

VILLAIN 581

Chapter 581: Frey Starlight vs Joseph Blattier (2)

Blattier gave him no breath; in a blink he appeared overhead, driving his spear down.

The attack was so vast Frey had to teleport to avoid it. The spear punched into the earth and shook it, carving a crater that plunged hundreds of meters below.

Frey reappeared at mid-range, taking in the devastation wrought by a single strike from Blattier.

This is SSS. This is the level my worst enemies stand at—the level I'll have to face sooner or later...

"Can I win...against power like this?"

His eyes burned violet behind the slits of the Nameless mask. He readied himself to charge again with everything he had, while Blattier walked toward him with the calm of a king.

"It's pointless, Frey Starlight. This power is beyond your comprehension—far outside your league.

"This is the power of a ruler—the power of an absolute standing at the summit of the world."

Blattier spread his arms wide, bathing in a deluge of light-aura.

"This is the power that will bend the world to its knees!" he declared.

"You talk too much," Frey snapped back.

In the blink of an eye, his arms knit whole, and he vanished—reappearing directly before Blattier.

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

BOOOOM!

In less than a second, Frey unleashed a catastrophic storm of shadow slashes, a barrage that rattled space itself, targeting every inch of Blattier's body.

But Blattier simply raised his colossal shield and took the onslaught head-on, letting it devour the impacts.

Frey's strikes erased everything around Blattier, reducing the world to ruin—yet beneath the bishop's feet the ground remained intact. That shield had blocked it all.

Peering from behind the shield, Blattier regarded Frey for a heartbeat, then spoke a single word:

"Rebound."

At that command, the shield flared strangely—and a heartbeat later it discharged a violent counterforce, a wave that smashed through Frey and everything behind him.

Frey was hurled away again through wreckage and splinters, only barely arresting his flight by driving both blades into the earth to anchor himself.

When he finally steadied, he was stunned by how far he'd been thrown—and by the swath of devastation wrought by the shield's rebound alone.

He didn't hesitate—he launched himself again, reappearing before Blattier at the speed of light.

Both blades hammered the shield, unable to break through, while Blattier thrust with his spear, aiming to crush him in a single blow. Frey twisted away at the last instant, flipping through the air and dropping in behind the bishop.

Riding his blistering speed, Frey's swords flared with shadow and darkness alike, drawing deeper and deeper on the aura within him.

But even at that speed, Blattier kept pace, answering him cleanly and on time.

They traded blows in a nonstop torrent—Blattier stabbing thousands of times, Frey striking with his blades just as many.

Auras collided. Steel screamed against light.

Little by little, fractures and wounds mounted across Frey Starlight's body—but he didn't care. Shadow Adaptation knit him together the moment he broke.

He refused to back down, not for an instant, pouring everything he had into the fight.

"I want to know...how far I can go against power like this."

Against true power—the absolute—how long could Frey Starlight stand?

'This body I forged in blood and fire...this strength I stacked brick by brick after a road of calamities...'

'My power, my skills, my gifts—every piece of me...'

"Everything I've built in this dark life ..everything I've suffered on this long, brutal road! Tell me, Blattier! Is what I have...enough?!"

BOOOOM!!!

Their chaotic exchange swelled and quickened until, to distant onlookers, it was nothing but a storm of black slashes constantly colliding with volleys of pure white light.

The clash spanned a colossal swath of land, swollen with overwhelming, absolute force.

"Your strength is paltry, Frey Starlight!"

BOOOOOM!!!

With Blattier's roar, light surged, swallowing the darkness again in terrifying waves—but Frey snapped the tide back, unleashing more and more shadow-aura.

"Ten Thousand Steps of Shadow -Supreme art: Eternal Blackout!"

SLAAAASH!!!

With a single abyssal cut, space itself tore before Frey, and from that one stroke bloomed thousands of black arcs—

—a cascade of slashes that matched Blattier's light on equal footing.

Blattier refused to let him breathe. He punched through the dark torrent, driving his shield, breaking through everything until he was suddenly in Frey's face.

The instant he closed, Blattier stabbed at light-speed, intent on blowing Frey's head apart—

—but the strike froze midair, unable to touch him.

-Skill: Screenshot.-

Time locked for one second. In that single second, Frey's blades deepened to a darker night, his arms moving like ceaseless rocket batteries.

With every fraction of that heartbeat, more and more violet gouges carved across Blattier's armored frame—

one after another, strike upon strike—until that endless second finally ended.

In less than a second, Frey delivered over ten thousand blows—his current absolute peak.

And yet the overwhelming barrage did nothing more than scratch Blattier's colossal shield.

Frey had thrown nearly all of the supreme techniques of Ten Thousand Steps of Shadow—the very pinnacle of that domineering style—

and still couldn't pierce his opponent's defense.

"These tricks won't help you anymore," Blattier said, firing a missile of light at him.

Frey crossed his blades in an X to meet it, but the cannonade pulverized him as if a mountain had been dropped on his head.

Every bone in Frey's body shattered; blood erupted from everywhere.

He clenched his teeth, ignoring the catastrophic damage, letting that violet fire roar through him as it force-healed his flesh—and he dove back in.

"I'll break that damned shield even if it kills me!"

"Then let me see you try!"

BOOOOM!

They slammed together again, trading blows as they ran and flew across the vast forest.

From afar, the spectators saw nothing but two beams—one of shadow, one of light—twisting and colliding as they streaked through the world.

Shockwaves rolled on and on; the aura they were burning belonged to another realm entirely.

From a distance, Snow Lionheart watched the duel with Uriel Platini lying behind him.

Aegon Valerion stood near Callistis; they too beheld the battle—though they clearly had no intention of staying, with Callistis already preparing to flee.

But Snow's eyes could see only the fight before him as a bitter truth cut into his pride:

"I can't get between them."

Even if he tried to help Frey...

he could barely track their movements.

"If I step in now, death is all that's waiting for me..."

Blattier had become a monster far beyond their grasp—a monster who could kill Snow Lionheart with ease.

That is SSS—a rank you simply cannot oppose unless you wield power of the same order.

Snow didn't have it.

And neither, yet, did Frey.

Yet even so, he was still standing against Blattier—still holding out.

Snow clenched his fist, teeth grinding—furious at himself, at his own weakness.

The human path... the demonic path...

He'd tried so desperately that he even ate the flesh of his own kind to grow stronger—and it worked.

But that strength looked pitiful beside what raged before his eyes now.

"Just... what the hell do I have to pay to reach power like that?!"

What must he sacrifice? What exactly must he do?

Snow didn't know. That ignorance—his weakness—hurt him most.

All he could do was watch, helpless, as his friend fought a monster whose might defied human sense.

Frey was alone—and he knew it.

From the beginning, Frey Starlight had relied on no one but himself, and nothing had changed.

He fought every battle with the strength he forged by his own hands—nothing else.

Power he had paid dearly for, suffering even more to claim.

And now he stood against Joseph Blattier, who had sacrificed millions to reach where he stood.

It was a grueling fight. Blow by blow, Frey Starlight was losing ground, damage piling up without end.

Chapter 582: Frey Starlight vs Joseph Blattier (3)

BOOOOM!!

Spear and swords crashed again, Blattier pressing Frey harder and harder.

"What good is this miserable struggle of yours, Frey Starlight?"

BOOOOM!!!

Another hit—Frey staggered farther back.

"You clearly can't defeat me. You can't even wound me, nor pierce this great shield tempered by the souls of millions."

BOOOOM!!!!

"Why keep fighting to deny the inevitable? In the end you'll die—just like every fool who ever dared stand against the Church of Purification."

Blattier kept talking—until Frey answered with an even greater surge of shadow-aura.

"I told you... you talk too much," Frey said.

Blattier's eyes flared white. "You're right. There's no need for words anymore."

His aura poured thicker, gathering at his spear's tip—

—and he unleashed a roaring beam of holy light straight into Frey's face, a torrent that erased the entire upper half of his body, down to exposed flesh and bone.

Blattier's power kept swelling; he was finally starting to master his new might.

He lunged again—and Frey did the same.

Half a body of meat and bone, Frey still attacked, ignoring his wounds and forcing his limbs to move by sheer Shadow Adaptation.

BOOOOOM!!!

The battle was on another plane entirely... a level Frey had never faced.

"This is SSS..."

The opening step into the absolute power his deadliest enemies wielded.

"I have to hold..."

BOOOOOM!!!

Another explosion tore Frey apart further—and the ground with him.

"I have to hold," he whispered, forcing his body to move again.

"If I fall to him, how can I even dream of facing the monsters beyond?"

Blattier was the trial—the wall Frey had to cross, whatever it cost.

His foe was the weakest of SSS—freshly broken through, by crooked means that might make him less than others of the same rank.

If Frey Starlight couldn't endure here, there was no point in going on.

The fight dragged on; Blattier's patience thinned.

Feeding more power into his colossal spear, he swatted Frey away yet again—

then, gathering everything, raised his weapon to the heavens.

"Let me show you—the true power of a sovereign!"

Blattier's body blazed; the sky itself split as if he'd opened a gate to another world.

From that rift, a titanic spear took shape, its girth blotting out the entire island—packed with SSS-ranked aura, the kind only a handful in history had ever witnessed.

One annihilating strike—enough to erase the City of Eternal Night.

Blattier aimed it squarely at Frey, intent on erasing him outright.

Frey stared up for a heartbeat, stunned—then clenched his teeth, every muscle drawing taut as he raised Velerion, the Black Terror, to meet the falling spear.

"All of it—every last drop of aura in me."

Every grain of strength, every shard of the being called Frey Starlight, he poured into the attack that would carry all of him.

Within that young body, an aura also classed as SSS surged—equal to Blattier's, perhaps even beyond.

He cut upward in a vertical arc to meet the spear, unleashing the strongest strike in his arsenal:

"Ten Thousand Steps of Shadow — Frey Starlight Style... Nameless Judgement!!!"

It was a terrifying technique—no matter how many times he unleashed it, it never lost its splendor in the eyes of those who saw it.

Unleashing it at its fullest, Frey sent Nameless Judgement crashing head-on into the colossal spear.

A vast vertical slash swallowed space itself—and threatened to swallow the spear with it.

Light-aura and dark-aura clashed again, but this time on a wholly different plane.

The impact of those titanic forces hurled out shockwaves that shook not only the island, but the wide sea around it.

Across the planet called Earth, sensitives felt the flood of aura, unable to comprehend what was happening in that distant corner of the world.

The collision was immense—but this time, the darkness overran the light. Nameless Judgement shattered the spear completely, then detonated in the sky in a breathtaking bloom that left every onlooker gaping.

Even Blattier hadn't expected Frey to repel a full-power strike.

Seizing that instant of shock, Frey tore through the veiling storm of aura and appeared before Blattier, forcing his battered body forward.

This was his one opening—

his single chance to wound the foe whose defenses he hadn't pierced since the fight began.

Face to face, at point-blank range, Frey Starlight swung Dark Sister, drawing more and more from the ocean of aura within him.

"I've never poured out this much aura in my life..."

He had pushed himself too far—but this enemy left him no choice.

He had used Nameless Judgement once against a War Angel, and again now against Blattier. Twice should have been the limit; any more and his body would break beyond battle-worthiness.

But against an opponent of this tier, Frey knew he had to break his limits to have even a single chance.

Drinking the very air from around him, Frey let loose a thunderous war-cry and cleaved for Blattier as the latter raised his shield.

Another strike into which Frey Starlight emptied everything he had.

"Nameless Judgement!!!"

SLAAASH!!!!

With a third Nameless Judgement, he split the world again, engulfing Blattier in that torrent of overwhelming aura.

The blow distilled Frey Starlight's story to this point—the peak of the offensive power he had reached in his life.

A terrifying strike that could reach even those of SSS-class.

From within the violet darkness, Frey's eyes stayed locked on his foe,

waiting for the result—

the result of his struggle and all the pain till now.

He didn't wait long. Out of the ruin and shadow,

Blattier emerged again.

He still blazed with dazzling holy light, unbroken—but this time,

his great shield was finally gone, dissolving into the air. And the left arm that had borne it was destroyed—obliterated by Nameless Judgement.

He had hurt him for the first time—but it wasn't nearly enough. His enemy still stood, ready to fight.

"All that... just to cost me a single arm," Blattier said, a deep voice edged with anger, eyes flaring at Frey Starlight.

Frey panted hard, fighting not to collapse.

"Congratulations. You managed to wound me and break my shield. Are you pleased, Frey Starlight? Your power reached me—I who stand here after sacrificing millions of souls..."

Blattier glanced at the ruined limb—then dismissed it. With a surge of blinding light, he renewed it, shaping a new arm from pure aura.

"You don't seem capable of giving more than that, Frey Starlight. It seems you've hit your limit."

Step by step, Blattier advanced, colossal spear in hand.

"Time to end this."

The battle had entered its final phase.

Frey Starlight had poured out everything in his arsenal, yet still couldn't defeat his foe.

Blattier had finally taken real damage—but it was so trivial he erased it at once.

Between the two, the tide swung harshly against Frey Starlight, who neared defeat; his mind raced for any escape.

The longer the fight dragged on, the clearer the gulf became—the gulf between his strength and that of the monsters who belonged to that legendary class.

Between Frey Starlight and Joseph Blattier—under the eyes of those watching from afar—

the war against the Church moved into its last act, poised to end at last.

Chapter 583: The Weight of 35 Million Souls

In Nocthera's lightless sky, titanic forces clashed in a grueling duel that threatened to tear the island apart.

The Golden World Tree shivered without cease, its radiance swelling with every collision between Blattier and Frey—

as if it were trying to say something, to mourn what humanity had become.

A frail race battered by calamity: not only do enemies far stronger than they loom beyond the horizon, but humans slaughter one another to the last—long before the true foe even arrives. Even without the demons, mankind would still wage war upon itself. Such is the fractured, chaotic nature they were born with.

And the fight between Blattier and Frey was the perfect example.

The young lord and prodigy of House Starlight found himself in a brutal bind: even his strongest strikes couldn't bring his opponent down.

Only Nameless Judgement had managed to wound him; Frey's other blows simply couldn't harm an SSS class combatant—one with terrifying durability and explosive power.

But unlike the other techniques of the Ten Thousand Steps of Shadow, Frey couldn't fling out Nameless Judgement without limit.

He'd already used it three times; there was no room for a fourth.

It was, by any measure, the worst possible position for Frey—yet still he fought on.

His black blades met Blattier's spear again and again, as many times as it took.

The two of them raced around the island at the speed of light, carving trails of aura and ruin behind them.

Explosions never stopped, and with every clash Frey Starlight reappeared bearing heavier wounds.

Blattier was overwhelming him at this stage, yet Frey's body kept knitting itself back together, refusing to leave the fight no matter how hard Blattier tried to end it.

The battle dragged on, and the High Bishop's patience thinned.

He pressed harder, drawing ever more catastrophic power from the multitude of souls burning within him.

As the duel stretched and he unleashed his full might, Blattier began to grasp—bit by bit—the power of the Throne Beyond Existence, the first stage of SSS-class.

With a whip-fast thrust of his spear, Blattier sent a thunderous surge of light-aura roaring forward ..an aura that eclipsed Frey's and blew a gaping crater through his chest.

The hit was savage, hurling Frey away—but he righted himself midair, set his feet, and stood again.

Panting, he focused his aura around the ghastly hole in his chest ..

then blasted off the ground and lunged back at Blattier with everything he had.

They traded, each trying to swallow the other whole. The cadence turned frantic; the fight grew almost incomprehensible.

With a flick of his spear, Blattier sheared off the arm that held Dark Sister—and Frey didn't even flinch. He booted the severed hand and blade straight at Blattier, attacking in that mangled state.

The hand caromed off the spear—an attack too paltry to harm him—but Frey vaulted over Blattier, snatched the hand midair, and reattached it as if it were nothing.

His regeneration was monstrous, inhuman. The instant his arm was back, Frey spun in the sky and came down with both swords.

Blattier raised his spear to guard; the weight of the overhead blow drove his feet deep into the earth.

With a sharp sweep of the shaft, he knocked Frey away and flipped the exchange on its head again.

Blattier's thrusts came in a blur, and Frey could barely keep pace now.

Yes, the great shield Blattier had used earlier was gone—but Frey still couldn't land a telling hit.

With each passing second, Frey understood more keenly the true gulf between ranks, and how towering SSS-class stood over all others.

Frey Starlight was an outlier—his power already acknowledged as beyond SS+—

but it had not yet reached SSS. The gap was massive.

"I think I'm starting to understand this power..." Blattier said, tightening the vise.

He had only just broken through and hadn't fully fathomed what was at his command—but, step by step, he was mastering it, shedding the old mindset of an SS-class fighter and adopting a style befitting his new plane.

He poured out a vast tide of aura; light swathed his body and then expanded to a terrifying scale—

and Frey's eyes widened at what took shape.

"Formation: Tower of God."

The words fell like a curse from the heavens. The instant he spoke them, a colossal hand manifested from nothing and smashed Frey Starlight flat, grinding him into the earth.

The strike covered a staggering span, the island itself quaking under the pressure.

Worse, the hand wasn't alone. From behind Blattier, light-aura gathered into a towering giant that blotted out the sky.

The giant wore armor echoing Blattier's own.

Frey Starlight rose from the crater that hand had punched into the land and stared at the thing for a long second.

Blattier walked toward him at a measured pace, and the giant followed in lockstep.

Each footfall sent violent tremors through the ground, and the aura packed into that colossus was so extreme it looked like a walking sun.

Blattier leveled his spear—and in the same instant,

the giant leveled its own and brought it crashing down toward Frey Starlight.

Another annihilating blow, poised to crush him.

BOOOOM!!!!

The titanic spear slammed down and shook the earth. Blattier narrowed his eyes at the impact point—his enemy wasn't there.

Frey had vanished, reappearing high above—over the giant itself—using his blink once more. The colossus tilted its head up, its eyes blazing with a pure white light, tracking him.

Frey dropped from the sky at breakneck speed. The giant lifted its hand to swat him from existence.

From afar, Frey looked infinitesimal next to that behemoth—an ant daring a monster that eclipsed it in size and might.

But Frey was anything but ordinary. From within his body, aura surged without end, detonating against the giant.

Violet fissures crawled across Frey's flesh as the aura tried to tear him apart, blowing everything around him to pieces.

He drew a deep breath and let out a battle-cry that seemed to ignite his very being.

"Ignition!!"

He detonated his own aura—his annihilating technique, a nuclear-scale blast whose radius was so vast it swallowed the giant whole.

The radiant beast vanished inside a pillar of shadow-aura. Even under that ferocity, the colossus resisted, trying to crush Frey and hurl the blast back.

Frey had no choice but to push harder, far harder; more violet fractures laced his body.

"Ignition!!!!"

He triggered it again. Frey doubled the aura he burned to erase the giant.

The column of darkness swelled wider and wider, climbing into the sky.

The explosion was monstrous, trapping both Frey and the giant within.

Chapter 584: Light of Damnation

At last ..after what felt like an eternity ..the darkness peeled back and revealed the result.

Having poured out everything, Frey destroyed the colossus by harnessing the SSS-class aura within him through the doubled Ignition.

Still standing, he hurled himself at Blattier below, trying to injure him as well—

—but the High Bishop turned him aside with ease and reengaged.

It happened again and again. Frey fell, over and over, suffering every kind of wound—yet each time he rose, relying wholly on his monstrous regeneration.

Little by little, the shape of the battle became clear to those watching from afar.

Aegon was the first to turn to Calistis behind him.

"Get ready, Callistis. We're leaving," the prince said, turning his back on the fight.

The move drew Snow's attention.

Moments earlier, the aftershocks nearly killed them, but the Golden World Tree had shielded them, making their spot the only place in all of Nocthera untouched by the duel.

"Where do you think you're going?" Snow asked, stunned that Aegon Valerion meant to retreat before the battle was even decided.

Aegon answered at once.

"There's no point in staying. Frey Starlight has already lost."

"What?"

Snow didn't buy it. The fight was still raging, and Frey hadn't fallen; to Snow's eyes his friend was still on his feet.

But Aegon saw much further.

"Frey's spent his entire arsenal and unleashed his strongest moves, yet he couldn't bring his opponent down. What he's doing now is nothing but futile stalling.

"Look at Blattier. He isn't even speaking anymore. He's no longer who he was—he's the result of millions of souls fused into one, and that aggregate is what's moving now. It isn't wrong to say he's no longer the bishop you knew."

As Aegon spoke, Frey was blasted away again, his body riddled with bloody craters.

He nearly hit the ground. His foe approached at an agonizing crawl, giving him time to regenerate and stand again.

"Blattier's undergone an explosive surge of power. He's using Frey to master it—he knows there are very few on this planet who can face him now, so he's drawing the fight out on purpose, testing his new strength and seeing how far he can go."

That's why he hadn't finished Frey with a single sweeping strike—opting instead to cycle through varied attacks, like the colossal giant from before.

"Frey is strong, and his reality-defying abilities are what let him slay foes above his rank. But his opponent has stepped into a realm you can't contest with tricks alone."

The souls Blattier absorbed hadn't only boosted his might; his temperament seemed altered as well.

He was calmer. Sharper.

He could steer the field for the best possible outcomes.

The current Blattier was, without question, a genuine threat to both the Empire and the Ultras—strong enough to stand against them alone.

Frey Starlight was the Empire's greatest hope, but even he could do little before SSS-class power—and that made Blattier Aegon's top priority.

Here and now, though, the prince had few options.

"Frey has lost. There's no sense staying, Snow Lionheart. I suggest you withdraw as well," Aegon said. Snow flatly refused.

"I don't understand you, Aegon. If Frey falls here, what's the point of running? With what do you plan to face Blattier?"

Snow drew Vermithor.

"I'm not fleeing and leaving him behind. I'd rather die on that field than run while he throws his life away for mine."

Snow Lionheart hadn't stepped in yet because he saw himself as a burden to Frey in this fight—but now that Frey was flagging badly, there was no reason left for Snow to stay back.

"If I push the War King's Form to its limit, I might at least open a gap..."

Fighting together and trying to survive—that was far better than running and leaving Frey to battle alone.

Aegon didn't like that plan at all.

"Frey won't die, Snow. Sure, Blattier's stronger—but that doesn't mean Frey can't escape if he wants to," the prince said, stressing a point Snow knew well. "Don't forget he can blink across continental distances whenever he chooses. I doubt Blattier can stop him."

"If he's truly cornered, he'll bail. When that happens, staying here will be the end of us." Aegon smiled, already turning to leave. "And let me remind you what he told you before he fight Blattier—he told you to get out with the saintess, didn't he? I suggest you move soon, dear Snow."

Aegon and Callistis slipped away, vanishing from sight, leaving Snow Lionheart with Uriel Blattini unconscious beside him.

"He can run whenever he wants..." Snow repeated under his breath, turning to the distant duel where Frey was still fighting.

Aegon's logic was sound. Frey could blink away the moment death loomed.

But for some reason, Snow didn't believe Frey would.

"He's used Nameless Judgement, Ignition—every lethal tool he has—and none of it worked..."

If Frey were going to run, he should have done it the moment his strongest weapons failed to reach Blattier. Yet despite that failure, he kept hurling himself forward, refusing to yield, attacking a foe who outclassed him again and again.

Nothing about the way Frey Starlight fought suggested retreat. If anything, he looked like he'd choose death first.

What Snow saw in his friend made him doubt Aegon's claim. However logical the prince sounded, reality said otherwise.

"Frey won't run. I'm sure of it." Snow was ready to bet everything on that—on his instincts and the long, hard-won understanding of the comrade he'd fought beside so many times.

So Snow Lionheart readied himself to join the battle—to try, at least, to help.

He had just set his first step toward the field when the girl behind him stirred for the first time since she'd fallen.

Startled, Snow turned. Drawn by the thunder of distant explosions, Uriel Blattini finally woke, pain written across her face.

She wore nothing but the golden coat Snow had draped over her earlier, which left much of her body exposed—skin defaced by blood-runes and by the scars the embedded tubes had left behind.

"Uriel..."

At first she was lost, unable to make sense of where she was. Snow Lionheart stood in front of her; a savage battle raged behind him. The ground trembled every heartbeat, the air itself taut with menace.

She understood none of it at first. The pain was blinding, and her last clear memory was a fading smear—being forced to begin that cursed rite that would transfer the saintess's power into her. The rite that had killed the previous saintess, Yorasha, the woman who'd been like an elder sister to her, and left Uriel naked in the spring while blood, mixed with sacred water, was pumped into her. The rite that had left her body as twisted as it was now.

Then, little by little, new memories flooded in—memories that made the poor girl lift trembling hands to her ruined face.

"What...have I done?" she whispered, terrified by what she remembered.

Chapter 585: The Last Gambit

"What did I do?!" Panic crashed over Uriel; she clutched her face so hard she gouged it with her nails.

She couldn't stop. Images poured through her. Uriel had been directly linked to every angel circling the world, and she'd seen everything through their eyes.

She saw how millions died in answer to her own words. She realized she had caused all those deaths—had exploited their blind faith and directly midwived the monster Frey Starlight was now fighting.

Uriel had always been the type to bear pain alone, to hide it deep and show the world nothing but her gentle smile.

But this time she couldn't hide it. The pain was immense. The guilt, greater.

Uriel shattered, sobbing as the faces of those who'd sacrificed themselves in obedience to her words surged up to meet her.

"No ... NO!!!" she screamed, bursting into tears as her nails raked bloody furrows across her beautiful face.

Snow grabbed her, stopping her before she could hurt herself further, shouting for her to get a hold of herself.

It was no use. The memories kept streaming in, and Uriel was forced to carry a guilt no girl like her could possibly bear. Even if it hadn't been her will, it didn't change the fact that she had been the cause of those millions of deaths—and the direct reason Blattier had become what he was.

A monster who might soon kill Frey Starlight—and countless more besides.

Realizing all of that, Uriel wept blood as fresh cuts opened across her face.

It was a moment of total collapse.

Uriel screamed her grief and pain at the top of her lungs—but her voice was a whisper beneath the explosions still rolling out from the fight.

In the end, Snow managed to stop her from hurting herself any further, clinging to her, scared she might try to end her own life.

Beneath the World Tree, which kept shuddering overhead, the hero and the saintess sat together before the tableau of death and ruin Frey and Blattier had painted.

Those two had been trading blows for a long time now, and the battle refused to end. Every time Frey fell, he rose and went back at Blattier.

But even Frey's monstrous regeneration had limits.

He dropped to one knee, chest heaving, fighting just to drag in a breath.

Breathing itself had become a task.

All around him lay nothing but the wreckage of his desperate struggle to hold Blattier at bay.

Blattier stood before him, looking down.

"Seems you've reached your limit," Blattier said evenly.

Frey let out a hollow laugh. "Trust me—you haven't seen anything yet."

"..."

He tried to stand again, bracing on his swords, clawing up whatever strength was left to force his body upright.

He made it back to his feet—but the fight looked finished. Aside from the arm Frey had taken (and Blattier had regrown), the high priest was essentially unscathed, while Frey was a ruin.

Frey Starlight had given Blattier a world of trouble; it wouldn't have been strange for Blattier to kill him on the spot. Yet, against expectation, Blattier remained perfectly calm.

"To be honest with you, Frey Starlight, I'm grateful. Because of you, I've learned to handle the power that's been granted to me." Blattier raised a hand toward the sky, admiring a body ripened by a might he'd never dreamed of.

"This is the perfect form befitting a ruler—the overwhelming force that can accomplish anything. I wouldn't have reached it without the pressure you put on me. You even fought me as an equal for a time, forcing me to draw out everything. But it seems you can't push me any further—not in that pathetic state."

He took a single step. The pressure of it alone drove Frey back to one knee.

"I see no reason to keep you alive. You'll die now. But be proud, at least—you're truly strong. The strongest I've faced."

"Your praise means nothing to me, so keep it in your pocket." Frey sneered, straining against the crushing pressure.

Staring at the maddened high priest, Frey realized Blattier was no longer the same man. His very nature had changed, as if the millions of souls inside him had reshaped what he was.

He'd become something beyond—colder, more composed, thinking past the human range. A nightmare of an opponent, one who would make them all suffer if he lived.

This was the first SSS-class foe Frey had ever faced. He had always assumed the first would be a demon.

Fate had other ideas. The opponent he'd waited for turned out to be human.

The fight made the gap brutally clear. Blattier was likely the weakest SSS alive—and still, Frey's weapons and trump cards had amounted to almost nothing.

All that struggle, all that hard-won power, had bought him a single severed arm. That was the ceiling.

The difference between SS+ and SSS was absurd—two different worlds entirely. No amount of "skill" erased that gulf.

"You can't defeat an SSS-class combatant except with another SSS."

There was a reason that absolute rule existed. Everyone in this world lived by it. Frey was no exception.

And yet, even at the edge, Frey refused to bow to the logic of this world. Long ago he'd chosen to defy fate itself—to break any law that tried to shackle him.

So he stood again ..and fought again.

Blattier intended to kill him, and took his time about it after realizing Frey couldn't win.

Then he paused, frowning as aura began to surge from Frey's body once more.

"Hm?"

Before Blattier's eyes, power poured out of Frey and rose above him, condensing into a sphere of pure violet—a sun that kept swelling until its shadow fell over Blattier himself.

"This power..." Blattier murmured, genuinely surprised. He hadn't expected his broken opponent to have something like this left.

In front of him, Frey Starlight forced himself upright and kept feeding aura into that growing star—a raging violet sun whose pressure made even Blattier flinch.

"I had been saving this technique for the day I'd be forced to fight Zeibar and Geppetto... It's still incomplete, but it seems I have no choice but to wager everything on it now."

Frey clearly struggled to control whatever he was building; gaps opened all through his stance and flow.

Blattier had every chance to strike him down before the technique was complete.

But he chose to wait, curious to witness his enemy's final weapon.

"What now, Frey Starlight? Planning to throw that at me?" Blattier asked, real interest in his voice.

The sun's pressure was truly frightening ...even he felt a prickle of fear.

But his confidence in the power born of millions of sacrifices was absolute, so he deliberately let Frey finish, eager for one more clash.

By now, most of Frey's SSS-class aura was crammed into that ravening star—the full reserve he had never been able to wield at once. He had only recently found a way to haul all of it out of a body that still couldn't properly channel it.

Having fought him, Frey expected Blattier not to interfere; the high priest saw this battle as a chance to master a strength he believed would place him atop the world.

So Frey wagered everything on this technique.

Blattier gathered himself to meet it head-on .. but Frey never hurled it at him.

"Sorry," Frey said with a thin laugh, drawing a deep breath, "it doesn't work like that."

And before Blattier ..and every watcher from afar ..Frey Starlight finished externalizing his aura... and then threw it with all his might.

Not at his foe, but at himself.

In a baffling scene none of them understood—least of all Blattier—Frey let the violet sun swallow him whole, erasing his body from existence.

Chapter 586: Dark Ascension

At the peak of his battle against Blattier—the man wielding the strength of thirty-five million souls—Frey Starlight found himself outmatched, unable to triumph over the monster his foe had become.

He had no choice but to gamble on a new technique he hadn't even finished.

Under Blattier's puzzled stare, the colossal violet sun of aura that had even made the archbishop flinch swallowed its maker whole in a scene as shocking as it was inexplicable.

"Did he lose control and erase himself with his own attack?" Blattier muttered, baffled by what he'd seen.

That violet aura-sun was vast, its contained power in no way inferior to his own. Blattier fully expected Frey's next strike to be a genuine threat. Instead, the opposite happened—there was no way Frey could survive a disaster like that. The sun should have obliterated him.

With no other explanation at hand, Blattier assumed Frey had lost control and died by the very technique he'd created.

But then the aura-sun shuddered—hard—and he realized that wasn't it at all.

Slowly, steadily, the sun began to shrink: from a world-eclipsing sphere that blanketed half the island, down and down again. The SSS-class aura-sun kept contracting as if squeezed by an invisible vice, until it

was smaller than Blattier himself—and when it reached that size, the archbishop froze at the sight of Frey Starlight still intact, hands braced around the violet sphere, compressing it tighter and tighter.

"He's still intact... even after burying himself beneath the weight of that thing," Blattier muttered, unable to comprehend what was happening.

Frey had slammed the aura-sun into himself, then compressed it until what hovered above his palm was no longer a star, but a tiny, dense body.

No—he didn't stop there. He pressed it further, forcing it into an even smaller size as veins roped across his skin and his body screamed to withstand the pressure.

It might have been small now, but it was still that same violet sun ..still carrying the same explosive might. Size was the only difference. Somehow, Frey had squeezed it down to a minuscule sphere.

A violet "sun" no bigger than a baseball floated above his trembling palm.

He dropped to one knee, grinning despite himself as he fought to catch his breath, clearly pleased with the little violet "baseball" he'd forged.

"What are you trying to achieve with this, Frey Starlight? What kind of technique are you even attempting?" Blattier's curiosity was genuine; he wanted to see how far Frey would push this.

Frey exhaled long and slow, then forced himself upright again.

"I really need to work on the timing. My enemies won't hand me this much prep time," he said.

Just readying it had taken an eternity—time Blattier could've used to take his head in less than a second. But the archbishop hadn't.

"Blattier, you're absolutely certain you can take whatever I throw at you, aren't you? That's why you let me finish—because you want to use me to master the power you gained by burning millions of souls," Frey said, lifting the aura-sphere to his face. "Don't regret that decision later."

And with that, he took the tiny, volatile sun and swallowed it whole ..deepening Blattier's confusion ..only for the archbishop to be denied even a second to think.

The instant the sphere vanished down his throat, Frey howled—a raw, tearing sound—as a cataclysmic force erupted inside him, threatening to rip him apart.

Frey's veins, his aura channels, even his blood blazed with a savage violet light. The pressure alone should have shredded him into dust.

"That power is destroying his body," Blattier observed—yet at that same murderous pace, another force was knitting the damage back together just as quickly.

Driving Shadow Adaptation to its limit, Frey's monstrous regeneration fought to keep him in one piece.

"You felt it before, didn't you, Blattier?!" Frey shouted, eyes blazing, hair igniting with that ominous violet sheen. "That aura was SSS-class ..the same tier you reached after all your sacrifices!"

They weren't equals in every respect, but Frey's aura itself at least matched Blattier's. It was the one SSS-class thing Frey possessed.

"Phase Three of Shadow Adaptation gave me total control over my aura—but this body can't output all of it at once. My foundation is still too weak."

Even techniques like Ignition or Nameless Judgement, which burned terrifying amounts of aura, had never expelled everything. No matter what he used, he couldn't empty the well.

So Frey abandoned the idea of venting it through attacks. There was no technique that could burn all of it in one go—and even if there were, his body couldn't fire it.

That was why he conceived this insane method.

A technique that fused multiple abilities and concepts at once:

Using Phase Three of Shadow Adaptation to exert perfect control, he extracted every drop of SSS-class aura in his body and shaped it into a colossal sun. The pressure was monstrous—the same pressure Snow Lionheart had sensed while searching for him before..

Then, through immaculate control, he compressed that star into something infinitesimal—like a nuclear core ready to detonate at the slightest touch.

Keeping it stable demanded obscene precision—never mind the next, even madder step.

He swallowed that "black hole," forcing it back into his body.

Frey's flesh had always refused to output all that SSS-class aura, because he lacked the foundation to release it. So he changed the equation: if his body couldn't emit it, then he would contain it—weaponize it from the inside.

For that reason, Frey forced his body to accept the aura by brute force—detonating it inside himself.

A suicidal move like that should have erased him from existence the instant he attempted it, but Phase Two of Shadow Adaptation prevented that outcome. Driving his monstrous regeneration to the limit, Frey Starlight rebuilt his body as fast as it was being destroyed, somehow keeping himself in one piece.

His current state was perilous, and he had no idea how long he could maintain it; regeneration wasn't infinite. A few minutes at best.

But within that brief window, Frey entered a wholly extraordinary state—one that let his body annihilate everything except the aura within, leaving that power to circulate unimpeded.

"I didn't live to see your whole journey, but I'd wager this is what you did in your time... Father." He smiled through the strain.

Frey drew all that explosive aura into himself and brought it entirely under his command. His body burned with a dark radiance; this was how he emulated the power he had once heard of and glimpsed in the distant past—the Absolute Manipulator's ability, said to shatter the world's limits and embody pure chaos.

"This is only a cheap imitation... a temporary mimic that grants a similar effect for a few minutes. But for those few minutes, I feel like I can do anything."

He drew a deep breath and tightened his grip on both swords.

He whispered the name of his new technique:

"Ten Thousands Steps of Shadow: Dark Ascension."

A dark ascension ..Frey Starlight set foot into another world of power, the kind he needed to subdue his enemies. The pressure pouring off him now was terrifying; Blattier couldn't believe what he was seeing. His opponent had somehow closed the gap, reaching a level comparable to his own.

"Impossible..." Blattier murmured, trying to deny even his heightened senses.

To reach his current realm, Blattier had needed to sacrifice millions of souls just to plant one foot in the first stage of SSS. Yet his foe had approached similar might through a single, unfathomable technique.

"Let's begin!" Frey shouted, fighting to hold together and finish it quickly—this form wouldn't last long.

Chapter 587: The Shattered Judgement (1)

Blattier gathered his full power, ready for whatever Frey would hurl at him. There's no reason to fear him, he assured himself. Even with his tricks, he can't erase the difference in tiers. The SSS rank isn't something you beat with gimmicks. Frey is no exception.

That was how it should have gone.

In the blink of an eye, Frey vanished and reappeared right in front of him—an untraceable instant teleport, face-to-face. Wreathed in that eerie violet aura, Frey Starlight struck with both blades, unleashing everything his state would allow.

Blattier answered with a lightspeed thrust of his spear—and moments later, the two powers collided, igniting a roar of auras more dreadful than any before. Light wrestled with darkness as they locked into a tug-of-war, each trying to crush the other with raw force—an exchange whose caliber sat squarely at SSS.

Those long seconds felt like hours. Then everyone on the island heard it—the savage rip of cutting power.

Slash!!!

Blattier couldn't believe it until Frey slid past him, piercing his guard to appear behind his back. A vast, X-shaped gash opened across Blattier's chest.

Feeling the blood-wet wound from that last exchange, he realized he'd lost the aura struggle. For the first time since the battle began, darkness had smothered light, and Frey's blade had reached him—his first clean hit since Nameless Judgement.

'Did I just lose a straight contest of power?!'

Refusing to accept it, Blattier flared even more aura and whirled on Frey.

"Light Artillery!!"

He fired an overwhelming shell of pure light, a blast meant to swallow Frey and everything around him.

Frey answered instantly, whipping his swords with absolute force.

“Ten thousands Steps of Shadow: Black Severer!”

Two ebon arcs carved into the oncoming barrage. Bracing through the deluge, Frey drove forward again, intent on cutting deeper this time.

BOOM!!!

Steel met spear once more, their blows trading at speeds beyond human comprehension. In this new state, Frey blazed like a star—outshining even Blattier’s light—yet that very power gnawed at him from within.

Dark Ascension was tearing his body apart; Shadow Adaptation was knitting it back together at the same pace, a civil war inside his flesh that kept him from focusing perfectly on the fight.

‘My body could eject me from this form any minute. I have to end this—now.’

His thoughts raced as he kept pressing. Flawed and incomplete as it was, the ability had done its job: it let Frey Starlight temporarily stand on equal ground with his foe.

It made him the exception—let him chase a miracle—and break the rule.

Frey’s blade was breaking through to Blattier with every exchange.

Blattier landed blows of his own, but that didn’t change the simple fact: the fight had tipped into the unknown—no one could tell who would come out on top now.

“Don’t get conceited, Frey Starlight! You are not my equal in any sense!” Blattier roared, shaking the ground with a colossal surge of light.

Frey met the wave head-on, carving through it with his swords.

“Ten thousand Steps of Shadow: Black Meteor.”

Shadow aura threaded between the particles of light, and Frey’s blades smashed into the spear again, leaving a deep mark.

He had no luxury to answer Blattier’s taunts; every shred of focus was locked on maintaining his new form for as long as possible.

‘Damn it... this cursed state is draining nearly all of my concentration just to hold it together—I can barely focus on the fight...’

BOOM!

‘Like this, I can’t fire any Supreme Art. I’ll be forced to rely on the foundational forms of Ten Thousand Steps of Shadow...’

A fresh spike of pain hammered behind his eyes. That was why he hadn’t unleashed any grand techniques against Blattier so far.

Dark Ascension let him output, miraculously, something comparable to an SSS combatant’s raw might—enough to withstand Blattier and even cut him.

But to finish the high priest, Frey needed a single, overwhelming strike—something that would erase Blattier outright. Surface wounds would never be enough.

The ordinary forms of Ten Thousand Steps of Shadow couldn’t do that. So Frey pushed himself harder, reaching for something greater.

A single annihilating blow to wipe his enemy from existence.

Strike after strike, he parried everything Blattier hurled at him while gathering power, waiting for the one opening.

The battlefield became an ocean of detonating aura; nothing about the fight was readable anymore.

Blattier slipped into absolute frenzy, the millions of souls inside him howling as he wrenched out every shred of the power gifted to him. He was a natural disaster, flooding the world with light in his bid to kill his foe.

Frey endured the deluge. Dim as he looked beside Blattier's radiance, he still turned back that aggression with ruthless efficiency.

"What are you, Frey Starlight?! Are you telling me you alone can manifest power equal to millions of souls?!" Blattier raged, fraying as Frey survived everything he threw.

Frey Starlight's gifts had always defied reason—but Blattier had never imagined they would let his opponent reach the same plane.

It was nonsense. This was SSS.

Frey didn't stop there. He answered in a voice that cut deeper than Blattier's.

"Equal? No... I'll surpass it!!"

He chased the moment, hemming Blattier in beneath a torrent of blows that finally tore open the high priest's guard.

Face-to-face, Frey gambled everything on the next attack.

He knew he couldn't hold this state much longer. He would stake it all on one last strike.

The only technique in my arsenal that can end Blattier outright is Nameless Judgement—nothing else. If I unleash it in this state, it'll be far stronger than before...

Nameless Judgement under Dark Ascension.

Together, the result wouldn't be hard to imagine: catastrophic power, enough to crush even Blattier.

That was the bet Frey Starlight made.

I've already exceeded my limit and used it three times. Under normal circumstances, I can't fire Nameless Judgement again. But like this... I feel like I can do anything!

He pressed harder, step by step cutting through the light and erasing the distance.

Blattier tried everything to stop him; Frey bore it all down to the final breath.

"I can do it!" he roared with everything he had, overwhelming his foe. "I'll end this—here and now!"

Face-to-face with Blattier, Frey Starlight poured everything into Balerion, the Black Terror, preparing to unleash his strongest strike.

His battle cry split the air—and dread needled the high priest's heart—as Frey hewed downward in a vertical cut meant to finish it all.

The peak of his power, the pinnacle of his craft ..focused into a single final blow.

Chapter 588: The Shattered Judgement (2)

Blattier couldn't stop him. The aura Frey had gathered made the high priest's heart sink, recognizing the disaster about to befall him.

Even with all those countless sacrificed souls, the specter of defeat still clung to Blattier—and for a heartbeat, fear tangled his thoughts. He, the supposed superior in every way, found himself under Frey Starlight's mercy.

But reality was different.

Grinding himself past the brink, wrestling through blinding pain, Frey unleashed it a fourth time:

“Ten thousand Steps of Shadow: Frey Starlight Style...”

“Nameless Judgement!!!”

A strike greater than any before—enough to rattle the world itself.

A stroke that set death's shadow upon Blattier and made terror seize him, if only for an instant.

An attack like that would erase him from existence ..that much was almost certain.

That blow would, in all likelihood, end the battle. That was what should have happened.

But fate had other ideas, and in the end... the unimaginable occurred.

Frey Starlight was a heartbeat away from unleashing the greatest Nameless Judgement of his life. The instant he raised his sword toward Blattier to hurl it at him...

Time stalled for a breath, and Frey felt his reality flip upside down.

His vision went scarlet, and a horrific scene followed: blood burst in torrents from his eyes, his nose, and his mouth.

His muscles convulsed grotesquely, and his skin cracked like a stone statue shattered by brutal force.

Frey Starlight crashed toward the ground as Dark Sister slipped from his hand, while Balerion remained bound to him—yet that blade now weighed a ton to the broken Frey, who had collapsed worse than ever before.

Eyes wide open, Frey stared at the ground beneath him, unable to comprehend what had just happened to him.

He felt his body being torn apart without end, pain flooding him like hell itself—a hell unlike anything he had ever known.

This was the price of trying to mimic a power beyond his understanding—a technique unfinished—and on top of that, forcing himself past his limit to unleash Nameless Judgement for the fourth time.

Frey had put too much faith in his body and its regeneration, pushing far, far past the boundary—past the point of no return.

His opponent was SSS-class, and the damage that opponent had inflicted was unlike anything Frey had experienced in his entire life.

“You’ve got to be kidding me...” Frey spat blood, his expression darkening.

Only a few seconds and a single strike had stood between him and annihilating his foe. If he had executed it properly, he might have won the battle.

But his body failed before he could.

Frey clenched his teeth, trying to rise and make another attempt—

—but the slightest movement in his current state sent every fiber of his being trembling with agony beyond human endurance. That was from a tiny motion, let alone fighting.

Blattier, standing before him, had also lost his senses for a few seconds. Even he had envisioned himself being hit by that attack; the aura he felt at the end was terrifying.

Terrifying enough to freeze him where he stood for a time, before his eyes returned to Frey, now kneeling before him.

From the very start, Blattier had never once felt he could lose. He had controlled the fight from the beginning and had many chances to destroy Frey.

One could even say he'd drawn the battle out on purpose, using his opponent to push himself toward even greater power.

If that proved anything, it was that Blattier was far stronger than Frey.

And yet, at the end of the battle—for the first time ..

Blattier felt the specter of death draw near. The possibility of defeat, which hadn't existed at all, suddenly stood so close that Blattier froze for long seconds, unable to process what had happened.

But luck still favored him. Even after his opponent had revealed one impossible power after another ..

.. powers that defied logic and shattered limits ..Frey still could not defeat him.

Frey collapsed completely before delivering the finishing blow, and that put him back under Blattier's mercy.

Blattier kept silent for a while, staring at his opponent with eyes that held a tangle of complicated emotions. As for Frey ..

his body trembled, losing a frightening amount of blood as he tried to stand.

To no avail.

Frey cursed again and again, refusing to accept the result.

“One attack!! All that stood between me and beating him was a single attack!! You could’ve fallen after that—damn you!”

He cursed with all his heart, but in this state, there was nothing he could do.

Before him, Blattier lifted his great spear, aiming to end him.

He said nothing. He refused to speak to him.

After what he had seen, the Bishop knew Frey Starlight was not someone who should be left alive—not for even a second.

Who knew when he might unveil yet another power beyond comprehension? There was nothing to do but kill him.

Frey’s regeneration had halted after all the strain he’d endured. Taking a hit in this condition would be a true catastrophe—one that could cost him his life.

Frey knew that—and so did Blattier.

Around them, the island—vast and immense—had become nothing but a ruined land choked with rubble.

It was no longer a paradise. And just as Blattier moved in to finish Frey ..

a pillar of light descended, swallowing both Blattier and Frey alike, shaking the island yet again.

“Grand Cosmos Formation!!”

At the last possible moment, Snow Lionheart intervened, unleashing his strongest strike at Blattier while grabbing Frey’s body to pull him out of danger at once.

Everything that had happened made him realize this level was far beyond him for now, but there was nothing he could do except hope the Grand Cosmos Formation would be enough to stall Blattier long enough to save Frey.

He used Void Step, trying to flee ..

—but a strange wave of light wrapped around his body and halted him mid-air.

“Where do you think you’re going, Snow Lionheart?”

With his palm raised toward him, Blattier stepped out of the pillar of light wrought by the Grand Cosmos Formation unscathed, untouched by Snow’s attack.

Snow pushed the War King’s Form to its very limit, barely breaking the shackles of light Blattier had placed on him, then stood at the fore with Frey behind him.

“Run, Snow... You’re no match for him,” Frey said hoarsely, trying to stem the horrifying bleeding.

Snow lifted Vermithor, facing Blattier— a monster with one foot already in SSS-class.

“I know he’s far stronger than me ..and I know I have no chance of beating him. But what choice did you leave me, damn it?! I can’t just let you die here!” He leveled his blade at Blattier.

Snow didn’t know what he should do. He had leapt into the fray without thinking when he saw Frey on the verge of death.

But once he arrived, he understood how little he could actually accomplish in a field like this.

Blattier had suffered a great deal of damage fighting Frey, yet even so... he remained an SSS-class monster who could crush the likes of Snow with ease.

Between a collapsed Frey and a Snow who had just set foot on the battlefield,

both now stood at the mercy of the man backed by 35 million souls.

“I no longer care, bearer of Vermithor—whether you’re an envoy of the Lord of Light or anything else. Here and now, both you and Frey Starlight will die.”

Determined to put an end to their lives, Blattier struck with all his might—letting the shadow of death sweep over both Frey and Snow, bringing them closer to their end than ever before.

Chapter 589: The Last Stand Beneath the Golden Tree (1)

Frey Starlight had lost.

He had done everything—poured out his entire strength in a desperate attempt to achieve the impossible and defeat an SSS-class fighter.

But in the end, even he was destined for failure. Though he came close—so close that Blattier himself felt death brush against him at the very end of their battle—it wasn’t enough.

He was that close, yet history only remembers the victors. What he achieved meant nothing if death was to be his end.

One could say that all of Frey's struggle, all he had offered, had been for nothing.

Snow Lionheart intervened at the last moment, trying to salvage what he could. But he lacked the strength to stand against someone like Blattier in his current state.

The high priest had taken damage—he was far from unscathed—but what power he retained was still more than enough to crush Snow.

"You fool... you should've run when you had the chance!" Frey forced the words out, blood continuing to gush from his wounds.

His body had shriveled, seizing violently, drained of all color. He looked like a man afflicted by some terrible disease that had ravaged him completely.

The sight was so pitiful that Snow could hardly bear to look at him.

"Shut up and focus on staying alive. I'll figure out some way out of this mess," Snow snapped, gripping Vermithor tight, eyes fixed on Blattier, racking his mind for a way out.

But the high priest gave him no time. Spear thrust forward, he unleashed a colossal beam of light that threatened to consume them both.

The sheer weight of aura behind that attack was staggering, and for the first time Snow felt true dread as the target of such force.

Before, he had only watched the battle from afar and felt the scale of Blattier's power.

But now that he was on the receiving end, it was far worse.

Summoning everything the War King's Form could offer, he unleashed the strongest one-sword strike he possessed, splitting the radiant beam in two.

Snow barely withstood it, scorched by the searing light as it tore across his body.

Even a mere brush left his flesh and skin burning.

And when it finally ended, when the light faded at last, Snow staggered, gasping for air.

"All that... from just one attack?" he cursed, realizing the vast gulf between himself and his foe.

The idea of fighting Blattier at all felt meaningless. This wasn't even a battle.

The gap was far too great. Even Frey, with his overwhelming power, had been toyed with for most of the fight. Had it not been for that strange state he reached at the end, Blattier would have simply played with him from start to finish.

"What does it take to reach that level of power? What path must I follow? What price must be paid?"

Snow had been pondering that for some time. The issue of Paths gnawed at him.

SSS-class power wasn't something that could be attained by ordinary means. To reach it, one had to walk extreme roads that demanded unthinkable sacrifices.

Blattier had chosen the Path of Sacrifice, offering millions of souls. Frey had followed the Path of Blood, killing thousands to grow stronger.

Even the Path of Demons demanded abominations—Snow himself had been forced to eat his own kind.

It seemed every path demanded some form of bitter sacrifice, in exchange for the power one desired.

And so Snow Lionheart couldn't help but wonder: what kind of sacrifice would he himself one day have to make, if he wished to reach that level?

That was—if he even survived today.

The imperial hero's mind raced, searching for a way before Blattier struck again.

Fighting wasn't an option. Death was all that awaited them if he tried. Words were his only hope.

"Blattier! Do you realize the catastrophe you're about to cause?!" Snow roared, loud enough to make the high priest pause for a moment.

If combat failed, persuasion was the only card left.

"I am the messenger of the Lord of Light you worship above all else! The bearer of Vermithor! To kill me now would mean defying the very teachings of the Church you represent!"

Snow leveraged the Lord of Light's name as a bargaining chip, using his position as Vermithor's wielder to try and sway him. Surely Blattier, a man of the Church, would care.

But the high priest didn't falter, not even for a heartbeat.

"We have no need of you, Snow Lionheart. Nor of the Lord of Light you represent," Blattier said, his tone heavy, leaving both Snow and Frey stunned.

"We have no need of a god who abandoned his followers, who ignored them for centuries. The Church will move forward regardless. I will become the new Lord of Light, replacing the old."

With a sweep of his spear, he cast them back on a tide of light.

“Unlike him, I am here, and I will lead this Church until my final day. With this overwhelming power, I will destroy all our enemies—demons, and even the Lord of Light himself should he dare intervene!” Blattier declared arrogantly, crowning himself the supreme force upon the earth.

“You’ve gone completely mad!” Snow shouted, forcing himself to stand and shield Frey.

The latter spat blood, showing his disdain.

“Joseph Blattier... you think that just by breaking into SSS, you can do whatever you want? You barely broke through. It’s no exaggeration to say you’re the weakest fighter of this class in the world right now.”

“You nearly lost to me—and I haven’t even reached SSS. How do you expect to stand against the real monsters you’re so eager to challenge?”

No matter how he looked at it, Frey knew Blattier was deluded—blinded by his own power.

Yes, what he had was incredible. But compared to the horrors this world still hid, it was little. And Blattier wasn’t listening.

“You don’t understand, Frey Starlight. Even if someone stronger than me appears... I’ll simply surpass them. Through the power of sacrifice.”

BOOOOM!!!

The entire battlefield shook as Blattier unleashed his might, shattering both Snow and Frey—Snow most of all, for he stood at the front, shielding his friend.

“I will rebuild the Church anew! I will create followers far more faithful than those before them! Followers who will believe in no one but me—willing to sacrifice themselves at any moment, without hesitation!”

“With such devotion, my power will know no limits.”

At his command, countless spears rained down mercilessly. Snow could do nothing but clutch Frey tightly, flashing through the void again and again with Void Step, barely evading annihilation.

But after mere minutes of running, battered by blow after blow, Snow stumbled, crashing down with Frey falling to the ground beside him.

Frey still could not move. Snow, in just a few minutes, had taken so much punishment that his face was drenched in blood.

And Blattier... showed no intention of letting them go.

“Damn it... At this rate, we’re really going to die,” Snow muttered bitterly. Every path, every possibility he thought of, all ended in death.

Frey, lying broken on the ground in the worst state imaginable, let out a strange laugh at Snow’s words.

“You shouldn’t have come back for me, my friend. You should have lived.”

“If you’ve got enough strength left to spout that nonsense, you’d better use it to heal instead,” Snow retorted coldly.

But before he could say more, a searing radiance engulfed them from behind. Another devastating beam swallowed them whole in an instant.

Even with Void Step carrying them farther and farther, Blattier was still on their heels.

The light consumed them, and in the next moment both men lay amidst a path of destruction.

Frey collapsed helplessly. Snow stood over him, shielding him with his body, taking the brunt of the blast.

His back was a bloody ruin. His face twisted with pain. It was as though a bomb had exploded directly behind him.

Chapter 590: The Last Stand Beneath the Golden Tree (2)

Yet despite the agony, Snow had not hesitated. He had taken it all—for Frey.

Shaking, he staggered back to his feet, a hollow, blood-stained smile tugging at his lips.

"We're dying, Frey... Sorry, but I don't think there's a way out of this. Hahaha..." Snow laughed weakly, lifting Frey once more, forcing his body to move, Void Stepping again into the distance.

"There's no point. We can't leave the island," Frey said with a faint, almost mocking smile, unconcerned with the agony ripping him apart.

He was right. Even if Snow Void Stepped to the farthest reaches, he'd only meet the island's edge. Escape was impossible.

"I know... but I'd rather try than just sit here waiting for death."

Carrying Frey over his shoulder, Snow pressed on. But the oppressive aura at his back made it clear—running would never be enough.

"Maybe we could've survived if Dawn were here... With his Survivor's ability, even Blattier wouldn't be able to kill him," Frey whispered weakly from Snow's shoulder, speaking of the companion they had left behind.

"Haha... Yeah. That would've been nice," Snow agreed, forcing himself to keep moving.

But finally, his body failed. He could go no farther. He knew Blattier stood behind him.

Snow froze for an instant. Then a gentle smile spread across his face.

"Sorry, Frey... and thank you, for everything. It's been an honor to fight beside you—until the very end."

He whispered the words into Frey's ear.

And the next moment, both their eyes darkened—when Blattier's spear impaled them brutally, blood spilling in torrents.

The spear tore through Snow's back, piercing everything in its path, driving straight through Frey as well.

Blattier lifted his spear slowly, and with it, both bodies rose, impaled and helpless.

"This is the end."

No more tricks. No more surprises.

"Only death."

With a sharp motion, he flung them aside, leaving gaping, bloody holes in their chests.

So simply, it ended. Both Frey and Snow defeated, powerless before the high priest who emerged victorious.

Blattier had won. And his great triumph... was only the beginning.

The dawn of a new era. The birth of a new Church. And there could be no better beginning.

In those fleeting moments of victory, Blattier found himself turning—drawn without knowing why—toward the golden tree.

It blazed brighter than ever, like a divine lantern lighting up the sky.

Its light swallowed the entire island, including Blattier, who stood frozen beneath its brilliance.

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Far from the battlefield, in those final minutes of Blattier's relentless pursuit of Snow and Frey...

A girl had been watching.

Uriel Platini.

Her body was twisted, marred by bloody symbols and punctured scars left by tubes. Limping, leaning against the wall for support, she dragged herself step by step—trying to reach a place where she could see the battle with her own eyes.

Uriel—normally so cheerful—now revealed a face twisted with exhaustion, pain, and despair.

Crushed beneath the weight of guilt and regret, she had torn her own beautiful features with her nails without realizing it, leaving behind a bloodied, pitiful visage.

The thought of ending her life had gnawed at her for the last few minutes. Yet she couldn't bring herself to do it—not yet.

Not when Frey and Snow had suffered because of her. Not when she bore responsibility for the monstrous power the high priest now wielded.

Indirectly, Uriel had killed millions. She had helped give birth to this catastrophe that threatened to wipe them all out.

"They're going to die because of me..." she whispered, standing at the crumbling edge of the great citadel upon which the World Tree still loomed.

From that vantage, she could see the battle unfold in the distance. Though, calling it a "battle" was generous—Frey and Snow could do little but flee in desperation, while Blattier hunted them down like prey.

Watching from afar, Uriel felt her broken heart sink deeper and deeper into darkness.

She had often wondered—why had Frey fought with such ferocity in his final duel against Blattier?

He surely had his reasons. But what Uriel remembered most vividly was the promise she had made him give her...

The promise that he would come to save her when the time came.

And that time had come.

Frey had never spoken of it aloud, but from the way he fought, it was clear he had taken that vow to heart.

"If only I had been braver back then... If only I had had the resolve to stay by his side... none of this would have happened."

Uriel collapsed slowly, unable to stand any longer. The endless rituals had drained her completely—especially the final sacrifice she had unwillingly contributed to.

Her helplessness only deepened the weight of guilt crushing her soul.

She regretted many things.

She regretted hiding her true feelings behind a false smile her entire life.

She regretted making Frey Starlight promise her something so heavy.

And most of all... she regretted not staying with him when the Church summoned her and Yurasha away.

The Saint had always been something sacred to the Church—the virgin who walked alongside the hero.

The Saint was believed to be a blessed vessel of the Lord of Light Himself, her presence always deemed essential.

Yet ever since the sacrifice of the First Hero, Kazis Valerion, the first Saint had vanished without a trace. Rumors abounded—some said she perished in war, others whispered she had fled and ended her life in solitude. But the truth was never known.

What the Church did still have, however, was her blood—kept preserved through the ages.

The blood of the first Saint contained a vast reservoir of holy power, often used for healing.

In time, it became the only remnant of her that remained. And so, to preserve their standing, the Church began its search for maidens—pure, untouched girls with a natural affinity for holy power—into whose veins they would inject that blood.

Thus, the Saint Candidates were born. Girls taken from their families, adopted into the Church, and remade into vessels.

The blood of the first Saint was not enough on its own, so it was diluted with the sacred waters drawn from the World Tree's spring. The result created a new Saint each time.

But the experiments, the burden of such vast power, were crushing for children so young and innocent.

Even if a Saint emerged successfully, her body could never truly withstand the weight of that power, nor wield it properly.

None ever surpassed the SS+ rank since the first Saint. And most died before the age of thirty, their fragile bodies collapsing under the strain.

Yurasha had been the last of them, until her power was transferred into Uriel Platini—condemning her to the same fate.

"Yurasha... she was the one who taught me how to smile. How to face this world without showing my pain."