

## VILLAIN 571

### Chapter 571: The Curse of Choice (3)

Frey stood too, inclining his head in agreement, hiding his face behind the mask once more.

“Ending the Church’s tyranny. Finding a way to deal with the shadow inside me. Discovering the path that will make you stronger. Rescuing the saint. All of it will follow, once we win this war.”

“They’ve existed for centuries—they’re bound to have countless tricks hidden up their sleeves. Prepare yourself. This will be no easy battle,” Frey warned.

Snow chuckled. “It was never a fair fight from the start. What difference does it make now?” With a grin, he surged ahead, Frey close behind.

“I’ll take the lead, since I’m the only one who can cross that labyrinth.”

He glanced back. “But tell me—should we leave the prince behind?”

“Let him be. He’ll find his own way. Dragging him with us would be pointless.”

Whatever the prince was planning, he’d appear when the time was right. Frey doubted that labyrinth would hold him for long.

“So it’s just the two of us against the whole Church, huh?” Snow said, wearing a grim expression.

“Are you afraid?” Frey asked with a mocking smile.

“Not at all,” Snow exhaled, shaking his head. “Since the moment I started walking beside you, I’ve had to carry the weight of this war on my shoulders. As if we were the only ones fighting it. Maybe that’s just one more curse laid upon you...”

And as Snow thought back, he realized: from the very start of this war, that's how it had always been.

Frey fought one battle after another, bearing most of the war on his own.

He had been the first to fight at Shizclar Bay, the first to lead the vanguard on the Ultras continent.

He faced Dragoth, the human-demon, and defeated him; then fought every Ultras commander alone and survived—

and now he stood on the verge of confronting the Church in its entirety.

Snow had only recently begun to accompany him, yet he already found himself carrying the same heavy burden—coming to understand what Frey had lived through all this time.

"This isn't a curse," Frey said. "It's simply the natural consequence of my own choices. I chose to fight this war, and what's happening now is the inevitable result of that choice. That's all."

"I think your concept of fighting a war is very different from everyone else's," Snow said.

There is a vast difference between taking part in a war, and shouldering the whole of it alone—that was what Snow wanted to say. But he had begun to understand Frey's way of thinking more and more, and realized such words would mean nothing to him. Frey had chosen this himself.

"Well then... at the very least, I can share this curse with you from now on."

Activating the War King Form, Snow readied himself to breach the labyrinth.

"We've already reached it. Stay close to me from here on," Snow said, and Frey nodded.

Following the golden trails of the World Tree, Snow pierced the labyrinth with Frey at his side.

The maze was strange—shifting ceaselessly by some sorcery.

An alien aura flooded the place, numbing the senses of all who entered.

Under normal circumstances, it would have been impossible to pass without possessing whatever the labyrinth demanded for entry. Even if one tried to fly over it, they would lose themselves all the same.

It was a truly bizarre maze—but Snow crossed it with ease.

“We’re almost there,” Snow said after they advanced for a while, prompting Frey to prepare; the battle would likely begin the moment they arrived.

“Frey... I know the timing is terrible, but I need to tell you this before we fight.” He spoke without looking back, and Frey watched his friend’s back.

“Don’t try to shoulder this alone. You’re not fighting this war by yourself. My words may sound strange or hollow, but I truly intend to fight beside you to the very end—no matter what we face, no matter how heavy the burden becomes. Be certain that I’ll be there.”

“There’s no need to say another word, Snow. I understand what you’re trying to tell me,” Frey said with a faint smile.

“To be honest, I had intended to carry this war to the end alone. My strength was the only thing I’ve trusted until now. But in the end, I’m only one man. No matter how strong I am, and no matter how much I try to deny it, I have limits I cannot surpass. I’m more fragile than I seem, and I could collapse at any moment.” Frey chuckled softly, remembering what happened to him in his fight against Dragoth—how life had driven him to the edge of madness.

“I could break at any moment. If that happens... I’ll rely on you to save the day, my dear friend.” He smiled—a rare, genuine smile—turning Snow’s head in surprise; he had not expected to hear those words from him.

Silence hung between them for a moment, then Snow returned the smile.

“Count on me, my friend.”

In that instant, a notification flashed from nowhere—something Frey hadn’t seen in a long time, a ping from the system he’d barely used of late.

Ding!

Snow Lionheart

Current Affection Points: 99

– Snow Lionheart trusts you completely and sees you as an irreplaceable ally, to the point he is prepared to die for you if necessary.

Maximum reached. Affection will not increase further unless certain conditions are met.

...

Staring at the notification, Frey understood he had gained an indispensable ally. Snow’s points had reached 99, and Frey would be unable to raise them to 100 except under conditions he knew little about.

Even so, the current level of his bond with his hero left him more than satisfied.

Snow was a friend and a brother Frey could not do without. There was still much between them that needed to be said—he still hadn’t told Snow what happened to Danzo, and many secrets remained hidden.

And yet Frey wished to treasure this bond with his friend, vowing that one day he would tell him everything. Perhaps then the condition would be met—and Snow Lionheart would become the second person to reach 100 points after Sansa.

“Thank you... my friend.”

Watching Snow’s back, Frey smiled as the two of them continued through the labyrinth.

Silence settled; neither spoke.

Snow remained focused—while Frey...

From beneath his skin, the crawling shadows stirred, making his power and aura surge and falter. He did not notice, but filaments of violet lightning skittered around him as a strange echo rang out—glimpses of a distant future.

An echo of clashing blades, of blood spilling without end, as two warriors fought upon a battlefield ..

fighting to the death, each intent on killing the other.

One was a radiant hero, shining with golden sigils that covered his body.

The other was a figure of darkness, a man wearing a baleful black mask.

“This is the kind of world we live in... the kind of hell we are forced to walk.”

As their swords collided and disasters bloomed in their wake, thoughts and feelings surfaced—fragments from someone who had abandoned everything and hidden his face behind a cold, lightless mask.

“In the end, Snow... my dear brother... everything was a lie.”

“A sweet lie we chose to believe. But in the end... we are forced to face the truth.”

“I’m truly sorry... my brother. Truly... sorry.”

Amid the ruin—after a battle on another level entirely—

a man sat, his face hidden to the very end behind that mask.

In his arms lay another young man—a youth who had once been his brother.

And in a few seconds, one candle of life went out, while the other remained seated, staring at his friend’s corpse.

“I’m truly... sorry.”

## Chapter 572: The False Light

The world changes every day, ceaselessly—especially in times of war.

A full week had passed since Frey and his companions reached the holy island and uncovered one of the Church’s secrets: Nocthera , the City of Eternal Night—a place where the sun never rises.

Seven days...

On the seventh, the long-awaited clash was fated to begin.

At the summit of the great edifice—where the golden World Tree stood like the Church’s beacon ..

the three bishops gathered, along with most who held the rank of metropolitan.

They were waiting.

"It's time," Blattier said, his eyes kindling with a pure white light, his face twisted with contempt for those who dared oppose him.

"Recovering Vermithor's bearer is top priority—and slaying Frey Starlight is equally important. With his fall, House Starlight falls in its entirety, and the Empire loses its greatest weapon. Keep that in mind."

Platini and Calistes nodded as one.

"We've already prepared the stage for them. Let's welcome them properly."

The battle was about to erupt, and the Church had readied its strongest weapons.

"Calistes, you'll remain behind. Make sure no one interferes with the legacy transfer. The new Saint must be ready as soon as possible."

Blattier issued his orders; Calistes inclined his head.

"Have no fear. Not a soul will cross this threshold."

Turning toward the spring behind him, Calistes' gaze fell on Uriel Platini, who had lain there for many days. Whatever rite was being conducted in that place—it was nearly complete.

Above them, the World Tree shuddered from time to time, releasing a strange resonance as its glow intensified, feeding Blattier and the others with an inexhaustible stream of holy aura.

The tree was their greatest weapon—and the Saint was of immense importance as well. Plattier had no intention of retreating now.

The Church was about to fight at full strength—against Frey Starlight and Snow Lionheart, who had come dangerously close to the forbidden.

Snow led the way, Frey at his back.

They climbed swiftly, scaling the vast structure, their bodies steeped in a threatening aura ..especially Frey, whose murderous intent chilled the air.

They stormed into that land like a temple, ready for war ..and they didn't have to wait long.

The instant they appeared, a terrifying heavenly light descended from nowhere and drove them into the ground where they stood.

Before them stood five men in a strange formation, chains curling around them and binding them to a peculiar angel that floated above.

"Do not kill Vermithor's bearer—he is of our flesh and blood! As for Frey Starlight, show no mercy! Death to any who defy the Lord of Light's will!"

The one in the center shouted— a middle-aged man with black hair and harsh features, clearly their leader.

Frey and Snow endured the initial strike, but their eyes slid to the angel hovering over the five.

"That isn't a War Angel..."

The being before them was neither the same type nor the same might as a War Angel, yet it was stronger than ordinary angels. Taking repeated blasts from it would be unwise.

"Fire again!"



At the leader's command, the angel unleashed another volley.

But Frey and Snow were already gone—one blinking away with teleportation, the other vanishing with Void Step.

They aimed to erase the angel in a single, swift strike ..

yet as they closed in, dozens of lights flared from afar, raining down upon them from every direction without mercy.

They held firm, but both were taken aback by the sudden appearance of so many stronger angels.

Wings spread above them, while below, Church followers advanced—bound to the angels by strange chains.

It was as if they were feeding the angels power—their very life force.

The followers were pallid, like sufferers of a chronic anemia, while the angels above them brimmed with strength.

Encircling Frey and Snow, they bombarded them without pause. The two held the line—especially Frey, who tore through the Church's ranks at a speed the naked eye couldn't follow.

"Has your blindness gone so far that you can't perceive the truth?"

With a single sweep of Balerion, he sent a vast violet arc that lopped five heads at once, then vaulted skyward to strike the angel.

"You bind your souls and cast away your lives to feed a worthless creature that dies to a single stroke of my blade."

Amplifying his aura through Dark Sister, Frey shot forward like a black meteor and smashed into the angel—erasing it completely.

At the same time, Snow Lionheart unleashed his arsenal of elements, throwing the field into chaos as he faced multiple foes at once.

Despite the difference in numbers, the tide did not favor the Church at all.

Fighting on multiple fronts, Snow's eyes caught the faces of many followers straining in desperation to stop him.

"I don't understand. Why struggle this hard? Why throw away your lives to serve a being you know nothing about? Is your life so cheap?"

Through Vermithor, Snow sent wave after wave of pure light aura, its clarity surpassing the strength of the assembled angels combined.

"Are humans truly this easy to manipulate?"

Snow was clearly hesitant when it came to killing the Church's followers—men and women deceived and driven by faith and blind devotion.

"Don't bother, Snow. They believe the Lord of Light is their god—and their god ordered them to exterminate people like me," said Frey, fighting nearby. Unlike Snow, he did not hesitate to kill them—right or wrong.

"They chose death for their cause. So let's give them the death they wanted."

Frey was about to cut down more when a man in a black mask appeared out of nowhere and launched a rocket-like punch. Frey caught it with his sword at the last instant, yet the force hurled him back, smashing him through the temple wall.

Through the eye-slits of the Nameless mask, Frey studied his new opponent with interest as he stepped from the rubble.

"That was a good punch."

Before him, the man bared his face—it was none other than Mikhael Platini, the bishop.

He was over two meters tall, white-haired, gold-eyed, with a massive scar over one eye.

"Frey Starlight... You dare speak of the noble sacrifices made by the Lord of Light's faithful?" Platini said, drawing every Church follower's gaze; their faces lit at the sight of him.

"You're nothing but a bloodthirsty monster—fighting for slaughter and ruin. We, on the other hand, have a cause worth fighting for, in the name of the Lord of Light who showed us the way and led us out of darkness.

"Even if the Church's followers die a billion times, their fate will still be better than that of a demon in human skin—faithless and honorless."

Turning to the Church's ranks, Platini shouted:

"Any of the faithful who die today will find eternal bliss! And our enemies will rot in the torments of hell!"

He goaded them to throw their lives away, promising impossible rewards no sane mind should believe.

Platini's words inflamed the Church even further, filling them with zeal to fight for the false cause that had blinded them.

"The Bishop is right!"

"Follow the Bishop! Let's purge the world of this monster who knows only bloodshed!"

They raved like fanatics, beyond reason or debate.

From behind them came another man, his aura pressure hammering the air as he clapped, a smile on his lips.

"Well said, my friends. Today, the whole world will learn that our cause is the righteous one."

It was the High Bishop Blattier, joining the fray himself.

Listening to it all, Frey laughed; Snow held his tongue.

"I'm honestly impressed—at your ability to spit that much nonsense with such straight faces," Frey said dryly, stepping toward Blattier and his retinue.

"Have you gone so mad you craft a lie and then believe it yourself? Come on... spare me the drivel about faith and piety. Let's just fight to the death."

Frey's words only enraged the faithful further; they had just heard him mock them and everything they did.

"You insolent heretic who doesn't know his place," Blattier snarled, advancing with Platini at his side and the Church's retinue massed behind them.

"Believe me, I know my place very well," Frey replied. "I'd love to expose the lie you used to fool the whole world—but as you can see, that would take far too much time and effort."

There was nothing worse than trying to convince a zealot that his religion is false—a lie spun by another man. Instead, Frey chose the other path.

"Killing you all will put an end to this farce. So let's stop talking and destroy each other with everything we've got!"

They stamped the ground and launched forward together, detonating the earth beneath their feet.

The High Bishop cloaked himself in a mantle of holy aura, twin blades of light forming in his hands.

His swords met Frey's dark twin blades, holy and shadow clashing, each aura trying to devour the other.

As the two dueled, Platini flashed in beside Frey and drove another lightning-quick punch—only for Snow Lionheart to parry it at the last heartbeat, forcing him back.

"I'm your opponent, Bishop."

"Lionheart..."

In seconds, the four were fighting at blistering speed, wreaking colossal destruction as the Church's followers swarmed to encircle them.

The clash between Frey and Blattier moved so fast that no one else could hope to intervene.

One wielded two dark swords; the other, swords of pure light.

Every strike released a terrifying surge of aura as their blades met.

"Blattier... you damned old snake. I see you've hidden quite a lot up your sleeves."

With a swift slash, Frey ripped a great swath from Blattier's robe, exposing his body—etched across it were the same blood sigils his followers bore, carved deep into flesh.

"So that's the secret of your strength?" Frey sneered, as Blattier tried to cover them.

"This power is beyond your comprehension, Frey Starlight."

"Beyond my comprehension? Do you truly believe borrowing scraps of power from your followers will let you defeat me?"

Blattier was an SS-class fighter—standing among the peak of human warriors. But that was nowhere near enough to face the Frey Starlight of today.

Frey had pondered it for a long time; at last, the Church's strange rites made sense.

"Those blood sigils are just catalysts for your sacrifice rituals. In exchange for your followers' souls, you gain... things. Angels. Or enough power to fight above your rank."

He didn't know how the Church had gotten its hands on such a thing. But for each Church follower who died, the bishops gained a measure of power in return.

Frey had killed many of them already—and had, indirectly, funneled their strength to the man before him.

Exploiting those sacrifices—the souls of thousands—Blattier had forced himself up to fight at a level comparable to SS+.

Blattier said nothing. That silence told Frey he was right.

"I don't know if that power is permanent or temporary... but let's see how long you last, Blattier."

Frey's body flared, power rising still higher. Despite his opponent's sudden surge, he did not seem troubled .. in fact, he looked... entertained.

They hurled themselves at each other again, harder than before ..determined to end this lopsided battle.

## Chapter 573: The Gospel of Blood (1)

Gaining strength through the sacrifice of others...

A strange ritual had fallen into the hands of the Church—one that made breaking into higher realms possible, even for someone like Blattier.

His power had now surpassed the SS rank after being trapped there for so long. His light blazed so fiercely he felt as though nothing was beyond his reach.

But his strength came at the cost of thousands of lives—every soul offered up for the sake of this so-called power.

This was the grim Path of Sacrifice discovered by the Church, the very foundation of their rise.

In this vast world, countless paths to power exist—this one, perhaps, the darkest and most tragic of them all.

Blattier was fast, relentless, radiant.

"I sacrificed thousands. I led them to ruin so I could grasp this strength."

BOOOOM!!!

Explosions rippled one after another as the High Bishop of the Church clashed against the monster called Frey Starlight.

"I've grown stronger—far stronger than I ever was!"

With every collision, every strike, old memories rose within Blattier—the days when he bowed his head, humbled himself before others, waiting for the day he would rise again to repay them in kind.

And now, that day had come.

This was meant to be his hour of triumph—the moment when the world would finally see who Joseph Blattier truly was.

The elder who led the Church for generations...

At least, that was what it should have been.

BOOOOOOM!!!

Before the stunned eyes of the Church's followers, the explosions roared on.

"With this power, I should stand among the strongest in the world... Then why—why in the hell..."

His fists clenched until they bled, his body forced backward, his feet digging into the earth just to remain standing.

Blattier stared in horror at the masked figure before him.

"I should be one of the strongest alive... Then why the hell can he still overwhelm me so easily?!"

BOOOOM!!!

With a single, vicious slash from those cursed black swords, Frey sent Blattier flying, pressing harder with each strike.



"Formation of Blades of Light!!!"

Gathering all his power, Blattier conjured dozens of radiant swords and hurled them at Frey in desperation.

But Frey brushed them aside with ease, never relenting.

"Ten Thousand Steps of Shadow: Supreme Art—Abyssal Wave."

In less than a fraction of a second, Frey vanished, reappearing behind Blattier in the blink of an eye.

The bishop's face turned ashen as his body was torn apart by hundreds of violet slashes that shredded him mercilessly.

Blattier forced his sacred power to its limits, healing himself as quickly as he was being cut, clinging to survival by the thinnest thread.

But Frey gave him no chance to breathe.

"Seems you're the one who doesn't know his place, Blattier."

SLASH!!!

Bathed in the glow of Shadow Assimilation, Frey carved him apart again and again.

At first, Blattier seemed able to hold his ground, but within moments, Frey had flipped the battlefield entirely to his favor.

"Damn you! Light Formation!!!"

Blattier gathered his power for a new technique—only for time itself to freeze. The world fell silent as though even existence held its breath.

"Skill: Screenshot."

Frey had stopped time for a single second.

A second was short, but for someone moving at Frey's speed, it was enough to accomplish plenty.

SLASH!!!

In one swift strike, Frey tore open Plattier's chest, spilling entrails and organs onto the earth without mercy.

"Ah, you were about to unleash a technique of some sort? I'm sure it would've been pathetic anyway... Let's not waste either of our time."

BOOOOM!!!

Another ruthless strike sent Blattier crashing across the battlefield.

"What were you even trying to achieve here? Did you really humble yourself for all those years, deceiving thousands of people—for this pitiful scrap of power? Tell me, Blattier..."

Frey's eyes brimmed with genuine contempt for his opponent.

Blattier, bleeding profusely, finally understood the grave mistake he had made.

Compared to the monster before him, his strength was nothing.

"Followers of the Church!!! Unite your strength against this demon!!!" Blattier screamed in terror. His voice shook the faithful, who rushed toward Frey.

"Whoever sacrifices their life here, heaven shall be their reward! Eternal bliss awaits! Do not hesitate—attack him!!"

He screamed, desperate, rallying them with promises no sane mind should believe.

Frey laughed bitterly at the sight.

"Look at you... this is far beyond blind faith. This is sheer stupidity."

SLASH!!!

Carving through the zealots like paper, Frey advanced on the fleeing Plattier, who was now running for his life.

"If you are the righteous ones—if I'm the mistaken heretic here—then tell me, followers of the Church..."

Slash!!!

"Why do you die so easily before me? And why does your noble leader flee from me?"

Slash!!!

The angels opened fire; the warriors charged with their weapons—but it was useless.

The battle was completely one-sided.

"I see what you're doing, Blattier—driving more of your followers to their graves so you can sacrifice them and swell your strength. You're truly desperate, old man."

Frey's swords moved at a mad speed, leaving only exploding violet trails behind.

Blood poured from the Church's ranks without end as Frey tore through them with his full power.

Blattier ran, leaving a line of blood in his wake.

He tried to retreat.

His followers hurled themselves in Frey's path to stop him, convinced they were serving their cause.

Platini was locked in his own battle with Snow Lionheart.

In other words, there was no one left to help Blattier.

"I still have a chance! The power of the World Tree is on my side!"

Clinging to his last hope, Blattier rushed toward the sacred tree—toward where Saint Uriel Platini lay.

There lay his final chance.

But everything around Blattier froze when he felt death closing in.

"You're not going anywhere."

He heard the voice clearly—a whisper beside his ear.

Realizing how close Frey was, Blattier spun to defend ..

BOOM!!!

Blattier heard a sound... a strange sound...

The sound of an explosion, as sticky things splattered to the ground.

It was odd—until he found himself lying there amid those viscous chunks and the blood soaking everything.

"This is the end."

With a single thrust, Frey drove Valerion into Blattier's chest.

The strike was colossal; Balerion looked like a dark meteor from the sheer aura Frey poured into it.

The blow obliterated Blattier's chest and neck, along with much of his stomach and shoulders.

A monster's strike, and the High Bishop crashed down, blood spreading everywhere.

The sight was so horrifying that many of the surviving followers lost the very will that had kept them moving.

The butcher of their leader stood there, face hidden behind a strange black mask. He turned toward them.

"Who's next?"

Simple words—but terror flooded their hearts; they all recoiled at once.

Snow Lionheart was still battling Platini, whose power had swelled through sacrifice—and that, in particular, caught Frey's eye.

"So the bishops are the only ones benefitting from the power of the dead."

Swords in hand, Frey prepared to rush over, help Snow, and cut down the second bishop as fast as possible.

That was the plan—

the plan he didn't carry out, because something utterly unexpected happened.

#### Chapter 574: The Gospel of Blood (2)

Turning slowly, Frey saw a sight he hadn't anticipated: his last strike had blown Blattier to pieces—his head flung one way, the rest of his body another.

And yet, despite that—though he should have been dead—Blattier's right arm rose upright, as if life had never left it.

On that arm burned a mass of incomprehensible blood sigils, cursed glyphs glowing with a baleful red light—then the entire place shook, and a massive beam fell from the sky, swallowing Frey and driving him dozens of floors below.

At the summit of the ancient Notherra temple, the female War Angel appeared again ..

the same angel Frey had avoided fighting last time—now ambushing him with an attack that came literally from nowhere.

Meanwhile, Blattier's body flared with light, his scattered parts floating above the ground—until, before their very eyes, his limbs knit themselves back together. The old man regained his form, then collapsed, panting and drenched in sweat, fear carved into his face.

He had just stared death in the eye—yet he lived.

And for his followers, that was all they needed to see.

"A miracle!"

"It's a miracle!" the faithful cried one after another, while Blattier stared at them in bafflement.

'What are these fools even talking about?'

This was no miracle—it was the power he had borrowed from the Golden World Tree.

The tree's power was so vast it breathed life into everything around it.

Blattier had long tried to make that power his own, but it had always rejected him, granting him only scraps.

Yet those scraps were enough—enough to pull him back when death was already upon him.

He hadn't intended it to happen now, but the result was the same: his followers were even more convinced, calling it a miracle.

Normally, Blattier might have taken delight in such a sight—but this time, he couldn't.

That monster who had killed him before was coming—racing back to them like lightning.

"Followers of the Church! Do not lose your faith! That monster is strong, but he's still just a human with a single heart. No matter how powerful he seems, he will die in the end! Devote your hearts and fight for the Lord of Light!"

Activating the blood runes, Blattier signaled for the angel to descend.

"The War Angels will fight at our side!"

As he spoke, he triggered the runes on his other hand as well. The pressure in the air spiked as a second War Angel appeared from afar.

"Stop him here—whatever it takes!" Blattier roared, and his followers answered as one:

"For the Lord of Light!!"

They shouted with zeal—then snapped their mouths shut as a crushing aura rolled over them, greater by itself than anything the angels had shown.

The pressure twisted Blattier's face with fear. He turned and bolted.

"You're testing my patience, Blattier—you and your damn flock, eager to worship the ass of a god you know nothing about but his name."

Leaping from the crater where he'd been buried, Frey emerged unharmed—even after taking a direct hit from a War Angel.

"This time I'll kill you properly," Frey said, anger low and cold.

"Fire!!!" Blattier screamed.

At his command, the second War Angel fired its cannon of holy aura at Frey. Frey whirled to face it, an immense surge of power flooding from within him.



"Ten Thousand Steps of Shadow: Frey Starlight Style—

Nameless Judgement!!!"

Unleashing Nameless Judgement at full power, his colossal slash met the angel's cannon head-on, split the great beam in two, and drove on—cleaving the War Angel itself in half.

At the same time, Frey lunged at the other War Angel, his twin blades blazing with shadow aura.

That second angel had finished charging and immediately fired its barrage straight at Frey. He dodged with teleportation, reappearing at a wholly different angle—but the angel snapped its head around and kept the beam trained on him, dragging a line of devastation toward him through the sky.

Both of them soared. Exploiting his insane speed, Frey descended on the angel's back, raining down a torrent of slashes—only for a massive barrier to shield the angel's body.

Elsewhere, a strange force began trying to re-knit the War Angel Frey had just bisected.

Noticing it, fury tightened Frey's features. His aura flared even harsher as he pushed to erase both angels as fast as possible.

The sight of a single youth battling two SS+ War Angels—the very pinnacle of that rank—only poured more terror into Blattier, who fled.

His retreat fell within Frey's perception; he saw it clearly. But he was locked with the angels—he would have to rely on his friend.

"Snow! Chase that senile bastard—don't let him run!!!"

At Frey's call, Snow Lionheart—who had utterly overpowered Platini—broke off to pursue. Despite Platini's swollen strength from sacrifices, Snow—who had opened the Demonic Path alongside the Human Path—was simply stronger.

With Blattier fleeing, Platini tried to do the same—so Snow hunted them both.

"Count on me, Frey! Just focus on the enemy in front of you!"

Frey fought above, in the sky; Snow waged battle below.

Their power far exceeded Blattier's expectations, leaving him no choice but to retreat and play every last card.

Snow gave chase, and Platini snapped his hand out with a command:

"Followers of the Church—stop him!"

At once, fighters and angels massed before Snow to bar his way.

Snow's voice crashed over them in fury.

"Open your eyes! Am I not the bearer of the blade forged by that so-called god you worship? Why standing in my way?!"

"You may be the Lord of Light's messenger, but you defied his decree, Lord Lionheart! Frey Starlight deceived you and twisted you to his ends—come back to your senses, Lord Lionheart!"

They cried out one after another, and Snow found himself speechless for a heartbeat.

"What is this... Are you serious? What cursed faith is this?!"

Whooooosh!!

Unleashing black lightning and blue flames, Snow carved his way through, abandoning any thought of persuading them.

Fighting alone, the Empire's hero once again found himself cutting down his own kind without mercy.

He looked into the faces of the Church's followers ..

people who fought to their last breath believing they were right, blinded by a faith built on a lie ..

and understood then just how terrifying religion could be. More terrifying than anything else ..

capable of washing the minds of millions with ease, woven into the very core of every human.

"Damn you all!"

Calling down elemental cataclysms, Snow burned them alive.

Exploiting the distraction that pinned Snow down,

Blattier and Platini fled back toward the sacred tree.

"Blattier! What are we going to do?!" Platini shouted.

"We use everything we have. Frey Starlight's strength exceeded our expectations by miles—that monster is far too dangerous," Blattier said, grimly resolute.

"We'll wield the tree's power—and the Saint's life if we must. We'll sacrifice everything to win, Platini!!"

Determined to play every last card, Blattier rushed back to the summit—and within minutes, he arrived.

But to his surprise, he was not the first to get there.

Sitting there already was a third figure, who had slipped in uninvited.

"Ah—finally. You’ve no idea how long I’ve been waiting."

Rising to his feet, he smiled the way he always did ..a smile that sent a shiver through Blattier.

"You... How did you get here?" the bishop blurted, while the newcomer’s smile only widened.

It was the prince .. Aegon Valerion.

Chapter 575: The Prince’s Game (1)

"Aegon Valerion... how in the hell did you get here?!"

Blattier advanced warily with Platini beside him, toward the prince who had appeared from nowhere.

"That’s a fair question... but you don’t need the answer," Aegon said, turning his head toward the great tree rising behind him.

"What matters is that I’m here—at the very place you hid from the entire world. Joseph Blattier... I knew you were hiding plenty, and you haven’t disappointed me."

The hall they now stood in lay beneath the sacred tree, overlooking the spring where Saint Uriel lay. Aegon had already taken it all in.

The prince was still admiring the place when Platini flashed in front of him without warning, driving a full-force punch.

Platini's blow sent Aegon flying, detonating the surroundings... The bishop had aimed to finish the prince in one strike—and he had landed the hit—yet the outcome was not what he wanted.

Platini stared, startled, at the sword marks across the arm he'd punched with, while Aegon laughed from afar.

"That was close."

Out of the drifting dust, Aegon stepped forth with a sword in his right hand, dark serpents of lightning crawling over it. In his left he held a strange staff, radiating a golden glow that had shielded him at the last instant.

"That's... the Dawn Guard..."

One of the ancient weapons lost since its previous bearer's death—apparently now in Aegon's possession.

"Kill him, Platini. We can't allow anyone who's seen this place to leave alive," Blattier slurred, swaying pitifully. His state was wretched after the fight with Frey Starlight; staying conscious at all was a struggle.

Platini had also lost to Snow, but he was in much better shape.

"Blattier, to be honest... I always thought more of you. I took you for a worthy foe—you hid your trump cards carefully and managed to deceive millions with this counterfeit religion you lead."

"But look at you now. Everything you built over all these years is crumbling before your eyes. Your trump cards, your mighty weapons you relied on to crush your enemies—none of it matters in front of real power. There are monsters in this world against whom plans and strategies are useless; only power equal to or greater than theirs can overcome them."

Aegon strode forward without fear toward the battered bishops.

"That's why you lost to Frey Starlight. He's the kind of monster whose strength can't be measured by human standards. In other words, ordinary schemes won't work on him. You've lost completely, Blattier—and it's honestly pathetic."

Blattier's face twisted.

"I've lost? And who decides my defeat or victory—you, Aegon Valerion?"

He bared both forearms; the blood sigils carved into his flesh shone a deep crimson.

"Frey Starlight is pinned between two War Angels right now, and I'll be done with my preparations by the time Snow Lionheart gets here. As for you—"

Pointing at Aegon, Blattier smiled, a terrible grin.

"You won't live to see tomorrow. We can end you here and now."

As Blattier spoke, a fourth figure entered the hall.

A man in his forties, robed in white, black-haired—different from the other bishops.

Ramiel Calistes, the last and youngest of the three bishops.

"Looks like I arrived just in time," Calistes said, fixing Aegon with a stare as a fierce green aura flooded his body.

Like the others, he'd benefited from sacrificial power, his strength greatly enhanced—and unlike them, he hadn't fought yet, so he was still at full capacity.

The battle had become three against one, and the prince stood alone.

"You spoke arrogantly, prince—daring to judge me from your paltry level. You spoke of power and plans... but you have little of the first, and that fabled cunning of yours has led you here alone like a fool. Perhaps you thought we couldn't fight after losing to your companions, that you could land an easy finishing blow."

"If that was your grand plan, then you're the pathetic one here, prince."

Eyes bloodshot, Blattier pushed himself forward.

'It's fine. We can win this' ... he told himself, glancing from the prince to the golden tree behind him.

The War Angels were fighting Frey; Snow was pinned and wouldn't arrive in time.

All three bishops were present against Aegon—they would defeat him easily—and then there would be many ways to end the battle.

'We still have the Saint—and the tree's remaining power.'

There were still plenty of chances; defeat was nowhere near certain.

"Let's finish him quickly. We've wasted enough time," Blattier said firmly, taking point, Platini at his side, Calistes behind him.

Three fighters pushed to near—or equal to—the SS+ tier...

against Aegon. The prince had no chance to win.

And yet, in answer to Blattier's earlier words, Aegon simply nodded with a smile.

"You're right, Blattier—we've wasted too much time. It's time to end this tired little play."

Though completely surrounded, Aegon kept walking toward Blattier.

"Humans are opportunistic creatures—simple and complicated at once. Among them you'll find those twisted to the core, beyond any sense... others live only for their own interests and ambitions. Some fight for family, for faith, for country... the concepts vary, but they share much in common."

"All of them are just aims and creeds people use to justify what they do ..

waging war in the name of faith, killing others as 'heretics who deserve death'...

in the name of country, under the pretext of defending it from foreign invaders...

in the name of family, under the pretext of protecting them...

or for something far simpler—for yourself, for your own selfishness."

"In the end, everyone stains their hands with blood for different reasons, but blood has only one color. And when the tale is over... we're all the same kind of killers, fighting for our own interests." Aegon kept talking, ignoring his current predicament entirely, making Blattier narrow his eyes at him.

"What in hell are you babbling about?"

"Ah—Forgive me." Aegon chuckled lightly, one hand settling on his hip as he pointed at Blattier with the other.

"What I'm trying to tell you, dear Blattier, is that humans are selective creatures who live for their own interests. Which is precisely why it's not strange for them to switch sides... when they're offered a better deal."



Aegon's words rang slowly in Blattier's ears with a peculiar lilt the bishop did not understand at all.

For at that exact moment, Blattier heard something break ..

the wet crunch and spill of something viscous onto the floor.

His vision bled red, and the prince's smile stretched wider and wider, until Aegon's face in that instant looked positively demonic—a sadistic grin the likes of which Blattier had never seen, the grin of a twisted soul who savored moments like this.

Blattier lowered his head by degrees... and at the same time, Platini turned toward him in shock.

Both of them stared at the bloody hand protruding through Blattier's back—jutting out of his chest.

He didn't comprehend what had happened at first. Seconds later, he finally understood: he had been betrayed from behind—stabbed in the back by his own ally.

"Sorry, Blattier. Nothing personal—the prince simply made the better offer." From behind Blattier, Calistes spoke with a broad smile—just as Platini lunged at him.

"Calistes!!! What have you done?!"

Platini attacked immediately—but too late. That split-second of shock had dulled his senses, and Calistes exploited it, lifting his free hand toward Platini and unleashing a massive cannon of sacred aura.

The beam swallowed Platini whole, driving him through wall after wall before detonating amid distant rubble.

Unlike Blattier and Platini, Calistes was at full strength—and thus held the absolute advantage.

He'd been precise, too—his hand had punched straight through Blattier's heart.

Blattier tried to muster something .. anything—but Calistes made his next move instantly, severing Blattier's left arm, the one carved all over with blood-runes.

Then, in a clean motion, he yanked his hand free of Blattier's back, snatched up the severed arm, and returned to Aegon's side.

His work was surgical. Blattier toppled, unable even to form words; blood filled his throat.

#### Chapter 576: The Prince's Game (2)

Standing beside Calistes, Aegon looked down at the severed arm.

"Is this the key?" he asked. And Calistes nodded.

"The runes on Blattier's forearms serve as the activation keys for the War Angels. With him weakened to this degree and his arm removed, he can't stop me from taking control any longer."

Clutching the severed arm, Calistes poured out sacred power, triggering the blood runes etched into his own flesh as well.

"Since I carry power equal to Blattier's, since he's too weakened to resist, and since I possess the same lost runes—we meet all the conditions. From this moment, the War Angels will obey me entirely."

As he spoke, he destroyed Blattier's hand with a burst of power and drew the runic energy into himself.

The blood sigils flared ominously, winding around Calistes—who now stood as absolute master of those mighty angels.

"The War Angels are at my command—and I am at yours, Aegon Valerion."

Bowing to the prince, Calistes displayed complete fealty.

It was not loyalty bought overnight, but one forged long ago.

Blattier couldn't speak, but questions stormed his mind.

When? How?

When had the prince turned Calistes? And how?

With a spy of Calistes's rank embedded among the Church's leaders, it meant Aegon had known everything—all of their secrets. Calistes had been one of the bishops steering it all beside Blattier.

In other words, Aegon had known the Church's plans—had known they would betray the Empire in this war.

And yet he chose to stand aside and let the current carry events along—regardless of the losses suffered by the very Empire he was meant to inherit... regardless of all those dead.

Aegon had gambled all their lives for this moment.

"We're alike, Blattier. We played the same game. The difference is, you're just a hobbyist who found himself up against a player vastly above his level." Aegon laughed, and Calistes joined him.

They both laughed at Blattier—the old man who thought he had the world in his grasp, never realizing the serpent had already coiled around his neck.

"The Church won't end here. It will rise again," Aegon said, gesturing to Calistes.

"Ramiel Calistes will be the new High Bishop. And given the method you used to manipulate that Revelation Tablet, it won't be hard to gather your flock beneath the banner of 'the Lord of Light's orders.'

"It's truly absurd—how ready your followers are to carry out anything that comes down to them, whether it's ordering them to kill themselves, violate their own families, or sacrifice each other! As long as it's labeled 'the Lord of Light's will,' they'll obey without hesitation! Isn't that marvelous? Isn't that sheer madness?!"

Aegon's baleful laughter echoed through the great hall.

Blattier's eyes slowly lost their light, a bitter expression frozen on his face.

The golden World Tree shuddered without cease, as if mourning the state humanity had fallen into.

Aegon Valerion had just laid his hand on a vast power... an entire faith, centuries old, was about to bend to his will.

Winning Calistes over to his side was a brutal blow to the Church, but the timing of Aegon's strike was the real masterstroke—

delivered at the single most perfect moment, at the Church's and Blattier's weakest hour.

He used his allies. He used his enemies. He used everyone.

At the end of the day, Aegon stood on the verge of being the only winner.

From afar, Platini dragged himself back, seething with rage... while life fled Blattier's eyes.

"It seems they're breathing their last," Calistes said, stepping forward to finish them.

He was satisfied. He had never felt any bond with Blattier or Platini.

By siding with Aegon, he had secured the decisive power within the Church—the highest office. True, he would serve Aegon, but the prince's side was the winning side he had chosen... the side that had given him everything he wanted.

Between the dying Blattier... the broken Platini... and Aegon and Calistes savoring every moment... the battle against the Church was entering its final act.

Calistes was about to end Blattier when he halted—because a young man finally arrived, soaked in blood.

"What happened here?" His eyes swept the chamber, trying to take it all in.

Snow Lionheart—the hero who had just slaughtered a terrifying number of the Church's followers, forced to stain his hands with their blood.

"You finally made it... Snow Lionheart."

"Aegon, I asked you a damned question. Answer it." Snow was furious—and confused. He had not expected the prince to be here.

"We won, Snow. That's what happened," Aegon said with a smile, gesturing at their enemies.

"Blattier has fallen—and with him, the entire Church."

He said it as if it were the simplest thing in the world—so simple Snow couldn't even form words.

He didn't fully grasp what had happened, but seeing Calistes standing with Aegon was enough to make many things clear.

At the end of the day, it felt as though everyone had lost ..

and the only winner was Aegon Valerion.

Was this even a war?

Could it even be called a battle?

No..

It felt like a Play. A stage drama in which everyone had performed their parts:

Him, Frey, the Empire, the Ultras, the Church ..

all of them acting out the show Aegon had prepared for them.

Not far from where they stood, Frey appeared as well, out of thin air—the angels he'd been fighting had vanished in some strange way.

Frey glanced over the situation, then his eyes drifted to the spring nearby—

—where a familiar girl he had been searching for lay.

She was completely naked, pierced by dozens of blood-filled tubes, a lattice of crimson runes carved across her skin.

"Uriel..."

"I wouldn't get close, Frey Starlight. Touch her before she finishes receiving the inheritance, and she'll die," Calistes warned, ready to say more—

—but fell silent the moment his eyes met Frey's. The killing intent pouring off Frey's body made the bishop break into a sweat.

Aegon spoke in his place.

"The Church's elites depend on the rites of sacrifice. The Saint is no exception.

"The Lord of Light abandoned them long ago. This was the only way to preserve their legacy: one Saint after another .. passing it on through sacrifice, then transferring blood and power to the loyal successor.

"They've done this for years to maintain the Saints' purity and strength... but the process puts a crushing strain on human bodies. That's why they don't live past their twenties."

And that was why Saint Yurasha had withered into an old crone the moment she was offered up.

"Their bodies burn through all their life force just to withstand the power forced into them—and some of them can't even wield it properly."

"Their leaders grow stronger by sacrificing others, and their religion rests on a lie. That is the Church that captured the hearts of millions," Aegon said, eyes lifting to the golden tree—

—the World Tree, the only thing that had exceeded his expectations and seized his full attention.

Then he looked back to Frey standing before him.

By all rights, they had already won; their enemy had been defeated.

But for some reason, no one moved.

The killing intent refused to fade, and it was clear neither Frey nor Snow would leave without spilling someone's blood.

But whose?

Between Aegon and Calistes...

Frey and Snow...

the dying Blattier, and Platini kneeling on the floor...

Uriel lying amid her own blood...

Silence fell—a silence that preceded the catastrophe whose consequences the world would suffer for many, many years to come.

#### Chapter 577: The Massacre of Faith (1)

At the summit of the City of Eternal Night—Nocthera—in the oldest temple of all, where the golden World Tree rose, the battle against the Church had reached its final turns.

Three youths, not yet twenty, had managed to topple an order with countless followers that had endured for centuries. In the face of those three, everything seemed poised to end swiftly—especially after Aegon Valerion dealt the finishing stroke himself, drawing one of the bishops to his side.

Though the fight looked over, the air said otherwise.

Aegon stepped back a pace while Calistes stood before him. Blattier still lay on the ground, a gaping crater in his chest and a severed hand—his control over the War Angels gone. In other words, he had lost every weapon he possessed. Platini, too, was of no use; he had been soundly beaten by Snow Lionheart.

As for Snow, he sided with Frey Starlight. Silence pressed in.



The sharpest tension in the room came from Frey himself, his face hidden behind that mask; there was no way to know what moved in his mind, or what his next step would be. The Empire's side was supposed to have won—but that was not the truth. The only winner today was Aegon, and no one else.

Left as things were, he would lay claim to the entire Church and gain even more power—enough not only to sit the Empire's throne, but to stand astride the world. Absorb the Church, then crush the Ultras... at this rate, it would not be strange to see that young man at the peak of the world before long.

Neither Frey nor Snow looked the least bit satisfied with that outcome, and blood could spill at any moment.

In that heavy air, Platini crawled, inch by inch, trying to reach Blattier.

"Master Blattier..."

Staring at the man he had followed all his life, Platini's face twisted with pain as he watched everything they had built collapse before their eyes. The shock was great for him—and greater still for Blattier.

Eyes bloodshot, Blattier stared at the floor beneath him, straining to keep himself alive. His breaths came ragged; blood pooled and spread across the stone, proof that his efforts were already failing.

Before him, a clash could erupt at any second among his enemies—over the Church and its future. Would it end under Aegon's control, or be erased entirely by Frey?

Either way, the battle no longer included him. He had lost—completely, and easily. His enemies gave him no heed. He was nothing now but a pitiful loser, unable to accomplish a thing.

"The Church... the Church I safeguarded all these years, the one I built until it became what it is..."

With blood-filled eyes, Blattier dragged himself forward. In those eyes flickered scene after scene, the storms that had battered him through the years—rises and falls, victories and defeats. He had bowed his head countless times, swallowed humiliation again and again to pursue his ends. He had lived his entire life inside the Church.

"My Church... this is my Church," Blattier forced out, spitting blood.

He had schemed and lied to make it what it was, killed and sacrificed thousands, endured degradation and defeat dozens of times. He had poured out his life here—and now he watched it being taken from his hands with ease.

I knew the Lord of Light abandoned us long ago. I know that. I know the Lord of Light is no god...

Decades ago, the young Bishop Joseph Blattier rose—becoming the youngest in history. Back then he was a bright youth, overflowing with faith. He believed in the cause; he believed in the Lord of Light. He was devout to the core, dedicating life and body to the faith.

But with the bishop's seat came truth—the knowledge few possessed.

The Church was not the noble body people imagined. It was a religion built on a lie. A great lie.

The Lord of Light had never even acknowledged their existence; all that mattered to him was his chosen champion—and nothing else. That realization shocked Blattier, and the shock deepened as he uncovered further secrets.

True, the Lord of Light did not own them—but he had left things upon the earth, things that helped make them what they were. He left a great tree that bore a mysterious power—enough to fill an entire island with life. From that tree came the sacred sword Vermithor. Alongside it, the Lord of Light left strange runes—meaningless scrawls no one understood.

After long and exhaustive study, over many years, the Church discovered those runes were tied to sacrifice.

"The Path of Sacrifices..."

Etching those cursed letters would allow the Awakened to grow stronger as the number of those who died for them increased. But absolute faith was required to trigger the path; the one sacrificed had to believe wholly in the person for whom they offered their life.

If the conditions were met, one could obtain a power great enough to break one's limits—the very power Blattier had relied upon and wagered everything on.

The Church was built on a lie, and the rope of lies is short. The day truth exploded and everything collapsed was fated to come. But Blattier held the line—he kept this edifice standing, right up to the end.

It was said that the first saint who had marched with Kazis Valerion in the ancient war also possessed a certain connection to the Lord of Light—but she, too, vanished long ago. To preserve her legacy, the Church tried to pass down her blood and power through candidate after candidate, hoping another saint of equal stature would appear.

All their attempts failed. Not a single saintess has broken past SS+, and every one of them dies young, unable to bear the alien power forced into their bodies.

The Church that tortured so many...

the Church built on blood and sacrifice, on lies and slander—

it was rotten to the core. And yet, in the end...

Blattier succeeded in keeping it alive. He delved into that filth and with his own hands committed enough sins to drown himself, until he, too, became rotten to the core.

He wanted his Church to reign. He wanted the lie he once believed to harden into a truth the whole world would accept.

To achieve that, he went too far—far beyond any return.

He had sacrificed so much, and now he was losing everything.

"So easily... so simply..."

Aegon Valerion. Frey Starlight.

They were taking it from him—stealing it right out of his hands.

Blattier clenched his teeth until they creaked, weeping blood while a furnace of feeling burned inside him—boundless rage, a madness that swallowed his exhausted mind. The pain was great, but the fire that scorched him from within was greater.

Without warning, Blattier began to scream—wild, unhinged screams that swung every gaze back to him. He tried to speak, but coughed up nothing but the blood filling his throat.

Chapter 578: The Massacre of Faith (2)

Frey, Aegon—even Snow and Calistes—

all of them stared with eyes that held a dozen kinds of judgment:

contempt... hatred... pity... scorn.

Blattier no longer cared what his enemies thought.

Under the weight crushing him, with everything collapsing, facing the loss of all he'd clung to, he snapped completely.

Mouth gaping to its limit, Blattier bit into his remaining arm with everything he had. His teeth sank deep; a horrific wound flowered where he tore the flesh.

"Aaaaaaaaargh! Aarghhhhhhh!"

Once wasn't enough. He ripped and gnawed, chewing through meat and bone until his own face was lacquered in his blood. He did not stop until he bit clean through his last arm—a feral spectacle that froze everyone where they stood.

Blattier clamped the severed hand between his teeth, breathing in ragged, ghastly groans no one would have believed came from a human throat. Slowly, he raised his head toward the heavens, lifting that hand high in his blood-slick jaws.

He was a ruin—limbs gone, chest gouged open, drenched in red—

but his eyes held a terrifying resolve that proved the high bishop had not yet fallen.

The instant he raised that hand aloft, it flared with an ominous crimson light. Blood runes ignited out of nowhere, and everyone understood the dying bishop was about to do something.

Three figures detonated the floor and rushed him at once—

Frey, Snow, and Calistes.

All three appeared before him and struck with brutal force.

Slash!!!

A storm of blood burst across the chamber as steel carved flesh—

but the flesh was not Blattier's.

A man had hurled himself into the path at the last instant, shielding him with his body.

Frey, Snow, Calistes—all three halted, startled by Platini, who had leapt in front of Blattier and given them his back. The blow was overwhelming; Platini had no chance to survive—yet he bought Blattier a few scant seconds. Seconds enough to act.

"Blattier... I have followed you always. I have been with you longer than anyone."

When Blattier climbed to the seat of high bishop, Platini had ever been the right hand at his side.

"This place was crooked and dark from the start—but you kept this edifice standing. You built it. Without you, there is no Church."

Those were the words Platini wished to say. They never left his mouth. Their blades did not spare him, and life fled his eyes at once.

But before he died, he entrusted everything to the high bishop he had always respected.

"I offer up this paltry life for you. I bequeath my dream and my strength to you, my lord. It doesn't matter how this day ends—whether the Church is erased or endures—but... let them know fear.

Show them the true terror of the institution for which we lived—and for which we now die."

Platini was gone. His body fell.

But his very being poured into Blattier—another sacrifice to fuel his master's mad ambition.

"This Church is a part of me. If I live, it lives with me... and if I die, it dies with me!!"

Blattier roared, dragging the words up from his gut, from the bottom of his soul.

"One last time! Let me use it—once more!!"

The hand clamped in Blattier's teeth detonated, and the stage was set.

At that same moment, far from them, a certain pair of eyes opened at last.

Within the spring where she had lain in her own blood, Uriel Platini awoke and opened her eyes—eyes once blue, now shining with a baleful golden glow.

Rising to her feet—her naked body still laced with dozens of blood-filled tubes—Uriel lifted her hand toward Blattier, and an uncanny aura gathered from nothing, bending to her will.

"Uriel... what...?" Frey breathed, stunned by the weight of the aura he felt.

Uriel Platini had laid her hand upon a vast power—an aura drawn from the golden World Tree shuddering above them.

In that instant everyone braced to fight, assuming that force was about to flow into Blattier. Because of that ..

Frey moved first at full speed.

With all his strength he struck at Blattier's neck, taking his head cleanly before the old man could act.

Blattier's head tumbled across the blood-wet floor.

It looked as if Frey had stopped him—but the scenario they all imagined had been wrong from the start. That power had never been meant for Blattier.

With a flick of her wrist, Uriel shaped the aura into a beam of blinding, immaculate white.

It shot skyward, streaking away to a completely different place.

Uriel herself wasn't conscious; she moved like a machine now.

Her actions were strange—no one understood what she'd done.

What was that light? Where had she sent it?

No one knew, but the way Ramiel Calistes's face went dark made it clear the result was catastrophic.

"Quickly! Kill the saint—now!"

Calistes flashed forward like lightning, striking for Uriel. His hand was inches from her when Snow cut in, severing that hand before it could touch her.

"What in hell do you think you're doing?!" Calistes roared, as Snow planted himself between him and Uriel.

"That's my question, bishop. You'd murder this girl after torturing her for years?!"

"Fool! You have no idea how grave a mistake you've just made!"

Calistes shouted on, panicked, trying to push past—Snow barred him completely.

Behind Snow, Uriel drifted slowly into the air as the sacred tree poured out a pure radiance that wrapped and shielded her.

Seeing it, Calistes wore a tragic look. "It's too late..."



Hearing that, Snow slammed him to the floor. "Too late for what? Speak! What's happening?!"

"For that light," Calistes laughed bitterly, eyes fixed on the saint. "It was the Light of Revelation."

"The Light of Revelation?"

At his words, everyone felt a peculiar tremor—like a distant earthquake rumbling somewhere far below.

Frey and Aegon in particular stared in the same direction, grasping part of what was happening.

That tremendous light had plunged downward at impossible speed—until it struck a certain place:

the Oracle Tablet.

The slab the Church had used for ages to receive the Lord of Light's commands flared anew with fresh decrees.

Angels wheeled around the tablet, their eyes blazing as they scanned the lines inscribed upon it.

And in that same moment, all across the world—especially throughout the Empire—angels took to the air. Their eyes lit, and from those eyes bloomed two-dimensional projections displaying the tablet, shining with those orders.

Chapter 579: Tower of God

"We've seized control of the Angels of War," Calistes said, unleashing a wash of green light to tear free from Snow, "but the other angels were still under Blattier and Platini's control."

"Now... nothing can stop what's coming."

Snow watched Calistes flee, bewildered. He sprang toward Uriel, trying to reach her—

but a wave of golden force threw him back.

As Calistes had said, there was no longer any way to halt it.

In that very instant, people everywhere lifted their eyes to the sky, staring at the tablet's image.

Uriel opened her mouth to speak—and her voice came out of the mouths of every angel at once, amplified to the world.

"O faithful of the Church, noble souls who give yourselves for what is right—

"The demons and the darkness have massed at our gates, threatening all that we hold dear. But their fate is sealed: they will fall before the power of true believers!

"The Lord of Light has not abandoned us! Behold—He now sends down His blessed words, the command that will lead us to salvation!

"The Lord of Light commands you: Pray, my righteous servants! Pray! Etch these words upon your own skin—upon the skin of your loved ones, your children, and their children too!"

"Pray, and consecrate your faith! These few words will bring you deliverance and end your suffering!"

The saint cried out, and the angels cried out with her, broadcasting those strange scrawls to the entire world.

Symbols none could read, none could comprehend.

And yet—across the world, in the same heartbeat—

the Church's followers moved as one, answering the call of the being they revered as their god.

"The Lord of Light!"

"The Lord of Light will protect us!"

All who carved those words into their flesh would be shielded by the God.

That was the message—the revelation laid before them.

They did not understand it, but the name of the Lord of Light alone was enough. Millions of the Church's faithful took up knives—any sharp edge at hand—and began engraving those words into their own skin.

At the same time, Frey and Snow lunged together to stop Uriel, but the Tree's power flung them back.

It was a might so vast that even Frey couldn't pierce it.

That force wrapped Uriel completely, and Frey realized he would have to strike to kill if he wanted to break through something like that—

—but even he couldn't bring himself to kill Uriel.

That single hesitation let the rite complete. And that was the beginning.

The beginning of the catastrophe.

Across the world, the Church's faithful carved those letters like mad—into their own skin, the skin of their children, their loved ones, their families.

Cursed words were now etched onto the bodies of millions—millions of innocent souls who had followed the Lord of Light in sincerity.

Once they carved them, they prayed.

They prayed as their lord had commanded.

They prayed for themselves, for deliverance, for the protection they'd been promised.

In answer to their prayers, the sigils on their bodies began to glow—and joy washed over them.

But it lasted only a few heartbeats.

The moment the rite ended, one man collapsed dead in a strange, inexplicable way.

Then a second. A third. A fourth.

People began dropping one after another as blood poured from their eyes and mouths.

A sudden, sweeping die-off tore through terrifying numbers of lives—victims of their own faith.

And that was only the first tremor of the chaos sweeping the world, as fear and death spread everywhere.

The strength of a religion isn't in how mighty its adherents are, but in how many.

Most who belonged to the Church were ordinary folk who lived quietly. They had no place among the great noble houses or the powerful guilds.

So they chose the faith they believed was right.

For that reason, the dead in those moments numbered... in the millions.

In mere minutes, more died than in the entire war to date. Panic gripped the world as people screamed, watching each other perish one after another.

All of them were sacrificed by a demonic rite that burned away their life force—offered up to someone else entirely.

Before the stunned eyes of Frey, Snow... and even Aegon, they witnessed a spectacle:

thousands—no, millions of lights streaking from afar toward this very place.

That night, "orders" from the Lord of Light drove thirty-five million people to offer themselves, unaware of what they were doing.

Thirty-five million souls. Thirty-five million sacrifices.

All that power flowed to a single point.

Millions of lights tore the sky and fell like meteors onto the body of the man who had died minutes earlier ..

the man who had given his entire life to this twisted religion:

Joseph Blattier, the High Bishop.

"If I live, the Church lives with me. If I die, it dies with me."

Those were his words—and he carried them out to the letter.

All those sacrifices, that vast power, were now in the hands of one man.

Light swallowed Blattier's body for long minutes while everyone present froze beneath the crushing weight of the aura.

The head Frey had lopped off earlier evaporated completely.

Blattier no longer needed it.

From within that column of radiance—

a different being stepped forth.

"Is that... Blattier?" Snow whispered, unable to take in what he saw.

What emerged was something grotesquely transformed: a body of pure white, laced with hundreds of golden and blood-red sigils in equal measure, all hidden beneath a colossal suit of golden armor.

His face was sealed behind a golden helm.

A massive spear in hand, he set his first step out of the light—and a tyrannical pressure slammed into the onlookers, forcing them to stand only by will alone as the power demanded they kneel.

"This pressure... this power..." Calistes stammered, lips trembling.

Such is the yield of millions of lives sacrificed at once.

"Joseph Blattier... Aspect: Tower of God."

Blattier had kept his vow: the Church would live through him—or die with him. That body had become the vessel for those countless souls that burned and perished.

The explosive power born from it was enough to place Blattier at the pinnacle of humanity ..

assuming he could still be called human at all.

"A calamity has befallen us," Aegon said, a crooked smile edging onto his face.

The tide of battle flipped in an instant. The whole world bled with Blattier—the man who alone had become the cause of millions of deaths.

His appearance made one thing clear: the real battle was only now beginning. Everything before had been child's play.

Chapter 580: Frey Starlight vs Joseph Blattier (1)

The condition was fulfilled, the revelation descended, and the sacrifices were made.

In the War of Darkness—on that starless night—the world witnessed a calamity.

A catastrophe that claimed millions of innocent souls—poor souls whose only crime was their naiveté, their folly in following that so-called god...the Lord of Light.

Believing those accursed words were a revelation from Him, they hurried to carve them into their own skin—and into the skin of their sons and daughters.

They thought that by doing so they would secure the protection of the god they revered, that the Lord of Light would grant them the radiance to survive the War of Darkness.

They did not know their fate was nothing but the black of endless death—a darkness with no escape.

In mere minutes, millions of bodies hit the ground uncounted and unmeasured. They died—every last one of them.

Their faith killed them. Their ignorance killed them. And thus the calamity began.

The world rang with screams and wailing; humanity had never witnessed an extermination on such a scale—not even the war had reaped so many.

Thirty-five million humans perished—thirty-five million lives offered up.

What followed was breathtaking and terrible.

Millions of stolen souls flared with pure light, then rose into the sky.

They ascended in unison, like meteors from the void—racing as one toward a single destination: Noctera, the City of Eternal Night.

The city blazed as every spirit fell to a single point.

They streamed into the corpse of the man who should already have met his end—yet rose anew

—in a different guise, a heavenly aspect that froze every witness where they stood, while a crushing pressure bore down on them. The weight of thirty-five million souls stacked one atop another for a single purpose, to serve a single man.

"Joseph Blattier—Aspect: Tower of God."

He had changed utterly, scarcely human by any measure. Whether he was even still a man was now in doubt.

Clad in a colossal golden cuirass, his face buried behind a helm, no feature could be discerned.



A titanic spear in his right hand, a vast shield in his left, he strode from the pillar of light with a white mantle of aura trailing behind.

It was power from another world.

"I am the Church, and the Church is me." Blattier spoke from behind the golden helm.

His voice had changed—deep and resonant enough to roll across the entire island.

He had not been exaggerating before. It was no overstatement to say Blattier now bore the whole Church within himself, attaining the summit of that cursed Path of Sacrifice.

Uriel Plattini—the saint who had moved almost mechanically until now—collapsed from the sky once her task was done, after transmitting the "revelation" Blattier wanted.

Snow Lionheart rushed to catch her, while Frey stood before him, eyes wide on the figure that was Blattier.

Aegon did the same. Fear showed plainly on Ramiel Callistis's face.

"This pressure...this aura," Aegon said, and Frey Starlight confirmed:

"This far surpasses SS+. Blattier has shattered the threshold and done the impossible."

They all suspected as much; now suspicion became fact.

Josef Blattier—the old bishop who had bowed his head again and again, who had lost so often he had forgotten the taste of victory—had finally climbed to that legendary height spoken of only in tales:

"The SSS rank."

The first human to stand there since Abraham Starlight—whose ascent the world never knew. To the eyes of humankind today, Josef Blattier was the first in centuries, since those ancient heroes.

Blattier took a single step, and with it the pressure multiplied many times over, forcing everyone but Frey down to one knee.

"The Lord of Light abandoned us long ago, leaving us to live by a lie of our own making. We endured and endured—now comes the change.

"The Lord of Light has abandoned us, and no faith can stand without its god. So here and now, I will become that god," Blattier declared, spreading both arms wide.

"I shall become the new Lord of Light." His proclamation rolled like thunder as he drove even more pressure onto Frey and the rest.

"I will unite mankind under one banner—no more division, no more wars. From this day, all will fight for one being. And to achieve that, many must die—beginning with you, enemies of the Church."

Spear in hand, Blattier declared war on everyone present—claiming he would replace the god who had forsaken them.

"He's gone completely mad," Frey said, stamping the ground until his foot sank deep.

As he did, he unleashed his full aura to clash with Blattier's.

Though the bishop had ascended to SSS, Frey Starlight met his pressure head-on, drawing Blattier's full attention to him.

"Snow ..take Uriel and get out. Now," Frey said, drawing his blades. But Snow moved to object at once.

"I'm fighting too—"

"You don't have the strength. His first blow will kill you." Frey's voice was iron.

"That bastard made SSS. He did it by twisted means, so I don't know if the power will last—but right now he's SSS, beyond doubt."

Balerion in one hand and Dark Sister in the other,

Frey Starlight sharpened every ounce of his strength.

"He's probably not used to this power yet. That's my only window."

Facing Joseph Blattier, Frey's thoughts raced.

He swept his gaze over Aegon, Snow, Callistis...everyone.

No matter how he looked at them, all he saw were liabilities. None of them had the strength to withstand what was about to happen.

Blattier has broken into SSS, but he's barely stepped into its first stage—the Throne Beyond Existence...

In other words, it wasn't an exaggeration to say that Joseph Blattier was currently the weakest SSS-rank combatant in the entire world.

Even so, merely breaching that rank brought a terrifying leap in power. The gulf between SS+ and SSS is vast—an entire world lies between them, a world that has shattered the dreams of countless gifted warriors.

There is an absolute law in this world—

—a law no one has ever broken:

"You cannot defeat an SSS-rank fighter except with another SSS."

Frey knew that law perfectly well—an absolute even he could not overturn.

But what choice did he have?

Everywhere he looked—before him and behind him—he found only a bitter reminder that in this world, power is all that matters.

'I can fight for the Empire and save it again and again, as many times as it takes. But when a monster like this appears, I find myself on my own...'

His only ally in battles like this was nothing but his own strength.

Frey considered retreat—fleeing far away.

But if he left Blattier to grow accustomed to that power and return later, it would be a catastrophe—one they could not afford.

Which left only one option: fight.

Snow Lionheart refused to withdraw to the very end, intent on joining the battle no matter the gap in power, but Frey sent a massive wave of aura crashing into him and hurled him away.

"Go! Now!"

In the same instant, Frey surged forward like a blazing black meteor and collided with Blattier, who charged to meet him.

Blattier's spear of light clashed with Frey's shadowed blades, their impact unleashing an earthquake of aura.

A terrifying shockwave obliterated the surroundings and flung everyone else through the air.

The temple collapsed from a single clash; only the golden tree remained standing.

Shadow-aura poured from Frey in torrents as he desperately tried to push back that overwhelming light—light forged from thirty-five million souls.

At first, Frey held, gritting his teeth against the pressure. But within seconds the light completely overwhelmed the dark, and Frey was sent flying, both arms shattering.

The blow hurled him an absurd distance; he crashed through the far forest and its trees, far from where they'd begun.

"He sent me this far...with one strike?"

Staring at his ruined arms, Frey finally reintroduced himself to it—the power that had haunted his nightmares:

the might of those in the SSS rank.