

VILLAIN 611

Chapter 611: The Red Moon's Descent (2)

"You gave a fine performance, Pure Vessel. I suppose you'd have done better given more time to grow."

Crimson set the Kingslayer against Snow's neck, red eyes gleaming.

"This is the end."

His hand twitched ..the blade was a hair from severing Snow's throat ..when time itself seemed to hitch. A sword sheathed in pure light crashed against the Kingslayer, arresting its advance. Crimson's eyes widened for a heartbeat before a newcomer's punch slammed into him and hurled him back.

Audrey had returned ..drawn by the wrongness she felt in the valley ..just in time to snatch Snow from death.

Her green eyes swept the battlefield, searching for one face. It wasn't there.

Orsted was gone ..and his killer stood before her.

Crimson touched his crimson cuirass; an indentation the shape of a fist marred the plate.

"She dented my armor with a single punch..."

"A troublesome opponent," he muttered.

Audrey glanced at her own hand ... shattered and bloody, bone showing. The instant her fist met that strange armor, a backlash had ripped through her knuckles.

So ..that was the armor's trick.

A powerful demon, clad in a stubborn, reflective shell, and wielding a spear that could kill SSS-class fighters in a single blow.

Orsted was dead. Snow would have followed, if not for her.

“All the way out here from your hole, are you, demon?”

Drawing a vast tide of sacred light around her blade, Audrey advanced.

Golden sigils flared across her skin; the pressure she exuded was in no way beneath Crimson’s.

Steel met steel again.

“This aura... I’d say you’ve reached the Fifth Stage ..Curse of Immortality,” Audrey measured him as their weapons sparked. Crimson blinked, surprised at the precision of her read.

“And if I have?”

Satisfied she was right, Audrey smiled as her body blazed ..light flooding the Valley of the End and driving the darkness from the sky.

“It’s only that I find it ridiculous... I reached the very peak of that stage long ago.”

BOOM!!!

Unleashing her full might, Audrey collided with Crimson in a thunderous clash that shook earth and sky alike, drawing Lightbearers from afar as their duel wrought devastation. It was a battle on an entirely different plane—one usually seen only when one of the Seven Great Powers crosses blades with a member of the Upper Ten Demons ..

Audrey had the strength to outmatch most ranked at that level.

True to the name she had been given long ago ..the Legendary Vessel ..she drove Crimson, the Red Moon, back and forced defeat upon him.

But she could not kill him. The gap she opened through sheer power was bridged again and again by the demon's world-breaking abilities ..tricks that more than once threatened her life.

By day's end, the battle of the Valley of the End closed as Audrey's victory... yet it tasted like a crushing loss.

Crimson escaped alive.

Orsted died.

Snow was grievously wounded.

Even Audrey herself did not walk away unscathed.

Standing with Snow before Orsted's body, both understood he had already gone, leaving them behind.

"I'm sorry, Snow... If only I'd arrived a little earlier, Orsted would still be with us," Audrey said, a bitter line on her lips.

Snow only shook his head.

"No. Orsted died because he was weak—and I would have died too... because I'm weak."

He faced his friend's body.

“If we’d had enough power, we could have averted this ourselves. All we can blame is our own weakness ..our own naivety.”

He had run with Orsted to seize freedom.

But in the end, there was no escaping the Pure Vessel’s fate. Even far from the front, the demons came hunting for him, for the Light Soul within.

His selfish choice to flee hadn’t only endangered himself—it had cost Orsted his life, simply because he fought beside the accursed Pure Vessel.

Snow shouldered the whole weight of it. Bloodshot eyes fixed on his friend’s corpse—rage and guilt vying inside him.

Even when he tried to sidestep the war, the demons knocked on his door ..and this had been only the Fifth Seat.

As long as he bore the Light Soul, he was destined to collide with them again.

Audrey bore her share of blame as well.

She couldn’t help recalling the countless times Orsted had asked her to take them as disciples. If she’d trained them, perhaps they would have gained enough strength to survive. She hadn’t. And when disaster struck, she arrived late and barely saved one of them.

Snow and Audrey both carried the guilt—each in their own way.

She had never expected to care for those two. Yet standing over Orsted’s body, she realized he had meant far more to her than she’d ever admitted.

After a long silence, Audrey smiled, pained and soft.

“This place will feel so empty without him... It’s just the two of us now.”

Only the Legendary Vessel and the Pure Vessel remained.

For the first time, Audrey truly considered setting her goal aside and taking Snow as her disciple, to make him stronger. But he startled her with his decision.

“I’m going back to the Vessels.”

He had already chosen to return to that dark abyss.

If he hadn’t run ..if he had fulfilled his duty as the Pure Vessel ..none of this would have happened. The Broken Vessel would still be alive.

“I won’t live as Snow any longer. From now on I wage war against the demons ..as the Pure Vessel people have always looked to.”

Crimson’s incursion had already drawn many Lightbearers to the valley, and the Pure Vessel used the moment to return with them.

He thanked Audrey, wished her success in finding the one she had searched for, and thanked her for the days she had given him and Orsted in her valley.

A short season of life ..but they savored every moment.

As Snow turned to leave, Audrey lifted a hand for an instant, as if to stop him ..then let it fall, remembering the one she sought. For some reason, Snow resembled him in that moment. And she had to choose.

Audrey chose the past over the present, clinging to her original purpose, and let Snow go.

It would become, perhaps, her greatest regret, for none of them knew then that Crimson's appearance among them was only the first tremor ..that the war had only just begun.

Thus the three parted, each stepping into a new branch of their tale ..while Orsted's story ended there, with nothing left to write.

Chapter 612: Threads of Destiny

After a thunderous battle and the emergence of a terrifyingly strong demon upon the land of the Lightbearers ..

It ended with the Pure Vessel losing the friend dearest to his heart. Orsted died—and with him, something inside Pure died as well.

Crimson, the Red Moon, was only the fifth seat at that time, yet even so he wrought ruin and devastation beyond measure.

Seeing the power of that young demon made the Pure Vessel realize how naïve he had been to think the Lightbearers and the Vessels were the only ones who could threaten his freedom.

But so long as he bore the Spirit of Light, suffering had been his lot from the very start. And that weakness ..that was what he regretted most in his entire story. Had he possessed enough strength, none of it would have happened. He would never have allowed Orsted to die before his eyes.

That event drove the Pure Vessel back to what he truly was, casting aside entirely the period of his life he had lived as Snow.

That night, he parted from Audrey. Each went their own way, ending the bond that had tied them together for years.

From the beginning, neither of them expected to meet; likewise, neither expected to part in such a way.

From that day on, time raced by, and the wheels of fate and destiny began to turn once more, set on writing a pivotal chapter that would transform the world completely.

Audrey remained secluded from the world, searching for someone in every corner of the cosmos, caring for nothing else.

As for the Pure Vessel, from that moment on he became the legendary Lightbearer people longed for.

He returned to that dark abyss and trained like a madman day and night, seeking to increase his strength as quickly as possible.

He pushed his body so far he nearly broke it. Despite the pain and crushing strain, the Pure Vessel never stopped.

His otherworldly talent let him climb the ranks at a blistering pace, and the Spirit of Light within him turned the impossible into reality, granting him the strongest and purest aura.

When his training ended, the Pure Vessel stepped back into the world and officially became one of the Vessels' knights.

He joined the wars, clashed with other races, and announced his existence to the world at large.

It was only a matter of time before every race understood his power; he was monstrous, surpassing his peers with startling speed.

The incident that made him famous above all else was a battle against one of the strongest demons alive.

After a grueling fight, and only a short time after his emergence, the Pure Vessel succeeded in killing the second-ranked demon of that era ..giving his people a decisive advantage in the war against the demons.

What the Pure Vessel achieved then was a first of its kind. Since the rise of Agaroth's High Demons, no one had ever slain one of the top ten—let alone the second.

That feat, followed by the staggering number of demons he felled, propelled him up the ranks with breathtaking speed. In record time, he was already regarded as Number One among the Seven Great Powers.

He became a merciless engine of war—from battle to training, and from training straight back to battle.

It was as if his existence had been consecrated solely to combat, forsaking everything else in life.

Like a weapon of mass destruction drawn only in times of war—that was how the Pure Vessel lived the final chapter of his life.

He forged himself so far that they named him Lord of Light—the great warrior whom the Lightbearers chose to follow instead of their so-called king.

Overnight, his name became the most prominent on the world stage. With such a presence, a clash with a certain demon was inevitable.

Just as the Pure Vessel rose among the Lightbearers, declaring himself the strongest among them .. and among all races ..

The Demon King, Agaroth, was still building his own legend.

At that time, Agaroth was hyperactive on the battlefield, waging war after war with his own hands.

The Demon King was like a one-man army—starting wars and ending them himself, and bringing death to countless great warriors.

His latest massacre was what he did to the Pantheon race, and to Number Two of the Seven Great Powers of that era—Midir.

It was said that Agaroth and Crimson alone fought the entire Pantheon with Midir at its head ..

And emerged victorious, after slaughtering a terrifying number of dragons, then deemed the strongest of all.

That catastrophe echoed across the world. The fall of the Pantheon marked the beginning of the end for every other race; only the Lightbearers remained on the stage of that age.

Agaroth rose into an existence that threatened whole races with extinction, and the Lightbearers failed to kill him before it came to that ..making his confrontation with the Pure Vessel only a matter of time.

The strongest and purest Lightbearer, Number One of the Seven Great Powers—versus the vilest demon since the dawn of existence: the Demon King Agaroth.

Everyone knew that battle would change everything. The days flew by, and the countdown had already begun.

As the decisive meeting between the Pure Vessel and Agaroth drew near ..

Secluded in the Valley of the End, apart from the entire world, and after years of searching, Audrey collapsed to the ground, staring at what she had discovered.

After roaming the vast cosmos tirelessly, doing nothing but searching for a single person ..

A goal that seemed wholly impossible, for Audrey did not know what he looked like, or even his features or his race ..

She kept searching nonetheless, certain she would find him in the end.

And that is exactly what happened. While the world prepared to witness the battle between the Pure Vessel and Agaroth ..

Audrey, at last, found a clue that would lead her to the one she had spent her entire life seeking.

Gathering her things, ready to depart and find him ..to put an end to all those bitter years of searching ...

Audrey was stunned that night when the Pure Vessel appeared before her in the Valley of the End, for the first time since their parting after Orsted's death.

His timing was strange—almost as if fate were mocking them.

With a single look, Audrey realized the Pure Vessel was no longer the one she'd known. His very presence, his aura, told her the man before her had become a warrior whose strength now surpassed her own.

That day, Audrey and the Pure Vessel talked, sitting quietly together just as they had when Orsted was still around. They spoke for a long time about many things, most of the talking coming from the Pure Vessel as he recounted what he had done in recent years—how he had become Lord of Light and was ranked first among the Seven Great Powers.

Compared to all he had achieved, Audrey had done nothing but continue searching for a single person. She had little to add—until she finally told him she had found a lead at last. A thread that would guide her to him. A thread that would end a search that had lasted for centuries.

When the Pure Vessel heard that, he congratulated her—genuinely happy for her. That pure part of him had never changed. But there was a tremor of hesitation, of regret, beneath his voice, and it made Audrey certain something was wrong.

After they spoke a while longer, silence fell—until the Pure Vessel revealed the real reason he had come.

He told Audrey he was about to face the Demon King, to fight the war that would most likely be his last.

“I’m about to fight the Demon King, Agaroth—the existence that makes the world tremble as we speak.”

The Demon King was a calamity on an entirely different scale.

“To be honest,” he said, half-smiling, “I feel as if that demon is my opposite—like I was born for this moment, to fight him.”

The strongest Pure Vessel in the history of the Lightbearers, and Agaroth, the vilest demon of all ages—the two seemed fated mirrors, and their clash had always been a matter of time.

“Truthfully, I feel as if fate is herding me toward this battle... and I have a bad feeling about it.”

“I don’t think I’ll fare well there, Audrey. I’m confident in the strength I’ve built over these long years. I’ve trained day and night, slain millions of demons, and reached the peak of my power.”

He knew his body’s limits better than anyone. The purest, most perfect vessel—he could not possess power beyond what he already held.

And yet he couldn’t shake the dark premonition curling in his chest. That, more than anything, was what had driven him to Audrey ..whether he realized it or not.

“In this war... in this confrontation, will you help me, Audrey?”

Seeking her aid, the Pure Vessel placed Audrey before a decisive choice: to help one of her own kind ..one closest to her .. or to set out and finally find the person she had searched for all these years.

Both moments had arrived together, as if someone were pulling the strings to force her hand.

Audrey’s answer would change everything.

Chapter 613: War of Schism (1)

On the eve of the most decisive battle in the history of the Lightbearers and the demons, the Pure Vessel visited Audrey in the Valley of the End.

Many years had passed since their last meeting, but they were beings who lived for a very long time; the passage of years left little mark on them. Their conversation flowed as easily as if only a few days had gone by since they had lived together with Orsted, who had left them long ago.

That day, the great Pure Vessel revealed his weakness to the only person he had ever been able to open his heart to.

“I feel as if fate itself is steering me toward that battle... I don’t think I’ll prevail there, Audrey. In this war—this confrontation—will you help me?”

Asking for her aid—Audrey was likely the only one the Pure Vessel could ever bring himself to ask. Perhaps it was one of the cracks that had formed after years of feigning perfection before the Lightbearers and the other Vessels.

Audrey had once been called the Legendary Vessel, and it wouldn’t be wrong to say that, alongside the Pure Vessel, she was among the strongest Lightbearers in history.

She was the only one the Pure Vessel could go to for help; he felt that if they fought together, anything might be possible. In those brief moments, he seemed more like the Snow she had known than the great Pure Vessel the world revered.

Audrey didn’t answer him at once. She fell silent, lost in thought.

The Demon King, Agaroth.

She had never crossed blades with him, and she knew little of his true strength, but the rumors and tales about him were terrifying. Without a doubt, he was a dreadful being standing at the summit of power. Likewise, the current Pure Vessel was the pinnacle of what her kind could achieve—strong enough to have slain the then-Second Seat among the demons with little difficulty.

Yet despite his strength, he had come to ask for help, confessing his unease about the fateful battle awaiting him.

In that fleeting moment in the Valley of the End, Audrey drew something from within her garments.

It was the first time the Pure Vessel had seen the fragile keepsake she had hidden and cared for over so many years: a locket of tarnished gold, timeworn and scored with scratches and cracks. On its battered surface, a simple inscription was engraved:

“My Family... My Everything.”

She opened the locket and looked at what lay inside.

A tattered photograph, as if taken ages—ages—ago.

In it were three people: an older man, a smiling young man, and, beside him, a girl sitting on a wooden chair wearing the same bright smile.

That lone picture meant the world to Audrey; it was her only tether to the distant memories that had driven her all this time.

The Pure Vessel watched her in silence.

His senses were preternatural; even as Audrey tried to keep it hidden, he could make out the photograph clearly. Its faces were indistinct, but none of them were Lightbearers. Even so, Audrey, standing before him, resembled the girl in the photograph to a striking degree—which was, of course, strange.

He almost spoke, then stopped, a faint smile touching his lips.

One look at Audrey’s face told him what her answer would be.

“It seems you’ve already made your choice,” the Pure Vessel said.

“I’m sorry,” she replied, a pained look crossing her face.

He saw no need for an apology.

He mattered to her—of that he had no doubt—but the person she had been searching for mattered even more. She had finally found a thread that might lead her to him; she wouldn’t let that chance slip away.

The Pure Vessel understood. Even turned away, he bore her no resentment.

Knowing the coming battle might be his last, he spent that night speaking with Audrey—the only friend he counted alongside Orsted. Out of simple curiosity, he asked what sort of person the man was whom she had pursued across the vastness of the cosmos for so long.

Her answer was vague, but she said he was someone very important—not only to her, but to many others as well.

When she spoke of him, Audrey became someone else—far from her usual cool composure.

The Pure Vessel truly wished he could meet that man someday. But somewhere deep inside, he knew he likely never would.

And so they talked a while longer, until the sun cast its first pale light across the sky and another day began.

Audrey set out on her final journey, intending to find that person at last, to end the long, grueling search.

As for the Pure Vessel, he took his leave and walked toward the fateful war that awaited him.

They parted again, as if they had never met at all.

Then came the great war that history would later record—the War of Schism.

A decisive clash between the demons and a coalition of many races, it was the first time four of the Seven Great Powers fought side by side.

There was the Pure Vessel, ranked first among them that day;

the King of the Ghouls, who wielded a strange golden shield that granted him tremendous might;

with them, Kalman the First, then hailed as the greatest swordsman in the world;

and Rhaenys, the most powerful sorceress of all, famed for her overwhelming presence on the battlefield.

Each came bearing the full might of their people—the Lightbearers and their power that countered the demons, and the Pure Vessel's own Light Soul blazing at the forefront.

With the Lucarians—wielding superior sorcery and spells of mass destruction—the Ghouls, with their overwhelming physical might and terrifying regeneration, and Kalman the First's hybrid race, unmatched in close-quarters combat and fearsome sword arts...

All of them stood against Agaroth, the Demon King; his Ten High Seats; and the Duchy of Hell that marched with him.

For a moment, the advantage seemed to lie entirely with the allied races: four of the Great Powers were present, and their armies were terrifying—enough to end any civilization, no matter its strength.

But reality was nothing like what anyone imagined. In that war, the world learned the true horror of the demons—especially the Ten High Seats that Agaroth himself had forged.

The battle was a living hell, a nightmare made real.

Every one of the Seven Great Powers present fought savagely with all they had; their peoples held nothing back. Yet on that battlefield ..fought across the surface of a dead planet ..what awaited them was only despair.

They held fast at first, but as the Great Powers fell one after another, the balance tipped cruelly toward the demons.

Chapter 614: War of Schism (2)

The Ghoul King was subdued and defeated after falling prey to the tricks of a vile demon called Wesker.

Rhenis suffered a bitter loss when she found herself opposed by a demoness who wielded shadow along with a witch whose skills rivaled her own.

As for Kalman the First, he died pitifully, overwhelmed by Crimson—the Red Moon—whose power had grown at a pace that rivaled the Pure Vessel's, growth that would later make him the First Seat.

The races lost ground piece by piece... but hope remained ..hope placed in their strongest: the Pure Vessel.

He faced the Demon King head-on—and what a battle it was.

A true collision of light and darkness—a clash whose reverberations were felt across the world.

The Pure Vessel poured everything into that fight:

All his potential. All his power.

His perfect body, perfect martial arts, preternatural quickness and keen mind—and his immense Light Soul.

A world-breaking power, the strongest weapon in existence against demons—capable of wounding even Agaroth himself. Nothing in the cosmos is more antithetical to demons.

And yet, despite it all ..despite every cut, every strike ..Agaroth's laughter never ceased.

The Demon King fought the Pure Vessel face-to-face, receiving everything he threw at him with a dreadful smile that never left his face from the first moment to the last. He was no ordinary demon.

He was different—utterly different from the rest of his kind.

He used countless abilities—many of them world-breaking powers demons should never have possessed. Throughout the battle he kept changing his form, fighting with shifting styles, hemming the Pure Vessel in from every side.

At some point, the Pure Vessel's light began to fade. Within Agaroth's darkness—like a black hole—he became no more than a spark struggling to survive.

The Light Soul was powerful—enough that he struck the Demon King grievous blows. That much was certain.

But those wounds only made Agaroth more monstrous, more rampant.

Instead of waning, his power increased—as if he were evolving in the midst of battle—like a beast without limits.

Thoughts raced through the Pure Vessel's mind as blood drenched him, muscles burning, the Light Soul thrumming inside him. He tried to overturn the board, to push past his limits and kill the accursed demon before him.

The gold in his eyes dimmed, little by little, under the gaze of Agaroth's crimson eyes.

All his people had placed their hopes on him ..indeed, the entire world watched that battle from afar, counting on him. His foe was the strongest of all; if he could defeat this one, none would remain to threaten or steal his freedom.

If he won, everything would be all right .. the quiet days he had once spent in the Valley of the End would return, far from the chaos raging outside.

Everything would be fine ..if Agaroth fell.

Defeating Agaroth...

Who was Agaroth?

The Pure Vessel wondered, even as he clashed with the demon who kept laughing, savoring every exchange.

A terrifying beast embodying all the darkness of the cosmos.

"Is defeating this monster... even possible?"

The ominous feeling in the Pure Vessel's heart swelled, and at some point only despair remained.

Absolute despair before a feral foe whose strength knew no bounds—a beast on whom wounds had no effect, who never stopped no matter how much damage he took.

Then, at the height of that despair, Agaroth forged a blade from a strange darkness—fusing two world-breaking abilities into one, forming a bizarre sword of shadow blended with black flame.

King's Shadow + Dark Soul.

It was the first time the Pure Vessel had ever seen anyone fuse two world-breaking powers together. Agaroth did it as if it were nothing, and from that moment the battle was already over.

After a bitter struggle and a thunderous clash, the whole world gasped; faces went ashen and hopes collapsed... when Agaroth's blade cleaved the Pure Vessel's body in two.

The greatest and strongest Lightbearer—felled before the eyes of the world—was cleaved vertically in two by a single finishing strike from Agaroth.

In that decisive instant, the Light Soul flared at its utmost, struggling by any means to save the Pure Vessel. It flashed from within his body, flooding him with radiance and trying to knit him back together.

But in that same moment, Agaroth thrust his hand into the Pure Vessel's chest and halted the process entirely.

From the Demon King's hand, a terrifying darkness spread, flooding Pure's body. That darkness coiled around the Light Soul, which fought back, tearing at it. Yet before that bottomless void, it was only a matter of time.

Agaroth then ripped the Light Soul from the Pure Vessel's body savagely and devoured it before the eyes of all who witnessed that tragic moment.

"The monster that devours everything."

That was the title Agaroth earned, and not without cause: the Demon King's core power was to devour other powers and make them his own. His strange body could withstand world-breaking abilities no matter how many ..

Even those that were his direct antithesis, like the Light Soul. Though it should have annihilated his body, he managed to absorb it and tame it ..an unprecedented feat in all recorded history.

A monster that can devour anything, whose strength knows no bounds—that was the Demon King the Pure Vessel had been forced to face. And before such a creature, he lost ..miserably.

Despite being split in two, he tried to regenerate and clung to life until the very last moment, which led Agaroth to aim for a final blow to end him once and for all.

But just then, a pillar of light descended from nowhere and swallowed Agaroth in an instant. The Demon King fought against that light ..which carried the same bane as the Pure Vessel's Light Soul ..its effect on him ruinous. The one who unleashed it was none other than Audrey, arriving at last.

With her sword, she slashed across Agaroth's chest with all the power she could muster and struck at the Light Soul he was attempting to absorb. Power collided. Audrey's attempt to reclaim the Light Soul caused it to shatter as well—split cleanly in two—before both she and Agaroth recoiled, their auras exploding outward.

In the end, one half of the Light Soul remained with the Demon King, while the other went with Audrey.

She immediately returned that half to the Pure Vessel's body in an effort to save him—but there was little she could do with the Demon King standing before her. She had come because she could not bear to let the Pure Vessel die as Orsted had before him, and she had arrived at the very end of the war—just barely in time.

It felt like history repeating itself: in the past she had failed to save Orsted from Crimson, and now again she was too late—the Pure Vessel had been utterly defeated by the Demon King. She came intending to take Pure and flee at once, certain that Agaroth was far stronger than she had imagined—so strong he filled her with despair.

But everything changed the moment she saw his power with her own eyes ..

The power to devour everything.

Chapter 615: War of Schism (3)

For the first time ever, Audrey's face twisted with boundless fury and a strange, venomous hatred. She abandoned her plan on the spot and attacked the Demon King with everything she had.

The Pure Vessel hovered between life and death, unable to witness it all. Yet it seemed Audrey already knew the Demon King. Likewise, Agaroth seemed pleased to see her ..

like a long-lost friend. Audrey became someone else the instant she recognized him, and when their battle began, she assumed a strange form, a blood-red aura flooding her body ..driving her to an entirely different tier of power.

At that level she managed to hold Agaroth at bay while she pushed the Pure Vessel away from the field. The strength Audrey used at the end far surpassed what she had shown against Crimson in the past. She fought with desperate intent to kill Agaroth; he, despite heavy damage after fighting the Pure Vessel and then her in succession, never fell, never yielded—he fought her to the very end.

As they fought, they said much to each other ..an odd conversation but the Pure Vessel heard only fragments. For some reason, Agaroth called Audrey by another name, and she, in turn, seemed to hate the Demon King with all her being. All of this burst forth after she saw that power—the beast that devours everything.

In the end, even Audrey, in that strange form, could not win.

"Your current body can't withstand this power. You know it well ..yet you used it against me. Do you hate me that much?" Each clash carried Agaroth's words like an echo as he gained the advantage, bit by bit.

"What made you think you could kill me? Even the one who gave you that power failed to do it!"

Their battle surpassed, in sheer intensity, the one between Agaroth and the Pure Vessel. Taking advantage of Audrey's check on the Demon King, the Lightbearers fell back, retrieved the Pure Vessel's body, and slunk away in defeat ..leaving the Legendary Vessel behind.

They left her to face Agaroth. That was the last time the world ever saw Audrey; she vanished completely after that battle.

An unspoken rule was born of that war: the Demon King cannot be defeated one-on-one. Audrey proved no exception. In the end, despite the grievous wounds she dealt him, she lost ..decisively.

When the war was done, only two remained on the battlefield: she and the Demon King.

Cradling her broken body, Agaroth's torn face twisted into a hideous smile—he himself was shredded almost beyond recognition. He looked...happy. Audrey's face, by contrast, was ruined where his blade had cut her.

"You...shouldn't exist in this world," she rasped.

"I know," he answered, smiling, "but I survived ..as you can see. And I'm truly glad to see you... my dear sister."

He plucked something from Audrey—her locket, the one that once carried everything her heart loved.

"My Family .. My Everything."

Agaroth laughed loudly and crushed it after glancing at the photo inside.

"This stirs up so many memories .. memories I thought had sunk deep into the bottomless chasm inside me."

Still smiling, he drew Audrey's body into an embrace .. and slowly, she began to sink into him, as if he were absorbing her very existence.

"I'm truly happy to see you again—happier than you can imagine. Since you and I are both still here, that means he survived as well... doesn't it?" Agaroth exulted.

"Come to me, and let's look for him together... let's rewrite history!"

His laughter rolled across the field as Audrey vanished within the monster.

With her body in ruins, she closed her eyes, wondering how her path had led to such an end. She had returned to save the Pure Vessel ..she could not abandon him ..only to find herself face to face with the one being she hated most.

Who would have thought that Demon King was the same accursed monster...

In those final moments, as darkness swallowed her and she realized she had handed the Demon King a clue to the person dearest to her, she knew she had made a terrible mistake. All she could do was apologize as the beast that devours everything consumed her.

"I'm sorry... truly sorry... Frey."

Those were the last words to leave the Legendary Vessel's lips before Agaroth devoured her completely ...writing the final line of the Sundering War, won by the Demon King and his hosts, and heralding the dawn of the Age of Darkness.

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Elsewhere, the Pure Vessel had suffered ruinous harm. Agaroth's cursed blade hadn't only split his body ..it had cleaved his very soul. The half of the Light Soul Audrey returned to him kept him alive, but in the end the Pure Vessel .. and his great power ..were split in two.

One half the Lightbearers managed to recover. The other half was lost entirely, diffusing into a pure, wandering aura.

The half that survived became someone else ..similar to the Pure Vessel, yet not the same person. He retained all of Pure's memories, but his temperament was wholly different. In time he became known as the Second Lord of Light, taking the name of his old friend—Orsted.

As for the other half ..it vanished for a long, long time, taking half the Light Soul with it.

Orsted searched for his other half for years, sending envoys to every world and race. Earth was no exception. He planted the World Tree there and appointed Kazis Valerion as his messenger to seek the missing half.

In the end, that half reappeared in a completely new form, on a distant, cosmically insignificant planet. Unlike Orsted ..who emerged at once as what he is now .. the other half was reborn from the start. When Orsted finally found him, he was only an infant .. human-like ..on a world called Earth.

Years after that birth, Orsted came to Earth himself. He shattered the rift Kazis Valerion had set and slipped inside to find his other half. But the child was fragile, weak. So Orsted chose to leave him hidden there, far from prying eyes—so he would not meet the fate of the other Vessels—and let him grow quietly.

All Orsted left him was the name he chose:

"Snow."

The very name he had once chosen for himself.

And so came the final tragedy of the Pure Vessel, who vanished completely—leaving only shards of his soul to wander and bear his legacy. Both he and Audrey disappeared from the world in ways neither had foreseen.

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As these memories finished unfurling before him, Snow returned to himself—standing within the golden World Tree, face-to-face with Orsted, his other half. Their eyes met. A single tear slipped from Snow's right eye. His face tightened under the weight of it all; he could not grasp what he had seen.

The Pure Vessel's soul had become two .. and each half had become a separate living being. Orsted had become the Second Lord of Light. Snow was the Lord Vessel, the vessel bearing the final shards of the Light Soul.

Orsted spoke first.

"Kill the human within you, and let the world see you as you truly are. You are Snow my other half and the Lord Vessel destined to wield the greatest power among us."

Thus the curtain fell on a tale from a bygone age ..eras layered with secrets still veiled .. stories waiting to be revealed someday.

Whether Snow or Frey, both were already drifting on the currents of fate, unaware of what the future had prepared for them.

Chapter 616: Rebirth in Gold

The final glimpse of Orsted's memories as the Pure Vessel faded ..and for the first time since his birth, Snow Lionheart finally discovered the truth. The roots he had long groped for snapped into focus. After suffering so long under shackles forged by ignorance of his origin, here it was at last ..and what a truth it was.

"I can see you have something you want to say," Orsted said, standing face to face with Snow, whose mind stalled for a few seconds.

Snow rubbed the back of his head with a strained smile.

"Yeah... I have a lot I want to say, but I don't even know where to start."

With a quiet laugh, he tried to process what he had just seen and heard.

"I lived my whole life assuming I was human ..only to realize I'm nothing of the sort. I'm a Lightbearer. And not just any Lightbearer, but one of the greatest Vessels to walk since the dawn of history. To be honest, what you showed me is hard to believe, Lord of Light."

He wanted to deny it; what he'd seen was simply too much. But denial wouldn't come.

"I want to reject all of it ..but the funny thing is, somewhere inside, I believe you. The heart doesn't lie."

To those memories, to those scenes, Snow felt kinship ..an intimacy he had never felt for any human. That only deepened his conviction that everything Orsted had shown him was true.

He was the second half of the Pure Vessel, who had once fought the Demon King, Agaroth ..and survived only because Audrey sacrificed herself for him.

Even so, knowing the truth didn't change the fact that Snow was still himself. No ancient consciousness awakened, no special memories flooded back. Orsted had simply revealed the truth and let him understand his origin.

"What am I supposed to do now?" Snow asked, feeling the weight of it all.

What he'd seen had widened his horizons. Now he knew what he was—and what final enemy stood across the board from him: Agaroth, the Demon King.

Even when the Pure Vessel was at his absolute peak, he had barely managed to face Agaroth one-on-one ..and lost miserably in the end. Now people whispered that the Demon King had grown far stronger than on that day. News like that brought despair more easily than hope.

"Do I live as a Lightbearer now and build my strength on that path? But to what end? Even when you and I were one, we couldn't defeat Agaroth. So what's supposed to be different now?" Snow said, a sharp ache blooming behind his eyes as he thought himself in circles.

Live as human? As Lightbearer? Or both?

What fate was he walking toward ..and how were they meant to topple that damned demon?

What happened after the War of Fission they lost? What became of Audrey?

Questions multiplied, each one a spike in his skull ..until Orsted cut him off before he spiraled any further.

"There's no need to overthink it. You are my other half. Your true name is Snow, and your original title is Lord Vessel."

"The first marks your human side; the second, the legendary Lightbearer you are. Even though you're my other half, we can't become a single person again ..you and I have become separate living beings," Orsted said, extending his hand as he gathered the golden power of the World Tree.

"Don't jump ahead. Don't fixate on an enemy beyond your current horizon. Focus on the war in front of you now—the human war."

"That's the perfect crucible to accelerate your growth. Defeat the enemies before you, and the path ahead will clarify. You're a legendary Lightbearer with potential beyond what was allotted to me ..because the Light Soul chose you, not me. It's there, inside you." Pointing to Snow, Orsted poured the World Tree's power into him.

"Once that world-breaking ability fully stirs, you'll wield one of the strongest auras in existence ..the anti-demonic force, the sharpest weapon against them."

"The World Tree will help draw out your true potential. But first, understand this: the War-King Form you use is not a mere battle stance ..it's your true state, the one you must live in from now on if you intend to walk the Path of Light properly."

Following Orsted's guidance, Snow anchored the War-King Form, letting it steep deep into both skin and soul.

At the same time, the golden World Tree shuddered violently outside, gathering all its sacred power and bending it to Snow at Orsted's command.

"Find the right path, Snow. Feel the grandeur of what's within you .. and know you have enough to reach the summit."

Orsted spoke with certainty. Even split in two, the Light Soul remained a lethal weapon ..its force far beyond the realm of men.

"Once you master this power, you won't be inferior to the likes of Frey Starlight in any way. Live with pride, and win the war at hand."

Leaving Snow to absorb the titanic surge within him, Orsted began to fade; he could no longer maintain this form.

"Become stronger. The next time we meet, the end will be near, and everything will be on the line."

As his body disappeared bit by bit, Orsted slowly closed his eyes.

The cosmos was changing day by day. Since the last war ..the battle between Agaroth, the Demon King, and Nameless, the lone fighter who could contest him .. the world had slipped into a lull, a strange calm that let the races breathe at last.

Agaroth had been inactive since that clash ..rumor held that Nameless had done something to him. As for the other demon, Crimson, whose presence was said to rival Agaroth's, he too went dormant, never leaving Helmond.

That left only the Upper Ranks and the Duchy of Hell for the races to resist. With the king and his strongest shadow withdrawn, the demonic invasions slowed; the era of apocalyptic wars receded.

That peace lasted a long time, but the clear-sighted knew all things end. It was only a matter of time before wars fiercer than those of the past erupted anew.

For the Vessel of the Pure Vessel had appeared ..and, likewise, what might be a new Nameless.

Demons began to stir in force again. The Great Ones acted strangely, as if something were on the verge of happening. The name of Odin .. the enigma the ancients feared and none had ever reached ..echoed more and more of late.

All signs pointed to something coming .. something ominous that would rewrite history and change the world's fate forever.

And the beginning would likely be on Earth, a planet tucked away in a forgotten corner of the cosmos.

Knowing this, Orsted had to ready his other half for the next phase. And so ..

The Empire's hero finally awakened his true potential. Bathed in the golden light of the World Tree, a wondrous radiance welled up from within Snow's body, and the Light Soul that had slumbered in him all these years surged free at last ..rising to the surface and announcing itself to the world anew.

Orsted vanished completely, leaving Snow alone to wrestle with the flood of power.

Time crawled ..second after second, minute after minute, then hours, then several days, with Snow confined inside the World Tree. His body became a vessel for that terrifying golden might, undergoing a series of transformations that altered his very being.

No one knew what the Empire's hero would be once he emerged from seclusion .. but one thing was certain: he would not be the same man.

Chapter 617: The Hero Emerges

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Days passed, one after another.

Quiet days, a suffocating silence blanketing the sacred island of Noctera.

Snow Lionheart was in the midst of finding his path, sealed within the golden tree that fed him inexhaustible power. Liora, meanwhile, had taken Uriel aside to teach her everything she could in the narrow time they had.

A barrier of SSS class now wrapped the place ..Liora's own work sealing it off from the rest of the world.

Earlier, as a result of the devastating battle against Blatier, the island had been laid to waste, and everyone upon it had perished.

All of that left Frey Starlight sitting alone before the tree, quietly gazing toward the far horizon.

The shadow beneath his skin had thickened, drowning him in a filthy blackness that ravaged him like a plague. The process was agony ..as if molten lava had been injected under his skin.

He could no longer summon his power properly, nor fight as he once did.

Yet despite the pain, despite everything Wisker's shadow had done to him, Frey sat in silence, face blank and calm, as if none of it mattered.

Training was impossible in his state. He had to remain conscious at all times to suppress the shadow; he hadn't slept in days.

Clutching the Nameless mask, the darkness in Frey's eyes reflected his exhaustion—a weariness that finally caught up to him now that the blood cooled and he'd been away from battles to the death for several days.

After training and do-or-die fights, this calm felt unnatural.

"Snow will learn the truth soon," he said with a sigh, lying back on the cold stone, legs dangling from the edge of the great spire.

"Which makes me... the only one who still doesn't know his origin or his truth."

In a way, he felt a kinship with Snow. Both were vessels ..one for Nameless, the other for the Pure Vessel. But in truth they were very different: Snow was part of the Pure Vessel. Frey was not Nameless, and there was no real bond between them.

"This body was designed to host the only monster who can stand against Agaroth... and I'm the one meant to clear the way for him."

That might be true, but Frey couldn't help wondering:

"Why haven't you taken my body yet, Nameless?"

He asked the emptiness.

At first, Frey hadn't been sure there was anyone there at all ..no ancient warrior from ages past. But as days went by and he grew used to the space within the mask, he became almost certain a second will lingered there. Eyes watched him from afar, waiting for something.

"But why wait? No matter how hard I push, I'm sure he'd do better than me."

If Nameless seized control, he'd grow far stronger than the Frey of now. Wars would end early; no one would be able to stop him.

But that hadn't happened. There was no use brooding on a long shot—at least, not now.

"I wonder if there's another way to get stronger .. stronger than I am." Frey spread his palms against the cold floor.

He had pushed himself to the limit, walked the Blood Path, mastered his aura control, and built a body that refused to stop fighting no matter the injury. He had even forged overwhelming techniques ..Nameless Judgment and the recently created Dark Ascension.

All of that had made him a great power whom everyone on Earth feared .. yet it still wasn't enough. He hadn't been able to defeat Blatier.

Compared to Blatier, Rank Thirteen ..Geppetto—was much stronger, at least a full stage above.

And Zeibar, Rank 10... Frey didn't even want to think about that nightmare.

Zeibar possessed a world-breaking ability called the Soul of Reincarnation, one of the six Souls owned by Agaroth.

It allowed him to create an infinite number of clones .. a one-man army. Each clone carried a percentage of his full power, and their existence did not diminish the original in the slightest. That was what made it a world-breaking power.

Zeibar could create two clones, each with 80% of his strength. Add a third, and the percentages for all began to drop. Two clones: 80% each. Four clones: 50% each. It continued to decrease until stabilizing at 10%.

The question that plagued Frey was: what was the exact ratio?

How much of the original's power did the clone on Earth possess?

That question gnawed at him. Even a 50% Zeibar surpassed Geppetto. An 80% clone... that would be a catastrophe ..one no human could endure.

"I'm exhausted. I've hit my peak... and it still isn't enough."

It felt endless; every time he climbed, a bigger obstacle loomed.

Lost in such thoughts, he rose when he heard approaching footsteps.

It seemed Uriel and Liora had returned.

"Back early. I thought you'd be longer," he greeted, as Liora headed toward the golden tree.

"I've passed on everything I can to the Saint of this era, so there was no reason to stay away any longer," Liora said with a smile. "And the hero has finished as well. It's time for him to step into the world in his new state."

As she spoke .. much to the shock of Frey and Uriel .. the trunk of the World Tree split, its glow dimming as it began to collapse. The church's long-guarded wonder was falling.

The tree's fall shook the island, and Liora rushed to spread her power to keep the island aloft in the sky.

"This place will collapse soon. Even I can only do what the tree did for a few hours at most," Liora said with a frown as she spread her golden domain.

But her scowl vanished the instant the tree shattered completely—and Snow Lionheart stepped back into the world after several days away.

The moment he emerged, everyone present felt a peculiar aura wash over them—an energy utterly unlike their own.

"What is this strange aura?" Uriel asked, unable to identify the power. Frey, however, could.

"Light Soul."

"I'm surprised you know its nature... but you're right, Frey Starlight," Liora said as Snow approached. "This is the great Light Soul .. borne only by the purest, most immaculate beings in this world."

And that being was none other than Snow Lionheart.

Chapter 618: Crimson Benediction

He looked almost the same as before, but golden runes now covered his entire body, flooding him with tons of overwhelming power. With a single glance, both Liora and Frey understood that the young man had leapt multiple tiers at once; with Light Soul active, his power had become inscrutable.

You could say he'd turned into an anomaly like Frey Starlight .. a fighter who could output far beyond his nominal level.

As Frey stared, Liora's words rang in his ears: "the purest, most immaculate beings." A wry smile tugged at his mouth as he remembered the other who held the second half of that power.

Even the Demon King would laugh if he heard this nonsense.

Chuckling softly, Frey stepped up to Snow. "How do you feel?"

Facing each other, Snow raised his hand for a moment and clenched his fist. Light burst from it, sending ripples of aura in every direction. Smiling quietly, he answered, "I don't think I've changed that much, but... those shackles ..I don't feel them anymore."

The chains that bound him and kept him from his full potential had vanished; the path lay clear before him. He was free of ignorance at last.

Realizing that, Frey nodded. "Then congratulations."

"My apologies, but I'll have to cut this short .. we have no time to spare," Liora said, intent on resolving what lay before them without delay. "Since the hero now holds the most destructive form of sacred power, we begin at once .. and erase the shadow."

Frey arched a brow. "Will Snow really be able to handle that thing?"

He stripped off his upper garment, revealing skin blackened with a filthy plague that had spread its poison. "I know Snow's grown far stronger, but to be honest... I don't think he can deal with this," Frey said, and Snow nodded in agreement.

"That thing was planted by a Rank Four demon, wasn't it? Even if I can use Light Soul now, that level is still..." Snow said, regret in his voice. His face looked strange with all those golden sigils, yet he was still himself.

"You won't be the one to handle it .. I will," Liora replied, patient and clear. "I can't destroy the shadow, but I can suppress it with my sacred power. All you'll need to do is deliver the finishing blow."

Turning to Frey, she confirmed the plan. "I'll need your help as well, Frey Starlight. You must restrain the shadow as much as possible .. and do not lose consciousness. We don't know what will happen if it takes your body."

In the worst case, they would be forced to fight Frey himself, as if he were under a demon-seed's influence.

She signaled to Uriel, and the two Saints closed in around Frey, while Snow stepped back to await the right moment. Frey shed his top as well and drew a deep breath.

"Are you ready?" Liora asked.

Frey smiled and nodded. "Hit me with your worst."

Liora nodded back and summoned her full power .. the ground trembled beneath the surge. "Uriel, I'll be the primary support. You'll back me from the rear. Treat this as experience to master what I taught you."

"Understood!" Uriel answered, fervent.

"Then let's begin."

Weaving strange sigils with her hands, Liora molded her golden power into a colossal, tangible form behind her. The aura she poured into it was truly crushing.

Eyes wide, Frey stared at the vast angel unfurling at Liora's back—six arms, and sixfold wings beating fiercely.

"Divine Lament: Crimson Benediction."

At her command, the angel lunged with incredible speed, clamping Frey in all six hands with brutal force. The pressure was titanic .. he felt he could be crushed any instant. The six hands pinned him from every side, above and below .. total confinement.

Then, without warning, the angel's mouth opened and spewed a vast torrent of golden sacred aura that swallowed Frey whole, threatening to burn his body away.

Liora's sacred gold made every cell in him quake; a searing agony ground his teeth together. His body trembled uncontrollably, and a strange substance began to seep from beneath his skin, trying to pry off the hands that held him.

Uriel moved at once.

"Divine Lament: Chains of Grace."

Using Liora's very style, Uriel conjured countless golden chains that coiled around Frey like snakes, binding him fast.

Meanwhile, the column of sacred aura intensified. The pressure was so great Frey felt he might shatter at any moment .. yet at the same time, the shadow kept leaking out, tethered to him by thin strands that refused to break.

The shadow took on a strange form. The instant Frey saw it, Wisker flashed through his mind.

It looked like his own shadow .. a malign silhouette exuding a foul aura that made Frey's heart recoil.

Who would have thought that thing had been inside him all this time?

The shadow fought savagely, trying to repel the sacred power and seize Frey's body ..but he clung to consciousness to the end, while Liora never ceased pouring down that golden might.

The whole thing felt like a strange exorcism—one that dragged on far too long.

Liora had to keep the shadow pinned and weakened until Snow Lionheart could destroy it. That made the process slow, and no one suffered more than Frey Starlight, who had to endure everything while staying conscious.

"This cursed shadow is stronger than I thought. It's withstood my sacred power for too long..."

Liora could have fought much longer, but the more time passed, the greater the chance Frey would collapse. Staying awake under an SSS-class onslaught while a shadow planted by someone of the same class pressed down on him .. that took a mind of steel.

Knowing that, Liora prepared to push herself past her limits .. when a pure white arc tore in from afar, a colossal slash that ripped through the shadow with shocking speed and force.

Charging in from a distance, Snow Lionheart surged forward with Vermithor in hand, his body blazing with immaculate light.

"Finishing blows aren't the only thing I can do."

Slash!!!

"Thanks to the World Tree's power, my aura reserves are bottomless .. and I'll gladly dump them all on this filthy thing."

Channeling Light Soul as hard as he could, Snow hurled dozens of strikes straight into the shadow. His blows drew a far fiercer reaction than Liora's, proof that Light Soul hit it especially hard ..and the shadow immediately turned on him.

At the same time, more chains burst forth, binding the shadow .. this time along with Frey himself.

"Keep hammering it!" Uriel shouted, struggling not to buckle under pressure far beyond her range.

Snow and Liora attacked without pause. The whole operation was chaos .. until, at some point, the shadow began to scream, a sound that threatened to tear the very air.

"Hurry up and erase this damned thing .. I'm going to explode any second!" Frey roared, the pain now unbearable, as if a thousand colossal hammers were crushing his skull.

Just when it felt it might never end, Liora shouted, "Now, Snow Lionheart! Hit it with everything you have!!"

Her senses were razor-sharp; she never missed the moments of weakness the shadow showed after such prolonged pressure.

Answering at once, Snow drew up every scrap of power his body could muster in its current state.

"I only ever saw him do it from afar... but I'm pretty sure he used it like this."

With a faint, fierce smile, Snow mimicked a peculiar stance .. the very stance Pure Vessel favored in his earliest training days in Fellwyn.

He wrapped Light Soul along Vermithor's edge and unleashed a sweeping strike that shredded the space before him and swallowed the shadow in radiant light.

"Judgement of Light."

The blow carried a massive portion of Light Soul. Snow had copied it after seeing Pure Vessel from a distance—and since they were one and the same being, unleashing it wasn't difficult for him, even if this was his current limit.

It was enough. The weakened shadow was engulfed, dispersed, and utterly destroyed.

The instant it vanished under Snow's strike, Liora and Uriel released Frey .. who crashed to the ground, collapsing hard.

Snow and Uriel dashed to him at once. It wouldn't have been surprising if Frey stayed unconscious for days after what he'd just endured .. but to their shock ..and even Liora's, he was still awake.

"Frey... you .." Snow breathed, stunned.

Frey's body had been scorched to a ruin by that sacred power ..like a fire that burned him while the shadow still clung to him. He looked a wreck. And yet his dark eyes remained open, unchanged.

"Finally... got rid of that damned shadow," he rasped, unable to even sit up.

Ignoring Uriel's frantic worry, Snow let out a short laugh at the sight. "Amazing... you can still talk in that state."

Seeing Frey's inhuman tolerance, Snow remembered what Orsted had told him .. that he would not be inferior to Frey once his true potential awakened.

Maybe I'll reach his strength someday... but I'll never endure even half of what he can.

Chapter 619: Dawn's Final Stand

Fortunately, with two Saints on hand, they began treating Frey the moment he fell. Within minutes, his skin returned to normal and his body looked as it had before the purification rites began.

This time, though, the cursed darkness infesting him was gone. Color returned to his flesh, and power stirred through his veins again. And then something else drew his eye .. a new line on his system interface:

Shadow Adaptation: 4/7

At last, after a long grind, Frey had reached the next stage of his strongest ability .. one that would grant him the extra power he desperately needed to survive what was coming.

"That shadow shows only a glimpse of its master," Liora said once she'd finished healing him. She knew Wisker's strength surpassed her own by a terrifying margin, but she hadn't expected the gap to be this wide. Even that fragment alone had given her no end of trouble, despite being nothing like the full might of its owner.

"No point dwelling on it," Frey said as he rose again. "Rank Four hasn't shown himself yet. We focus on what's in front of us." He glanced around. "Our work here is done."

"But the war isn't over," Snow added immediately, and Frey nodded. "We need to get back fast. We don't know what happened while we were gone."

The war between the Empire and the Ultras was still raging. With the Church gone, at least the Empire had removed a persistent enemy snapping at its heels.

As they turned to leave, Uriel looked back to Liora. "Please come with us, my lady. With you there, we'll have a huge edge in this war!"

At Uriel's plea, Snow and Frey both turned as well. An SSS-class combatant like Liora would be an enormous, welcome addition; both supported bringing her along.

But Liora only shook her head with a gentle smile. "I'm sorry .. but I can't join you for the moment."

Pointing to the space around them, Liora spoke calmly.

"Once I leave, this place will collapse completely, and there are things I must do before that happens .. the World Tree's remnants are still here."

Liora refused to join them right away, but she did promise to catch up later.

"Saint of Dawn... Liora, I don't know everything your generation went through, but this is your chance to fight for your people again. We don't know where this war is headed, but I hope you'll aid us when the time comes. We don't know what our enemies are hiding," said Snow Lionheart, pressing her to come.

She reassured him.

"Don't worry, Snow Lionheart. I've already decided .. I'll take part in this war and fight in it. Focus on the task in front of you, and trust that the heroes of the past stand with you all."

Affirming her intent, Liora guided Frey and the others to the gate that would carry them down, back to the Holy Isle of Sicilia.

"I wish you luck in the battles to come. Each of you has enough strength to change much .. and I'm confident you can win," Liora said, opening the gate.

The three thanked her in turn.

"We wouldn't have survived without you. You have our gratitude and respect," said Snow as they bid farewell to the Saint of Dawn, leaving her behind.

In those final moments as the three departed, Uriel Platini heard Liora's voice once more inside her mind:

"Be careful, Uriel Platini. Do not grow attached to Frey Starlight .. I see a pitch darkness rising from his depths."

Hearing that veiled warning, Uriel spun around to find Liora still waving them off with a gentle smile. Wearing a pained expression, Uriel bowed to her one last time, then left with Frey and Snow through the waterfall.

And so Liora was left alone up above. Barely seconds passed before her face tightened with a sorrowful smile.

"It seems I don't have much time left."

As the words left her, an ominous crack sounded. The golden barrier she'd cast to cloak the site began to collapse at an alarming rate.

The instant it fell, a terrifying pressure flooded the air.

Liora turned slowly toward its source.

"Ah... I've finally found you."

From Nocthera's dark sky, an unexpected visitor descended out of nowhere, and the Saint of Dawn shifted into battle stance at once.

The figure before her was strange .. a demon, young and fresh-faced, with ash-gray hair and unsettling eyes that swept over Liora from head to toe.

"You and your friends hide so well I nearly died of boredom trying to find you. But you decided to show yourself! Thank you! Hahaha!"

Overflowing with delight, the Rank Thirteen demon, Geppetto, laughed aloud.

Liora didn't answer .. and his laughter tapered off.

"Why the scowl, Saint of Dawn? Are you afraid of dying?" Geppetto grinned, while Liora's body lit with that same golden radiance.

"I am a warrior. I learned how to die a long time ago. As for you, demon .. I've nothing to say to a vile thing like you."

Gathering her strength, she called up everything she had. Geppetto's eyes narrowed.

"I see. Then let's begin."

His foot struck the ground, and a wave of foul, potent darkness surged across it. Under its weight, Liora's very being quivered.

"You'll make a splendid piece in my collection, Saint. Don't disappoint me!"

Madness unfurled .. and so began the battle between Geppetto and Liora.

Liora fought savagely, with everything she had. She'd known this would come sooner or later.

It was the price for revealing herself to the world again.

Ever since she did, it was inevitable she would be the first to fall.

"At least... I managed to get them away in time."

Had she delayed even a little, Frey and the others would have been dragged into this fight .. and the outcome for them would have been catastrophic.

They had no idea how many monsters lurked in the shadows, and her reappearance had done nothing but drag those monsters into the light.

That was why she'd stayed hidden all those years .. and now, having broken that vow, she would bear the consequences.

Face-to-face with the Rank Thirteen demon, the Saint of Dawn waged a thunderous battle .. far from the world's eyes, and far from Frey and the others who left, unaware of what they'd left behind.

Chapter 620: The End of Shadow and Light (1)

On that collapsing, blood-soaked island, a brutal battle of a wholly different caliber raged.

The Saint of Dawn, Liora, found herself face to face with one of the strongest demons alive .. Rank Thirteen, Geppetto.

Hovering aloft with a filthy grin, Geppetto struck at Liora from afar.

She gathered her full golden power and fought savagely to survive and kill the demon before her—but she could barely gain a single step. Geppetto drowned her in a torrent of long-range strikes, a black flood threatening to swallow her whole.

"You're a support," he drawled, "while I'm a wave controller. I suppose our methods rhyme .. but the gap in power is simply too vast."

Crouched in midair, elbow resting on one knee, Geppetto watched Liora struggle, clearly entertained.

"To be frank, I still don't understand why I was summoned to this dreary place and told to hunt the likes of you... You're far too weak to be a threat."

BOOOOM!

Explosions rolled one after another as Geppetto put on a dazzling show of destructive force. Then, with unnerving calm, he raised a hand toward Liora. It spasmed grotesquely as black lines crawled across it.

"You should've stayed hidden, Saint of Dawn. You have no idea how terrifying this world truly is."

With a flick, a baleful dark wave rippled out. Liora's face went grave.

That aura—nothing in her life had ever felt like it.

"What in the hell is this damned aura?"

Filthy. Lightless. Lethal.

"Allow me to show you a glimpse of true horror," Geppetto smiled.

The island shuddered under a savage quake as something supernatural unfolded.

Once, thousands had stood upon this ground .. followers of the Church who all perished in the last battle. They should have remained dead. Yet at Geppetto's gesture, the corpses began to rise, one after another, an eerie blackness flooding their eye sockets.

Liora looked down. She was surrounded from every side—hundreds of dead men and women, reanimated.

They didn't look like corpses anymore, nor like zombies; they looked exactly as they had before they died. If not for that blackness in their eyes, anyone would have thought them alive.

It was a terrifying, worldbreaking ability .. so long as the bodies were in his grasp, Geppetto could exploit the dead.

"Thousands, and all of them trash... what a waste," he sighed, annoyed to find nothing truly valuable .. Blattier hadn't left a body behind, and even if he had, his power had guttered at the end.

Forcing Liora to fight the Church's flock all over again, Geppetto smiled anew.

"It's been a while since I had a proper fight. Do your best, Saint .. try to live as long as you can, because I'm going to enjoy every moment of this~"

Bodies clawed out of the ground one after another, a rain of darkness fell without end from the sky, and Liora stood trapped in the middle of it all.

Between darkness and light, a thunderous battle raged far from the eyes of the world .. a harsh glimpse of the horrors the future hid from humankind.

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Far from Nocthira, Frey Starlight and the others passed through the far side of the waterfall and returned to the sacred island of Scicelia.

The waterfall was no longer what it had been; with the World Tree shattered, it had begun to lose its luster, and it showed.

Unlike Nocthira's black sky, Scicelia basked in morning sun .. it was already day.

"It's been a while since I stood under sunlight," Snow Lionheart said, lifting a hand to shade his eyes as he looked up.

"It's been days since our war with the Church began. I'm guessing a lot has changed," Frey said, walking without hurry—words that put a bitter look on Uriel's face.

"A lot has changed .. starting with all the souls lost in that sacrificial rite..."

The more Uriel thought about it, the more her heart hurt. Her voice had led millions to throw their lives away for Platier. The only reason she could keep fighting now was to atone, even a little, for the guilt gnawing at her.

"This wasn't your fault. The culprit's already in the ground," Frey said, trying to comfort her. Snow nodded.

"We can't change the past, but the present and future are still in front of us. All we can do is win this war and save whoever remains... It's the least we can do for those who already died."

"You're talking with confidence now, Snow. So that's the kind of strength you gained," Frey smiled.

"I've still got a long road ahead," Snow laughed softly, "but at least I know I'm not walking it alone."

"Right."

Both men turned to Uriel behind them.

"Come on, Uriel. You don't have to carry this by yourself. You've got the strongest allies possible."

"I doubt you'll find better support anywhere .. because we're the strongest," Snow said with easy certainty. Uriel hesitated, flustered .. then smiled, genuine and bright, and hurried to catch up.

"Yes!"

She'd worn a harmless, practiced smile for so long, masking what she really felt. Not this time. Now she knew that the greatest warriors of her era were ready to fight for her .. and share her burden. It was a bond she cherished.

Together, the three made their way across the island, following Frey.

At first they simply trailed him in silence, until Snow stopped, not understanding what they were doing.

"Frey, where are we going? Shouldn't we just head back using your teleportation?" They were, after all, stranded on a far-flung island in the open sea.

Frey hadn't been able to use his ability while they were on the skyborne island—the barriers cut it off from the rest of the world.

Here in Scicelia, it should have been easy.

And it would have been... yet Frey led them somewhere else.

"There's something we have to take care of first. Or rather, someone who's still waiting for us," Frey said, voice cool as his eyes darkened.

He clenched his fist, feeling raw power course through his veins.

The shadow was gone now—nothing left to shackle him. You could say this was the peak of his life thus far.

Snow felt momentarily lost by Frey's words, until he realized whom his friend meant.

A few minutes later, the three stopped when a fourth figure stepped out ahead of them.

A familiar one.

"You... Aegon!" Snow spoke the prince's name as the man emerged from between the trees, the same easy smile on his face.

"Incredible... you all survived," the prince said brightly, and Snow frowned.

"Didn't you leave with the Church's bishop? I thought you'd already fled the island," Snow asked, as Aegon strolled closer with his usual light steps.

"That was my plan, but I decided to wait when a strange barrier cut the sky island off from the world. Curiosity got the better of me," Aegon said, narrowing his eyes at Frey and the others.

"And I see the result far exceeded my expectations. Your being here means you defeated Blattier... astonishing."