

VILLAIN 641

Chapter 641: The next step (2)

Only a few years ago, everyone present would line up before her in the Elite Residence and listen to her orders like children. Back then, she was the strongest among them.

Now... some of them had left her behind by light-years.

"There's no need to look at it like that. Each of us can still change the course of this war in our own way," Snow replied to Ellen.

"We're all fighting this war together. So when it's finally over... I'd love for us to gather at the temple again, like the old days."

"I want that too."

"Me as well."

"Let's win this war and make it real!"

One after another, the former students agreed, eager to chase that distant hope.

Frey Starlight remained silent among them, watching.

It would be wonderful if Snow's wish came true .. if they could all meet again after the war. But he knew such rosy dreams were far-fetched, especially in wartime.

As he looked at them one by one, Frey couldn't help but wonder... how many of these faces would still be here when the war ended? Who would die, and who would live?

He had no answer—only the wish that they all survive, even as he recognized how naïve that wish was.

And so Frey was declared the winner, with Snow taking second, in the impromptu "temple test" the students had staged.

The night passed quickly. They used it to talk .. about the temple days, about how each of them had fared so far. Soon, dawn returned them to reality: the war was still waiting.

Since the puppet master .. Simon Manus .. was the primary threat, he had to be found.

The Empire's side formed small, scattered scouting teams led by Ellen White and Frost Moonlight.

"Your goal is to recon the area and locate the Hollow, Simon Manus. Do not engage unnecessarily. Return as soon as you discover anything," ordered Gal Varion Sunlight, nominal commander of their front.

Meanwhile, Snow and Frey volunteered to search on their own.

"We'll probe enemy territory ourselves .. maybe we'll pick up a lead on his location," Frey said, not exactly asking permission. Even if Gal had refused, he would have done as he pleased.

Each scouting unit numbered only in the dozens .. except for Snow and Frey, who chose to operate separately. Their individual strength was more than enough, whatever they faced.

Thus the search parties set out to find Simon Manus.

Standing side by side one last time before they split up, Ellen and Frost approached Frey and Snow.

"You two will be part of this mission as well," Frost said, and both Frey and Snow nodded.

"We'll speed things up. I can spread my aura across an enormous range," Frey added while checking his gear.

"You're both incredible... I only wish we could support you better," Ellen said, speaking her true feelings.

"Before we head out, I wanted to thank you, Frey Starlight."

"Hm? For what exactly?" Frey asked.

"For killing Gavardiol. He slaughtered my entire family. I spent most of my life training for the day I could avenge them... but you did it first. You ended him."

Ellen White sounded genuinely relieved .. but Frey also heard an emptiness between her words.

"No need to thank me. I only did what I had to do."

Like Ellen, he'd had an old score to settle with Gavardiol .. ever since Gavardiol killed Danzo. So he killed him.

"To be honest, I was happy when I heard you'd done it... and at the same time I felt hollow because I couldn't do it with my own hands. I know it's pathetic, but for a moment I felt like I'd lost my reason to fight."

Her voice .. usually a weapon in itself .. was very quiet now.

"But I think I've found another reason to fight for our homeland. So... I hope you'll rely on us 'older ones' a little more."

Ellen finished with a warm smile, and both Frey and Snow returned it.

"Of course."

Wishing each other luck, they finally split up, each heading in a different direction to cover as much ground as possible. Snow and Frey set out together at first, but soon parted ways as they pushed deeper into the barren lands of the Ultras.

"Looks like it's time we split up," Snow said.

Frey nodded. "Yeah."

"I know this isn't the best time to say it, but if you find the enemy before I do... don't rush it. If you can, wait for me. If we fight together ..you and I .. no one can stop us." Snow's voice was firm.

Frey didn't argue. "Don't worry, my friend. I'm not fighting this war alone anymore."

"Glad to hear it."

Snow nodded, satisfied, then broke off in a different direction.

"Good luck!"

"You too."

They parted, and soon each was on his own.

Normally, wandering enemy territory alone would be reckless. But Frey Starlight and Snow Leonhart were now strong enough to do exactly that ..and even if things soured, either could at least escape.

"Back to being on my own," Frey muttered as he scanned the wastes.

The Ultras' land was strange and unchanging: dead deserts, barren plains, and ..now and then ..forests of bleak trees emptied of life.

"This is the fate of any land where demons set foot..."

The more demons arrive ..and the stronger they are ..the worse it gets. Lately, even the air itself felt heavier.

"I need to end the Ultras quickly... and push my power as high as it will go."

He flipped open the system interface. His eyes fell to his strongest asset:

Shadow Adaptation: 4/7.

Stage Four had unlocked, but he still didn't know what it actually did.

"My body has definitely changed since I purged Whisker's shadow and opened this stage..."

He teased at his aura; the difference was obvious.

"I'm definitely stronger than I was against Platier... but the ability itself still hasn't revealed its face."

Each stage of Shadow Adaptation had granted a frightening new power; Stage Four wouldn't be an exception. It would surely become a major edge ..but likely only under real combat pressure.

"I probably won't discover it until a fight forces it out of me..."

A foe who could push him past his limits. There weren't many of those left; even Pontiff Sulyvahn hadn't truly threatened him at his current level.

So Frey kept hunting for the Ultras' elites. His present target: Simon Manus.

The search dragged on. All he found were lower-blood Ultras settlements ..places full of the weak and the warped. Frey cut them down quickly and moved on. They did nothing for his Blood Path; they were too feeble even to feed it.

Hours passed. Then days. Nothing. Frey's patience thinned.

"Where is that bastard hiding?"

He was nearing higher-blood cities and would likely collide with other Ultras forces soon. Even so, there was still no sign of Simon Manus.

Just when it seemed nothing would change, his comm crystal...the one he'd been given before setting out ..flared.

He gripped it and activated it. A phantom projection formed: Seris Moonlight.

"Seris... what is it?" She'd been coordinating communications, so her call wasn't a surprise.

"Sorry for the sudden interruption, but it's urgent."

"It's fine. I haven't found anything anyway. Tell me.. what happened?"

Seris kept it tight. "Since you all set out, tracking went smoothly ..we've been following your positions via the crystals. But just now, something changed. We lost Ellen White's team's signal ..suddenly.

I contacted Frost Moonlight and sent him since he was nearest... but his signal vanished the moment he reached Ellen's last location."

Frey's face hardened. "Signal loss... meaning?"

"Worst case... something happened to them."

"What about Snow?" Frey halted.

"Snow is still advancing on the far side of the sector ..he's the farthest from them. I'm going to notify him as well." Seris exhaled. "Frey... this is serious. We're preparing to move the Empire's full force toward their position ..but you're closest."

"So you want me to go first, right?"

"...Yes."

"All right, then." Frey didn't hesitate. "Guide me in. I'll handle it."

"Thank you, Frey. I'm counting on you."

Despite her composure, Seris was clearly worried ..especially for Frost Moonlight, her house's current lord, who had matured so much of late. Losing him would be a brutal blow.

Seris fed Frey the coordinates, and he surged forward at full speed.

"I'm the strongest the Empire has. Don't worry ..I'll take care of it."

He braced himself to collide with whoever or whatever ..had taken his comrades.

Chapter 642: Frey Starlight vs Zibar (1)

In the heart of the Ultras continent—at the crown of its wastes ..

a lone man moved like a shadow, slipping past whatever lay within.

Rain, rare upon that barren land, began to pour in sheets.

As the cold drops struck his skin, Frey Starlight felt something ominous drawing near.

"How much farther?" he called out, voice low but firm.

"You're very close ..just a few kilometers west and you'll be there," Seris answered at once.

"Copy."

He accelerated. With the others still far out, he would be the first to reach the place where their allies had vanished. At his current speed, every second ate distance.

"Be careful, Frey. There's a high chance whatever's waiting is a trap," Seris warned.

"It's fine. I'll handle it."

The rain intensified with each stride ..and with it, the malignant pressure pressing on Frey's heart.

"I've sent Snow Lionheart the coordinates as well, but he'll be delayed ..ran into some obstacles. The main force is moving toward you now," Seris went on, unusually tense.

Frey stayed silent.

"Be careful, Frey... be... ca .."

Her voice began to break, as if something were jamming the signal.

"Seris? What is it? Can you hear me?"

"F... re...y... wa—...re...fu—..."

The sound cut in and out—and then died entirely.

The crystal went dark. Frey tossed it aside.

"Let's see what's waiting for me this time."

He slammed a foot down, launched forward, and the promised place rushed up to meet him. Step by step, he drew closer—until, with Seris gone, only the drumming rain filled his ears.

His task was simple: find the teams led by Ellen White and Frost Monlight. Seventy people in all ..not few, not many.

After a hard run, he stopped. In the middle of the desolation rose a crooked range of stone, and at its foot gaped the mouth of a vast cavern.

A cave. If they were anywhere, it would be inside.

He flared his aura, sweeping the ground before him, searching for an enemy. Nothing. No trace. Even stretching his reach to the limits, he felt no one.

So he stepped in.

In seconds, the dark swallowed him.

Silence. Only the rain behind him, a distant hiss.

As he advanced, his eyes adapted; with Hawk's Eye, the blackness gave way to detail ..and then he saw what he had not expected.

The cavern was enormous. And full.

Full of bodies.

Some he did not recognize at all. Others were unmistakable ..faces he had seen only hours ago in the glow of a campfire, voices that had traded easy words with him.

They were mangled, slaughtered with grotesque cruelty: limbs severed, torsos crushed, features carved away. Blood soaked the stone.

Frey's expression did not change. Death did not surprise him anymore. He walked on.

Deeper in, the tunnel ended ..and he understood what had happened to the missing.

Before him hung a familiar corpse.

He had been stabbed to death, his face defaced beyond recognition. Whoever had done this had done it thoroughly.

Frost Monlight was there, dead and ruined. His great spear, the Rimeshard, had been taken from him and used to impale him—his body displayed on it like a warning.

Beside him slumped a girl he knew as well, propped against the wall. All her limbs had been cut away. Her eyes had been gouged .. dried rivers of blood stained her cheeks—and her throat was destroyed, her voice forever silenced.

Her white hair was now a muddy, dark red. She had been dead for some time.

Ellen White.

Frey stood looking at them for a heartbeat. Then he let out a low, heavy laugh.

"How strange," he murmured. "How absurd."

You speak with someone one day ..and the next you find them like this.

Death was closer than anyone realized.

As he stood before the bodies, a voice rose out of the dark behind him ..one he had not sensed until the very last instant, his instincts exploding in warning.

"You're laughing, Frey Starlight. That's disappointing. I thought I did excellent work here."

The voice was thick, grating.

Its owner was tall, broad-shouldered ..four horns arcing from his skull.

A ruined grin split a warped face; amethyst eyes burned with a predatory light beneath a black, flame-like cloak of aura.

"Zibar," Frey whispered, turning to face the demon head-on.

"Are you the one who did this?"

"Do you see anyone else here?" Zibar shot back with a mocking laugh.

"I see... then it's time for the likes of you to join this war," Frey said, voice cold as he advanced on careful feet.

Zibar shook his head. "Not 'the likes of us'—just me. I disobeyed orders, as you can see."

"Understood," Frey replied curtly, and Zibar studied him with interest.

"Hm... calmer than I expected. Tell me, Frey Starlight .. weren't those worthless gnats your comrades?"

"They were."

"Feel nothing about the way they died? Like this? They screamed a lot when I played with them .. especially that short girl.

Her voice was so annoying I had to shred her throat to shut her up. As for the boy beside her... brave enough at first—but the moment his spear couldn't scratch me, he crumpled. Hilarious, really. I could hardly stop myself .. hahaha!"

Frey cut him off. "Save the provocation. Their lives don't mean much. They went to war and died in battle because they were weak. That's all."

Zibar paused, then chuckled. "I see. Perhaps I should've targeted others—those closer to you. But I'm no expert in such games. That's Wesker's specialty."

"Enough talk. You're here to fight, aren't you?" Frey's patience thinned.

"I'm here to kill you."

"Good. Then let's change the place .. I've no desire to fight you here."

"Inside, outside .. makes no difference. The ending's the same. But have it your way, hee-hee... lead on, Frey Starlight."

Zibar followed as Frey turned and left the cave. The demon strolled behind him, amused, while Frey clenched his fists to keep himself steady.

For all his composure, his heart hammered in his chest. How could it not, when his opponent was Zibar .. tenth-rank high demon ..

a monster bearing one of Agaroth's own abilities?

With a sidelong glance, Frey measured him. He hadn't sensed Zibar before, but now that the demon had revealed himself, the pressure of his aura was unmistakable .. though weaker than when they'd first crossed paths at the start of the war.

Matching what he felt with what he knew of the High Demons, Frey concluded this was perhaps 50 to 60 percent of the main body's power.

Half strength or not, that half was terrifying .. far beyond the likes of Joseph Blattier.

"Don't overthink it, Frey Starlight," Zibar said, clearly savoring Frey's calculations. "Thinking won't help you."

They stepped out into the open. Rain hammered the barren plain as they faced each other.

"Fight with everything you've got," Zibar said, folding his arms. "Show me everything. Try to live to the end .. and show me what you're really made of. If you don't, I'll be disappointed."

Frey drew Balerion and Dark Sister.

Chapter 643: Frey Starlight vs Zibar (2)

"Before we begin .. let me ask you something, Tenth-Rank Demon."

Zibar tilted his head. "What?"

"I know your king never leaves his seat .. only watches from afar. And I know he somehow became one of the Great Ones after killing the Demon's Great one and taking he's place."

At that, Zibar's smile thinned. The human before him had named secrets no human should know.

"So here's my question, Zibar: after he became a Great One... did Agaroth finally abandon you .. leave you to wander like masterless dogs? If that's the answer, it makes perfect sense."

A vicious smile spread across Frey's face.

"It suits you .. a dog that can't live without a master. Isn't that why you're wagging after Wesker now?"

He taunted the demon head-on.

Zibar's expression darkened; killing intent rolled out so hard the air itself seemed to shudder. Then he threw his head back and laughed, the sound shaking the plain.

"Very good, Frey Starlight. I've no answer for your question... but I do hope your mouth isn't all you've got."

His grin widened. "Let's begin."

At the same instant, Frey roared, unleashing everything.

"Dark Ascension!!!"

His SSS-class aura detonated outward, whirling back into him like a raging violet sun.

"Oh?" Zibar arched a brow .. even for a Tenth-Rank, that was a respectable tide of aura.

Frey drew it all in, forcing it deep through flesh and bone. The process was far faster than when he'd faced Blattier .. though he left plenty of openings Zibar could have punished. The demon didn't. He wanted to watch what Frey was attempting.

The aura settled .. barely inside a body now like a nuclear core on the verge of rupture.

This was his peak .. the most he could bring to bear at his current level: Dark Ascension layered atop the heightened control from Shadow Adaptation, Stage Four.

All of it for a single purpose: to break the monster before him.

The hour had come. The enemies he'd dreaded were here.

Zibar had stepped from the void, and Frey had no choice but to fight with everything he had .. and try to survive.

"Let's begin!!!"

In a sprinter's crouch, Frey lowered his center of gravity .. then detonated the ground and launched like a roaring violet beam, the earth shuddering as he slammed into Zibar with everything he had.

"Hahahaha!!! Come on, Frey Starlight! Hit me with it all!"

Zibar's laughter merged with Frey's feral shout. Frey's blades hammered the demon, shockwaves scouring the mountains behind Zibar .. erasing them, corpses and all.

The clash was monstrous; aura pressure spiked to unheard-of levels. In a handful of heartbeats, Frey carved at his foe tens of thousands of times .. too fast for the eye to track. Yet just as quickly, Zibar's arms blurred, backfists catching steel, shunting the aftershock aside each time.

"Is that all you've got, Frey Starlight?!"

BOOOOOM!!!

A sudden punch slipped through Frey's guard .. an explosion of raw aura and Frey was hurled away, pulverizing everything in his path.

He recovered mid-flight and surged back at light-speed, riding the brutal boost of Dark Ascension.

"Believe me .. you've seen nothing yet!"

"Then show me!"

Unleashing the full breadth of Ten Thousand Steps of Shadow, Frey chained his ultimate techniques one after another at Zibar. The two tore across the sky at light-speed, black trails of aura lacing behind them and knotting together.

"I've always wondered why they care so much about you! Why would Wesker hide himself for years over a whelp like you?!"

BOOOOOM!!!

A thousand titanic fists collided with a thousand murderous slashes .. thunder rolling across the wastes.

At first the powers seemed even.

But they weren't.

Frey hadn't landed a single true hit. Zibar, meanwhile, brutalized him so thoroughly that ..without regeneration .. Frey would already have fallen.

"Pathetic! Is that it?!"

"Shut up!"

Frey slid back a step, packing a colossal swell of aura along his blades.

"Ten Thousand Steps of Shadow: Supreme Art : Echo of the abyss!"

A tremoring mirage wrapped Frey, supercharging his cuts. He unleashed everything straight at Zibar ..

There was no wet rip of demon flesh .. only the ring of metal on metal. Zibar had read and caught it, again, despite the blistering speed.

Frey adjusted instantly and struck again.

"Ten Thousand Steps of Shadow: Mirage."

In an eye-blink, ten thousand Freys bloomed around Zibar, hemming him in like a cloud of gnats ..

.. and just as fast, ten thousand Zibars appeared, shredding every copy until they smashed the real one too.

"Copies? On me? Hahaha! You're dumber than I thought!"

He hounded Frey, grin unshaken. High above, Zibar's fists ignited with a murderous black aura. Frey looked up to see thousands of blows pouring down like rain.

Teeth bared, he braced .. feet gouging the earth .. then kicked off, leaving a crater. He shot skyward like a violet star, battering through the storm of punches, forcing a path to Zibar.

They met again in midair, and the battle climbed to another tier. In that cold expanse, their exchanges went berserk. Frey's swords were parried; Zibar's feral strikes landed again and again on Frey's body.

Skin, flesh, bone atomized into bloody dust each time ..only to knit back together an instant later. Face, arms, legs, chest, gut, shoulders .. everything was wrecked and restored, over and over, as he shouldered the horrors of a Tenth-Rank High Demon.

Zibar's laughter cracked like thunder, relentless.

Frey was swatted away, then dragged across the ground as Zibar chased him down.

"Ah...ahaha... HAHAAHAHA!!!"

Amid the explosions and ruin .. blood and ash .. the fight turned catastrophic. Frey endured by inches: monstrous regeneration and Dark Ascension barely keeping him upright. But the tide was against him.

BOOOOOM!!!

Zibar's fist crashed into Frey's locked blades, the demon leaning in harder.

"What made you think you had even a chance against me?!"

BOOOOOM!!!

"Even as an avatar, I'm still one of the Ten High Demons the King, Agaroth, forged with his own hands! There is no world where I lose to the likes of you, Frey Starlight!!!"

BOOOOOM!!!

The pressure Zibar poured on was insane—orders worse than Joseph Blattier .. so far beyond that any comparison felt absurd. Even at only half his true power, this level had once required two SSS-class combatants just to hold it back.

And it had taken six of them just to handle a clone at eighty percent of his power.

The Ten High Demons were, simply put, instruments of total war .. peers to the Seven Great Powers. Their strength belonged to another world entirely, and Frey had no choice but to face that kind of power head-on.

"You're strong, Frey Starlight," Zibar said, "but I exist far beyond the 'strength' you understand."

After a savage, rapid exchange, Frey Starlight was buried under tons of rubble, while Zibar stood on the peak without so much as a scratch marring his shadow-black body.

"I've always known what's happening on this planet is a farce," Zibar went on. "With my own hands I'll end it .. by killing you here and smashing everything Wesker's trying to achieve."

He raised his fist, dark aura flooding into it.

"You aren't worth the attention they lavish on you. Maybe you have a few traits that make you dangerous... but you're still just a weakling who's easy to kill. And that is your fatal flaw."

He stalked forward.

Frey answered by blasting rubble away in a wave of aura and stepping out of the crater. His cuirass was shattered, the entire upper half of his body laid bare. Barefoot, in dreadful shape .. yet already healed .. he stood across from Zibar again, violet fire burning in his eyes.

"You're right, Zibar. I don't deserve the attention your masters give me. I don't even know why they care."

He crossed his blades, settling in.

"I never asked for it. I never wanted it. But they left me no choice, so here I am.

"I fight and fight... and fight and fight—fight, fight, fight! Until my body gives out, my soul is drained, and my blood runs dry.

"And still .. I keep fighting!"

With a scream that split the air, Frey unleashed a crushing surge of aura; violet channels cracked across his skin.

"I never wanted any of this! So shut up and fight me! We end it here and now!"

His aura swelled and swelled; violet heat hissed from his mouth and nose.

Zibar's smile returned. "As you wish."

BOOOOOOM!!!

The ground erupted again as they crashed together .. harder than ever. No restraint. No mercy. Their duel rattled the continent; the world could feel it from afar.

Chapter 644: Frey Starlight vs Zibar (3)

Frey tried to pierce Zibar's guard again and again, and again he met an iron defense that turned everything aside.

Grinding his teeth, he spread his swords wide like vast black wings.

Dark aura howled around both blades—then he carved a sign at Zibar.

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

Draining himself to the last drop, Frey set a calamity in motion.

"Nameless Judgement!!!"

Two Nameless Judgements .. one from Dark Sister, the other from Balerion. Twin colossal slashes that veiled the sky, crossing into a violet X that tore through the air toward Zibar.

He watched the incoming cross .. massive, violent; a power that, bolstered by Dark Ascension, truly threatened him.

He didn't dodge. He opened his mouth to meet it.

From deep in his throat, a strange power welled up .. ashen, wreathed in lightning-like sparks. Without warning, Zibar exhaled it as a devouring beam that split the heavens and slammed into Nameless Judgement.

The collision came from another world. The violet cross bored into the roaring gray breath ..deeper, deeper until the battle became a tug of war.

From behind his technique, Frey stared across a vision both sublime and terrifying: Zibar's ashen aura shearing apart around the arms of his Nameless Judgement. His cut was truly overwhelming .. enough that even Zibar's breath could not stop it outright.

Then, after a harrowing struggle, everything detonated .. Zibar's power and Frey's alike .. like a dozen nuclear suns blooming at once.

Silence, then storm. A few seconds later, Frey staggered out of the dust, panting, eyes locked ahead to gauge his foe.

He had his answer soon enough.

Zibar strode from the blast intact, laughter knifing through the haze.

"You have grown stronger since our last meeting. I'll grant you that."

He stood whole, save for a double gash across his chest in the shape of a cross. It was deep; black blood leaked steadily. But such wounds meant little to demons with that kind of vitality .. especially one of the Ten.

He shrugged off his black mantle, revealing the full, corded frame beneath. His fists flared once more.

"Let's continue."

He said it simply .. and surged at Frey.

For a heartbeat, Frey froze, mind reeling to catch up.

He caught Zibar's strike a heartbeat too late .. and paid for it.

Frey was blasted back, Zibar streaking after him at a terrifying speed.

"Come on, Starlight! Show me more!!!"

The fist of a rank-ten High Demon was heavy.

So heavy.

Heavier than anything Frey had ever taken.

A mad, crushing power .. and with it came a feeling he hadn't tasted in a long time.

Despair.

And this was only a clone.

A clone carrying half the strength of the weakest among the Ten High Demons.

Even so, the gap was staggering.

"Ha-ha-ha! Hahahahaha!!!"

While Zibar laughed, Frey's world reeled.

He fought like a madman, with everything he had—but apart from that one wound he'd carved earlier, it felt like he'd never touch Zibar again.

"Show me more!!!"

BOOOOOOM!!!

"Show me your strength! Show me your blood!!!"

Through Zibar's laughter, his howls, and the echo of ruin, Frey felt his head boil.

The end was close...

...

...

...

— Frey Starlight's POV —

I wonder... how did it come to this?

Not long ago I was sitting by a campfire, calm, with only Simon Manus on my mind.

Relaxed. Naive.

I thought I had more time.

I thought I could take things slow—build my strength step by step.

I truly believed the battle I feared was still far off.

Reality hit me in the cruelest way.

And here I am, facing Zibar, who appeared out of nowhere...

He's strong. Too strong.

No matter what I throw at him, no matter how I cut, he withstands it all and sends back something worse.

"I have to fight..."

I whipped my blades at full power, forcing myself onward.

"I can't fall here. I have to fight!!!" I roared, and Zibar answered, harsher still:

"Then do it!!"

BOOOOM!!!

He beat me down harder than anyone ever had. I tried to endure to the very end...

But my consciousness kept slipping with every blow.

Only my monstrous regeneration kept me in it, and still I could barely scratch him.

He shattered me again and again.

In seconds, the weight of it all crashed over me.

I watched his fist swell in my vision.

I felt his power and understood the gulf between us.

But I had to fight.

I must. I'm the strongest among the humans.

There's no one here stronger than me. If I fall... who fights in my place?

Who survives this monster?

I'm the only one who can so ..

"I have to fight!!!!!!!"

SLASH!!!!

In an instant Zibar thought he'd punched through me .. only to find his fist hitting the after-image I'd left behind.

At that same heartbeat, dozens of violet scars bloomed across his body .. my blade had already passed.

He whirled to find me at his back.

My aura seethed. My breath burned violet.

My eyes lost everything but that light, turning into twin amethysts blazing without rest.

I didn't know what was happening to me. I knew only one thing:

I must not fall, no matter what.

So I met him again. And again. And again.

My speed and strength spiked; I'd hit my limit.

My regeneration never stopped; every vital part he destroyed a dozen times regrew each time.

And my blade... finally started to land.

The wounds were shallow .. pathetic, even.

But they landed.

I can hurt him. That's enough to keep me moving.

Even if he destroys me a thousand times, I'll rise again. I'll regenerate as many times as it takes, so ..

"I won't go down!!!"

The battle became a war of attrition, a blur of impossible trades.

Seconds passed, then minutes.

The stalemate held.

And for the first time, I saw a different look on Zibar's face. The horrific smile was gone, replaced by an empty mask and dead eyes.

I knew that look well.

Boredom .. and disappointment.

That was what Zibar felt—and from nowhere...

His fist tunneled through, carving a crater in my chest before hurling me away.

I spat blood as aura coiled violently around the wound, trying to knit it shut.

Chapter 645: Frey Starlight vs Zibar (4)

Zibar approached in silence.

"One hundred and ninety-one times, Frey Starlight." His voice was heavy as I struggled to stand.

"What... the hell are you... saying..." I rasped, and he kept speaking in the same flat tone.

"One hundred and ninety-one .. that's how many times I've killed you since this fight began."

He paced toward me, counting as he came.

"I crushed your heart seventy-one times, blew your head apart fifty-four times, and destroyed your lungs sixty-six times," Zibar said, his smile slowly returning.

"For humans, those are instant kills—yet here you are, getting back up again and again."

By the time he finished, my wound had already re-knit, and I was on my feet.

"And I'll keep getting up as many times as it takes .. until I beat you."

I answered, crossing my blades before me, ready to fight to the last breath.

My body was boiling; every muscle screamed; my swords felt impossibly heavy.

Even so, I was set on continuing.

That resolve reached Zibar, who realized this could drag on far longer at this pace.

"I see... you've left me no other choice."

His words struck like lead, echoing in my ears for a while .. because I didn't grasp what he meant until it was too late.

No choice?

What exactly did he mean? What was he about to do?

Thoughts raced, trying to parse it—and everything changed when he struck.

SLAAAAASH!!!

I heard the cut as clearly as thunder—a savage line that split my chest open.

"Huh...?"

The word barely left my mouth before I coughed blood and collapsed again, crimson pouring out in sheets.

When I lifted my head, I saw Zibar now held a sword.

A strange, wicked blade with a hooked profile, wreathed in searing black fire.

He'd moved so fast I hadn't even seen the swing .. but that wasn't the terrifying part.

What truly chilled me was that I couldn't regenerate the wound.

No matter how I tried, no matter how I focused ..

It refused to heal.

Agony flooded me; dizziness swelled as the blood loss mounted.

"Heal... heal, damn you!!!"

I shouted .. but nothing happened.

The injury stayed. And Zibar laughed, elated.

"Let me teach you something important you've overlooked, Frey Starlight."

Standing over me, his grin deepened; he kicked me until I rolled onto my back.

"This 'regeneration' you rely on and brag about—it isn't a healing factor. I confirmed that after breaking your body over and over."

"Simply put, your power makes your body adapt to all kinds of physical damage, process it on the spot, and restore you to peak condition. But..."

Zibar paused, a murderous light glinting in his eyes.

"That only works on types of damage your body has already experienced .. and adapted to. Heh-heh-heh..."

Lifting the blade to my face, he showed off the weapon.

"That cursed body of yours is used to taking hits, so my punches stopped mattering. But I'll wager you've never dealt with anything like my sword."

He seized me by the hair and hauled me up, his smile growing more grotesque as he made me understand my situation.

"This is the Cursed Sword of Katarina .. a one-of-a-kind weapon in the entire cosmos, paired with Katarina's Armor worn by my true body."

"Maybe you've adapted to every kind of weapon and strike after a life of getting torn apart .. but you've never fought my kind before, Frey Starlight. Do you know what that means?"

He fell silent for a heartbeat, then finished:

"You won't be regenerating anymore."

SLASH!!!

One blur .. blood sprayed everywhere as Zibar hacked me open with feral delight.

Everything turned red as the demon howled with laughter.

"This is the end, Frey Starlight!!!"

Fisting my face, he held my ruined body up like a trophy ..

Then flung me, burying me under a mountain of rubble.

In those few moments as my vision faded from red to black...

I understood .. I had lost.

...

...

...

The battle between Frey Starlight and Zibar wrought horrifying devastation... and ended in a catastrophic result for Frey.

He fell once more into the pit of despair, his consciousness sinking away.

Deep in the dark, in the void,

an old, quiet fire kindled..

a simple campfire, around which gathered a number of figures alike, yet different.

Each was a version of Frey, but from other times and other paths.

They stood in a ring, staring upward.

There, the present Frey... the one who had just been defeated .. drifted down slowly, floating in the dark.

"So... even our strongest self lost," said the Frey who won the Victoriad,

while Frey the Author let out a long sigh.

"We can't blame him—his opponent was one of the Ten High Ranks..."

"It was only a copy. Even so, we lost miserably," said the Frey who killed Danzo, while the others sighed in grief.

"Who could've predicted the regeneration would stop? That was the finishing blow," said the Frey who underwent the Londor cycles, and everyone nodded.

"Zibar may have been just a copy, but he can still summon Katarina's Sword. Unlike the physical armor, the sword is a spiritual weapon any of his clones can call at will. We should've planned around it ..we should've done better," said Frey the Author, only for another version to counter him.

"Pointless to dwell on it now. We lost. We might not even get another chance to fight..."

At that, all of the Freys turned toward a single direction ..

toward a place where darkness pooled, black vapor streaming up into the void.

"We're out of time... he's awakened," the copies said in one voice,

as a shape emerged within the dark:

the figure of a strange man seated on a chair drowned in shadow.

He was bound in chains .. but one by one, the chains shattered.

Shadow Adaptation: 4/7

The chains fell away, and for the first time... the man stood.

In the same instant...

all the copies heard the blast of colossal horns ..

a heavy sound that shook the place as the darkness thinned.

"The time has come."

Chapter 646: The Awakening

At the heart of the Ultras Continent,

the barren ground lay in ruins after a cataclysmic battle between a demon... and a human.

In the end, Zibar was the one left standing.

"With that, the game ends, Wesker."

Zibar's voice was grave as he turned his back on the place where Frey Starlight lay buried.

"Time to bury this wretched planet—wipe out the low forms of life that crawl on it. After that, everything will be consigned to oblivion."

Step by step, Zibar walked away ..

not even glancing behind him.

He stopped when he heard a sound.

Something was moving ..something crawled out from the rubble and returned to the open, slowly, very slowly.

At first Zibar didn't believe it. He didn't want to believe it.

Even so, he turned ..slowly, painfully slowly.

Behind him, a man pulled himself free of the debris; only his lower half had emerged at first, his upper body still swallowed by shadow.

"I'll admit it... I didn't see this coming."

Zibar sighed in annoyance and drew his blade again.

"What kind of cockroach are you, Frey Starlight...?"

He didn't finish the sentence .. his eyes flew wide and he froze.

Frey stepped fully into the light at last. Bare-chested, with that same body ..

there was no trace of the wound Zibar had dealt him. No trace of any wound.

But that wasn't what paralyzed Zibar with dread.

It was the piece of metal on Frey's face.

A mask .. plain, black, and metallic ..yet its presence alone made a Demon of the Tenth Rank take an involuntary step back.

"Impossible..." Zibar muttered, appalled.

The figure before him

walked forward at an unhurried pace, then stopped and lifted his gaze to the clear sky, the clouds all scattered by the last clash.

With darkened eyes, he stared upward, giving Zibar no heed.

Then, at last, he spoke.

"I had a dream."

It was Frey's voice .. but somehow, it wasn't.

"A long, strange dream..."

He sounded a little dazed, Dark Sister in his right hand, Balerion merged with his left.

"A dream where I lived a different life... where I felt so many things .. anger, sorrow, joy, love, hatred..."

His hand pressed slowly to his chest; he lowered his head.

"And now I wake from it, only to find those poisonous feelings still burning inside me, splitting my heart. What kind of curse is this?"

Zibar answered the question with one of his own.

"You... what are you?"

The man finally looked at him.

Those eyes .. where white should be, a cold, ashen gray had spread.

"You ask who I am? I'll answer," he said, voice low, lifting his hands.

"But first .. what is this primitive form?"

With a flick of irritation, he raised his left hand to the sky.

Balerion, the black blade, melted, turning liquid ..

a black substance that wrapped his left arm, shaping itself into a plated, onyx gauntlet that sheathed him to the shoulder.

It was uncanny .. metal that hard, dissolving so easily.

Then, just as simply, he tossed Dark Sister into the grasp of that armored left arm and took the sword in that hand.

The motion was simple .. but the instant Dark Sister was held by Balerion ..

everything changed.

The void... shuddered.

The air... grew heavy.

And Zibar's face... became a tombstone.

"Nameless..."

Zibar spoke in disbelief as Nameless tilted his head.

"That's the name you chose to give me of your own accord .. but you're not wrong."

As he said it, Nameless took a single step forward.

Zibar, in turn, took several steps back.

"Impossible! I saw the King kill you with my own eyes! You're bluffing!"

Clutching Katarina's Sword, Zibar unleashed his full aura .. an overwhelming pressure that shook the mountains and threatened to tear the place apart.

Nameless didn't so much as flinch beneath it.

"I don't know where you got that mask, Frey Starlight... but you're not walking out of here alive!"

At light speed, Zibar streaked forward, a shroud of darkness blazing around him, aiming to end it in a single blow.

It was speed on an entirely different plane .. the same speed Frey couldn't even see before.

But this time... things were different.

Slaaash!!!!

In less than an instant, a deafening blast rippled out ..

an explosion born from the air being cleaved so fast the void itself detonated.

And in the next fraction of a second, Nameless stood behind Zibar.

Zibar's hand .. and Katarina's Sword with it hit the ground, cleanly severed.

The demon's face twisted in horror. He whipped around at maximum speed ..

and stopped dead as a slim hand clamped over his face, a strange aura sinking into him and locking him in place.

Nameless was fast ..so fast Zibar couldn't even react.

Hoisting him into the air, Nameless stared through the slits of the mask.

"How odd... my movements feel sluggish. Dull."

He glanced down at his own body, visibly annoyed.

Zibar could only curse as the scope of the disaster hit him.

'Sluggish? Did he just say that speed... was sluggish?!'

Zibar nearly lost his mind.

There was no room left for doubt.

Weakened far below his zenith though he was, the figure before him was, without question... Nameless.

Memories surged through Zibar's mind—old, pitch-black recollections of that masked monster who had visited ruin upon demonkind, who slaughtered the High Ranks as if crushing insects.

Realizing the truth, Zibar's body erupted with a violent darkness as he tore free of Nameless's grip.

In the very next instant, he bolted, fleeing at absolute top speed.

Even if this was only a clone, the terror was so absolute that flight was the only sane choice left to him.

"I have to run! I don't stand a chance against him!"

"Only the King and the First Seat can fight that thing! No one else!"

Even at that speed ..

Nameless appeared in front of him out of nothing.

"Where do you think you're going?"

"Damn it!!"

Zibar's maw yawned wide and monstrous toward Nameless.

From that hellish aperture he spewed a beam of cursed breath, a ravening ray that swallowed the void .. and Nameless along with it.

The blast was colossal, erasing everything in its path.

"He's not as strong as he used to be... this should at least hurt," Zibar muttered, certain of a close-range hit.

But from within the beam and the wreckage,

Nameless emerged without a scratch, Dark Sister reversed in his grip as a guard.

"Whether it's you... or the owner of this body... neither of you understands how aura truly works."

He raised his blade slowly, with a heavy motion, and his entire form darkened to a cursed, coal-black sheen.

"Allow me to show you, demon .. what real aura manipulation is."

With perfect control, the familiar violet of Frey's aura vanished.

In its place came a different color ..

a pitch-dark shade that poured ice into Zibar's veins.

...

Shadow Adaptation: 4/7

Fourth Stage: The user can now wield the Black Hole Aura .. a supremely potent, hazardous aura attained by Nameless upon perfecting his power. He is the only one capable of using it.

Chapter 647: My Name is Frey Starlight

Black Hole Aura ..

a baleful kind of destructive power. In ages past it scarred even the Demon King's body,

and bored straight through the flesh of Dragon God Midir .. the hardest of all creatures .. with ease.

As Nameless let it loose, a crushing pressure dropped, and Zibar hurled everything he had in response.

only for Nameless to draw a single, horizontal line with his sword.

The blade was wreathed in that ominous, lightless glow.

In that instant... it ended.

"Huh?"

Zibar couldn't comprehend it.

Nameless had cut once.

Just once .. a slow, ordinary stroke.

Then why...

Why did the world flip upside down, as if hell's gates had yawned open beneath him?

One cut became millions ..

no, billions of slashes from every direction,

ominous black arcs that carved through all things.

They cleaved air, void, particles ..

everything was cut, and within that storm

Zibar's body was delivered to the merciless savagery of that technique.

A style that belonged to the very pinnacle of their world.

The aura pressure that burst forth in that instant was colossal, its echo rippling everywhere .. so much so that, for a brief moment, the whole world felt it.

In the Empire, people stopped mid-step, wondering about that strange sensation that came out of nowhere.

Across the Ultras continent .. within the higher Blood Domains; in imperial camps and mustering grounds; in the Nightmare Lands among their beasts—everyone froze for a heartbeat...

as if time itself had stalled.

All of it born from that overwhelming pressure saturating the air .. like a phenomenon, a miracle, from another world.

In those few, suspended seconds ..

seated upon his chair at the Empire's helm, Aegon Valerion narrowed his eyes, attuned to that pressure. It was as if the entire world had reacted to the presence now upon it ..

the presence of Nameless, appearing for the first time in a very long while.

That savage strike of his went on for a long time before it finally dispersed, its aural shockwave washing out across the land.

The result was horrifying by any measure.

On the battlefield there now yawned a volcanic maw a meteor crater .. its rim clean, its span as large as the entire capital of Belgrad.

A crater gouged by a single, simple cut of Nameless's sword.

And then, after a few heartbeats, the dust thinned.

Nameless stepped out through it in heavy strides, Dark Sister resting in his left hand,

while his right dragged Zibar's body behind him.

The demon had lost most of his form and was in a ghastly, ruined state .. so much so he was scarcely recognizable.

With a hand sheathed in that black metal,

and a plain mask that made his identity,

and despite having lost the greater share of his power,

Nameless had felled his foe with a single blow.

He walked a little farther, then let Zibar's carcass drop from his grasp.

Now that his opponent was down, Nameless's thoughts drifted.

A sharp pain throbbed in his head, and he could barely remember anything. Then memories began to seep back slowly .. like flashes, little shards that pulled him toward the past.

Glimpses of a battle against a certain being...

Before that monster ..the one said to swallow everything .. Nameless clutched at his skull, bewildered by the flood of feelings he now carried, feelings he had never borne in his life.

They were the very emotions that had driven him to strike at Zibar without hesitation ..

Frey Starlight's emotions.

Raising his hand slowly, Nameless looked down at his body with a heavy gaze.

"This is, without a doubt... a curse."

His voice was low as he turned to leave .. but a voice behind stopped him.

"Wait..."

It was Zibar.

He had staggered to his feet, barely restoring the annihilated half of his body. Even after pouring what little power he had left into it, he was still in a wretched, weakened state.

"I finally understand... huff... why you draw so much attention, Frey Starlight."

Zibar swayed as he spoke.

"You're Nameless .. the entity that stood against the King and left his soul imprisoned in Helmond. Now I see why they want you so badly."

His tired words drew Nameless's gaze.

"You're still alive."

Sword in hand, Nameless took a step.

"I've lost my edge .. grown dull .. so dull I can't kill the likes of you in a single blow..."

He advanced, slowly.

"But I won't miss this time."

Those words should have spelled Zibar's end.

He braced for it ..

but the death he awaited never came.

Instead ..

Nameless froze, his body shuddering violently.

It was a strange sight, and Zibar couldn't make sense of it.

Nameless stumbled, then his free right hand seized the mask and tore it off, flinging it away.

"This isn't the way."

He spoke in a familiar tone,

and Frey's face surfaced again .. pale, with those strange gray eyes.

He forced a crooked smile as he fought himself.

"This isn't how I want to win."

This time, it wasn't Nameless.

It was Frey.

Zibar didn't understand what he was seeing, but he knew an opening when it appeared.

Mustering the last of his strength, he leapt high, summoning his sword .. aiming to end Frey before any new "surprise" could occur.

Frey, having only just wrested his body back after losing it the moment he'd fallen to Zibar, glanced down at his arm and understood he had only one chance.

Dark Sister seemed to have fused with Balerion the Black Dread .. become a single power.

And layered atop that was the strange Black Hole Aura still clinging to him since Nameless had wielded it.

Drawing a deep breath as Zibar's blade fell from above,

Frey gathered everything he had into one final strike.

"This is my last chance..."

Gathering every last drop of his strength, Frey willed his fate to change.

He wanted to defy everything .. and finally claim the victory he had always reached for.

So in that moment... all his power...

all his abilities...

all his suffering...

everything he had lived...

the story of Frey Starlight itself was poured into a single strike.

The fused force of Dark Sister + Balerion + Dark Ascension + the Black Hole Aura ..

all of it was forged into that blow.

"Frey Starlight Style..."

With the loudest shout he could muster, and the greatest power he could summon,

Frey Starlight unleashed the strongest attack of his entire life.

"Nameless Judgement!!!!"

Every ounce of that power, borne on the blades now as one,

became a final Nameless Judgement Frey hurled into the heavens.

Before him, his dark attack took shape as a vast arc ..

a colossal bow of night, like a black hole threatening to swallow all things.

That arc soared into the sky, devouring everything in its path.

In that instant, Zibar watched the onrushing catastrophe ..

and within a heartbeat it engulfed him completely, erasing his body from existence.

"Ah... I should've listened to Wesker... and brought my true body..."

Those were his last words before the darkness of Nameless Judgement wiped him out.

The strike was immense ..within it pulsed the power of Nameless himself.

So it did not stop with Zibar's destruction; it kept climbing, a dark pillar ripping open the void.

Before the eyes of the world ..human and demon alike ..that black death rose toward the firmament.

And then, in a few short seconds, came a sight none would ever forget:

Nameless Judgement carved through a vast portion of the moon, changing its ancient, perfect face for the first time since time began.

Mouths and eyes alike fell open in shock and dread ..

at a phenomenon, a miracle, that would not come again.

The severed mass drifted away, and in that moment history was written,

the sky itself standing witness to what had happened.

Down below... trembling, breath ragged,

Frey dropped to one knee and plunged his sword into the ground.

His left hand ..the one fused with Balerion .was shattered completely by that strike.

But he had reached his aim.

He had won.

With the last fading thread of consciousness, just before he fell back into the dark,

Frey spoke the words he had always wanted the world to hear:

"My name is not Nameless... my name is..."

"Frey Starlight."

Chapter 648: The Key of Darkness (1)

The long-awaited battle .. between the strongest champion Earth could muster and the Tenth-High demon ..was over.

And what an ending no one could have predicted.

It felt almost like a mirage, as if the fight had never happened at all... for no one knew what Frey Starlight had faced, nor what kind of foe he had met head-on. But the sky would forever stand as witness to that night.

The moon, constant for thousands of years, had changed .. its great mass cleaved by a final Nameless Judgement, the greatest stroke ever unleashed by Frey Starlight's blade. Shards of ruin drifted around it; the two sundered halves hovered close, yet everyone knew they would never be one again.

Likewise, the world would not return to what it had been before that battle.

Across the Ultrass continent, clouds gathered anew after being scattered by Frey and Zibar's blows. Now that the fighting had ended, it was only a matter of time before rain came down harder than before.

In a crater the size of Belgrad itself, Frey Starlight lay unconscious, having spent everything and suffered through it all once more. The Dark Sister had fallen beside him, while Balerion ..that great black sword had lost its shape as well, fused to Frey's arm in the form of a black armored gauntlet: a demonic hand, as if it belonged to some ancient, unknown creature.

At the crater's rim, a woman stepped from nothing, rain beading and rolling off her elegant hat.

"Zibar has been defeated," Beatrice said, her face devoid of expression. "Even if that was only half the power of a Tenth-Throne great demon, it doesn't change the fact: he was defeated."

What had happened had exceeded even the witch's expectations by leagues. In truth, she could no longer claim to foresee events at all. She had never imagined Zibar would disobey Wesker and enter the war himself. When he did, Beatrice assumed Frey and his companions were doomed—unless the shadowed powers backing them chose to intervene.

Reality proved otherwise. At the end of the battle she had witnessed, with her own eyes, the manifestation of a being she had believed dead long ago.

"I've seen Frey Starlight don the mask before, and I took him for a cheap imitation .. an echo unworthy of attention. I was wrong."

That power... that pressure and dreadful aura she had felt...

Beatrice had never stood before the true Nameless; someone like her would die just by drawing near, given the gulf between their powers. Yet she could still affirm that, if only for a few fleeting moments, Frey Starlight had become Nameless.

"That's why Wesker is obsessed with him... and why the King showed interest in this world despite his torpor and his loss of interest in all else," she said quietly, lifting her gaze to the moon Frey's blade had carved.

In those brief moments, Beatrice recalled what Wesker had once told her. She had always wondered why the Upper Fourth Wesker .. didn't simply kill Frey. The answer was that he never wanted Frey dead at all .. he wanted him alive. The reason was finally clear.

"After the final battle between the Demon King Agaroth and the shrouded warrior Nameless, the King prevailed, and Nameless fell," she murmured.

"But in his last moments, Nameless did something... something born of a power that toyed with life and death and broke every law. In that domain, he stood far above Agaroth."

Exploiting that uncanny mastery, Nameless conjured a phenomenon no creature has since understood. Though he lost, a strange working took shape at the battle's end, and Agaroth's soul was bound in chains of abyssal strength. With the wounds he had taken fighting Nameless, the King could not repel that sorcery.

Nameless manipulated souls better than anyone .. better even than Maskith.

Knowing he would lose after clashing with Agaroth time and again, he devised that mad plan. He could move souls into vessels. That was what he tried to do with Agaroth. Yet the King's power was too vast; there was no vessel capable of holding him.

So Nameless made Helmond—the demons' world itself—into Agaroth's vessel, his prison. A prison that held him for a very long time, sparing the rest of existence from his horrors for a while.

That battle marked the beginning of the King's isolation.

Few knew the truth; even now, many remain ignorant of why Agaroth withdrew. But it didn't happen without cause .. his final rival was the direct reason.

Agaroth, the Demon King who conquered the world and fought without end, who crushed its titans and claimed the summit, became a prisoner of the very ground where he began.

The blow was so great that the First Seat, Crimson the Red Moon, in his fury, wrought calamities. Yet contrary to expectation, Agaroth did not rage .. he accepted it, and remained in Helmond of his own accord for years upon years, quiet and absent from the field.

Among his followers, reactions split. The First Seat, Crimson the Red Moon, cast down his spear and secluded himself in Helmond as well, remaining by his King's side as guardian of the heights Agaroth occupied.

Crimson was fearsome in his own right—many likened him to Agaroth himself. Even he laid down his weapon after that last battle between his King and Nameless.

The other High Seats differed. The Second, Agares, and the Third, Vaine, acted on their whims, heedless of their kin. The demon ranks fractured between the power centers of the Fourth, Wesker, and the Fifth, Marvas. A fair number also rallied to the Dukes of Hell, beasts whose might rivals that of the Ten High Seats.

Among them was Gael, the Father of the Abyss, the mightiest of all .. so enraged by Agaroth's stance that he stormed the Tower of the End, the very place where the Demon King resides.

He broke into the tower and reached its summit, but there he clashed with Crimson. Their ferocious duel ended with Gael's withdrawal; no matter how he tried, he could not defeat the First Seat.

Thus the Dukes of Hell began acting on their own, and the High Seats split as well—sending the demons into a long retreat.

It was the end of an era ... the Age of Ruin .. the demonic age that kept the world in ceaseless terror.

Demons still raided other races; they had to, for they live on life-force itself. But their pace slowed greatly, and their strength waned with the absence of the King and the First Seat.

And so the other races finally drew breath and lived in peace for a long while, spared the endless, soul-devouring wars against the beast that swallows all.

The demons fell far .. because of a single person.

"Nameless..."

Chapter 649: The Key of Darkness (2)

Even in death and defeat, that masked warrior left his chains wrapped around their throats like an eternal curse.

Many of the greater demons believed this state would last far longer. But a few years ago...

"Nameless's seal .. and the chains binding Agaroth ..grew weaker, for the first time."

Weaker by a hair .. too slight to change anything then. Yet the strongest, keenest demons noticed at once, sensing that something was happening.

The cause remained unclear, but it coincided with one thing:

"The appearance of Frey Starlight."

There was no proof, but the King's Eye saw something .. and that was why Wesker came to Earth immediately. After his cataclysmic fight with the Engineer and Abraham Starlight, Wesker stayed on Earth, spinning threads and seeding his poisons.

He hid in the shadows, watching quietly from afar. For years he observed .. and in those short years, the Upper Fourth discovered something pivotal. Something that would change everything.

Now that Beatrice had witnessed the truth with her own eyes, she knew: Frey Starlight is Nameless .. or rather, Nameless resides within him.

"Now it all makes sense."

The dots connected. The truth Wesker uncovered was simple .. but decisive:

The power of the seal imprisoning Agaroth was ebbing, little by little. And whenever it did, it coincided with Frey Starlight's growth .. his mastery over different facets of himself.

"That colossal seal is Nameless's power itself. The stronger Frey Starlight grows, the weaker the seal becomes in turn."

It seemed the power was returning to him. And if Frey Starlight were to become Nameless in full .. if that masked warrior returned at his peak .. there would be only one outcome:

"The seal... will break."

And the Demon King...

"will return."

That is why they need Frey alive. That is why Agaroth has not killed him, despite being able to do so from afar with ease. Wesker, too, knows this thanks to the King's Eye .. so he has not killed Frey, only driven him to his limits.

Zibar did not know. Nor did Beatrice. But the last battle laid the truth bare for them both.

"Frey Starlight... you are the key."

The key that will open the door to a new age of horrors and war.

"You always were the key."

Unconscious at the heart of the crater, after a brutal fight and a hard-won chance to rest, Frey had no idea this was only the beginning .. that he had opened the way to a different hell, and that the greater demons now understood what he was, and how important.

"You will not die. You won't be allowed to die anymore," Beatrice said, a wry smile curving her lips. "You won't die .. but you will walk through a hell unlike anything you've ever seen, Frey Starlight... poor man."

Toward that man, she felt ridicule... and a flicker of pity. He had grown so powerful she could no longer handle him; even tricks would not avail her now.

It had become necessary to raise the level .. and send foes who could push Frey to the brink. That was what Wesker had been doing all along .. and, at the same time, what the Engineer had done as well. Both sides worked the same design, for utterly different ends.

Between one and the other, Frey Starlight was forced to bear everything alone:

The Engineer Gehrman machinations and the Nameless Cult.

The pressure of the demons .. the weight of being watched by Agaroth.

Wesker's shadows coiling ever tighter around his throat.

Unprecedented pressure, all on one man's shoulders.

"You've won a great victory, Frey Starlight—but at what cost?" Beatrice said one last time, turning her gaze elsewhere. "It seems our esteemed guests have finally arrived. I should go."

With a subtle shimmer, Beatrice vanished, and her words echoed once more upon the rain:

"What a poor man you are, Frey Starlight."

...

...

...

On the far side of the devastation, the Empire's detachment finally arrived.

Thousands of fighters poured in under the command of Gal Varion Sunlight, with Frey's companions at the forefront .. Uriel, Selena, Seris, Dawn... all of them were there.

They had raced at full speed, ready to throw themselves into battle, but their fervor was smothered halfway there when a colossal pressure rolled in from afar ..an echo of a power none of them understood.

A pressure from another world. And then, out of nowhere, they all witnessed the rending of the moon. Being so close, they saw Nameless Judgement lance into the heavens with terrifying clarity.

There was something familiar in that power .. an aftertaste of Frey Starlight's aura that every one of them knew.

It was too much. Many froze, refusing to advance. Who would dare step into a fight at that level? There could only be death waiting there.

Even so, they pressed on once that pressure finally dissipated and it became clear the battle had ended.

When they reached the site, they stopped dead before the vast impact basin that stretched for staggering distances .. a crater the size of a nation.

In those brief moments, beneath the torrent of rain drumming on their helmets, the Imperial soldiers stood staring for a long time at the ruin before them.

Among them, Gal Varion clenched his fists until his knuckles whitened, teeth grinding.

"What kind of battle leaves destruction like this?"

Whispers rippled everywhere; soldiers traded fear and bewilderment in hushed tones. Some dared to descend into the crater. Seris took to the air, sweeping the scarred landscape from above.

The deeper she looked into the aftermath, the deeper her frown grew.

"What happened here? Who did you face, Frey? What kind of enemy drove you this far?"

The crater was enormous, but finding Frey didn't take long. He lay there .. in its very center.

Seris reached him first, with the others close behind.

Frey was in a strange state. The upper half of his body was bare; his lower garments were shredded. Though his body showed no wounds, his complexion was ghostly pale. Dark Sister was stabbed into the ground beside him, thrumming with a solemn, resonant hum.

His left hand was sheathed in a baleful black gauntlet that made Seris's instincts bristle the moment its presence pressed against her.

It seemed Frey had collapsed the instant the battle ended, falling face-down into unconsciousness. Seris gently turned him over.

That finally revealed his face. It was the same man she had seen so many times—yet somehow different, as if he came from a world entirely apart.

"Every time I see you, you're farther away," she murmured. "Reaching places we could never follow."

Uncovering the tattoos that wound along her arms, Seris set Frey's head in her lap, then placed her palm over his chest. The sigils flared with a regal sky-blue light, and strange spikes of pure aura unfurled, coiling around him.

For the first time in his life, Frey had exhausted the immense SSS-rank reserves within him. The ocean inside him had run dry. Seris poured everything she had into him.

The others arrived in a rush; Uriel bent over him, golden power bright with worry. But all she could do like Seris .. was feed him her aura. His body bore no lasting injuries.

That was the trace of Nameless ..the state Frey had entered for that brief, terrible span. Nameless had repaired the mortal wound Zibar left in him as if it were nothing at all.

"No matter how hard he tries, wherever he goes... it seems his fate is to fight alone," Uriel said softly, sorrow shadowing her voice. Seris kept her silence.

Even with Snow and Uriel ready to stand at his side, it felt inevitable that Frey would find himself alone against monsters. It was a bitter truth.

One by one, soldiers filtered in, but few dared draw near .. keenly aware that this gaunt man had split the moon and wrought a miracle before their eyes.

A heavy silence thickened .. until Selena pulled out a scrying crystal and her face darkened, shade by shade.

"What is it?" Dawn asked at her side, and heads turned toward her as one.

In that moment, Selena spoke for all to hear.

"Snow Lionheart..."

Her voice was leaden as she delivered the news.

"We've lost Snow Lionheart's signal."

It was only the beginning.

Chapter 650: Snow Lionheart vs Geppetto's Champion (1)

The wheel of war turned forward, and events began to accelerate.

The Black Knight of Earth had prevailed—after a thunderous battle that split the moon and wrought a phenomenon humanity would never forget.

Now, the White Knight of Earth was about to face his own trial.

Since parting ways with Frey, Snow Lionheart had pushed deep into Ultras territory. For days he moved relentlessly, erasing every enemy encampment he found along the way... until Seris Moonlight's call reached him, reporting the sudden disappearance of their allies.

"I'll head there at once."

That was Snow's reply as he veered off and streaked toward the same destination Frey had chosen. He was on the opposite end of the map entirely, so naturally it would take him much longer .. except his Void Step let him devour distance at terrifying speed.

The plan was to rendezvous with Frey Starlight, learn what had happened to their comrades, and deal with any enemy presence on sight.

That was the plan. And so ..

Snow Lionheart tore across the Ultras deserts, unaware that his movement had already been caught in the distant gaze of demonic eyes.

Atop a high ridge that overlooked the barren plain, two figures stood watching him. One was a demon with the shape of a young man .. but his mere presence was a catastrophe. Beside him stood a hooded giant, over three meters tall.

From beneath the black cloak poured an uncanny, killing chill—an aura that felt like living frost.

They stood there, and they watched. Then the demon raised a finger and pointed at Snow.

That simple gesture was an omen .. ill luck descending upon the promised hero.

Seconds later, the hooded creature answered the signal, launching in the direction the demon had indicated.

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"How's the situation?"

Snow asked as he ran at maximum speed without slowing a fraction. On the other end of the channel, Seris Moonlight answered immediately.

"Frey is about to reach the point where our teams vanished... At your pace, you'll catch up to him in a few hours."

Snow's expression tightened.

"That's not good. If I'm more than an hour late, it could all be over by the time I arrive."

Seris nodded to herself, agreeing.

"I'll ask Frey to hold position and wait. There's no need for him to charge in alone." She had been bouncing the link between Frey and Snow nonstop, coordinating them both.

But Snow refused at once.

"No need. I'll be there shortly."

Even as he spoke, Snow's eyes flared with pure radiance. He was about to unleash his true power and carve a straight path to Frey. He was certain he could close the gap if he went all out.

Light of immaculate purity flooded Snow Lionheart's body. Since mastering the Spirit of Light that resided within him, his power had surged .. amplified by the golden World Tree and the opening of his Path. It was like a colossal dam bursting, letting a cataclysmic volume of destructive force roar through.

Covering that distance and joining Frey would be trivial ..

but before he could move, Snow froze in place.

A strange, glacial aura crept over his skin—a warning that prickled every sense. Danger.

A colossal shadow fell across him. Snow's eyes lifted slowly.

A greatsword was cleaving the air straight for his skull .. held by a towering, massive creature wreathed in a detonation of killing intent that promised to obliterate everything it touched.

An instant before that blade could split him, Seris Moonlight felt her stomach drop. The detonation was so violent she felt its echo through the crystal despite being far away.

"Snow! Are you okay?! What's happening?!"

She couldn't see from his angle; the crystal didn't show her the strike.

"Snow!" she called again .. just as his voice came back, steady.

"Calm down. I'm fine."

Snow had already reappeared far from the impact point. The blow had gouged a vast crater into the desert, at the center of which stood the hooded monster.

Snow stood at a distance, gaze cool.

"Seris, looks like some obstacles showed up. I'll handle it and call you back."

Seris hesitated. She had no idea who the enemy was or how strong ... but it was only one opponent, and Snow was the strongest of their generation after Frey. She assumed he could manage it.

"Can you take it?"

"Of course I can. I'll finish this quickly—tell Frey not to do anything reckless."

"...All right. Good luck."

Snow cut the link. His expression grew colder still.

On the other side, the strange creature cast off its shroud and revealed itself.

It was no human . an otherworldly figure from whose body rose a cold, uncanny vapor. Fully armored, greatsword in hand, its face hid beneath an ethereal helm. Its eyes burned a sky-blue glow veiled in darkness, and its aura was dreadful.

Facing it head-on, Snow Lionheart felt that power and began to recognize it.

A crushing pressure .. one that reminded him of a very particular man.

"This pressure... it matches .. no, it surpasses Blattier."

A hard smile slowly formed on Snow's face.

"SSS-class, then."

His opponent was anything but ordinary; yet for all Snow's scrutiny, it didn't seem sane .. the thing hadn't spoken a single word.

Instead it screamed, a feral bellow, as its aura swelled.

Golden sigils flared across Snow's body as he stepped forward.

"You... I know what you are," Snow said, voice cold as he advanced. "I still can't fully grasp all of my old memories yet—but I recognize you, without a doubt."

"You're one of the Knights of Baharat... aren't you?"

The Knights of Baharat: a cadre of warriors from the Fireborn race who dwell on a distant world called Irithyll .. the very race that produced Number Six of the Seven Great Powers, Vordt.

"Knights of Baharat are supposed to be the noblest of fighters, sworn to follow the path of the great warrior ..Saint Gehrman. That is what you were meant to be, fallen knight."

Snow drew Vermithor.

"Knight of Baharat... I don't know why you've come here, so far from your kin, but I promise you this: if you withdraw now and put away the killing intent you're aiming at me, I won't harm you. I won't lay a finger on you. And I won't kill you."

His tone sharpened.

"But if you still choose to raise your blade against me, you leave me no choice."

The answer was another savage howl from the armored knight.

That was all Snow needed.

"I see... so be it."

There was nothing left to say. The battle had already begun.

The Baharat knight blew the ground apart beneath his feet and charged like a berserker, annihilating everything in his path.

Snow slipped aside at once. Light Spirit power wrapped his blade, and with a flick of his hand he loosed dozens of radiant arcs that hammered into the knight's frame, shockwaves ripping outward.

The Baharat knight tanked the barrage and hurled his greatsword at Snow.

Snow dodged again .. only a fool would take that strike head-on. He was right. The instant he slipped past it, a distant mountain behind them was cleaved clean through.

Snow wove the elements, feeding blue fire along his edge and packing his left hand with black lightning. He countered in a blur, carving for the giant's mass.

Blue fire detonated with black thunder. The Light Spirit amplified each element monstrously as runes flared across Snow's body.

The knight staggered a single step .. then came again, even more ferocious.

"A tank, then?"

Reading his foe, Snow attacked anew. He circled at speed, raining black bolts and sapphire flame, lacing them with focused slashes of light. Every shot landed.

The armor absorbed it all. The knight's swings only grew heavier. Each sweep of that colossal blade hurled a storm of destruction and killing frost that scoured the field.

Under that overwhelming pressure, Snow evaded .. barely, each time. Without noticing, a haze of rime was crawling over his skin.

Feeling that ether-cold creep toward him, Snow understood the tide.

"This aether chill... they say it can freeze even souls—slip past time itself."

He poured more Light Spirit power through his body, purging the frost, and fought on.