

VILLAIN 88

Chapter 88: The Story of an Old Man

Days passed, one after another. I was still inside the temple at the administration's request.

But aside from me and the other elites, everyone else had already been dismissed.

So I decided to take the chance to explore the now-empty temple.

The elite hall was still somewhat lively, with the student council struggling to maintain order. It was a difficult task.

Many wanted to return home already. Honestly, it was surprising that this many had even stayed.

Of course... I didn't care. I left immediately.

The first thing that greeted me was the elite academy's garden—now completely ruined.

The once-vibrant greenery and multicolored flowers that had adorned this place were nowhere to be seen. All that remained was scorched, barren land.

No matter where I went, all I found was more and more destruction.

I got lost in my thoughts for a while.

The temple had suffered not just physical devastation but also a severe blow to its reputation.

Soon, the ruling powers would turn to Bloodmader and use him as a scapegoat, placing all the blame on him.

And that plan... would work perfectly.

"Bloodmader..."

I thought of that old man with his radical ideals.

What he did was sheer madness. Regardless of his motives, he had caused the deaths of students who had yet to even take their first steps in this temple.

876 to 430.

That was the final toll of the invasion.

876 students had perished.

Meanwhile, the temple had managed to eliminate 430 Ultras and traitors.

These numbers weren't entirely accurate, but they were close. And that wasn't even accounting for the wounded—those who would never be able to fight again.

"What a crime you've committed, Raphael Bloodmader..."

But I knew...

As someone who had knowledge of this world's future, I could say this with certainty—

He wasn't wrong.

Bloodmader... the worst is yet to come.

The blood spilled here was merely a drop in the ocean compared to what would soon follow.

These thoughts consumed me.

I had been getting lost in my own mind more often lately. So much so that I only just realized I had wandered into an entirely different place...

Seeing the destruction around me, I suddenly remembered something important.

"Wait... Shaheen!"

Panic surged through me as I sprinted toward the food district.

I hadn't thought about it until now, but the invasion had affected the entire temple. And now, I remembered that old man I had spent countless hours with here...

"Damn it... you better not have gotten hurt, old man..."

A few minutes later, I was standing before the familiar place—

But I couldn't stomach what I saw.

That magnificent tent, reminiscent of a circus canopy... The gaudy lights that had once given it a unique charm...

All of it had been destroyed.

They had torn everything apart, reducing it to scattered, broken fragments.

"No way..."

I stepped forward, my footsteps heavy, gazing at the ruins before me.

And then I saw something worse—

Scattered bloodstains across the debris.

"Is he... dead?"

A bitter feeling welled up inside me.

He was just a senile old man who had reminded me of something I had long forgotten.

A simple man who had helped me rediscover a sliver of the humanity I thought I had lost.

Just another character in this damned world...

But still... I couldn't accept it. I couldn't accept that he was gone.

Just as I reached a dead end in my thoughts, I heard footsteps behind me.

"Hey, kid! What are you doing there? The place is wrecked, so there's no service today!"

That voice... that familiar tone.

I turned immediately—

And there he was.

A short, muscular old man standing in his usual white apron, his arms and chest exposed.

I instinctively placed a hand over my face, a smile forming on its own.

"You're still alive..."

I muttered without thinking.

On the other hand—

"Hmm? Oh! It's you, Frey! Don't scare me like that—I didn't recognize you for a second!"

That was strange...

The moment I saw him alive, all those troublesome emotions just vanished, as if by magic.

I chuckled at myself, realizing how ridiculous I was being.

I really had gotten soft.

I waved at Shaheen with a grin.

"Well, well... I can't believe you're still breathing, you senile old man. How the hell did you survive?"

Shaheen's expression shifted in an instant.

He furrowed his brows and thumped his chest.

"Foolish brat! Do you have any idea how long I've been here? I've survived more than all the idiots in this place combined!"

He closed the distance between us and jabbed a finger into my chest.

"Besides, look at yourself! How the hell did you make it with that scrawny body? You're softer than my kids!"

This old man really was something else.

"Haha, I'm stronger than I look, Shaheen. I could take ten of you with one hand."

His expression darkened instantly.

"You can take my ass, you little punk! Get over here—I'll teach you a lesson myself!"

What followed was a full hour of messing around with Shaheen in the middle of the wreckage.

Arm wrestling, tests of strength, and all sorts of dumb games that should never happen between two people with such a ridiculous age gap.

Even if Shaheen split his age into three, he'd still be older than me.

But none of this changed the way I treated him.

If anything, I found his strange belief that strength was all about muscles rather amusing.

After a while, Shaheen gestured for me to follow him.

"Come... Frey."

"Hmm? Where to?"

Without a care, he simply started walking away.

"Since you're already here, I assume you're looking for a meal. Am I wrong?"

His question made me hesitate before responding.

"Well... you're not wrong, but your restaurant is completely destroyed."

"Tsk, tsk. How many times must I remind you of your ignorance?"

As we stepped through the back entrance of the ruined tent, I was surprised to see a small stall set up beside it.

Before I could say anything, Shahin walked inside, laughing loudly.

"Haha! Discipline and perseverance! Give me the ingredients, and I'll cook even in Nightmare Lands if I have to!"

"I'm surprised you're still willing to work here after everything that happened."

He paid no mind to my remark and was already preparing the ingredients.

"The usual, right?"

Seeing him ignore my words, I simply nodded.

In the end, I found myself having a meal with the old man again, chatting like nothing had changed.

But as time passed, our conversation grew quieter, and eventually, silence settled between us.

We both drifted into our own thoughts.

Then, out of nowhere, Shaheen spoke, his expression unlike anything I had seen before.

"Tell me, Frey... do you remember when you jokingly asked if I had a daughter, saying you wanted to marry her?"

I blinked, caught off guard.

His face was too serious for me to take it lightly.

"I think I said something like that..."

It had been nothing more than a passing remark.

Shaheen let out a quiet sigh.

"Well, I did have one... or rather, I used to."

A strange feeling crept into my chest. I had a vague idea of where this conversation was going.

I quickly muttered, "I'm sorry."

But he only shook his head.

"No need. It happened over twenty years ago."

"I had a daughter... a truly gifted one. Far more than I ever deserved. I'm just a cook, the son of a cook. So when she was born with talent that could take her to heights I never even dreamed of... I was happy. And I was terrified."

I didn't know why he had chosen this moment, of all times, to tell me this.

But I listened.

Shaheen's gaze wandered over the ruined surroundings.

"I was happy because she was special... but afraid because I knew she would face horrors I couldn't even imagine."

"Of course, I supported her with everything I had. She made it into the temple—this prestigious institution I never dared to dream of. Since her mother had died the moment she was born, I was all she had. Thanks to her, I was able to move my restaurant here... that way, I could always be by her side."

He suddenly sighed before continuing.

"But nothing lasts forever, does it? Frey... this attack today? It wasn't the first. Something similar happened twenty years ago."

"Back then, I remember... I found myself cowering in fear while my daughter stood in front of me, protecting me. I—who was supposed to be her shield—hid behind her small, fragile body. When I felt her warm blood spill onto me... when I felt it slowly turn cold... that was when I realized I had lost her."

Shaheen's eyes locked onto mine.

"Frey... earlier, you asked me why I'm still here after everything that happened, didn't you?"

I didn't move. I didn't confirm or deny it.

I simply remained silent, waiting for him to continue.

And he did.

With an empty expression, he gathered the dishes.

"I survived, Frey. I survived that day, and I've kept surviving ever since. And I will continue to survive until the very end. This is my punishment for letting her die. Everyone around me will perish, one after another... but I will remain."

As he washed the dishes, he glanced at me from the corner of his eye.

"But you... you're different, Frey Starlight. Go back to your family. Leave this cursed place."

His words hit me harder than I expected.

Without thinking, I muttered, "How?"

Shaheen simply laughed.

"Did you really think I wouldn't recognize someone as famous as you? In the first place, who else would pay that much gold for a meal like this?"

"Right..."

I replied weakly.

He caught onto my hesitation immediately.

"Frey Starlight, I don't care about the rumors surrounding you. I've dealt with you myself, and I know you're a good person. So don't waste your time. Don't make the same mistakes I did. Cherish the things that matter... and leave. Don't come back. This world has no mercy for anyone."

Hearing his final words of advice, I forced a small smile.

I stood up, placing a gold coin on the table.

"Don't worry, Shaheen. I understand perfectly."

Dark mist rose from my body as I turned my back to him.

"The things that matter to me... the ones I hold dear... my family. If I want to return to them, I have no choice but to keep fighting. And I won't die. I'll stay alive until the very end. So you'll be seeing my face again, Shaheen."

With a smirk, I walked away, step by step, leaving him behind—though I knew he was staring at me, perhaps even overwhelmed by my presence.

But I paused for just a moment.

"You know, Shaheen... maybe I have no right to say this. But I think your daughter protected you because she loved you just as much as you loved her. She wanted you to live. So... live."

And with that, I left.

At the time, I didn't know...

That this would be the last time I ever saw the old man.

Because by the next day, Shaheen had vanished without a trace.