

## VILLAIN 591

### Chapter 591: The Last Stand Beneath the Golden Tree (3)

Uriel Platini had been only six years old when High Priest Platini adopted her, ripped from parents she could not even remember.

From that age, her body had been scarred with bloody symbols carved into her skin. Into her veins, they had injected the blood of the first Saint—so that she might bear the so-called blessing of holy power.

But Uriel's blessing had been nothing but suffering.

She had known pain since childhood. Pain without hope, for every Saint Candidate understood that death was their only end.

Some clung to blind faith and accepted their fate. Others knew something was deeply wrong, but could do nothing.

Uriel had endured her life with quiet strength, mastering the art of smiling while bleeding inside.

For a time, she had lived as though she were normal, and her years in the temple had been her happiest memories.

There, she made many friends. There, she learned what it felt like to smile with genuine joy instead of a mask.

And at the end of those years... she met Frey Starlight.

The strange boy who had appeared from nowhere, carrying burdens heavier than hers.

Watching his suffering, watching the way he fought, had made Uriel want to help him. She had felt a kinship between them.

But the difference was stark. Frey had chosen to fight against his cursed fate. Uriel had done nothing but wait quietly for death.

He had fought battles far worse than the one she had been born into. Yet despite the endless trials, Frey had always won. He had never broken.

Seeing him struggle so desperately had given Uriel a faint glimmer of hope.

She saw in him the strength she herself lacked, and so, without even realizing it, she had clung to him—selfishly, unforgivably—asking him to save her.

"Even knowing the suffering he endured... suffering far greater than mine, I still dared to drag him down with me, begging him to rescue me..." Her eyes had long since dried; she had no more tears left to shed.

Frey Starlight and Snow Lionheart... both were about to die because of her.

If she could have sacrificed herself to save them, she would have done it without hesitation. But she did not have the power to do so.

"I'm supposed to be the Saint now... I carry the power of my predecessors, these cursed blood runes carved into my flesh!" Uriel screamed, thrusting her hands forward—toward the place where Snow and Frey stood.

"Holy power... angels... anything!"

She had once been able to command every angel upon this world. She still bore a fragment of that power within her body. So she tried desperately to draw it out—for their sake.

"Please... I beg you—give me the strength to save them!"

Her runes bled as she tried to activate them.

"Lord of Light... my ancestors... grant me your power!"

Even one angel, even the faintest spark—it didn't matter. She would throw her life away without hesitation if it could save them.

She called upon the Lord of Light. She invoked the names of the Saints whose blood and power flowed within her.

She prayed and prayed, but nothing answered.

No matter how she tried, no one came.

Her desperate struggle lasted only minutes before her eyes caught a scene that shattered what was left of her spirit.

The sight of Blattier's spear piercing both Snow and Frey at once, extinguishing the light in their eyes in a single, merciless blow.

It was over. There was nothing left to save.

"No..." The word left her lips as an empty whisper, drowned beneath Blattier's triumphant laughter that echoed across the island after he felled his foes.

Uriel collapsed to the ground, tears flooding her eyes though she had thought them long spent.

"I couldn't do anything... until the very end, I did nothing..."

Helpless, powerless—she had lost everything.

"I killed them... with these hands... I killed them..."

Her blood-stained arms trembled as she blamed herself for it all—for the catastrophe, for their deaths.

And so she resolved to end her life.

"Frey... Snow... everyone... I'm sorry."

Her apology was a whisper to the dead, as the runes across her body began to glow.

She wished only for death now, to put an end to the torment she could no longer bear.

She had lost everyone she had ever cared for. She carried a guilt too great for anyone to endure. Death, she thought, would be her release.

But even death was denied her. The power within her refused to obey—refused to grant her even the mercy of an ending.

Realizing this, Uriel, overcome with rage and despair, clawed at her own throat, tearing at it savagely, desperate to end her life with her own hands.

Madness consumed her final moments; the burden she carried was too heavy for a single soul.

She ripped at her neck with feral violence, nearly ending herself...

But then a strange golden light burst forth, stopping her hand before she could strike the fatal blow.

The light did not only restrain her—it healed her torn flesh, slowly, gently, suffusing her with an alien warmth.

"This is not your fault."

Along with the golden radiance came a soft, tender voice, whispering by her ear. Uriel turned toward the source—toward the golden World Tree behind her.

And there she saw something she had never imagined possible.

From within the tree, a pure aura poured forth, weaving and coiling until it formed a shape—the figure of a woman.

A noble lady, radiant with a sacred presence unlike anything Uriel had ever seen. Her long golden hair flowed like sunlight, her face ethereal, with only her nose and smiling lips visible. Her eyes were veiled beneath a black cloth embroidered with a golden symbol Uriel could not comprehend.

She wore the vestments of a Church nun, and in her appearance, Uriel saw a reflection of herself.

But the pressure she exuded defied imagination—greater even than what Frey or Blattier had revealed. Perhaps greater than both combined.

With her holy radiance, the woman illuminated the island, drawing every gaze toward her.

Power divine. Aura noble. Uriel did not know who she was, but she could guess.

"The... Saint?"

For there could be no mistaking it.

This was none other than the First Saint—the one erased from history, the one the world had long forgotten.

Chapter 592: Chronicles of the Lost Truth (1)

Beneath the skies of Noctera, from within the majestic World Tree itself ..

A mysterious woman emerged, unseen by mortal eyes for countless ages, draping the island in golden light that overwhelmed the prevailing darkness.

An aura of purest gold radiated from her, accompanied by a noble presence unlike any other.

Uriel Platini was the first to notice her, being the closest.

Her wounds began to mend instantly, healed simply by the proximity of that overwhelming sacred power.

A holy force.

A noble presence.

A familiar figure—this woman was a Saint.

But which Saint?

"This is not your fault, Uriel Platini... there is only one true culprit for this heinous crime."

The Saint's voice was gentle, though her tone carried an undeniable weight.

Her eyes were hidden behind a black blindfold embroidered with a golden sigil, concealing her vision yet not her clarity. Even without sight, she immediately discerned the true enemy.

And that enemy was none other than Joseph Blattier.

He recognized her presence at once. Her figure was too distinctive, her name too sacred in church records for him not to know. Yet still, he refused to believe.

"This is impossible..."

She was supposed to have vanished long ago, already dead and gone from this world.

Yet here she was, appearing at the most critical moment of his life.

Her golden aura reached out, pulling both Snow and Frey away from danger, as the Saint rose slowly into the sky, her every movement measured and solemn.

"Dawn Saint... Liora..." Blattier uttered the name aloud, stunned as recognition struck.

For centuries, she had been venerated in books and hymns as the Saint who once stood beside the First Hero, battling demons of unimaginable might during the Great War—an age when SSS-ranked beings roamed freely.

And she looked exactly as the records described, untouched by time, her youth preserved as though the Great War had ended only yesterday.

"There must be some trick here..."

Blattier ascended into the air to meet her, rising to her level.

"There are no tricks, Joseph Blattier," the Saint replied, her expression firm, her aura intensifying until the golden light eclipsed his. "What stands before you now is one of the founders of the very church you have defiled with your hands."

Her radiance bore down upon him, forcing dread into his heart.

"Defiled it? I am the Church! The Church is me! I kept this order alive when you vanished, abandoning it!" Blattier roared back, unleashing the full extent of his newly awakened SSS aura, struggling to push back against her overwhelming presence.

The Saint merely raised her hand, and from the void, golden chains manifested like furious serpents, coiling tightly around him.

They constricted with such strength that Blattier could not break free.

"I never abandoned anything. I was always here—sheltered within the great Tree, preserved across the ages."

The Dawn Saint, Liora, had been here all along, concealed within the World Tree that humanity had worshiped but never truly understood.

"I have no eyes with which to see this world, for I lost my sight long ago. But I never needed them to witness the atrocities you committed with your hands."

"You, who claim to be the Church—how can you represent its faith, when you desecrated every value and doctrine it once stood for?"

Each word from her lips inflamed Blattier's anger.

"Silence! I have no interest in hearing another word from you!"

Clutching his great spear, he tore through the golden chains and lunged forward.

"The Lord of Light abandoned me long ago! The First Hero gave his life and vanished! And you—you disappeared without warning! By what right do you judge me for what I've done?!"

BOOOOM!

His spear clashed with her raised palm, unleashing a deafening storm of power.



But the truth was undeniable—Blattier's light paled before her absolute gold.

"The Lord of Light never abandoned anyone, Blattier. He is a noble, mighty being whom we chose to follow. But we never claimed him to be a god. He was never omnipotent. That was a truth known by all in the past.

It was you who twisted the truth.

You who rewrote history to suit your desires."

Her golden radiance surged even brighter, forcing him back and threatening to overwhelm him entirely.

"You claimed to embody the Church. But you represent no one but yourself. Because of you, millions of innocents died. By your filthy hands, you nearly brought about the death of this generation's greatest heroes."

Forming a strange seal with her hands, Liora unleashed her full strength.

"This is the burden I have borne in silence. For centuries I was bound by the vow... forced to endure as I watched, unable to intervene."

Her words unsettled Blattier, especially the mention of a vow. But his attention was fixed on the overwhelming aura forming behind her.

From her seals emerged a celestial figure—an awe-inspiring being, immense enough to cast its shadow over the entire island.

Golden eyes glared down at the bishop, ready to deliver judgment.

"I had no choice but to break that vow. When this generation's heroes fell, when death stood a step away from them—then the old had to return. To cleanse the chaos you have unleashed, Joseph Blattier."

Liora's revelation confounded him. He could hardly believe she had been slumbering within the World Tree, preserved by its divine blessing, waiting for this very moment.

But to defeat an SSS-ranked being, another SSS was required.

And Liora had reached that stage long ago.

"Divine Lament: Tears of Salvation."

With those words, she summoned a golden pillar from the heavens, a cascade of light like tears of salvation and judgment, descending upon Blattier.

The sacred technique scorched his body and spirit alike, leaving him writhing against its might.

But still, he resisted, grinding his teeth, summoning the fury of the 35 million souls that burned within him.

"Do not think for a moment that you can defeat me, Liora!"

Struggling forward through the storm of light, he advanced, his madness refusing to yield.

"Your time is over! There is no place for you in this world anymore! Return to your grave! Upon this earth and beneath this sky—I AM the Lord of Light!"

Clinging to his arrogance and obsession until the end, Blattier refused to fall.

Even against an SSS Saint, he did not flinch.

"There is no right or wrong in this world. The victor is the one who writes its laws! The victor decides what is true!

And I am the victor!

I am the one who will rule this land!

I will fight until my last breath, with the boundless power bestowed upon me!"

His cry was a savage roar of defiance, hurling himself against the Saint's judgment.

In the end, Blattier was caught off guard when she came at him herself, striking from close range.

#### Chapter 593: Chronicles of the Lost Truth (2)

A Saint was never meant to fight on the frontlines—her role was support. Close combat was never her domain.

But Liora disregarded such logic entirely.

She was far too fast for him to react. In an instant, her right hand pressed against his chest, unleashing a strange force that surged violently through his body.

"Joseph Blattier," she said softly, her tone carrying a divine weight, "this power was never yours to begin with. You are nothing but a usurper who stole strength by sacrificing countless innocent souls—souls that never belonged to you."

"For that reason, I must set them free... to grant them the salvation and freedom you so cruelly stole."

At her words, Blattier felt something within him tear apart.

And then—without warning—his back exploded, spewing forth thousands... no, millions of radiant motes of light that burst free from his body at the first chance they had.

The bishop screamed in agony, his very essence cracking and collapsing.

"You may not realize it yet," Liora declared, her voice calm but merciless, "but you have already lost."

Blattier tried to respond, tried to muster strength—but his power had collapsed, fleeing from him under the Saint's assault.

"Arrogance blinded you. Your newfound strength swelled your pride so greatly that you dared call yourself a god. But the truth is clear: you are nothing but a thief. A usurper. And even with all you've stolen, your might isn't enough to cover a single corner of this vast universe."

Liora pressed her hand harder against his chest. The flood of souls poured from him faster and faster, shredding him from within as his screams echoed powerlessly across the sky.

In desperation, Blattier tried to invoke the blood runes carved into his flesh—his last resort to bind the souls to his body before they escaped entirely.

But Liora had already seen through him. With a single gesture, she purified the markings, erasing them instantly and stripping him of even that final chance.

"The path you chose—the sacrifice of others to empower yourself—is nothing but a vile, demonic road. It bears no relation to the Lord of Light or His kind, not even in the faintest shadow. Joseph Blattier, perhaps you thought you were the manipulator, pulling the strings of others. But in the end... you, too, were nothing more than a pawn in someone else's game."

"And the very runes etched upon your body stand as proof of that."

From the beginning, these practices were never of the Lightbearers, nor of the Lord of Light. They were foreign, demonic rites, insidiously planted within the Church long ago.

Roots of corruption ran too deep, poisoning the Church until it birthed today's catastrophe—a calamity that nearly erased the new generation of heroes, and would have, had the Saint not broken her chains and returned.

Blattier himself was nothing but a product of that corruption. A victim, as much as he was its monster.

Liora knew this. And for that reason, she resolved to end it swiftly.

"This would have been a harder fight had you mastered your stolen strength, had you faced me in your prime. But your battle with Frey Starlight drained you. You have nothing left to give."

"As easily as you gained this power, so too do you now lose it. These innocent souls were waiting for their first chance to escape you. And that chance is now."

As his body convulsed and tore, as the radiant lights poured out in an unstoppable tide, the Saint pressed down one final time—ending the battle that had dragged on far too long.

"Divine Lament: Dirge of the Saint."

With her final hymn, her power surged through his body. In moments, the bishop's form shattered utterly.

The Tower of God crumbled into dust, scattered upon the wind.

Liora stood there, suspended in the heavens, as millions of radiant lights rose around her—souls that had finally been released, freed from torment and captivity.

Amid the majestic sight that lit the world in gold, she smiled gently, lifting her head toward the sky.

"...I broke the vow."

In the end, she had stepped forth before her time, unable to remain bound by her silent oath. For years she had endured, watching but never acting. But when the new generation of heroes were on the brink of death, she shattered her chains and returned once more to the world.

"And so, I shall be the first to leave... after you, Kazis."

The words carried from her lips with a bittersweet smile as she descended, returning to the sacred temple beneath the World Tree—the one place left untouched by the ruinous battle.

There, beside Uriel, lay Snow and Frey, sprawled in pools of their own blood, deep wounds carved across their chests.

Liora's golden light had drawn their bodies back to Uriel, who tried desperately to heal them. But no matter how hard she tried, she could do nothing.

All she saw when she looked upon them were corpses—lifeless husks.

That dreadful truth kept her from even registering the majestic sight of the freed souls ascending into the sky. Her world was collapsing before her eyes.

But Liora reassured her, descending gently from the heavens.

"Do not fear. They will not die."

As if those were the very words she had been waiting for, Uriel turned toward her with trembling eyes.

"Can you save them?!"

The Saint nodded, and Uriel's eyes lit with desperate hope. She fell to her knees before Liora, bowing until her head touched the ground.

"Please... I beg of you... save them... please!"

Liora lifted her at once, pulling her back to her feet.

"There is no need to bow your head, dear child. I would have saved them regardless."

Her smile was soft, her voice warm, as she stepped toward the two fallen warriors.

"Their wounds are mortal to ordinary men. But they are no ordinary men. Frey Starlight possesses a strange body, one that adapts to every torment he endures. And Snow Lionheart was never truly human to begin with. With a little aid from my sacred light... they will endure."

She released her golden aura, wrapping their broken forms in brilliance. The golden light filled the holes in their chests, mended their shattered bodies, and began stitching closed the wounds that had nearly ended them.

From behind, Uriel watched in awe. She had never seen such sacred power before.

Ordinarily, holy light glowed green. But Liora's was golden—purer, stronger, far beyond anything Uriel herself possessed.

The sight convinced her without doubt that this woman before her was beyond comprehension.

It did not take long. Their bodies were healed. Only their spirits remained to awaken.

The speed and precision of the miracle was but a glimpse of what Liora had been in her prime—on the battlefield, where she once fought behind the First Hero, Kazis Valerion, and the great houses' champions.

Back then, none had feared injury. With her at their side, wounds vanished in an instant.

They had even said the Dawn Saint could steal souls back from death itself, so long as she reached them in time.

Before such a figure, Uriel could feel nothing but gratitude—and awe.

When she saw Frey and Snow restored, Uriel bowed once more, thanking the Saint from the depths of her heart.

But Liora stopped her once more.

Chapter 594: Chronicles of the Lost Truth (3)

"I do not deserve thanks," she said gently. "For years, I stood by as the Church committed its sins and atrocities, and I did nothing to stop it."

Her words, spoken from guilt, only deepened Uriel's curiosity. She dared to ask:

"My lady, forgive my impertinence... but I must know—what truly happened in the past? Why did you spend all these years hidden away? And why now, of all times?"

Uriel's questions were many. Liora merely smiled in reply.

"I promise you, every question in your heart will be answered. But first, let us wait until they awaken. I am certain they will want to hear the story as well."

Uriel nodded. There was much mystery yet to be unraveled, and many truths only Liora could provide—truths from someone who had lived through the Great War centuries ago, the war that ended with Kazis Valerion's sacrifice.

Both Frey and Snow deserved to hear those truths. So, until they stirred, Liora and Uriel stood at the edge of the great temple, gazing at the wondrous sight of millions of lights—souls rising one by one into the heavens.



Uriel, in particular, was overwhelmed. She felt the crushing weight of guilt as she watched the liberated souls vanish into the sky, souls taken and slaughtered because of her.

"You are not guilty, Uriel Platini," Liora reassured her softly. "Like those countless souls, you too were only a sacrifice—an unwilling pawn in the schemes and horrors of others. Of Blattier... and of whoever it was that pulled his strings from the shadows."

Uriel understood, but shook her head.

"I know I was manipulated. I know I had no choice. But that doesn't change the fact that I was the direct cause of their deaths. Of all those innocent lives..."

She lifted both her trembling hands, despising her own weakness and helplessness.

"If only I had enough power... enough courage... perhaps it would not have ended this way."

Listening, Liora shook her head gently. She placed her hand on Uriel's arm, and with her golden light, began to purify the twisted blood-runes carved into her skin.

"Power is not always the answer, Uriel Platini," Liora said. "No matter how strong you become, there will always be someone stronger. I am proof of that."

The golden radiance spread, cleansing the corruption from Uriel's body, as Liora infused her with sacred light.

"It is not power that defines us, child. It is the choices we make, the paths we walk, the destinies we forge with our own hands." She smiled warmly.

"I see now. They injected you with my blood... along with the blood of the other Saints."

Uriel lowered her head, ashamed, but nodded.

"This was how they preserved the Saint's legacy—by forcing fragments of our blood into others. Your strength is part of us."

But Liora shook her head.

"No. Those foreign traces do not strengthen you. They bind you. They limit you."

She released more of her golden aura, purging the foreign blood entirely from Uriel's body.

Uriel stared at her in shock, not understanding. Liora explained:

"The strength was always within you. All you need is to awaken it—not through twisted rites, nor through sacrifice, nor through blood, but through true awakening. Through your own potential. You carry it deep inside, as I do. Train yourself, and one day... you will reach it."

Liora's voice carried absolute certainty. She had felt that same golden spark hidden within Uriel's soul.

Still, Uriel was unconvinced.

"You mean to tell me... that one day I could reach your level? That I could wield the same golden light as you?"

Liora nodded.

"Perhaps you might even surpass it."

Those last words shook Uriel to her core. This was the First Saint—the Dawn Saint herself—whose level had never been matched in centuries. Yet she claimed Uriel might one day exceed her.

Uriel dared not refute her. She could only remain silent... until their conversation was cut short.

For in that moment, Frey and Snow stirred. Their bodies, once broken, moved faintly for the first time since falling to Blattier. Seconds later, they opened their eyes almost in unison.

The sight of them alive overwhelmed Uriel. Her emotions burst forth as she embraced them both tightly, unable to stop herself.

Everything happened so fast. Surprise was written across their faces—especially Snow's, who could not comprehend how he had survived at all. Frey, however, was calmer. Gently patting Uriel's back, he eased himself free of her arms.

"...We're alive?" Snow whispered in disbelief. His last memory was of Blattier's final attack, followed by darkness. He still could not accept that he was breathing now, as if nothing had happened.

Then both of them noticed her—the figure who had changed the entire flow of aura around them, who had saved them.

With one look, they knew.

Liora did not keep them waiting. Stepping forward, she addressed them with a soft smile.

"Frey Starlight, Snow Lionheart... I know you must have many questions. But first, allow me to thank you both for all you have done. I am truly glad to see you alive."

Then she turned her covered gaze toward Frey, whose silence had been steady until now.

"I have no eyes to see you with. But from your aura, I can tell—you are not surprised, unlike your friend. Isn't that right, Frey Starlight?"

Liora smiled. Frey held his silence for a long breath before finally answering.

"To be honest... I had a feeling I wouldn't die here. Not like this, not in this place." His voice was heavy, remembering all the times death had eluded him, all the times he had failed to end his life.

He had been forced to live, again and again, dragged back by forces outside himself. Death had never claimed him before. He could not believe this time would be any different.

"I expected something would intervene, something to change the outcome. And it seems your arrival was that something. For that, I suppose I should thank you... Saint."

Liora's smile deepened.

"You realized who I was so quickly... remarkable."

Snow, still regaining his sense of reality, struggled to follow the conversation. Unlike Frey, he had been certain they were doomed. He needed time to accept survival.

But Frey's violet eyes glowed as he looked at her.

"A presence of SSS rank... a sacred aura unlike any other... and your appearance, your very features. Identifying you is hardly difficult. You're the one who dealt with Blattier, aren't you?"

Liora nodded.

"My name is Liora. I am the Saint who once walked beside the First Hero, Kazis Valerion. And yes... as you guessed, I am the one who ended Blattier and saved you both."

Her words confirmed Frey's suspicions, and at last revealed the truth of who she was.

"The Saint who stood with the First Hero... but wasn't she supposed to have died centuries ago?" Snow asked in disbelief.

"Yes," Frey answered. "She should be long dead. Yet here she stands before us."

His tone held equal parts curiosity and suspicion. He had never imagined such a figure could still exist.

Liora tilted her head, her faint smile never faltering.

"I can see you both have much you wish to say..."

"That's right," Frey answered at once, rising back to his feet.

#### Chapter 595: Chronicles of the Lost Truth (4)

"You are the Saint, and you saved us before, so I assume you stand on our side... but there are too many questions that demand answers. First of all—why now? Why intervene at this time, of all times? And where have you been all these years?"

Frey's voice carried caution. Even though she had saved him, he never once lowered his guard before the Saint. Too much mystery surrounded her.

If she had been nearby all this time, then why had she remained hidden? Why not appear when the world was falling into chaos?

Snow wanted to speak but held his tongue, for he too wanted to hear her answer.

Thankfully, Liora did not shy away.

"Your questions are fair, Frey Starlight. And I will answer them all. There is no need for such hostility."

She gestured toward the World Tree, speaking calmly.

"Since the First War against the demons, the world believed I had vanished... that I had died, fading away somewhere unseen. But the truth is different. I have remained within the World Tree all this time. It sheltered me, keeping me in slumber for centuries."

The World Tree was no mere plant, but a mysterious being of unfathomable power—power enough to conceal even one of Liora's caliber without anyone ever discovering her presence.

Though her body had slept, her consciousness had remained awake, entwined with the Tree, ever watchful of the world.

"As for why I appear now... it was to save you, Frey Starlight, and you, Snow Lionheart. As for why I hid for so long—" she paused, her tone deepening. "That is another story altogether."

"A story that begins hundreds of years ago, with the First Demon Invasion... with the truths erased from history itself."

The moment she mentioned that ancient war, the three of them—Frey, Snow, and Uriel—fixed their full attention on her.

Little was known of that era. History's records were fragments at best.

To Frey especially, it carried a heavier weight. He now knew he was not in another world but in the future of his own. Which meant... that First War had taken place shortly after the time of his own death, before his transmigration.

Liora fell into a long silence, as though choosing carefully where to begin.

"I suppose I must start from the very beginning. But instead of words... it is better that I show you. The things my eyes once witnessed—before I lost them."

She clasped her hands together. At once, light engulfed Frey, Snow, and Uriel, drawing them into Liora's distant memories.

"Remarkable... you can make us see your memories," Uriel whispered in awe.

"Not all of them," Liora replied, smiling faintly. "Only the clearest ones. And you, Frey Starlight—stop resisting me with your aura. If you continue, I won't be able to hold you here."

Her tone was half annoyed, half amused. Frey lowered his guard slightly, offering a quiet apology.

His aura had already reached SSS-tier. If he wished, he could resist her intrusion entirely. The fact unsettled Liora, sparking further curiosity about his strange power.

But now was her turn to answer, not his.

The visions sharpened.

The Earth—hundreds of years ago.

A peaceful, ordinary world... before everything changed. Before the Gates appeared. Before the Demon Army poured forth, bringing humanity to the brink of extinction.

Through Liora's eyes, they watched.

"The demons came from nothing. And in the span of mere days... they slaughtered us in numbers too great to count. We had no way to resist."

The images were horrific. Demons tearing through flesh, bodies shredded apart in grotesque violence.

A race that fed on aura, that brought only death wherever it set foot.

"In those days, humans began to awaken their abilities. They discovered they could wield aura. But their control was primitive—weak, unstable. We had no power to stand against the demons."

Yes, mankind had awakened. But what could newborn strength do against demons who had existed for millions of years?

The war was hopeless. One-sided. Humanity faced annihilation.

Before Frey and the others, the scenes unfolded: humanity broken, massacred daily by the millions.

It was devastation beyond anything they had ever witnessed. Even the War of Darkness seemed like child's play compared to the wholesale slaughter of the past.

"We died day and night," Liora said grimly. "We could not even fight properly. But then... everything changed when they appeared."

Frey and Snow both widened their eyes as figures emerged in the vision.

A group of humans—yet unlike any they had seen before. They wielded aura with mastery, as though it had always belonged to them.

"They were strong. Beyond strong. On a level no other humans of that era could even approach."

It was they who first laid down the rules of aura, the combat styles, the very foundations upon which the world now stood. They were far ahead, almost impossibly so.

Frey stared in shock. Snow too recognized one among them.

A dark-skinned woman.

An old man with a strange blade.



A young spearman.

And a small boy with short golden hair, soaring through the air.

There were more. Many more.

But Frey knew these faces. He had seen them before—in his father's memories, within the Shadow Sect. He had even encountered one in Londor, when he had found the Nameless mask.

They were the same.

"This group of outsiders," Liora continued, "was the reason humanity survived. They shared their knowledge. They gave us their methods. And so we called them... the Readers."

"...The Readers?" Frey repeated, unable to hide his astonishment.

Liora nodded. Her expression was heavy with memory.

"When the Gates first appeared, a book was discovered. It told of events eerily similar to what had befallen our world. The coming of the demons. The Gates. The awakening of aura. All of it was written inside—a mere novel, authored by a man no one knew. A man who died quietly, in some forgotten corner of the world."

In that moment, a title appeared before them.

"Its name was... Land of Survival."

The instant Frey heard it, his head throbbed violently.

"The Readers of that novel already knew what was coming. Armed with the knowledge written within, they grew powerful at incredible speed, and they guided humanity forward. To us, that book became sacred. A heavenly scripture. A revelation from another world."

"With the Readers, we were able to rise. We were able to fight. All of it... because of a single novel, long lost, yet carved into the minds of its readers."

The revelation struck like thunder.

"A fictional story... predicting reality with perfect accuracy? That's impossible," Snow muttered, stunned.

"You are right," Liora said, nodding softly. "It is impossible. And yet... it happened."

"The author died before we could reach him. He took the answers with him to the grave. And so, all that remained were his words... and his Readers."

She spoke with regret, her voice tinged with sorrow.

For she believed the truth had died with that unknown author.

But she could never have imagined...

That very author now stood before her, wearing the face of Frey Starlight—his expression twisting as he heard a truth he never thought he'd encounter.

#### Chapter 596: The Broken Oath (1)

Humanity was on the brink of extinction centuries ago. The losses were astronomical, the dead uncountable—an entire civilization stood on the edge of annihilation.

But because of the emergence of the few they called the Readers, mankind managed to breathe again, to rise on its feet against the brutal onslaught of the demons.

The Readers never hoarded their knowledge, never bound it by chains of secrecy. They shared freely, thinking of humanity's survival before anything else. That was why so many chose to follow them.

"After learning so much from them, we finally managed to fight properly, to endure the invasion. But the war only grew harsher with time..." Liora spoke with a solemn face, showing glimpses of the demon invasion.

That vile race had two overwhelming advantages: their vast numbers and their terrifying vitality.

A demon was hard to kill unless utterly destroyed. Given time, they recovered from nearly any wound. Humans, by contrast, fell permanently when dealt a fatal blow.

These were the factors that made the war nearly impossible.

And yet, despite it all, humanity endured. At a certain point, the tide began to shift. Losses became fewer. Each day more demons fell than before. New champions rose—heroes whose strength rivaled legends.

Unlike the current age, where humanity had grown sheltered, with the Ultras as their greatest concern across the seas, the ancient war was an entirely different ordeal. Losses were counted not in millions, but in billions.

Before the Gates appeared, Earth's population had reached eight billion. After years of ceaseless war, only a few hundred million remained. Humanity stood at the edge of extinction.

It was a merciless age—an era that forged monsters among men.

"Every race in this world has something that defines it. For humanity, it was our ability to adapt," Liora said, remembering the countless heroes who rose against despair, no matter the odds.

She had been one of them.

"No matter the suffering, no matter how life crushed us, we adapted. We moved forward."

In that age, countless warriors broke through to the SSS-rank. A rank many of this era dismissed as myth was, back then, not uncommon. Earth had many who reached such heights.

Because they were monsters forged in an age where only that strength could grant survival. Humanity's ability to adapt was their sharpest weapon.

Perhaps it was even why the demons experimented on them—injecting their blood into humans alone.

Though demonic blood was poison and killed many, there were those who survived. Their bodies adapted, evolving from what should have been death into new power.

That became humanity's greatest weapon—the edge they clung to in desperate times.

"After suffering humiliating defeats, after nearly being exterminated, we turned the tables. We slaughtered demons by the thousands and crushed the invasion that sought to wipe us out," Liora said, showing scenes of human triumph.

Beside the Readers, who were all terrifying in their own right, other humans rose to equal power. Kazis Valerion, chosen by the mysterious Lord of Light. The great family leaders. Even Liora herself, who bore the mantle of Saintess.

Frey and the others watched silently, stunned by the sheer scale of the victories humanity achieved at the end of that war.

"The humans of that era... they were truly strong," Snow muttered, astonished by the strength of his ancestors, a strength beyond what he had ever imagined.

A multitude of SSS-rank fighters. A strange group who knew the future. It was a generation that dwarfed the present by countless measures.

"With such strength... doesn't that mean they weren't just capable of surviving? Couldn't they have actually won? To end the demons once and for all?"

Snow's words carried conviction. In that terrifying generation, he saw power enough to accomplish it.

But both Frey and Liora wore expressions that made it clear: this was a grave misunderstanding. A foolish illusion.

"What you just said, Snow Lionheart, is precisely the thinking that led to the disaster which changed everything—what made us realize how weak, how powerless we truly were." Liora's voice darkened as the memories shifted again.

If humanity, even then with so many SSS-rank warriors, was weak... what was true power? And how did the current generation compare—when no one had reached SSS at all, not even Frey Starlight, their strongest?

Liora answered patiently, from the very beginning.

"It began when we discovered that what we had faced then was only the vanguard of the demons. A mere fragment, not even a shadow, of the true army that race commands."

Even after humanity purged the world of demons, even after victory upon victory, the Gates above never closed. Which meant at any moment, more could come.

"In the moment of our greatest triumph, when we dared dream of salvation... came the First Schism. Humans turned upon each other as we tried to decide our next step."

The memory showed the moment humanity was forced into a fateful decision.

"Arrogance had taken root. We truly believed we were strong. That was when the faction arose—the one that demanded fire be answered with fire."

They were mighty warriors, yet blinded by arrogance—convinced their strength could accomplish anything.

"They were the ones who slaughtered the most demons in those days. Titans like Cheon Ma, the Sword God Avalon, or Rion Nightwave... all of them were SSS-rank warriors, some even surpassing Kazis Valerion himself."

"This faction was bloodthirsty for battle. They called upon all of humanity to carry the war into the demons' world itself..."

The moment Liora uttered those words, everyone stiffened—even Frey's eyes narrowed.

"To Helmund... where the Demon King himself resides, along with the highest Seats and the Dukes of Hell—the ones we rarely ever clashed with."

"That's madness..." Frey said coldly, emphasizing just how reckless and insane such a decision was.

For men like Cheon Ma, it wasn't bravery—it was lunacy. They truly believed they could invade Helmund and destroy the demons on their own ground, as they had done to humanity.

Snow and Uriel were struck by the sheer audacity of such warriors. But Frey saw only their folly—their arrogance.

Liora continued, unflinching.

"As I said, we split into two factions after once being united. One demanded we strike first, that we carry the war into Helmund itself."

"The other faction, led by the Readers who had guided us this far, opposed them fiercely. They argued we must hold the line, defend, and never provoke powers we could not contend with."

The Readers fought against the plan until the bitter end. They knew too much, and they feared what lay beyond the Gates.

But the debate became conflict, and conflict became division. Humanity fractured.

One faction yearned for war, to strike the demons on their own soil. The other called for unity on Earth and defense only, insisting we had no chance in Helmund.

"The Readers were our wisest, the very reason we survived the war at all. We should have all listened. But many were blinded by their own strength, intoxicated by the heights they had reached."

#### Chapter 597: The Broken Oath (2)

The SSS rank itself was intoxicating. It was the reason Blattier once dared call himself a god simply for attaining it. And he was not the only one.

Arrogance. Overconfidence. Ignorance. That was the true sickness of humanity.

"In the end, Kazis, the great houses, and I chose the Readers' side. We chose to hold back, to trust their warnings. But I'll admit the truth—even we believed deep down that the warriors might be right. That fighting was the braver path."

To strike first rather than sit idle, waiting for the next wave. With such strength at their command, many believed it was the only correct choice.

"We did not realize... that had we not stepped back at the final moment, humanity would have been wiped from this world long ago," Liora said bitterly, and silence fell over the others.

To explain, she showed them the vision. The day it happened.

A host of proud warriors standing before the Rift. Dozens of titans, their ranks led by monsters of the SSS rank. A force that, in this present era, could have ended the war with the Ultras in mere months.

The previous wielder of Balerion, Cheon Ma. The wielder of Dark Sister, Avalon. And countless more.

They were not men. They were monsters in human form.

And they marched boldly through the Gate, into Helmund itself, determined to wage war against the race that had tormented humanity for so long.

"That day... our greatest warriors left Earth behind, setting foot upon a land unlike anything they had known. They carried with them the hopes of our entire race. That day marked humanity's first attempt to confront the demons directly."

Liora paused, her expression a mixture of sorrow and bitterness.

"And that day... was the last we ever saw of them."

"What? You mean to tell me all of them—all those SSS-rank monsters—died, unable even to escape?!"  
Snow burst out, shaken, Uriel's face mirroring his disbelief.

Only Frey remained calm, for he alone understood the horrors that waited on the other side.

"We lost all contact with them the moment they set foot through the Gate. Days passed, then weeks, then months. We waited, but no word ever came. They never returned. It was as if they had been erased. Slowly, despair consumed us, and we gave up hope."

"Some even volunteered to follow them, to discover their fate. We gathered at the Gate more than once, but none of us dared to enter."

"And then... after all that time, from the countless who had gone with pride, carrying the hopes of mankind... only one ever returned."

"Through the Gate, only Avalon—the man once hailed as the Sword God—staggered back."



"But what returned was not the man we once knew. Avalon left proud and unshakable... but came back broken, terrified. His body frail, his form mutilated. The light had been stripped from his eyes, leaving him blind. Whatever he faced on the other side destroyed him—body and soul. Nothing remained of the great warrior but fragments."

It was a tragedy beyond words.

Kazis Valerion and the others rushed to him at once, desperate to know what had happened in Helmund. To uncover the truth.

But the shattered Avalon refused to speak. He fled from them, lips sealed.

Whatever torture he had endured had shattered his spirit completely. And so no matter how they pressed, no matter how they begged, they never learned a thing.

That incident rekindled the terror humanity had long forgotten after its fleeting victories—reminding them that the horrors were far from over.

"We didn't learn what had truly happened on the other side until much later... but we discovered that all our comrades had been massacred. They died unable even to fight back."

"In Helmund, there exists a demon who never leaves, one who remains dormant yet ever-present. I never saw him with my own eyes, but what I heard was enough to make me fear him without facing him..."

"The First Seat of the High Demons... Crimson, the Red Moon."

The First Seat never once leaves Helmund, remaining there for countless years as the immovable guardian of the path leading directly to his king.

For Cheon Ma and the others, it was misfortune without equal—they ran headlong into him, along with the Fourth Seat, Wesker, who happened to be nearby.

The battle was one-sided. So much so that the great Cheon Ma, one of the strongest humans to ever live, was killed with a single strike from Crimson.

A single blow that shattered Balerion, the Black Terror, into pieces—and with it, Cheon Ma turned instantly to dust.

It is said Crimson slaughtered most of the humans who dared set foot in Helmund, while Wesker took a handful alive—keeping them breathing only to torment, to mutilate, and to break their spirits.

Wesker was infamous for his sadism, his games of torture. And among those few victims... was Avalon, the only one who somehow returned alive.

"The Readers had warned us this was exactly what would happen... but we did not believe them. The strength we had gained filled us with arrogance. And in the end, we were forced to face the bitter truth: no matter how strong one becomes in this world, there will always be someone stronger.

The gulf in power between those who merely reach SSS rank and those who reign at its peak is vast beyond imagination."

Liora's words fell heavy. Snow and Uriel remained silent, both struggling to process what they had just heard.

But Frey was different. He wasn't surprised—he saw it as inevitable. After all, these fools had dared not only to invade Helmund, but to pit themselves against Agaroth, the Demon King himself.

Agaroth alone would have been more than enough to annihilate them in seconds. But with the strongest of the High Seats also present?

Victory had never been possible to begin with.

Still, something in Liora's account caught Frey's attention.

"Liora... you said Avalon refused to speak to the end. Then how did you learn what happened on the other side?"

It was a sharp question. If Avalon had kept his silence, then how did she know Crimson had struck Cheon Ma down? How did she know Wesker had been there?

Frey wanted the truth—and Liora did not hide it from him.

"I was about to get to that... the meeting that changed everything, the one that made us forge the vow that has led us to this very moment."

The vision shifted again, showing them a different memory.

"The one who told us what had happened to Cheon Ma and the others... was not human at all."

He had appeared before them from nowhere, one fateful day.

"He was the one guiding the Readers from the shadows. A strange man none of us trusted. But the Readers followed him blindly, and so we tolerated him—despite the fact that he was neither human nor of our kind."

The memory sharpened, and Liora revealed the figure that had warped the fate of humanity itself.

When the scene came into focus, Frey Starlight could only clutch his head as confusion and dread stabbed through him.

The man who walked into the council of humanity's greatest warriors, the one who stood at the forefront of the Readers, was cloaked in black, his features hidden.

But his blue eyes... unmistakable. Eyes Frey could never fail to recognize.

It was none other than the Engineer—Gehrman.

"He told us what had happened to Cheon Ma and the others. And then he showed us a future... a vision of a world where we all died, sharing the same fate as our fallen comrades."

"The Readers agreed with every word he spoke. He declared that we had no chance of victory. That we would be crushed, humiliated, no matter what we tried."

"But in the end, he added a condition: not in our era. Not in our time."

#### Chapter 598: The Torch Passed On

The Engineer had been there since the first day of the invasion, watching the war unfold from beginning to end.

He interfered only occasionally. It is even said that Cheon Ma himself had once been his follower—but chose instead to defy him, to fight, and to die against the demons.

"He told us that in our age, victory against the demons was impossible. Utterly impossible."

"But far into the future... in a different era, with different warriors, he claimed humanity would have its chance. He said he knew the future, knew the secrets it held."

According to him, the only chance of victory lay hundreds of years ahead. His words were absurd—but undeniable in the wake of their crushing defeat.

Many resisted his claim. But with the shadows of their dead comrades looming over them, despair crept in. They were forced to admit the truth: they could not defeat the demons if the true army ever turned its gaze toward them.

The only reason they had survived as long as they had was because other, stronger races were fighting the demons elsewhere—drawing away the deadliest of their kind.

The Engineer urged them to endure, to remain hidden, to build a foundation for the future of their species.

He promised that if they did, one day they would have their chance. However slim.

What was strange—disturbing—was how the Readers agreed with him completely, blindly, as though their minds had been bent to his will.

There was too much mystery surrounding that man. To trust him so absolutely was madness.

But humanity had no choice. Their strongest had been slaughtered in an instant, their pride and hope reduced to ash.

A single demon had plunged them all into despair.

And so they clung to the only light of hope left before them.

The Engineer showed them the path. And they chose to follow it.

"We decided to believe him..."

Whether it was the Readers, or the heroes of the old generation...

They chose to place their faith in the generations yet to come.

"After that... everything happened quickly."

In order to give humanity an environment where new generations could rise, the gates—those ever-looming threats that could unleash demonic invasions at any moment—had to be dealt with.

It was then that Kazis Valerion chose to sacrifice himself to seal them.

At that time, the old generation of heroes waged their final battle. It ended with Kazis Valerion burning his own soul, consuming every last drop of his life and power to seal the gates shut.

Many opposed what he intended to do. But Kazis was a true hero, one with the courage and resolve to do what was right before anyone else.

The gates closed. The threat of invasion was lifted—at least for a time.

Before his sacrifice, Kazis Valerion had left behind a family.

And so did the leaders of the great houses. They passed down their bloodlines and their combat legacies, ensuring their descendants would inherit both skill and duty. Thus they laid the foundation for the next generation, passing the torch to their sons, and their sons' sons.

And once they had prepared everything, each of them walked his own path, after making the same vow.

"We swore that one day, in the distant future, we would return and fight again. To achieve the victory that strange man had foretold..."

He had told them that stronger heroes would one day arise—heroes capable of accomplishing what they themselves could not.

Their role was to prepare the way, to support those future champions.

And to achieve that, the great warriors of old had to vanish. Their continued presence would only draw unwanted attention. So, one by one, they let themselves fall into obscurity, deliberately erasing their own existence.

The Saint, Liora, bound herself to the World Tree. It embraced her body, preserving her through the ages. She hid all that time, waiting for the promised moment.

But in the end...

She broke her vow. She could not watch Frey and the others die before her eyes. She believed that those young men were among the heroes they had awaited.

And so she stepped forth before her appointed time, returning to the world after countless long years.

There were many details Liora did not share.

But overall, this was the story of humanity across those ancient centuries.

"Does this mean that everything humanity has gone through until now... was the result of manipulation by someone who wasn't even human? And that all those Readers... and all the leaders of the great houses... are still alive somewhere?!" Uriel asked, pressing on the final point.

In answer, Liora merely shook her head.

"I do not know if the others managed to keep their vow. But some of them are certainly still here, somewhere in this world, hiding themselves until the proper time. Just as I did..."

"What we did was born of the urging of a being not of humanity. But at that time, what he showed us was the only seed of hope left to carry us forward. We trusted the Readers, who had become like chosen messengers in our eyes. They trusted him. And so, in the end, we followed too. That is what led to the world you know today... to the founding of the Great Houses."

"Houses destined to be the cradle from which the long-awaited heroes would emerge."

With that, Liora ended her tale, telling them all that needed to be told.

Because of that vow, she could not reveal herself through all those years. Her presence would have drawn enemies humanity could never withstand.

So she waited in silence, turning a blind eye to the horrors that plagued the world.

Another reason she had believed the Engineer's words was that she herself had once followed a being who was not human: the mysterious Lord of Light, who had aided them by bestowing power upon Kazis Valerion.

So she had no reason to reject the Engineer simply for not being human.

And in the end... they all followed him.

Snow and Uriel needed time to absorb what their eyes and ears had just been shown.

But Frey...

For him, it only deepened the realization that Gehrman had been weaving his plans since a time far older than he had imagined—manipulating everyone on a scale far vaster than he had thought possible.

Everything that had happened to humanity... all the schemes, all the conspiracies...

It had all begun with him.

By urging the ancient heroes, the Engineer had shaped the very civilization the world knew today.

All of it, to pave the way for the appearance of the "new generation" he had promised.

But that was a lie.

The only one the Engineer had truly been preparing the world for... was Frey Starlight himself.



The thought that the Engineer had gone so far—that he had built such a terrifying, far-reaching plan—only convinced Frey further.

There was no escaping his destined path.

A fate the Engineer had been constructing for a very, very long time.

#### Chapter 599: Bound to Darkness (1)

Thanks to Liora, the Saint of Dawn, a long-buried fragment of the past was finally revealed—truths that had been hidden from the present.

The reality was nothing like what Snow and Uriel had believed their whole lives, raised on tales of heroes such as Kazis Valerion and his glorious sacrifice.

But in the end, even that sacrifice was revealed to have been instigated by someone else... the Engineer, who had walked the earth since hundreds of years ago.

The heroes of mankind had tried to fight the demons, yet all that awaited them on the other side—in Helmund—was death, defeat, and utter despair.

A defeat so absolute it drove the remaining champions of Earth to follow the strange vision shown to them by the Engineer, convincing themselves that their only chance at victory lay far in the distant future.

"Once Kazis sacrificed himself, each of us who had stood beside him went our own way ..be it the clan leaders, or the Readers. I do not know their fates, but I am certain some of them are still out there, somewhere in this world."

With those words, Liora released Frey and the others from the thread of her memories.

Silence hung between them for a long while.

Snow was the first to break it, forcing out a dry laugh as he pressed a hand against his forehead.

"Ah... this is truly... truly disappointing."

All eyes turned to him—Frey's, Uriel's, and even Liora's—wondering what exactly he meant.

Snow spoke his thoughts aloud, giving them his honest judgment after everything he had heard.

"I don't know whether I should feel glad to learn that humanity still has all those mighty warriors... or despair at realizing that the very heroes I looked up to were nothing but cowards—defeated and manipulated by beings who weren't even human."

His last words were aimed squarely at the saint, though she said nothing. Instead, Uriel spoke in her defense.

"Snow... how can you say that?!" she asked, genuine respect in her voice for the saint who had saved their lives.

Frey remained neutral, but Snow's disappointment was raw and unmasked.

"Saint Liora, I don't know much about you, and I am not one to judge others. But let me ask you this—do you really believe this generation will bring you the victory you've been waiting for?"

Taking a step closer, Snow's tone grew harsher.

"I, along with the one standing there—" he pointed at Frey, "—we are the strongest this generation has to offer."

And his statement wasn't wrong.

"Yet even so, we lost. We died against Blattier. The same man you defeated with ease, without so much as a scratch. Tell me, Saint of Dawn—what do you see in us? What do you think we can possibly achieve when we couldn't even overcome a single man who is nothing compared to the enemies you once faced?"

Snow's point was clear.

He couldn't stomach how Liora and the others had chosen to retreat, leaving everything to the future. What enraged him most was how blindly they had trusted a non-human entity they knew nothing about.

"While you were hiding all these years, this world suffered war after war, with millions dying. Wars that could have ended instantly had you shown yourselves instead of hiding! We die every single day. And this current war we're fighting is proof of that!"

In just a single day, Blattier alone had killed thirty-five million people—and the war was far from over.

"You said you broke the vow when you revealed yourself earlier. From that, I gather your return wasn't meant to happen yet. So tell me—had you chosen to keep hiding, leaving us all to die... what would have happened then?"

The saint faltered, unable to answer.

"This..." she began, but Snow cut her off.

"I'll tell you what would have happened. You, and all your companions—you would have emerged only to find ashes. Nothing but the ashes of human corpses, the very people you claimed to be fighting for."

"What good would that vow be then? What use would victory hold at that point?"

"This was the only way, Snow Lionheart."

"No, damn it, it wasn't!!" Snow's voice grew sharp, anger spilling from him.

Unlike Frey, who could somewhat understand Liora and the others because he knew the strength of the demons and the existence of the Engineer—Snow could not.

He had just tasted death at Blattier's hands, leaving a deep scar upon his soul.

All his life, he had believed the legendary SSS rank to be the peak. He had believed the heroes of the past to be true champions, capable of standing against the mightiest demons.

But reality crushed that belief. Even at SSS rank, the gulf was monstrous. The First Seat, Crimson, had slain them with a single strike, as if they were nothing more than flies.

And the Engineer? With just a few words, he had manipulated them like livestock being herded toward the easiest escape.

"You were all just cowards. You chose to run instead of fight. That is the mindset of failures. You lived through centuries, witnessing all the horrors that ravaged this world—horrors you could have ended with ease. And what did you do instead? Nothing!!"

Snow's body trembled as he uttered his final words—then he began to laugh.

"Ha... ha... hahahaha... this is pathetic."

Pointing at himself, Snow showed Liora a broken smile.

"Look at me! I'm nothing but a weakling you could kill with a single strike. Tell me—what do you see in me? What do you think I have, compared to you, the so-called heroes of old? What greatness do you see in me, and in my companions, that made you sacrifice all those countless lives just to wait for us? What exactly do you see?!" he roared, before laughing again.

"Ah... you're blind. So I suppose you don't see anything at all. My apologies."

Snow Lionheart was a simple, straightforward man.

He simply couldn't comprehend what his predecessors had done—no matter how hard he tried.

To him, they were nothing but a band of cowards—men and women who chose to run, closing their eyes to the countless humans who perished throughout those long centuries.

All for the sake of a vow, for the words of a strange, non-human entity—words that carried no proof of truth or falsehood.

"You should have all gone into the demons' realm that day. Dying on the battlefield would have been an honor—a far greater end than hiding like cowards and placing your hopes on a generation not yet born."

Snow spilled everything that weighed on his heart—his thoughts, his disappointment, his grief.

He was about to say more.

But a familiar hand gripped his shoulder, halting him.

"Snow... that's enough, my friend. You've said all that needed saying."

It was Frey.

The latter smiled faintly at him, then turned his gaze toward the saint.

"Forgive my friend. This war, and our last battle, cast deep shadows over him." His smile was strained, but Liora shook her head.

"No... there is no need to apologize. For in his words lies a measure of truth."

Even if their intentions had been noble, even if their cause had been just—that did not change the fact that Liora had lived all these years knowing what transpired in the world, while possessing power enough to halt countless disasters.

And yet, because of one vow—and the fear of an enemy that might come knocking if she revealed herself—she chose to hide, leaving humanity to die.

#### Chapter 600: Bound to Darkness (2)

"Whatever the reason, there is no true justification for what I did. I know my guilt. I accept it."

Liora's bitter smile carried that confession as she looked at Frey and Snow.

"No... you are not guilty."

This time, it was Uriel who spoke, her words sincere.

She clasped her hands and lowered her head, recalling the years she had spent within the walls of the church.

She had seen much. And though her strength was modest, she could have influenced pivotal events. But she had remained silent, paralyzed by fear of what might happen to her.

Because of that silence, disaster followed. Thirty-five million lives were lost—a burden she would likely carry for the rest of her days.

"You are not guilty. Or rather—none of us have the right to judge you. We have not endured what you endured, nor lived the life you and the other heroes of the distant past lived."

It was always easy to speak, to cast blame on others.

But what if the roles were reversed?

What if they had lived in that age, forced to face what Liora and the others had faced?

What would they have done, discovering that all the strength they had clawed their way to was nothing but child's play before an enemy who could erase SSS-ranked beings as if they were mere insects?

There were doubts about the Engineer, yes—but the Readers had believed him. And the "solution" he offered was the hope they needed in their darkest hour.

"Perhaps you are guilty. Or perhaps your choice was the right one. I don't know. But I do know this: had I borne the same burdens, I most likely would have chosen as you did. So who am I to judge you?" Uriel said with a small smile.

Frey nodded.

"Well said."

Turning toward Snow, he reinforced Uriel's words.

"Snow... we did not live what they lived. We did not suffer what they suffered. Even if we were in their place, forced to choose—perhaps we too would have chosen the same. And besides, the past is done. There is no point in speaking endlessly of what cannot be changed. Our present and our future—those are what matter now."

Frey's agreement with Uriel surprised Liora, who had not expected such words. She thanked them sincerely.

"On behalf of myself, and of all my comrades... I truly thank you for those words."

The words of Frey and Uriel did not erase the past—but they warmed her heart. Doubt had plagued her choices for centuries, enough that she had finally broken the vow to save Frey and Snow.

"No thanks are needed. You are still the one who saved our lives. But let's see... there are many things you can help us with now, since you've chosen to reveal yourself," Frey said with a faint smile, already intent on seizing the opportunity of having gained an unexpected SSS-rank ally.

His calm composure, his unshaken demeanor despite all that had happened—these qualities earned Liora's admiration.

"Ask me anything, Frey Starlight. So long as it is within my power, I will aid you however I can." The saint declared her intent to cooperate.

Snow, meanwhile, fell silent—choosing not to speak further as he wrestled with all he had heard.

Uriel Platini, watching Frey intently from the side, found her thoughts drifting back to her earlier words... wondering what she herself, alongside Frey and Snow, would have done had the choice been theirs instead of Liora's.

She knew well—she would have chosen as the saint had. Which was why she did not see herself fit to judge.

But Frey Starlight... he was different. Of that, she was certain.

He would fight to the end. No matter the foe, no matter the obstacle—he would fight until death.

He had chosen long ago. And he had already learned how to die.

That was why he could remain composed, even now.

A man like that... so long as he stood beside her, Uriel felt that she too could fight, and perhaps find the courage she had always lacked.

And so she resolved to grow stronger—to seize this chance, no matter what it cost—since the Saint of Dawn herself now stood among them.



Frey took the initiative, already intent on using the saint's presence to his advantage. And his first move struck straight to the heart of what plagued him most.

"To begin with, I'd ask your aid in destroying the shadow that dwells within my body. And in guiding our friend, the hero here, to find the path most fitting for him."

"The shadow dwelling in your body... ah. I think I understand what you mean—I could sense something aberrant in the aura coming off you."

Frey nodded, then stripped off his upper garments. The moment he did, Snow and Uriel both widened their eyes at the sight of his bare skin.

A strange blackness had spread across his body, leaving him sickly, drained of his usual vitality.

"Frey... what happened to you?!" Uriel asked, alarmed.

"It's a long story. The short of it is: this body has hit its limit, and I need treatment," Frey answered, turning to the saint. "You wield a tremendous holy power. I'm assuming you can help me—right?"

He pressed the point—this was his top priority. The shadow infesting his body had grown so disruptive he was losing control of his strength. It had directly contributed to his loss against Blattier. He wouldn't be able to fight again unless he purged it—fast. He'd pinned his hopes on the saint; perhaps this was what the Engineer meant when he said Uriel would lead him to the answer.

Liora nodded and stepped closer, placing her palm to Frey's chest. Within seconds, her golden, sacred power surged into him, flooding his body with warmth and majesty.

Frey felt an immediate rush of vigor, like his peak returning all at once. With power like this, he truly believed he could finally scour the shadow out—end the First Shadow of Wisker once and for all.

But after only a few breaths, a troubled frown creased Liora's face. She drew back her hand, cutting off the flow of holy power.

Disoriented, Frey spoke first, recognizing at once that something was wrong—the tar-like shadow still clung to him.

"Is there a problem?"

"I'm sorry," the saint said, brow knit, "but I don't think I can purge something like this."

Her calm words struck Frey like a thunderclap. He froze for a moment—then snapped.

"You've got to be joking. If SSS-rank holy power isn't enough, how am I supposed to strip this curse out?!"

This was not what he'd expected. He had truly believed Liora would be enough. He had underestimated the shadow.

"There is a reason I cannot help you ..but first, I need to ask you, Frey Starlight: what exactly is this thing?" Liora pressed her palm lightly to the darkened skin. "I have never seen anything so foul and twisted. It's like a fragment of hell itself."

Her question piqued Snow's and Uriel's fear and curiosity alike—especially because it was something even Liora hesitated to touch.

Frey wavered, then chose to tell them. There was no point hiding it anymore.

"It's a curse placed on me by one of the Upper Demons—the Fourth Seat, Wesker."

The truth left his mouth ..and shock rippled through all of them, Liora included.

"An Upper Demon? Wait—doesn't that mean we can't cure it...?" Uriel asked, panic edging her voice, while Liora's frown deepened.

"I won't ask how you faced a demon like that and survived—I doubt you wish to speak of it. But you must understand: holy power cannot save you from this," Liora said. She raised her hand, forming a golden ring of light. "Holy power exists to heal. It is an aura opposed to demonic essence—meant to aid and to support, not to destroy."