that blood; only his will kept him going.

But will alone is not always enough. There is a limit to what a human can bear.

Days passed, one after another.

Hunts and injections, again and again, until Pontiff's mind grew drunk on slaughter, and madness took him piece by piece.

Then, on a cursed moonlit night, Pontiff Sulyvahn lost himself and drowned in the blood of his victims.

The killing was heavy that night. He found himself drinking his victims' blood and devouring their bodies ..like an animal.

He was gone ..unable to sense time.

He was so late that his wife went out to look for him. As always, she found him ..but this time,

her voice was not enough. The monster he had become was not something words could stop.

And so he did the unthinkable, staining his hands with blood he should never have shed.

Pontiff never truly knew what he did that night. His madness lasted so long that when he finally came to, several days had passed.

When his mind began to work again ..when he realized what his hands had done .. Pontiff felt his world crumble. He rushed home

to find the last member of his family.

He reached his house and found it in chaos; his heart sank.

He went in, searching for his only daughter.

“Maria...”

The house was small; it didn’t take long.

He found her .. and how he wished he hadn’t.

Before him, hanging from a thick rope.

She had taken her own life, her body swaying quietly, all signs of life gone.



Her mother had died at the hands of her father turned monster.

For the child, there was no reason left to live .. especially after their home was attacked later and she barely escaped death anyway.

And so Pontiff Sulyvahn lost the very people he had suffered to protect.

You could even say he caused their deaths with his own hands.

That was the final blow .. the one that took his self, and his mind.

What followed was pure madness.

Madness as he killed everyone he found, spilled their blood, devoured them.

He killed, and killed... and killed anyone who stood in his way,

until he personally slaughtered all the people of his city, then went on to commit a massacre so great the Ultras sealed him off from the world.

His power kept growing as he drank demon blood in grotesque quantities, turning him into a savage beast feared across the world.

This, in brief, was the story of the broken knight whose life Frey Starlight brought to an end ..

the end of a silent suffering no one knew, save Pontiff and Frey.

To the world and to the Empire the one who died was not a noble knight or a man,

but a vile, loathsome monster whose absence made the world better.

“What a farce.”

Frey said it with an expressionless face as he turned away, leaving the Pontiff’s corpse behind.

He returned to the war, kept fighting—

burying another story behind his back.

Chapter 638: Voices Over the Battlefield (1)

The barren lands of the Ultras once again hosted one of the bloodiest battles yet ..

Hollows and their forces against the Empire.

Soon after, the world witnessed the fall of one of the oldest Hollows of all: Pontiff Sulyvahn.

He died ..and with him, the story that would never be told.

Only Frey Starlight, the man who slew him, knew it.

Frey finished the Pontiff swiftly, then returned to the fight as if nothing had happened.

Near the site of their duel, Frey’s friends approached the Pontiff’s corpse at a slow, wary pace.

What they found was wretched: the body ruined by Frey’s brutal technique—those relentless, lightning-fast cuts the Pontiff could do nothing to stop.

Standing over the Hollow's remains, the former Temple students struggled to process what they had just seen.

"So this is what Frey is capable of now..." said Seris Moonlight as she descended from the sky.

She'd been nearby the whole time, ready to help the instant Frey needed her.

But he handled his foe with ease—and it was the Pontiff who would have needed saving, not Frey.

"I've heard a lot about him, but this is the first time I've seen him fight right in front of me... He really went easy on me that day,"

Frost Moonlight said with a strained smile, recalling his friendly spar with Frey.

After watching Frey fight seriously ..with the intent to kill ..Frost realized Frey had never taken him seriously at all.

"He's grown so strong he can keep fighting right after killing a Hollow... like he'd just cut down an ordinary soldier. I can't believe he's the same person who was once my classmate at the Temple."

Examining the Pontiff's corpse, Dawn Polaris remembered the days he trained alone with Snow and Frey.

Once, he'd been their peer.

He'd always been strong ..but never out of reach.

Now, they couldn't even grasp his shadow.

The gap had become immeasurable.

And before that overwhelming power, everyone present could only wonder:

“What did he do? What did he have to sacrifice to gain strength like this?!”

They were exhausted from battle, so they took a moment to breathe.

Strength soon returned as a soothing golden light washed over them.

Turning toward its source, they saw Uriel joining them.

“The Saint...”

“Good work, all of you. Let me bring you back to your best as thanks for what you’ve done.”

Uriel’s new golden power was far stronger than the old holy Aura ..its effects cleaner, deeper.

In moments, everyone felt themselves restored simply by basking in that radiance.

“Seeing you and Frey here... does that mean the fight against the Church is over?” Ellen White asked, coming up to Uriel as an old friend would. Uriel nodded.

“Yes. We won.”

As her words faded, thunderous explosions rolled in from every direction.

Snow Leonhart was there too, shaking the battlefield with an endless arsenal of elements.

Vermithor gleamed in his hands brighter than ever; he had become a flamboyant, terrifying war machine.

The pressure Snow gave off was anything but ordinary; everyone quickly realized he, too, had grown far stronger than before.

Even Daemon Valerion stood out ..his feral style and the way he crushed foes with his bare hands set him apart.

In these final stages of the battle ..when the ancients and the great had fallen ..

the new generation became the Empire's main strength.

Without them, the war would have been lost long ago.

Ironically, most of them had survived the purge of the past ..

the very talents the Ultras had once tried so desperately to kill. They failed, and now they were paying for that failure.

"Our allies are strong, but they can't win alone... so please, fight at their side," Uriel urged, inviting everyone back into the fray.

For a moment it seemed like people like Frey and Snow could do everything by themselves.

Uriel stressed that wasn't true.

No matter how small help may seem, it matters.

She feared their friends might feel inferior before Frey and Snow's overwhelming power.

Seris's reply proved otherwise.

"Don't worry, Uriel Platini. Even if you'd said nothing, I planned to fight anyway."

Unfurling her ice wings, Seris rose into the air again.

"Because this isn't their war alone ..it's ours."

Frey, Seris ..each had their own reason to fight this war.

That had never changed.

It seemed everyone present shared Seris's resolve, and Uriel felt relief.

They all returned to the battle, with Uriel supporting them from the rear.

Chaos deepened ..and with the Pontiff's fall,

the Empire seized a crushing advantage.

The barren Ultras wastes, as ever, cradled one of the bloodiest clashes ..

Hollows and their hosts against the Empire.

And when Frey and Snow tore through hundreds of enemies with terrifying speed, the tide broke ..

especially once Frey plunged deep into the puppet ranks.

Slash!

With a single sweep of his blade, he triggered dozens of explosions, turning puppet bodies into shrapnel.

He was too fast. No one could stop him.

“Simon Manus! Show yourself!”

He roared it, shredding more and more puppets.

Earlier, when he spread his Aura, Frey had only sensed the Pontiff—meaning Simon hadn’t been nearby.

But that wasn’t certain.

So Frey tried to draw him out. Simon Manus could see and hear whatever his puppets saw and heard.

“I know you can hear me... Simon ..come out and face me!”

Slash!!

Leaving ruin in his wake, Frey pushed farther in.

“Do you plan to keep hiding until I smash every precious puppet you’ve made? Is that it?!”

Slash!!

“No problem then! I don’t mind!”

Slash!!

“I can fight your flimsy toys for days and they won’t even scratch me!”

Blades whirling, Frey turned the battlefield into a vast graveyard of puppets.

He could handle them all ..but somewhere inside, he was genuinely surprised by their numbers.

It was as if Simon’s puppet army had multiplied many times over since their last fight.

Simon had a grotesque method for turning people into puppets using a strange blue substance ..worse, in its way, than foul demon blood.

It was how he’d turned Clana Starlight into a puppet in the past and sicced her on Frey.

#### Chapter 639: Voices Over the Battlefield (2)

Frey still remembered that day with blinding clarity.

His feelings might have cooled, but he truly wanted to kill Simon ..to settle that debt.

Yet no matter how deep he cut, no matter how many puppets he felled, he found no trace of him.

Then, when he’d begun to think there would be no clue at all ..

Frey heard a voice he never expected to hear.

It rolled over the battlefield ..the buzz of loudspeakers.



Amid the fire and wreckage, scattered puppets appeared, each carrying a speaker ..the very kind Frey had seen in the puppet city long ago.

And through them, that cursed voice returned.

“Ah... is this thing on? Check, check.”

War and ruin. Fire and blood. While countless fought for their lives ..

that man’s grating voice came from everywhere.

“I see you’re all fighting quite fiercely to stay alive, so I won’t take too much of your time—kikikiki.”  
Simon chuckled, light and mocking.

Frey’s expression tightened at the sound of him.

“To be honest, I hadn’t planned to address you at all... but Frey Starlight’s sudden appearance made me change my mind. I didn’t expect him to show.”

“It’s been a while, hasn’t it, Lord Starlight? I wonder if you’re still holding a grudge after our last meeting... You’re angry, aren’t you? Even though I only killed one of your friends, while you destroyed all my puppets. That’s hardly fair.”

Simon prattled on as if he were hosting a broadcast, not a war.

Frey, slicing down puppets, visibly bristled.

“Cut the nonsense, Simon, and face me!”

“Haha ..and why would I do that, Frey Starlight? If I fought you now, the match wouldn’t be fair.”

Slash!!

Frey destroyed a cluster of speaker-puppets, but Simon's voice kept piping in from elsewhere.

"You're not the same young man anymore, Lord Starlight. In a short time you've become a true monster ..and monsters like you can only be handled by other monsters of your kind."

Far from the battlefield, seated calmly before a strange machine,

Simon Manus spoke with a smile.

Clad in his elegant black coat and tall hat, he looked exactly as he had the last time.

Before him, a reactor whirred violently, blue Aura coalescing around it ..

a savage pressure thrumming through the chamber as Simon relished the moment.

"The ignorant Empire, the foolish Ultras, even the demons who fancy themselves the apex of creation ..

all of you are blind to the truth. You don't grasp the real mission of the evolution I'm pursuing."

"True evolution ..the kind that will make me a perfect being your small minds cannot comprehend."

He was undeniably strange .. grandstanding about his ideals in the middle of a war.

Every word only confirmed how far gone he was.

“With my own hands I’ll carve a path to a world utterly different ..free of the ceaseless nonsense of humans and demons alike. Mark my words: the decisive moment is very close!”

“Because I, Simon Manus, will show you what the true pinnacle of evolution looks like ..an evolution that will let me surpass the gods!”

Simon Manus’s proclamation swelled in fervor with every word .

There was no stopping him.

“This bastard’s gone insane...”

Frey sighed, irritated by what he was hearing. Simon sounded just like Blattier after he’d swallowed the souls of millions—the madness that comes when power floods in all at once.

“It’s laughable to claim you’ll surpass the gods while you won’t even show your face,” Frey shot back. “You’re no god—you’re a coward who won’t shut up.”

Simon chuckled.

“Patience, Lord Starlight... patience. It won’t be long before you and I meet face-to-face. And when we do, you will bow—before the god soon to be born! Ahahaha!”

While Simon Manus’s laughter echoed everywhere, the battle itself reached its final phase. The puppet army could no longer hold.

In the end, the Empire won the clash that would be called the Graveyard of Puppets.

They had slain the Hollow Pontiff Sulyvahn, and that alone was a crushing advantage.

But they couldn’t find Simon Manus anywhere ..meaning he’d never come to the field in person.

His words, though ..his deranged broadcast ..stayed in many minds. It wasn't something they heard every day. To many he sounded unhinged; to others, terrifying. One thing was certain: the fight with him was very close now.

...

...

That night, they buried the dead while the survivors reformed their lines.

Frey and his companions had helped secure the victory, but the Empire's side had already suffered heavily before they arrived. They had lost half their force; barely a little over two thousand remained—the only troops they could spare for the Blue Front.

One major enemy.. the Pontiff had fallen.

But Simon Manus and his puppets remained, and the Hollow Ludwig had yet to appear, his intervention a constant possibility.

The situation was far from ideal, and they couldn't call for reinforcements ..the other fronts had their hands full.

Even so, with Frey and Snow present, fresh support hardly seemed necessary.

After the battle, Frey and Snow were summoned to a lengthy meeting led by the man in charge of the front: Gal Varion Sunlight.

He clearly understood the current political winds ..proof he stood with Aegon Valerion. But with Frey holding many allies on this front, Gal had no practical way to move against him and so tried to harness Frey's strength instead.

Frey left the meeting early, indifferent to Gal's attempts to keep him on a leash.

Soon he was moving through the camp, past soldiers who either greeted him respectfully or stepped hurriedly out of his path.

Whether he liked it or not, he had become famous among Imperial ranks.

"Fame that's good for nothing," Frey muttered, slipping away from the bustle.

Alone, he kindled a small campfire and sat before it, letting his thoughts wander. He wanted to finish with the Hollow front quickly and rejoin the others—but now he was being forced into a hunt with Simon Manus, whose true plan no one knew. Annoying, to say the least. He needed quiet to sort his head out.

He didn't get it.

Within minutes, a small crowd drifted over.

"Ah ..alone again, as usual," Snow said, arriving with the former Temple students.

They all came up behind him, and Frey sighed, making space.

"I was alone... not anymore."

He found himself surrounded by many companions sharing the quiet and the firelight ..

peers of his generation like Dawn, Seris, and the rest...

and the older ones ..Uriel, Eleen, even Frost.

For a moment, it felt like they'd all returned to the Temple, and a gentle nostalgia settled over them ..

memories of better days, long gone.

#### Chapter 640: The next step (1)

Gathered around the campfire, the Temple students came one after another, forming a ring around Frey Starlight.

Familiar faces ..and others Frey had never seen before ..were all there, and their number kept swelling until a single fire barely felt enough.

From among them, Daemon Valerion stepped forward and took the lead, sitting down across from Frey.

"Lighting a campfire before the battle and talking through our fights from this whole war ..I love this vibe."

Daemon spoke in his usual loud, heavy tone.

Being the only one still wearing armor made him stand out more than anyone else. From the looks of it, he could no longer remove the Golden Dragon plate since fusing it to his body.

"'Vibe'? And who said we're going to talk about our fights? Didn't you get enough of that in the briefing?" Selena shot back at him.

"Ah, damn it—women..." Daemon grumbled, shaking his head before continuing.

"We're in a war. That's the main topic. Or would you rather we talk about love and your silly relationship with that 'lucky bastard' standing next to you?"

He jabbed a finger at Dawn, turning Selena's face beet red.

“There’s nothing between us!” she snapped, while Daemon scowled harder.

“Ah... you’re one of those girls who deny their feelings to the very end. I really hate your type.”

He kept stoking the flames ..hotter than the campfire itself.

Despite the tension, he managed to make someone burst out laughing.

It was Frey ..laughing honestly for the first time in a while.

“Daemon... you really say whatever pops into your head without a second thought.”

Frey was plainly enjoying the spectacle.

“You don’t get to laugh, Starlight ..you’re worse than she is on that front.”

Daemon tipped his chin toward Frey’s own tangled situation ..juggling two girls at once.

Uriel was present, and she clearly didn’t like what she heard, but Frey didn’t care.

“Fine, Daemon. Let’s talk about the war.”

Agreeing to his initial suggestion made Daemon grin with satisfaction.

“It’s simple. Everyone here reports what they’ve done since the war began. Think of it like a Temple exam ..and whoever did best gets the top mark!”

“Ah... I see.”

At last, everyone realized what Daemon was trying to do.

“That’s so childish...”

The comment drifted in from the side, souring his mood again.

“What now, Seris Moonlight? Why do you girls insist on opposing me to the bitter end?”

Seris shook her head.

“I’m not opposing you. I just think it’s childish. You’re making war sound like a game.”

“Women...”

He grumbled again, but Frost Moonlight stepped in before things could escalate.

“No need to wind each other up. Treat the ‘game’ as a breather from all the strain.”

Frost seemed fine with Daemon’s idea, and that got things moving quickly.

“Good. Then let each of you tell us what you’ve accomplished since the war began,” said Ellen White, the former Student Council President, taking charge.

One by one, they shared their tallies.

Most present were among the Temple’s finest, and the fact they’d survived this long spoke to their skill. Many had slain a great number of Ultras since the start.



But overall ..besides Frost Moonlight and Ellen White ..the new generation of the Temple led the board on raw achievements.

“Since the war began, four hundred and fifty Ultras have died by my hand, and I’ve killed eleven of their commanders,” Daemon reported.

He’d been active from day one, and by the numbers he outpaced most of the circle.

“I don’t know my total count,” Selena said, “but I’ve taken down dozens of Mist Aberrations ..each around S+ ..which should be decent, right?”

Her feats were on Daemon’s level, perhaps even beyond. Seris wasn’t far behind either.

But when it came to achievements, two people eclipsed everyone else.

In second place stood Snow Lionheart, who had done plenty in his own right.

“I defeated a Nightmare Lord ..the Cosmos ..and killed the Hollow Smogh. I also prevailed over a bishop ..Michael Platini. As for how many enemies I’ve slain... I don’t know.”

Snow summarized his path. Those few names alone placed him far above the rest by a wide margin.

Above everyone ..except one.

“Ah... Frey Starlight.”

“It’s a foregone conclusion.”

“I’ve been hearing about him since the war began...”

When Frey's turn came, whispers spread .. tallying up rumors of what he'd done.

Hearing the chatter about himself, Frey sighed and began to recount.

"Let's see... my 'accomplishments' in the war..."

He tried to recall, counting his victims slowly.

"First ..no idea how many Ultras I've killed. A few tens of thousands, maybe more. I don't know."

He said it like it meant nothing ..yet that alone silenced the circle, the gap laid bare.

"I also took down Lord Gvardiol; killed Dragoth; recently ended the Hollow Pontiff Sulyvahn; and I've beaten Gavid Lindeman and V, though I couldn't finish them, unfortunately."

He paused, thinking.

"I've killed a lot of the Church's followers... ah, and I think I beat their Angels of War, too. I fought Joseph Blattier. I've faced most of the Ultras' Lords, plus some demons like Beatrice ..and another who came with her..."

Frey was about to continue, but Ellen cut in.

"That's enough... Frey Starlight, you're the winner ..there's no need to list anything else."

Ellen cut him off, a headache forming from the sheer weight of the names Frey was tossing out so casually.

The others agreed.

“He’s fought every enemy commander and killed tens of thousands... doesn’t that make it feel like he fought the whole war by himself?”

Someone said, and once again the circle fell silent.

He wasn’t wrong.

It could be said that Frey Starlight had carried most of the war so far on his own, making many of them realize that, had he not been there... they might already have lost.

“That’s honestly terrifying,” Frost sighed.

Not long ago, he’d set Frey as his target—someone to challenge and surpass. But since the war began, he’d had to face how naïve that was. They now lived in entirely different worlds of power.

“Seeing how far you’ve all come .. especially you, Frey Starlight ..I can’t help but laugh when I remember your first days at the temple,” Ellen said with a gentle smile.