

VILLAIN 651

Chapter 651: Snow Lionheart vs Geppetto's Champion (2)

"I don't understand... Why would one of the knights famed for their honor and chivalry—and their hatred of demons—attack humans?"

He questioned aloud as he watched the rampaging foe.

Snow Lionheart now possessed most of his former memories .. of the life he'd lived under another name. He still hadn't put all of himself back together. but some truths were clear.

"This knight... he isn't in control."

Since the first exchange, the Baharat knight hadn't uttered a word .. only charged him with mindless savagery, as if programmed for a single purpose: to kill Snow.

"I see what's happening now..."

Once he saw it, the pattern snapped into place. Someone else was pulling the strings.

Far away, atop the high ridge, Geppetto sat watching the duel unfold. Snow Lionheart was holding out brilliantly, but the knight was grinding him down. It was only a matter of time.

Geppetto sighed, annoyed. "I can't believe Zibar chose to defy orders..."

Staring toward the far horizon, he felt clearly what was happening in the distance.

"He's fighting Frey Starlight right now and having all the fun, while I'm forced to stay back and send one of my prized heroes to deal with a single human..."

Zibar had disobeyed orders, but Geppetto didn't dare do the same. Sending only one of his heroes was the limit, after Zibar demanded he make sure no one else interfered.

Bored, Geppetto yawned lightly.

"Hurry up and finish that human, Baharat Knight. You're one of my finest dolls .. this shouldn't take you long at all."

The Baharat Knight was SSS-class—just a shade stronger than Joseph Blattier. That level alone was enough to wipe out Imperial forces by himself if it came to it; right now all he had to do was handle Snow Lionheart.

Snow was fighting savagely, unleashing a stunning array of elements and combat tricks. That light in particular drew Geppetto's eye.

"That light... it's very close to the Light Spirit Neto uses..."

Neto .. the 9 high rank demon..

Gep4 shook his head. "But what that human's using is much weaker. A knockoff, perhaps?"

However he looked at him, Snow didn't seem human at all .. more like a Lightbearer. But he was far too weak to be a real threat...

Then, as Geppetto watched the battle, something struck the ground behind him without warning. He spun, startled—only to find another masked man standing there, human-shaped in build... yet the man's presence was so terrifying that Geppetto broke into a sweat for a heartbeat until recognition set in.

"Ah... it's only you. Don't scare me like that."

He exhaled in relief, his smile returning.

"I see you finished what I assigned you. Well done."

Geppetto praised him sincerely, but the man said nothing.

The Thirteenth High-Rank demon had no idea how to "handle" this particular hero. Usually he was stronger than his dolls—this was the first time one of his subordinates had surpassed him.

Clapping the man's shoulder with genuine pride, Geppetto walked back to his vantage point over the field.

"Make sure you stay at your best. With you, I'll break into the Ten High Seats for sure. Ahahah!!."

He laughed, ugly and obscene.

"Once we finish with this cursed planet and return to Helmund, I'll personally rewrite the Ten High Seats' order that hasn't changed in ages!"

Ambition burned in him...and that man was the reason. The Thirteenth High-Rank demon was excited; the masked figure behind him remained still, showing no sign of life at all.

Right in the middle of Geppetto's gloating, everything changed. A bizarre, overwhelming aura pressure fell—colossal, terrifying... a presence from another world.

He whipped around and barked, "What was THAT?!"

The reaction was warranted: that insane pressure came from the direction where Zibar was fighting Frey Starlight. It was horrifying ... even the masked man beside him turned to look.

Moments later, Geppetto's eyes widened as a dark radiance speared the sky.

Before his very eyes, the moon was cleaved, its shape remade by a single strike .. an overwhelming blow that only a handful in this world could unleash.

"Zibar..."

In that instant, a dreadful truth hit Geppetto. The aura of the Tenth had vanished completely.

It had only been a clone .. but none of this was supposed to happen. His expression darkened by the second.

"What is going on?! Did that bastard Zibar actually lose? To who .. Frey Starlight?!"

Unable to make sense of it, Geppetto prepared to move.

"Impossible!"

He was about to go see for himself when he froze. Another crushing aura slammed down .. this time from the opposite side.

Specifically, from where Snow Lionheart was fighting the Baharat Knight.

"What NOW?!"

Geppetto snarled as a column of immaculate light swallowed the battlefield and speared the heavens .. a light so pure it made him feel bitter even from this distance. That power was fundamentally hostile to demons.

Moments earlier, after struggling under the knight's pressure, Snow had fallen back. That was when Frey Starlight sent his Nameless Judgement that split the moon .. a sight that stunned Snow.

Seconds later Snow laughed aloud, joy plain on his face. He recognized his friend's power instantly.

"Yes, Frey... that's the one."

Smiling, Snow rose again to face the Baharat Knight.

"I've humored you long enough, Baharat Knight."

As he spoke, Snow's aura deepened and his power surged monstrously.

"From this point on, I won't fight you as Snow Lionheart. You don't deserve that."

Bit by bit, his aura swelled; his eyes blazed with a searing white light. The armored knight lunged at once .. but that vast radiance blasted him back immediately.

Snow's voice rolled out from within the pillar of light.

"From this point on, I'll fight you as the Pure Vessel .. The First Lord of Light!!"

Light erupted. Snow drew out his full might, walking the path of the Lightbearers ... returning to his ancient origin. He began by emulating the Pure Vessel's memories that flickered through his mind.

The Pure Vessel's power had once been so great he was ranked Number One among the Seven Great Powers.

What Snow accomplished wasn't more than a glimpse of what the purest of vessels had once been... but even that glimpse brought a staggering transformation.

When Snow stepped from the column of light, he was no longer the same.

"At the beginning... this was the war-form that made the name 'Pure Vessel' echo across the world."

From within the radiance, Snow extended his left hand. Slowly, the rest of him emerged.

Before the Baharat Knight's visor .. and Geppetto's stunned gaze .. he stepped out and declared himself to the world.

His right hand still held Vermithor, but a round golden shield had appeared from nothing in his left.

His clothing was gone, replaced by a grand cuirass gilded in gold .. armor reminiscent of an ancient Roman warrior, plating chest, arms, and legs in hammered sunlight .. and at last a golden helm covered his face as well.

"Pure Vessel: The Anointed War State."

Unveiling a final war-aspect erased from history, Snow Lionheart rekindled old legends of a great warrior of the past .. and unleashed that might upon the Baharat Knight.

The White Knight of Earth, too, was set to fight .. down to his last breath.

Chapter 652: The White Knight's Path

In the thick of the clash between Snow Lionheart and Geppetto's champion, every eye witnessed that breathtaking pillar of light that pierced the heavens and bathed the barren Ultrass lands in radiance.

From within it, the one who stepped out was no longer Snow Lionheart; he had become something else entirely.

"Pure Vessel: The Anointed War State."

In a form utterly different, Snow appeared bearing a round golden shield. His clothes had vanished, replaced by a Roman-esque panoply that covered only select parts of his body, and a resplendent golden helm through which his golden eyes blazed—lamps of searing brilliance.

The instant he entered this form, the very air around him changed. His presence alone grew vastly heavier.

"Baharat Knight, I'm sorry for what you've been reduced to ..but your suffering ends here."

Gripping the great sword Vermithor .. its blade now far longer than before ..Snow drove forward, and the raging Baharat Knight did the same. Both were armored like true knights, making the collision all the more spectacular.

The Baharat Knight's sword was a towering thing, over three meters long, each sweep erasing swathes of terrain. But this time, that frost-wreathed colossus halted dead against Snow's golden shield.

Planting his feet, Snow seized the opening and rammed Vermithor straight into the knight's chest. The thrust was so fierce that a terrifying lance of light blew out the Baharat Knight's back, leaving a yawning crater through him.

Riding the momentum, Snow followed with several lightning-quick cuts that ripped into his foe. Vermithor had grown so potent that tearing through the knight's iron hide had become almost simple.

Sensing danger, the knight recoiled at maximum speed, trying to reset. The instant he did, Snow hurled Vermithor like a spear instead of a sword ..

and in the blink of an eye the blade skewered the Baharat Knight with brutal precision.

The knight toppled backward ..only for Snow to appear above him out of nowhere, hand already on the hilt.

"If that's all you've got, this will be over quickly."

Snow prepared to finish it .. but at that very moment, his words seemed to trip some hidden alarm within the knight.

The armored giant began to scream, blasting out a surging wave of aura that hurled Snow away. Snow righted himself at once, bracing against the pressure and fixing his gaze on the frenzied foe.

The knight's body swelled monstrously. From roughly three meters tall he surged past five ..and threatened to grow even more ..changing from armored knight to armored beast.

Strange fluids seeped from the cracked mask of the knight's helm, erupting at the mouth. With that, he loosed his fiercest howl yet and opened his jaws, spewing a roaring beam of killing frost ..

frost that froze the very air and carved a path straight for Snow.

Snow slipped behind his golden shield at once as the beam detonated across it. The aura pressure was immense; he could feel his opponent's power spiking, desperate to keep pace.

Icy ether crept through Snow's body, threatening to freeze him solid and strip away his life. But the Light Soul countered instantly, dispelling the frost and flooding him with warmth.

Seeing the breath had failed, the Baharat Knight shut his maw and seized his sword, charging to drag Snow into a pure contest of strength.

Snow did not refuse. He met him head-on.

The swollen Baharat Knight swung with wild, brutal force; every blow unleashed shockwaves that shattered mountains and cleaved the earth into trenches. Yet none of those attacks touched Snow—every one was caught on the golden shield.

Vermithor's answers were lethal now, devastation sharpened by the Light soul's blessing.

Sensing true peril, the knight warped his aura, sending wave after wave of frost. Around the battlefield, dozens of ice spears, forged of a chill hard as steel, burst forth to skewer Snow from every angle. At the same time the aura around the knight's blade thickened, each impact heavier and more savage than the last.

Snow's sword-work flowed with ruthless precision, the light around him a beacon that flooded the arena. Arcs of radiance devoured the ice spears in torrents of speed, and the Baharat Knight's sword—no matter how dense the aura upon it .. was turned aside time and again.

Snow's body, reinforced by the Light Soul and the golden, sacred aura, was terrifyingly resilient—neither to be pierced nor broken.

Enduring everything the Baharat Knight hurled at him, Snow drove through and unleashed a dazzling cut that opened the giant's armor wide.

"It's useless, Baharat Knight. You won't break through me with attacks like these."

BOOOOM!!

With a swift sweep of Vermithor, Snow sent the massive knight hurtling away—then chased him into the sky, colliding with him once more. The crash of Vermithor against that colossal blade blasted a tide of annihilating force across the land, and the two slammed back to earth, gouging it open.

The Baharat Knight kept vomiting out more and more aura, his flurries so relentless that the entire field was turning into a coliseum of frost.

Snow, by contrast, seemed dimmer—like a lone star adrift in a cosmos of ice.

Even so, with every passing second the Baharat Knight was the one racking up damage, while Snow hadn't been struck once.

From afar, Geppetto watched, his eyes widening bit by bit.

"He's overwhelming him... Snow Lionheart holds the clear advantage over the Baharat Knight."

However he looked at it, it was obvious Snow was controlling the flow despite everything the knight hurled his way.

"The Baharat Knight's in the first tier of SSS. Not the very top, but still a colossal force—especially here on Earth. If Snow Lionheart can beat him... does that mean this human has already broken through?!"

Geppetto balked at his own thought.

"Impossible..."

He forced himself to recall what he'd sensed at the start of the fight. In raw terms, Snow Lionheart was SS at best; with his abilities and that war-king form that made him resemble the Light-bearers, his power climbed to match the peak of SS+. That should have been his ceiling.

Yet the moment he entered the Anointed War State, everything changed.

Snow's aura output surged past SS+ and stepped into the realm of SSS ..

as if he had become someone else entirely. And that light of his... it was so potent it no longer felt like a mere imitation.

"No doubt about it .. that's the Light Soul."

Realizing this, Geppetto knew he'd badly underestimated Snow. Frye Starlight wasn't the only human packed with secrets; Snow Lionheart no longer felt human at all, but a true Light-bearer—his power no joke.

First Frye Starlight, and now Snow Lionheart.

"What is happening on this cursed planet?"

He dragged his gaze back to the battle. Snow still dictated the pace and had inflicted massive damage on the Baharat Knight.

The answer Geppetto sought had already been spoken by Snow himself ..Geppetto simply hadn't grasped it. The human hero had said it plainly: from this point on, he wasn't fighting as Snow Lionheart. He was fighting as Pure Vessel, the great warrior who once ranked No. 1 among the Seven Great Powers ..a warrior who, in the distant past, slew beings within the upper Ten Seats.

His current might was but a pale echo; the road to reclaiming his prime was still long. But merely invoking the Anointed War State had given him a tremendous boost—especially with the Light Soul dwelling within.

The Baharat Knight could do nothing and was thoroughly cornered.

Even so, Geppetto hadn't given up on him.

"This Baharat Knight is one of the finest champions I've ever acquired .. and recovering his body was no simple feat..."

To add the knight to his vast army of the dead, Geppetto had been forced to kill him himself and preserve the corpse. It had nearly cost Geppetto his life.

"It wasn't his brute strength or flashy strikes ..back then I still controlled the fight..."

But when the Baharat Knight was truly on death's door, he used something ..

a bizarre ability that almost blindsided Geppetto into the grave.

"Snow Lionheart... you're strong, but the real test hasn't started yet."

Not until the Baharat Knight was pushed to the absolute limit, with no hope of survival.

With each second, that moment drew nearer ..inevitable.

Slash!!

Tearing the knight's helm, Snow drove his sword straight into his foe's head.

He ripped it free and instantly slipped past a sudden surge of frost that crawled across ground and air alike.

"There's no point dragging this out."

Clasping Vermithor in both hands, Snow gathered the Light Soul within him, ready to end it in a single, final stroke.

"Burn in light ..and find your rest, ancient knight."

With one sweeping cut, Snow unleashed a colossal arc of radiance. It chewed the land to rubble and streaked toward the broken knight at terrifying speed.

"Judgement of Light."

Chapter 653: The Smoldering Star

Snow's strongest strike hit home ..

and within moments the Baharat Knight's body erupted and began to crumble beneath the weight of Snow's light. The murderous cut bored through him at a terrifying rate; to take the blow in full would mean certain death.

Instinct screamed it at the Baharat Knight—triggering the danger mechanism deep in his mind.

At that final instant, with death a hair's breadth away, the space around the Baharat Knight shuddered ..

and the knight's eyes blazed.

From within the broken knight's body, a strange cold pulsed outward in a ring—

a wave that toyed with the void itself and sank everything around him into darkness.

For a moment, the world seemed drowned in a deep, murky blue.

And as it spread, everything froze.

Snow Lionheart's magnificent strike halted mid-arc after carving through half the knight's torso. Snow himself stood on the far side ..locked in place, unable to move a muscle.

Even far away...

Geppetto froze as well, along with the hooded giant behind him. That figure's eyes glimmered faintly .. unlike the others—yet he, too, remained fixed where he stood.

Thus space itself congealed, and time ceased to advance for all who stood upon that battlefield and near it.

The only one able to move within that frozen domain was the broken knight—and no one else.

This was the ancient Baharat Knight's trump card .. his ultimate art.

The Firefolk were singular, capable of wielding a peculiar frost that warped the fabric of space; some among their strongest became infamous for powers that seemed to meddle with time itself. The trick, however, was not truly time, for time still crept forward. The knight's uncanny frost froze reality and the senses of all present, making it feel as though time had stopped.

It was the very gambit that had nearly ended Geppetto's life in the distant past—he had barely escaped it.

Now Snow Lionheart faced the same snare.

The Baharat Knight gripped his sword—his shattered body dragging itself through the congealed void ... closing on his helpless foe to end it while Snow could do nothing.

Snow stood there, frozen, sword in hand, shield lowered ..his whole body bared. However great his strength, a direct hit like this would be catastrophic.

In only a few heartbeats, the knight reached him and raised his blade high to finish it.

This was...the end ..

SLAAAASH!!!

At the fight's conclusion, everyone heard steel sing ..flesh and bone crushed.

Time lurched forward again, and Geppetto finally saw the result ..

one that blew his eyes wide in shock.

Far off, Vermithor was buried deep inside the knight, obliterating him with a final, overwhelming thrust.

At the very last instant, Snow had moved before the broken knight .. slipping past the halted flow, cleaving the Baharat Knight who never imagined his prey could strike inside the "stopped" world.

"Freezing time, is it?"

Shoving the ruined body away, Snow unleashed a roaring beam of light that devoured the knight's remains, reducing them to dust.

"Your art works by freezing everything .. dragging the temperature of all things down, even your opponent's body. But I don't carry an ordinary body to begin with. The Light Soul dwells within me."

Within Snow, the Soul of Light flared .. pouring warmth through him that banished the frost's chill. That made him immune to the faux time-freeze; he merely pretended to be caught, waiting for the perfect moment to end his foe.

And so he won.

Snow turned his gaze to a distant rise, golden light igniting in his eyes.

"Perhaps you think you can lay your hands on this planet however you please, with no one to oppose you... Let me tell you something important."

He struck his chest with his left hand and shouted, thunder-loud:

"This earth is under our protection!"

Vermithor hummed in his grip as Snow's body blazed, a tidal wave of aura surging across the wastes.

"And we'll guard it .. to the death!"

He vanished.

At the very same instant ..while Geppetto was still reeling ..

Vermithor's edge whispered at the demon's throat at the speed of light.

Above him, Snow Lionheart descended in that terrifying war form, intent on cutting down not just the puppet ..but its master as well.

The strike was blindingly fast; clearly Snow had hoarded power for this moment. Geppetto tried to react, but he was a heartbeat too late ..

Snow's blade came down, detonating the ridge, leveling the hill and sending a tidal roar of aura across the land.

Snow was certain he'd landed the kill ..

but before he could take the demon's head, the impossible happened.

Snow's eyes flew wide as a hand clamped around Vermithor.

The hooded figure who'd stood quietly behind Geppetto had intervened faster than even Snow could perceive .. catching the blade effortlessly.

"With his bare hand?!"

With one palm he stopped Vermithor. With the other, he shaped a sword of condensed aura .. pure, honed lightless edge. The masked giant swung.

Snow snapped his great golden shield up to meet it.

The moment blade met shield, Snow watched that mighty bulwark split in two ..

and the aura-sword drive clean through his body.

SLAAAAASH!!!!!!

With a single blow, blood burst from Snow's chest, and a large portion of his shield arm was carved away. The same golden shield that had shrugged off the Baharat Knight's strikes was hewn neatly in half.

The hooded man followed with a short, brutal punch that launched Snow, slamming him into the ground with crushing force. The blow flung him back, tumbling until he smashed into a colossal boulder that pinned him in place.

There he lay amid his blood, fighting to steady himself.

The hooded figure dropped from the air as well, a sword of pure aura in his hand.

Seeing him draw near, Snow rose at once.

"That aura... the Star Aura..."

He recognized it clearly .. but its intensity was terrifying.

He hadn't expected another warrior at the demon's side, much less one this strong.

This was no joke. He had sensed Geppetto earlier, but he had never felt this man at all.

Snow's eyes flared as he readied himself.

"I've got no choice but to use the Light Soul to deal with him... If I push myself to the limit, I should be able to manage..."

The hooded figure advanced in heavy steps.

Studying him, Snow tried to read the man's make-up .. and what he saw stunned him. No matter how he looked, there were no organs, no flesh ..only aura flowing freely everywhere, running his body in place of vital systems.

What shocked Snow even more was that this wasn't ordinary aura.

"This... is ignited aura."

He rejected the thought on instinct.

"Impossible. Igniting one's aura grants a massive surge of power, but it dooms the user to certain death. Yet this man..."

The more he analyzed, the deeper his disbelief.

"He's burning constantly .. and controlling that power absolutely without any backlash..."

That shouldn't be possible. Even in the Pure Vessel's memories, he had never seen anything like it.

Realizing the calamity standing before him, Snow braced to fight ..only to learn how naïve that was. The man's blade lashed out from nowhere with speed beyond imagining.

The masked giant unleashed a torrential flurry of Star Slashes ..so many, so fast, they shredded the battlefield itself, tearing it to pieces.

And with them, Snow was ripped open as hundreds of bloody fissures crawled across his armored body. He hadn't even seen the strike.

One brutal blow knocked him out of his war state and hurled him away.

The hooded figure kept walking through the ruins, intent on ending him ..until Geppetto intervened at the last instant.

"That's enough. Don't kill him. We're here to stop him, not to end him."

Geppetto stood in his path, one forearm trembling. Even facing a thing he commanded, the Thirteenth Seat felt nothing but fear before that monster.

"Weskar doesn't want him dead. His death would trigger interferences we do not want. And I'm not bold enough to defy the Fourth-Ranked Demon, so stand down."

The hooded man held still a beat, then the sword in his hand dimmed away. He turned and walked back to his post.

Geppetto exhaled in relief, his gaze falling to where Snow had collapsed.

"We'll meet again, Light-bearer. And then, the battle will be to the death."

He turned to go.

"Count on it," Snow answered.

Thus the fight ended .. in a harsh defeat for the White Knight of Earth.

Chapter 654: A Voice in the Abyss

—Frey Starlight's Pov—

"On that day, I stared into the abyss... and the abyss stared back at me."

The fight against Zibar was different.

Different from anything I've suffered through so far.

It wasn't the first time I'd stood before a presence vastly stronger than me .. I'd met the Engineer, Gehrman... and I'd once felt the nearness of the Sixth High Demon, Asmodeus.

I've spent my life defying giants.

But this was the first time I had to battle one of them to the death.

And it was hell.

Even with only half his power, Zibar overwhelmed me completely, a brutal reminder of what the Ten High Ranks truly are ..beings that exist on an entirely different plane.

Nameless Judgement was the only strike that dealt him real damage. Everything else I threw at him barely scratched him.

He, on the other hand, tore my body apart again and again ..then even shut down my regeneration.

I'd believed that ability triggered automatically against any injury. I was wrong. If I'm hit by a kind of damage my body has never endured before, regeneration won't trigger at all. That's how I ended up in that wretched state against Zibar.

That was the turning point. From there, my defeat felt inevitable.

At first, I was desperate. I genuinely thought I had no chance.

I used everything .. every ounce of strength, every skill .. and that was all the height I could reach.

I truly believed I'd hit my ceiling.

That belief shattered the moment he took over.

Nameless.

In the dark within that lightless void ..I floundered alone. The little campfire where I used to gather with my other "selves" had gone out, and there was no trace of them.

Instead, it was just me and the masked man.

We shared the same space, yet we were impossibly far apart. The black around me pressed like deep-sea pressure, pinning me in place. Nameless sat across the gulf, back on that chair, head bowed.

I've long feared I was nothing more than a vessel for that terrifying being.

That fear has followed me for a long time, and lately it's become a truth I can't deny.

Nameless has returned, and his will grows stronger by the day .. and Shadow Adaptation seems tied to it.

As I looked at that masked figure, the feelings inside me kept piling up. Fear gave way to curiosity.

From afar I shouted, calling to him with everything I had. I wanted to speak to him .. anything. But my voice never reached him, as if something broke it in transit.

Little by little, the darkness grew heavier, freezing me in place.

All I could do was lie there in silence and stare at the man in the mask.

I knew I was unconscious in the real world. That last Nameless Judgement had bled me dry.

It was the strongest blow I've ever swung... and I'd never have reached it without him—without Nameless.

I thought I'd mastered my powers, that I'd reached my peak. He proved how wrong I was.

When Nameless took control, it wasn't as if he summoned new power from nowhere—or added anything foreign.

He simply used what he found in my body .. the very abilities I suspect were his to begin with.

Shadow Adaptation at Stage Four. My dark weapons. A fighting style all his own, one I'm sure he forged himself.

All of that was already within me. And while I was being crushed... he won easily with the very same tools.

He redefined strength for me, laid my shortcomings bare, and showed me how far I still am from the top of what I already possess.

At the same time, he made me wonder:

If Nameless can do this much with my current body... how high is his true ceiling? The level at which he once traded even blows with the Demon King, Agaroth.

When I face that reality, I can't help feeling small beside him. Without meaning to, I feel myself being pulled under.

Before a monster like that, how am I supposed to keep my body from being taken?

I felt like a thin shadow next to him... a shadow that could vanish at any moment under his presence.

So I fought desperately—to take myself back.

I was terrified of being lost forever to him.

But contrary to my fear and expectations... Nameless didn't resist.

He relinquished my body quickly, and I returned to the battle with Zibar in the end.

Because of that because he yielded ..my fear turned into curiosity.

"Why?"

I asked quietly, my voice finally cutting through the dark.

"Why didn't you resist?"

Why did you let me take control so easily?

At first I thought you couldn't ..but that wasn't true at all.

If Nameless had fought me for this body, I wouldn't have been able to resist him, not for a second.

But he chose not to. He yielded of his own will.

"Why?"

I wanted the answer to that question, but I couldn't get it .. my voice never reached him.

Slowly, the darkness thickened and I felt my awareness drift. That was how I knew I was about to wake up .. back in the real world.

In those last seconds, all I could do was stare at Nameless from afar.

And in that moment, he looked back.

Facing that monster who once walked the road of blood, I felt something strange toward him .. almost as if...

"I've known you before."

Whatever the answer is, I won't get it today. But someday, I will.

Of that, I was certain.

Those were my last thoughts in that closed, lightless space .. before I returned to reality.

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Somewhere on the continent of the Ultras, beneath the ceaseless drum of heavy rain that hadn't let up for days, Frey Starlight opened his eyes again ... aware he was still alive to see another day.

He pushed his upper body up slowly and took stock.

He was in a small cave .. no, a grotto carved out by the last battle with Zibar.

Checking himself over, he found no wounds. Someone had thrown a cover over him, and his aura reserves had been restored .. somewhat.

While he was still orienting himself, footsteps approached the cave mouth. Someone peeked in to check on him, and when she saw him awake, she dropped what she was carrying in surprise, eyes widening.

"Ah... Uriel."

Of course .. it was the Saint. She had been tending to him the whole time he was out.

Chapter 655: Comfort in the Wasteland

Frey was about to speak, but she blindsided him with a quick embrace, seemingly unable to stop herself .. so he fell silent.

"I'm all right, Uriel. There's no need to worry," he said, patting her back and holding still for a moment.

"I thought you weren't going to wake up... especially after seeing the devastation your last fight left behind."

Hearing that, Frey let out a small, helpless laugh. Even he hadn't expected to survive at one point.

"I'm here. I'm still alive .. and I don't plan on dying anytime soon. So don't worry."

Despite his reassuring words, Uriel's expression tightened. She didn't believe a single word.

He had recovered from a cataclysmic battle against an enemy none of them even knew by name. Judging by the aftermath, he'd faced a cursed monster beyond their comprehension .. of that she was sure.

And she was equally sure that Frey would head straight back to the front to fight again .. against enemies even stronger. He would do it even if it meant standing alone.

Knowing his damned nature, she couldn't believe him at all.

Frey realized his words wouldn't reach her .. especially when his actions so often contradicted them.

So, instead of speaking more, he simply slipped his arms around her in return, letting his head sink for a few seconds against her shoulder, near her neck.

In this bleak, filthy land of the Ultras, being this close to Uriel .. overflowing with the power of life ..was a blessing. The warmth of her body, the clean scent that teased his senses ..none of it belonged in this cold land of death.

So he took the gift as it was and let himself rest for a while in her arms.

She was different from Sansa; she carried a maturity his demon friend did not.

Uriel was five years older than him ..twenty-four now and fully grown. That, in itself, held a special kind of magic.

They say a single, mature woman can pull a man out of the pit of despair in a single night. Frey had heard that saying many times long ago; he didn't know how true it was.

But he was certain Uriel could do it with ease.

The moment of peace didn't last. Neither Frey nor Uriel moved beyond that embrace before they were interrupted.

"My apologies... it seems I'm intruding on something," said Seris as she stepped in to check the place .. drawn by the sense that Frey had begun to stir.

On the other hand, Uriel slowly drew back as Frey let her go.

Frey had nerves of steel; even being caught by Seris like that didn't rattle him. Uriel, though, couldn't control her embarrassment .. she averted her eyes, unable to meet Seris's gaze.

Fortunately, Seris was even cooler-headed than Frey himself. She didn't overreact and moved on immediately.

"I'm glad to see you awake again, Frey... but forgive me .. I have to trouble you, even though you've only just come to," Seris said, sincerely apologetic.

"It's fine. I know there's a lot that needs explaining," Frey replied.

He rose slowly .. then realized his clothes had been reduced to nothing in the last battle. With a frown he sat back down, letting the blanket cover what needed covering.

"Could I have some clothes first?"

"Of course," Seris sighed lightly, flicking a look toward Uriel—the one who'd insisted on caring for him herself and thus was in charge of such things.

Uriel gave an apologetic glance and hurried out to fetch something, leaving Frey and Seris alone for a time.

The air was awkward for a moment, but they broke the ice quickly enough; talking wasn't hard for them anymore.

"Mm... how long was I out?" Frey asked, not wanting to waste time.

"Not long. Barely a day," Seris answered.

"Ah. Better than I expected."

For a moment it had felt much longer from his point of view. A single day after that battle .. far better than he'd hoped.

Since he'd asked first, Seris didn't hesitate to voice what had been weighing on her.

She wanted to know what had happened—who Frey had fought .. but there was something more urgent.

"Frey... what happened to them? To our comrades whose signals vanished?"

That was what she most needed to know.

"When we arrived... we found no one but you, lying in the middle of a massive crater. I searched myself, swept the area over and over .. there was no trace of them."

Seris fell silent for a few seconds.

She had been composed the whole time .. even when they first reached the battlefield. She helped Uriel, did everything required of her.

But despite scouring the entire area, she found nothing, and the worst possibility forced its way into her mind.

"Are they... Already—?"

She asked the only question that mattered.

Among the missing were people close to her .. especially Frost Moonlight and many members of her house. Frost was the current lord of House Moonlight; if he was dead, the title would fall to her. She

didn't want that .. and losing Frost would be a heavy blow, especially now that he had matured and become a dependable leader.

Frey didn't intend to hide it. He shook his head quietly and apologized.

"I'm sorry. There was nothing I could do."

"So that means..."

"They're dead. All of them."

He answered firmly, lowering his head a little.

"It was their misfortune that set them before a monster .. a monster that shouldn't exist in this world."

Then he let out a thin, joyless laugh.

"No... it would be hypocrisy to blame luck now. Most likely they died because of me."

Seris didn't understand. "Because of you?"

Frey nodded.

"The one who did that to them was targeting me from the start. They were just tools he used to draw me out. So... you could say I'm the reason this happened to them."

What he said laid bare his fractured, fragile nature .. a man who had shouldered most of the war's horrors alone and was ready to take the blame for anything that happened around him. It was true Zibar had been after him; still, the reason Frost and the others died was Zibar, not Frey. But in his current, broken state, Frey wouldn't accept that.

"For now... I want to hear everything .. exactly what happened," Seris said.

"I promise I'll tell you .. and the others. I'm sure they all want an explanation," Frey replied. There was no point hiding it any longer.

Seris didn't reproach him, but she didn't comfort him either .. not when she didn't yet know the facts. That was simply the kind of person she was, and Frey didn't dislike it. In fact, he found it fitting.

But first, he had a different question.

"Since I woke up, I spread my aura and checked the area... but I can't sense him."

Everyone was here .. except one.

"Where is Snow?"

That was what Frey truly wanted to know—something Seris didn't quite know how to answer.

Snow Lionheart... was missing.

Chapter 656: The Meeting Before the Journey

Alongside the Imperial host ..the army assigned to deal with the Hollows ..an emergency council was convened near the field where Frey Starlight had fought his last battle.

It looked like a meeting from the outside, but in truth it was a hearing .. an inquiry held to hear the truth straight from Frey Starlight's mouth: what had happened, and what exactly had caused that much devastation.

On paper, the session was chaired by Gal Varion Sunlight, commander of that front, with several ranking officers at his side. Most of Frey's friends were present as well, gathered close behind him.

Within minutes, Frey took his seat across from Gal. The latter chose his words a hundred times before speaking, unsure how to handle someone whose power so vastly eclipsed his own.

After all, Frey was now a potential threat to the Empire .. he had tried to kill Prince Aegon Valerion ..and while they were wary of him, there was little they could actually do. Gal's only option was to go along and try to stay on Frey's good side.

"Frey Starlight... I trust you know why we've gathered?" Gal began.

Frey nodded. "I do. You want the truth of what happened .. though this doesn't feel like a 'meeting' to me." He leaned back, indifferent. "Still, I'm not looking to escalate anything. I'll give you what you want."

With every eye on him, Frey began.

"First, let's settle one point and stop living in denial. You all know the Gates our forebears sealed have opened again. I'm sure the rumor reached you."

"I don't know whether you chose to believe it or not, but know this: it's real. There's no ambiguity."

At the mention of the Gates, Frey caught hesitation flicker across several faces.

"If the Gate's broken, that means demons far stronger than before can enter our lands," Gal said.

"They already have," Frey answered, "and they're walking this earth, lurking far closer than you think, Gal Varion Sunlight."

"That's impossible!"

Gal lost his composure for a heartbeat, whispers of disbelief rippling through the tent.

"The higher demons are foes mankind cannot face. If they were here, we wouldn't be alive to talk .. they'd have attacked already," Gal pressed.

It was a fair point, and Frey found the explanation tedious. He didn't bother to unpack it .. nor to bring up the possibility that heroes of the past might still be alive. A shadow of ill omen brushed his thoughts when he recalled Lioras refusal to come and what might have become of her.

"Believe what you want," Frey said. "Just keep what I've told you in mind so you don't regret it later."

He moved on.

"Which brings me to the battle I just fought—the one that produced the crater you all saw."

At last, he spoke of his enemy.

"Here, on this very ground, I fought a demon. Not just any demon..."

He swept the room with a steady gaze.

"My opponent was Zibar .. the Tenth of the Upper demons."

The name landed like a hammer. Silence fell, followed by a stunned collective intake of breath.

"The Tenth...?"

Many stared at Frey as if he'd just told the wildest lie imaginable. Even humans knew of the Upper Ten: monsters of power beyond reason.

"You're telling me you faced such a demon and lived?" Gal demanded, tight-voiced.

"I didn't just live," Frey said. "I won."

"And I'm supposed to believe that?"

Gal sounded incredulous, as if the very notion insulted him.

Frey wasn't lying .. though he omitted that what he'd fought was a mere copy. Explaining reincarnating souls and world-breaking abilities would only invite headaches, and Frey saw no benefit in burdening men like Gal with that truth.

"So according to you," Gal summarized, "an Upper Ten demon appeared on this soil, slaughtered our scouting teams to lure you in... you fought him here... and you defeated him?"

Frey nodded. "That's right."

Gal's fist tightened until it crushed the armrest of his chair. The account sounded like fantasy. Why would the Tenth come himself, take the trouble to kill the likes of Frost Moonlight and Ellen White just to bait Frey? And stranger still .. Frey claimed he had prevailed.

To Gal, a far more "reasonable" explanation was that Frey himself had killed the scouts. But he couldn't voice that after feeling the aftershock of the insane battle that had clearly taken place.

Outside of Frey's own companions ..most of whom believed him .. the rest rejected his story outright. Frey didn't bother pushing back; he simply pointed them to one immovable fact.

"If you think I'm exaggerating or lying .. if you won't accept that enemies of that level are already near .. then do me one favor: look up. The best proof is hanging over your heads."

He meant the sundered moon .. split by his final Nameless Judgement.

"Like it or not, that's the truth," Frey finished. "The sooner you accept it, the better your chances of surviving what's coming. Because none of us knows how this war ends."

It was a mistake to think the Ultras were the last enemy, that victory over them would be the end. What stood behind the Ultras was far greater .. and far worse. Zibar, the Tenth of the Upper Ten, was only a small taste of the horrors still waiting.

As soon as he finished speaking, Frey rose and walked out of the council.

"Where do you think you're going, Frey Starlight?!" Gal called after him, trying to halt him. Barely a quarter hour had passed since the meeting began, but Frey had no intention of staying a moment longer.

"I've no time to waste here. I told you what I know, and I'm leaving. Snow Lionheart is still missing, and finding him is my top priority."

He spoke over his shoulder and continued on, unmoved by the threats tossed after him .. there was nothing they could do to stop him anyway.

"Don't forget to brief your lord on what you heard," Frey added. "He'll want the news."

He meant Aegon Valerion, who would certainly hear of it first. Enemies were everywhere .. and Aegon Valerion was one of them, perhaps the worst of them.

Frey couldn't see through the fog around the prince; everything about him was sunk in deep obscurity. But Frey was convinced the prince stood with the demons. Let him know even Zibar hadn't been enough to kill him .. perhaps that alone would keep him at bay for a time.

And so, Frey left.

A small group peeled off to follow him at once. Turning back to them, he smiled.

"What is it? Have you all come to see me off?"

"To go with you," said Daemon Valerion, taking the lead for the rest.

"I'd rather follow you than sit with that gaggle of feeble old men." Daemon's admiration was plain.
"You're the one who beat the Tenth, right? That alone is reason enough for me."

Daemon respected only true warriors and real strength .. and both stood before him in Frey. The sundered moon above had sealed his decision.

The others had their own reasons. Auriel came simply to support him; Seris, Selina, and Dawn had their motives as well.

Seeing them all ready to accompany him, Frey realized that, at least this time, he wouldn't be alone.

"Good. I won't stop you. But you'll have to watch yourselves .. my path keeps dragging me into the hardest fights."

He scratched his head and kept walking. "Not that I go looking for them..."

Even if he sought peace, the enemies seemed to find him anyway.

"We're heading to where Snow disappeared, right?" Seris asked.

"Yes. Straight there," Frey said. "But first, there's something we need to retrieve .. and I think it matters to you in particular, Seris."

Her curiosity kindled, Seris fell in beside him as Frey led them to a spot near the crater carved by his battle with Zibar.

As they walked, most of them couldn't help but gape at the scale of the destruction.

Then, in an instant, everyone's eyes snapped to Frey as a strange pressure rolled off him.

He stood before a mountain of rubble, a jagged hill of shattered stone. Frey raised his left hand and called to Balerion.

He answered .. but not as the familiar blade. He flowed into a black, eerie gauntlet that clad his arm to the shoulder.

"He's still taking this shape," Frey murmured, studying the black metal. He summoned Dark Sister as well, and gripped it with Balerion.

The moment the two met, their power seemed to fuse entirely, and Frey's strength surged.

If his weapons had once been SS tier, he wondered what tier this fusion now represented...

Along with the weapon fusion, Frey could now call on Stage Four of Shadow Adaptation without strain. In seconds, a pitch-black aura crept over Dark Sister in answer.

"The Black-Hole Aura."

A different, terrifying power .. mastered by Nameless when his control reached heights no one else had attained. It was that aura which had once let his blades carve through demons with ease, and even wound Agaroth himself.

Weapons fused. Black-Hole Aura awakened. Dark Ascension ready to be invoked.

With the three combined, Frey felt his power spike .. thanks to Nameless, who had forced that path open for him. Yet the feeling brought him little joy. It wasn't born of his own effort. He felt like a lesser version of the original; even with all this, he was still weaker than the Nameless who had fought Zibar.

"I've still got a long road ahead," he sighed, giving Dark Sister an idle sweep.

A single casual stroke sent a roaring wave of aura across the rubble-mountain and erased it to dust.

The onlookers were struck speechless. Frey could now loose that much force with a simple swing.

When the debris cleared, something lay exposed within the ruin .. something many recognized, Seris most of all.

"This..."

Frey reached down and wrenched it free, lifting it high.

"The great spear, Remshard. The only thing that survived."

While the bodies had all been obliterated, this alone had endured. Frey studied it for a breath, then tossed it to Seris.

"I believe this belongs to you .. and to your house."

Before moving on, he preferred to return the weapon to its rightful owners. Seris nodded her thanks.

"Thank you."

She hugged the spear for a heartbeat, then stored it away, resolved to find a worthy bearer.

Frey gave a satisfied nod. "Now we can go. There's no reason to linger."

"Let's find Snow."

And so Frey and his companions set out to search for the missing Snow Lionheart.

Chapter 657: The Taste of Blood

After a grueling battle .. cut short by an unexpected intervention ..

Snow Lionheart was defeated by a strange, terrifyingly powerful man.

That power far surpassed the Thirteenth High Rank demon, leaving Snow wondering how a monster like that could be under someone like Geppetto. That thought vanished at once as the masked man overwhelmed him completely, finishing him with a blistering chain of strikes.

The onslaught tore Snow out of The Anointed War State, forcing an immediate loss and dropping him unconscious before the enemy. The Thirteenth High Rank demon didn't kill him ..orders from above forbade it ..so he left Snow alive and departed with the masked man.

There, on the barren desert floor, Snow lay unconscious with nothing to protect him in the enemy's domain. Though the demon had spared his life, Snow was far from safe. The Ultras wastes crawled with every kind of blight; even the weakest would be a threat to him in that state ..mutated humans that wandered aimlessly, nightmare beasts, even Ultras themselves, who would rejoice at slaying an imperial hero.

Normally, nightmare creatures wouldn't dare approach, not with Snow's power. But now... he was prey.

Soon, hideous creatures began to gather at the site of the battle, slowly encircling him. Mutated humans with black ichor and blood drooling from their mouths, as if they had finally found a meal to sate their hunger.

Snow, still unconscious, had no idea what was about to befall him.

As the monsters reached for him, their limbs simply fell away severed ..and they were cut down one after another at terrifying speed. Within seconds, all of them lay ruined and dead around Snow.

Then, as the bodies stilled, something began to drag Snow's limp form. A strange force curled around him, hauling him away into one of the Ultras' dark, forgotten hollows.

A full day passed. Frey and the others had already begun searching—but it was in vain. All trace of him was gone.

At first Snow remained unconscious, but his extraordinary body soon began to recover on its own, feeding on the abundance of sacred power within him. Normally, he would have recovered mid-battle the moment he was injured, yet the masked man's blows had been so destructive that the Aura of the Star kept ravaging his body for hours.

The sacred power had to wrestle it constantly, expelling it at last .. only then could the healing begin. That was why his recovery took so long.

In the end, Snow opened his golden eyes.

The first things to reach him were the stench of thick blood and the sight of bizarre torture implements surrounding him on all sides.

Realizing where he was, Snow tried to move—only for the slightest attempt to send a savage wave of pain through him. Something was paralyzing him completely.

He looked down at himself. He was suspended, both arms and legs bound. He was utterly naked. What seized his attention most were clusters of crimson spikes driven deep into various points across his body. Those nails were the source of the pain; they had completely numbed him and sealed his power.

"Where the hell am I?" Snow asked, scanning the chamber.

Beside him lay a scatter of mutilated corpses, long dead, desecrated in bizarre ways .. mouths sewn shut, eyes stitched over. Others had their limbs severed and reattached in the wrong places, leaving them like grotesque, misshapen chimeras.

It all drew a hard scowl from Snow. Given how thoroughly he'd been restrained and suppressed, the one who dragged him here was no trivial foe.

"Looks like I've wandered into a monster's den," he muttered, taking stock.

The last thing he remembered was the battle with Geppetto and his underlings .. how that man had finished him.

"I need to get out of here and return to Imperial forces. The demons have a roaring beast among them ..one that might rival the Ten High Ranks."

A man like that under Geppetto's control was a catastrophe .. one that had to be prioritized.

Since he'd failed to fight him off even after invoking his strongest war form, Snow knew he couldn't win at his current level. His only option was to join forces with Frey and hope the two of them together could deal with that man.

And with Geppetto ever at his side, it would at best be two against two .. never mind the other fighters and the army of dead that Geppetto commanded.

Thinking it through, Snow finally grasped the dreadfulness of the Thirteenth High Rank. That demon hadn't reached his seat by personal might alone, but through that terrifying ability to weaponize the dead—an entire army hidden beneath the shadow of a single demon.

The fact that such a demon stood against them now...

The odds weren't in their favor at all.

"I need to do something about that... but first—"

Pulling his focus back to the present, Snow realized his immediate situation took absolute priority.

"I have to get out of here."

He tried to gather his strength, to coax his aura into motion .. but every time he did, the crimson spikes driven into different points of his body shut it down at once. Whoever had hammered them in had targeted critical, precise nodes that left his body refusing to respond.

"What are these damned spikes, exactly?"

They were strange implements indeed. They didn't just block his internal aura flow; they even tampered with his blood itself. He could feel something circulating within him—as if it had mingled with his blood and seized control.

Piece by piece, the signs pointed Snow toward the identity of whoever had done this to him. He didn't have to wait long for confirmation: the clicking of heels rang from somewhere down the corridor.

High heels, sharp and unhurried, drew closer... until she appeared.

"Ah! You're finally awake!"

Beaming at him, the strange girl hurried over. She wore a simple black dress, its hem dappled with flecks of blood. Her skin was pale as chalk, her hair jet-black, and there was a small spider-shaped tattoo at her throat.

She was, admittedly, stunning. But Snow didn't fall for the surface. She carried the same scent .. the stench of blood.

"You slept for such a long time! I thought you might never wake up," she chirped. Snow's face hardened.

Given the way he'd been bound and displayed before her, he had already guessed.

"If I'm not mistaken, you're a Hollow .. the Blood Queen, Evelyn. Aren't you?" he said, voice edged with doubt. The girl blinked, then lit up.

"Marvelous! You sussed me out just by reading the room. As expected of the Empire's hero! Ahahaha!"

Exactly so: Evelyn, the Hollow .. one of the strangest, most brutal among them, always hiding her true nature behind that innocent mask.

Snow's predator's gaze stayed locked on her as he ran the numbers. Under normal circumstances, dealing with her would be easy; she was SS-class, a level he had surpassed long ago. But as he was ..wounded, fully suppressed .. he was little more than an ordinary man. His options were scant.

Evelyn's smile deepened.

"Look at those eyes... the eyes of a beast who'll kill me the moment he gets the chance. I do love eyes like that."

She reached out and laid her hand over his bare chest.

"Unfortunately for you, you can't do a thing to me. Your body already belongs to me."

At her touch, a wave of pain roared through him .. as if every cell in his body were reacting to her. Snow clenched his teeth and rode it out.

"What do you want? Why leave me alive?"

"If it's torture for information you're after, you're wasting your time," he added, steadying his breath.

"Information? Whatever are you talking about?" she laughed lightly.

With a sadist's smile, her fingers traced slowly across his bare torso.

"I don't care about this silly war. I only care about finding a partner to play with..."

Her hand clamped down hard around him below.

"...a partner who can last a very, very long time~"

Snow's body went taut, a chill running through him at her intent.

"At first, I wanted Frey Starlight. I waited for him to fall... but he's a real monster. He scared me." Her voice dropped, honest and almost breathless. "He defeated one of the High Rank demons himself. It was the first time I'd ever felt something like that... fear."

Even collapsed and unconscious, Frey had been an unknown—his body all wrong to her senses. If she tried to shackle him, he would break free and kill her.

"That's when I found you, dear Snow Lionheart."

Snow was powerful, but unlike Frey, his body obeyed sane rules. If she drained him completely, her bloodcraft could restrain him.

"From now on, we'll always be together, Snow Lionheart. You'll be my eternal partner, so do try to endure..."

She leaned in closer and closer.

"...I get a bit rough sometimes."

She lunged, kissing him with violent hunger, her free hand still gripping below. Snow's body was fettered; he couldn't move. She thought her net was already tight around him.

But at the very moment she believed that, Snow answered .. and she realized just how grave a mistake she'd made.

Mid-kiss, he struck .. mouth opening, he bit down, savaging her lips and tearing away a mouthful of flesh and skin.

Blood burst and splattered. Evelyn jerked back with a strangled sound, clutching at her ruined mouth.

Snow chewed once, twice .. then spat the blood onto the floor and looked at her with a feral smile.

"You taste foul, Blood Queen Evelyn."

At that, Evelyn finally understood: her "partner" this time was no ordinary man at all.

Chapter 658: Before the Storm

Somewhere in the middle of the Ultras continent, a small party carved through the barren heartland at breakneck speed.

They were few, but several of them possessed staggering individual power. In less than a single day they clashed with multiple enemy groups .. and erased them in record time.

It was, of course, Frey Starlight's squad: only his friends from the Temple.

After a full day on the move, they paused beneath the shade of a mountain to catch their breath. Sitting in a close circle, they were still searching for Snow Lionheart.

"It looks like Snow fought a hard battle too..." Seris murmured, remembering what they'd found at the point where his signal vanished.

The place had been a ruin .. clear evidence of a brutal fight .. and that stirred fresh worry about the Empire's white knight.

"Snow isn't weak. He won't die that easily," Frey said, scrolling idly through the system interface.

Snow's name still sat there, along with a high Affinity score; at the very least, it meant he was alive. He was likely unconscious, which was why Frey couldn't lock onto him with the third-person player view.

"The moment I get a fix on him, I'll teleport straight in and bring him back."

That was the plan—but he'd gotten no ping at all for the past twenty-four hours.

"You said you fought a demon of the Tenth Upper Rank, Frey. Makes me wonder what Snow ran into at the same time..." Daemon said, fiddling with his armor. Frey hesitated, then answered.

"I don't know exactly what he fought... but it wasn't some ordinary foe. Most likely the demon of the Thirteenth Upper Rank."

"Sorry for keeping that to myself, but the tenth didn't come alone .. the thirteenth was here too."

"And how does the Thirteenth compare to the Tenth?" Dawn asked.

"There's no comparison in raw power. The Tenth is far stronger," Frey said, laying out what he knew.

He wasn't wrong. Even at fifty percent, Zibar's clone outclassed Geppetto. The gap between the top ten and those below .. save perhaps the Eleventh ..was enormous. But Geppetto was a special case.

"The Thirteenth is terrifying because of his cursed ability: he can use the corpses of the dead, raise them, and make them fight for him. In wartime, that makes him one of the most dangerous demons alive .. his army of the dead has no known limit."

That left most of them stunned.

"Isn't that a catastrophe for us? If he can use corpses at will, he can build an endless army .. and even turn our fallen against us," Selena said. Frey nodded.

"Exactly. That's why he has to be killed as soon as possible."

Easier said than done. Geppetto had survived for ages; no one had managed to kill him. Demons weren't fools .. they never let him roam alone. He'd come with Zibar; and even without Zibar, Wisker lurked close by. Dealing with him was a genuine headache.

"This is infuriating. It feels like we won't be able to do anything against enemies like that..." Daemon grumbled, clearly rattled by the scale of the battles they were glimpsing.

The man beside him was the one who had split the moon with his sword.

Frey only shook his head. "Don't jump ahead. Everyone has a role to play in this war. You're all strong .. you just need time to grow."

"You sound like an old man when you say that ..and it's not exactly fair coming from you, considering you hit your current level at record pace," Daemon shot back.

He'd been born with talent, yes .. but he was still human. No cosmic entity had chosen him as a successor, no broken training path had catapulted him past his peers.

Chasing strength, he'd done something no one else had: after losing a leg during that old abduction and hunt on the Ultras continent, he replaced it with his golden armor's limb... and then kept going, deliberately destroying more of his body and fusing it with the same golden armor.

It was a savage, merciless process with no guarantees .. but Daemon did it. Whenever Frey looked at him with enhanced sight, the result still seemed bizarre: more than half of Daemon's body had merged with the armor.

He'd become something like a cyborg .. half man, half weapon.

That strange evolution had supercharged him .. but even so, he was still far from Frey and Snow. Impressive as Daemon's feat was, it wasn't enough to reach their tier.

"My strength comes from the trials I've lived through .. the life-and-death fights I survived. I'm just a walking mass of chaos wearing a human shape. Don't compare yourself to me. Move at your own pace, Daemon."

Frey looked around at the others. "That goes for all of you."

"I'm getting used to the supernatural lately .. nothing feels that strange anymore. Take Dawn Polaris here ..perfect example," Selena said, propping her chin on one hand, pointing at Dawn beside her.

"He's got some freaky ability that lets him survive anything. No matter the opponent. Honestly, I find that more impressive than the raw power you monsters throw around."

The Last Survivor .. Dawn's ability .. would always be a mystery, and Selena wasn't wrong.

"Since you brought it up, I've always felt something... off with you, Dawn Polaris. What exactly is that ability of yours?" Daemon asked, thinking back. "Back when we were hunted, you were the only one who came out without a scratch. Even in this war, you're always spotless .. meanwhile the sorceress next to you has taken hits."

It didn't add up.

"That's why I stick close to him," Selena said dryly. "I know I'm guaranteed to make it out as long as I do."

At that, Daemon Valerion raised an eyebrow.

"Really? I figured you two were having some kind of wartime romance, the way you cling to him."

"Hah... who in the hell would do that in the middle of a war?!" Selena snapped—so Daemon simply pointed at someone.

"Frey Starlight does."

Thinking about it, everyone had to admit he had a point.

"Love and war... those two don't mix at all. How can you even think about relationships when death is breathing down your neck every second?" Selena asked .. and the reply came from Frey, unexpectedly:

"What's wrong with it? Seems like a good way to step away from the pressure of war now and then." Frey smiled lightly.

He drew everyone's gaze .. especially Auriel, who hadn't expected that from him. Frey had always seemed like a man who poured everything into fighting, to the point that chasing romance felt unreal for him. He fought and fought; every time he felled one enemy and survived, an even worse one appeared. The cycle repeated like a curse.

Yet even under that crushing weight, he could still say something like this. No one could find a retort.

"Anyway... Dawn, let me give you a friend's advice," Frey said, turning back to him.

"Of course," Dawn Polaris replied easily—then Frey warned him.

"That ability that keeps saving your life .. it's strong. Like Selena said, in some ways it's more impressive than what people like me and Snow have... but it isn't absolute. Keep that in mind."

At that, both Dawn and Selena frowned.

"What do you mean, Frey? Please be clear," Selena shot back. Dawn seemed to share her view; he truly believed he could survive any situation he ended up in. Frey wanted to pull him out of that illusion.

"What you have is an ability ..supernatural, yes, but still just an ability. It keeps you alive, sure. But you're not the only one in this world with something like that," Frey continued. "Plenty of beings have comparable tricks, and the Upper Ten Demons are prime examples. Your power might save you from most of them, but some have tools that can nullify the causality your Last Survivor relies on. If that happens... you know what the result will be."

He said it flatly, and Dawn stiffened for a beat.

"So you're saying his ability isn't absolute?" Selena asked.

"There's nothing absolute in this world—not even the Demon King," Frey replied.

Believing in perfect powers was foolish. Everything had a weak point .. and Dawn's was his total reliance on the Last Survivor. If he ever met a monster who could cancel the ability's causality, that would be the end. Frey wanted him to think about that—and stop leaning on it blindly.

Dawn clearly hadn't expected to hear this. He fell silent, mulling it over.

Frey rose. "Let's move. We've rested enough."

They fell in behind him, setting off once more across the Ultras desert.

"This really brings back memories... can't believe we're out here again, just us," Daemon said, recalling their abduction and how they'd fought to escape the continent. A year later, they'd returned .. by choice.

"A lot's changed since then," Frey said simply.

They were far stronger now .. no longer temple students dragged off in chains.

"I'm sure most of you have your reasons for coming back. As for me... I just wanted to pay back the sons of bitches who tried to kill me," Daemon said, blunt as ever.

Most of the elite students had chosen to return .. Lara Croft the archer was the lone exception, refusing to step foot on this continent after what happened. Aside from her, the rest were brave enough to come back.

"For me... I wanted to help others survive instead of surviving alone," Dawn said, voicing what he truly felt. It would be great if he could extend his ability to those around him .. but realistically, it still looked like he'd mostly survive on his own.

Selena kept her reason to herself; Seris spoke next instead. "I came to fight for my family... and to take revenge on a certain someone."

At that, Frey and the others knew exactly who she meant: Baylor Moonlight. She had fought him during the abduction and been utterly defeated .. but she hadn't let go of her goal. Revenge was still her aim.

"My role is to save and support people. That's why I'm here," Auriel said softly from the center of the group. "And... there's a sin I want to atone for."

That left Frey.

"The way you're all talking about your goals sounds like a string of death flags," he said dryly. "Most people die before they ever reach what they're aiming for."

Then he smiled and gave his own answer. "My goal hasn't changed. I'm here to kill as many enemies as possible .. nothing more, nothing less."

Simple as that. By doing it, Frey would keep growing .. strong enough to crush his foes, protect those close to him, and fight the fate closing in.

As they trekked through the Ultras in that brief calm, Frey had no idea how many mountains of corpses and seas of blood awaited him. The killing had only just begun. The road ahead was long .. stacked with harsher, harder trials .. ready to script a new struggle, and new suffering.

Chapter 659: The Queen of Blood and Madness

In a hidden place steeped in the stench of blood ..

A chamber that contained nothing but machines and instruments of torment ..

Snow Lionheart still hung there, naked and bound, while that madwoman, Evelyn, toyed with him.

After their sadistic kiss ended with Snow tearing off a large portion of Evelyn's lips and mouth, the Blood Queen repaid him—and began to play in earnest.

Slowly, she tested Snow's toughness and pain tolerance: peeling his skin little by little, flaying him alive, all while manipulating his blood to keep him from summoning any power at all.

The agony was insane. And the more Snow's blood spilled, the deeper Evelyn's smile became.

"I always took you for the gallant, fearless hero—the perfect man without flaws."

The wet rasp of her blood-knife accompanied every word as Evelyn spoke, having already mended what Snow had done to her.

"But you did something feral, unbecoming of a 'hero.' I suppose even your kind are capable of that."

A noble, 'great' hero eating human flesh, acting like demonkin themselves .. even Evelyn, steeped in gore and torture, found it strikingly strange.

Snow endured the pain and managed a smile. "Believe me... you haven't seen anything yet."

"How lovely. You can still speak so freely despite what I'm doing to you."

His endurance was terrifying—less than Frey Starlight's, but still higher than anyone else's. Gradually, a strange golden force seeped through him, knitting flesh whenever the injuries deepened.

"I'm suppressing your power, and yet this sacred aura acts on its own in spite of me... fascinating."

That golden, sacred aura was peculiar .. healing Snow's body automatically whenever he was wounded. It granted him something akin to Frey Starlight's monstrous regeneration, letting him recover from almost any injury at once.

But that only delighted Evelyn; it meant she could play for a long time.

As she tortured Snow, he began to acclimate to the pain. His gaze grew calmer, steady enough to speak without difficulty.

"It may be strange to ask you in this state, but I truly want to know—why are you doing this?"

He fixed his eyes on Evelyn.

She was stunningly beautiful .. he could admit that easily. A different kind of beauty from Seris and Auriel: a mysterious, gentle-seeming allure that could spark any man's curiosity.

But those slender hands had been soaked in blood too long for any return.

As his vision adjusted to the gloom, Snow noticed Evelyn's other "toys":

Dozens .. no, hundreds of mutilated humans.

She had severed her victims' limbs and grafted them onto one another. A man with three arms here, an extra leg there .. even extra genitals. Some she had fused to her female victims.

The madness of that place sickened Snow Lionheart.

And Evelyn's answer left him baffled.

"Why am I doing this? What a silly question," she said, shaking her head as if she'd just heard something stupid. "To express my love, of course! What other reason could there be?"

Her deeds were diseased; her answer, more diseased still.

"Love?"

"Mhm~"

Humming as she flensed another strip of skin, Evelyn savored the scent of blood and raw flesh. "There's no better way to show love than through pain."

She drove her claws into him. "After all, pain is the only kind of love I've ever had in my life. It's only fair to share some of it with others, don't you think?"

Those last words convinced Snow she was profoundly unstable .. dangerous not only to the Empire, but to the Ultras as well. It was why she was a Hollow, and why her personal power soared in war .. where blood flowed freely. If Evelyn fought on a battlefield awash in blood, her output could exceed her rank and brush SS+.

"Pain has never been a form of love," Snow said, eyes drifting to the other victims. "It's a manifestation of misery and suffering. If those shapes are the signs of the 'love' you speak of, no one in this world would want love ever again."

Evelyn's smile deepened. She sank the blade farther into him, drawing a low groan.

"Well... you all say that at first. It makes you entertaining. But soon you start begging, and then you become boring."

How many times had she done this? How often had she crossed every human boundary in love's name? Snow didn't know, but the number was surely vast.

He couldn't help wondering what had made her this way. She claimed pain was the only love she'd known .. what, exactly, had happened to her?

Whatever the answer, Snow knew Evelyn had gone far beyond any line long ago. No past, however cruel, could excuse what she had become.

The men she captured were mutilated: the ugly ones castrated outright; the handsome ones taken from time to time to sate her urges .. Snow, for better or worse, fell into that latter group.

As for the women, their fate was grim: Evelyn despised them, killing them swiftly—after prolonged torment.

Aware of everything she had done, Snow Lionheart knew he could kill her without feeling a thing.

Hours crawled by. The torture continued.

Snow endured the pain with a terrifying steadiness much like Frey .. and that only made Evelyn happier. Someone was finally withstanding her "love" without breaking, which meant she could get even more creative.

"You really are wonderful, Snow Lionheart. Your endurance is impressive ..you might be the one I've been searching for all these years!"

She said it as she wrapped up another session.

Snow was soaked in blood; there wasn't a patch she hadn't carved. Even so, his golden eyes still burned just as fiercely.

"Sorry ..you're not my type. I suggest you find someone else," he said, dryly, even in that state.

"You're cruel. No matter what I'm doing, I'm at least confident in how I look." Striking a provocative pose, she closed in. "No use lying .. you do find me attractive, don't you?"

"It's hard to call a lunatic who enjoys flaying people 'attractive.'" Snow spat blood at her.

The blood stopped in the air before it could touch her.

"That's because you don't understand what love is. I'll make you understand, eventually."

"And what makes you so sure this will last?" Snow asked .. talking more than he usually would.

Evelyn noticed, but humored him anyway. "You think you'll escape? Sorry .. that's impossible."

She paced through her theater of torment.

"This place is completely secret. No one knows it exists but me, so your friends won't find you. And you won't break free of me .. I control every drop of blood in your body. In other words..."

"You're not going anywhere."

Snow exhaled a long breath as the sacred aura quietly set to mending him again.

"What about the war? Don't the Ultras need their Hollow?"

She shrugged. "Who cares about them or their stupid war? I already got what I wanted. I have no reason to go back."

"I see..."

Snow's smile sharpened. "You know you're going to lose, don't you? Your only hope is the demons. The Ultras alone aren't enough anymore."

He pressed the blade in. "Even without me, Frey alone is more than enough to deal with you."

Chapter 660: Frey and Snow vs Everyone

He wasn't wrong. Frey Starlight had defeated a copy of Zibar that wielded half his true power .. comparable to a Stage Two apex in SSS .. without having even broken into SSS himself.

When Snow felt Frey's aura that day, he knew that even after finding his own path—and gaining both the world-breaking Light Spirit and the sacred golden aura .. he was still weaker.

Three paths:

The human path.

The demonic path.

And the path of the greatest Lightbearer of all.

Even with all three, he was still beneath Frey.

That only deepened Snow's certainty about his enigmatic friend.

"If I .. who am supposed to be the Pure Vessel himself ..am still below you, Frey, then whatever sleeps in your depths is something far greater."

Thinking of his friend, Snow smiled wide.

"I can't stay behind forever, can I?"

Evelyn arched a brow. "What are you talking about?"

“Nothing... Just talking to myself. I think it’s time to end this farce.”

As he said it...

Snow raised his hand—and Evelyn’s face darkened at once.

In that hand, Vermithor manifested out of nothing, blazing with aura.

In the same breath, Snow shattered the blood-binding around his arm and unleashed a razor pillar of force that ripped across the chamber, tearing Evelyn’s chest open and hurling her into the stone behind her.

The strike caught her clean; she hadn’t defended in time.

“Ah... you’re tougher than I thought. I was hoping to cut you in half with that,” Snow laughed, easing himself free by degrees.

The Blood Queen struggled upright. “How...?”

“How did I do it? Is that what you want to know?”

Snow flicked his tongue over blood-wet lips. “You shouldn’t have kissed me. By doing that, you let me eat your flesh. And as you can see—”

“I can turn the human flesh I eat into power.”

Evelyn’s expression curdled. “Cannibal...”

It was the cannibals' way of growing stronger .. one of the foulest paths of all. Who would have imagined the Empire's shining hero would use it?

Bound so completely by her bloodcraft, Snow couldn't assume the Anointed War State or use his power freely. He needed another way to scrape together strength .. and that way was to eat human flesh.

Even so, what he'd taken from Evelyn was barely enough for a single strike .. not quite sufficient to finish her.

Snow was still weakened. She hurried to rouse her Blood Aura and clamp down on him again ..

But as she did, Snow smiled in her face.

"Too late, Blood Queen. He's already here."

At that very instant, a violet flare split the chamber, right between Evelyn and Snow ..

And from nothing, a figure stepped in and flipped the board.

SLASH!!!

With a motion so fast the Blood Queen couldn't even register it, he cleaved her without mercy—Frey Starlight had finally arrived.

Seeing him, Snow let out a breath. "Took you long enough, you bastard."

Frey dropped Evelyn with a single blow, blindsiding her with the fused power of Balerion and Dark Sister. Then he turned to Snow.

"You're the one at fault. I could only jump in the moment you used your aura."

While waiting on Snow, Frey had discovered something annoying: his third-person player pov wouldn't lock on if the target was unable to use aura at all. That was why he hadn't been able to pinpoint Snow and teleport to him sooner.

Shrugging off his black cloak, Frey tossed it to the naked Snow. "For now, heal up .. and let's get out of this hellhole."

One glance around made his lip curl. He'd walked into the den of one of the foulest Hollows.

Evelyn lay a short distance away, body half-severed .. yet she laughed when her eyes found Frey.

"Laughing in that state... she's completely insane," Snow muttered, stepping to Frey's side.

"Let's finish her and go," Frey said, not eager to linger.

But Evelyn kept laughing, staring at Frey with a strange light in her eyes. "Amazing... Truly amazing," she breathed. "You actually came .. just like that witch said."

Those last words landed out of nowhere, and both Snow and Frey frowned.

Frey froze as multiple explosive auras flared to life on every side .. signatures that had been smothered under some kind of veil, now suddenly revealed. At the same time Evelyn's body liquefied into blood and seeped down the cracks in the floor.

It all happened in an instant. Within seconds, their sharpened senses caught a voice:

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

Snow shot Frey a look—but it wasn't him. Which meant ..

“Nameless Judgement.”

The moment the name rang out, everything went black. Ravenous black fire surged, swallowing the site whole.

And the truth snapped into focus: Evelyn had lied. This place was no secret at all .. it sat inside one of the Highblood cities, now encircled by thousands of Ultras, with the masked “V” at their head. He had triggered the blast .. and the arcane artillery followed, spewing devastation until the entire district was a single crater of ruin.

Ultras troops massed along the rim. Most of the big names were there—Hollows and Lords alike. “Did we get them?” a soldier asked, hopeful.

He fell silent as a murderous intent crawled out from beneath the smoking rubble.

The debris detonated upward. Two figures rose from the blast.

Frey’s clothes were shredded, his torso bare; Snow was in similar shape. Both had been caught by the last strike, but most of the damage had been blunted .. thanks to Frey.

With Dark Sister fused into Balerion in his left hand, Frey’s eyes burned violet as he fixed on the distant V. Brushing black fire from his skin, he growled, “You call that Nameless Judgement? Huh .. what a joke .. ”

He set his stance and held out a hand to Snow. Snow took it at once as Frey pushed a heavy surge of aura into him.

“After my fight with Zibar, my reserves still aren’t full,” Frey said. “You’ll have to make do with that.”

“I burned a lot in my last battle too,” Snow answered, “but this will be enough.”

Together they advanced into the deathtrap the Ultras had laid.

Frey's gaze swept the enemy line. Most of their main pieces were on the board .. Lords and Hollows both, with Beatrice and the demon Beleth holding the rear.

"Looks like they want to end the war here," Frey said.

"Then let's grant them that," Snow replied.

Retreat wasn't an option; Beatrice had raised a barrier the moment Frey arrived, blocking long-range teleportation. In other words ..

Fighting was the only choice.

And in this battle, it felt as if the fate of the war between the Empire and the Ultras would finally be decided .. an ending about to be written.