

Death Magic 551

Chapter 551: Graduation

"What was the whole Demonlord thingy about?" wondered Rena.

"You would have fooled me," said Igna, "-the mouth says one thing, the face says another. I guess my coming so good a thing," stood to breathe the dusty air, "-nothing much really, came to assist Lady Haru. I'll be graduating soon per her words. We won't be saying much of one another. Goodbye," no visible irritations nor discontent, the visage was clear as crystal. The same couldn't be said of Rena in particular, her underlying tone of not wanting to accept remained. Given what Igna had done for them, time and time again, no matter how much he tried, they never really accepted the kindness.

"Rena, that's enough," fired Leonard. "Igna, wait!" he held out a hand, "-please, I have something to say."

"About what?" stopped without facing back, "-if it's not important, I'll take my leave."

"Listen," said Jen joining Leonard's plea, "-we have something to say."

"And?" he remained steadfast on not giving them any more attention.

"THANK YOU!" their shout echoed about the arena, "-lady mother told me all about what you've done," said Leonard, "-if not for you, she would have never accepted Jen and I's relation. I had resolved to make it on my own, part of me was hesitant, even during the rescue, I was scared... if not for you and your friends, I'd have died a fool's death not even joining the battle."

.....

"No, you're wrong," instead of being filled with emotion like Leonard, Igna kept a cool face and tone, "-the honor is for my mother. Tis she who pressured the Goldberg's into reconsidering. Besides, we're not part of the Federation anymore. Save the manners for someone who deserves it." Another step forth came with greater shouts.

"STOP!" shouted Jen, "-I'm thankful for what you did. My arm, I thought I would be a burden my whole life, I thought I'd have to rely on Leonard who was already in pain from the family issues. Part of me wanted to die that evening, when I woke and saw everyone so battered and bruised, I wanted to die and not be a burden. It was you, Igna, you stayed and gave a sliver of hope, thanks to which, I can now stand today on my feet."

"Wrong again," said he coldly, "-I'm not the one responsible. It belongs to Lady Clarise and her team."

"STILL!" she stomped forth, "-without you, we'd all have died," hands-on his shoulder, "-don't dismiss what you've done," she pulled, "-Igna."

"Are you done?" he stared with a frozen expression; "-my intentions were made clear. Rena showed me the true reason; there's no way I'd accept such a frivolous relation. Lying to please another, what an appalling prospect. What happened was a mere whim. I couldn't care much for a group that looks down upon others without warning. Girls who'd alienate an innocent boy for being part of a group, he who did nothing, he who tried, it was you," fingers to her face as well as pointing to Rena, "-I endured a lot of shit because of you both. So much trouble for damned strangers. You never saw me as friends, the

instant you realized feelings of love, thee saw fit to push me aside as if I were nothing. That, that," he glared, "-is what I don't accept. I did what I did for my own satisfaction, I don't want or need an apology. Leonard, Lampard, as far as I'm concerned, I have no interest in you guys or your lives. I'll leave the academy sooner or later," smiles turned into saddened arched lips, "-excuse me, this fa?ade is long overdue."

"Igna, wait up!" cried Frost grabbing his wrist, "-come on man, don't be like that, just look at them."

"Strangers should stay out of other's business," a murderous side-glance froze the energetic step. "-And," halted for a second, "-that stranger is me. I should mind my business. Take care of them, Frost."

'What was that about?' turning to the group, "-guys, are you ok?" he rushed over.

"Igna's such a jerk," added Anna.

"Don't," said Leonard, "-I get where he's coming from."

"Are you saying?" tears flowed.

"Jen, there's no reason to start a waterfall. He said that to avoid us from being hurt. Igna has always cared for us, it's out of responsibility?"

"What responsibility," sighed Rena.

"He was once our friend," said Lampard, "-even now, even if it's fake, he'll always do what's best. "

"You girls should have realized it by now," mumbled Lampard, "-you girls are the ones who made him so, and we bare part of the blame. Man, this is awkward," he stretched, "-I'm more than happy to see him well and good."

"I agree," said Leonard, "-we always admired him."

Breaking relations, giving up on people who never really cared. An easier way of thought than action. Newer problems faced him, there was no time saying what is associated with the past could do. The decision was made long ago, resolve to break ties with the Academy. Time and time again, the people always found ways to sneak back into his life.

"Are you sure about that?" inquired Haru sat in the company of Fletcher.

"Yeah, moving on is another part of life. About the graduation?"

novelusb.com

"Tis where I come in," said Fletcher stepping forward, "-we'll be heading on an expedition to the Azure Walls. The grading will be done by the adventurers and Wall-Guardians. Is that acceptable?"

"Wait, isn't that supposed to be done by lady Haru?"

"Yes and no," said he, "-to graduate, one must be judge by two qualified instructors. As for now, only lady Haru gave the highest grading. Either fight or take an exam, I recommend the former."

"I guess," he sighed, "-when's the trip?"

"Later this afternoon," said he, "-you'll be part of the Adventuring Class," pointing back, "-those six there are this year's best students. You'll work with them, no questions asked."

"Yes sir, may I leave for preparation?"

"Gladly," smiled he.

Breaking into the long-empty corridor circling the arena, -the ground is cold,' thought he on barefoot. '-Can't return to the Eatery. Only one guy I know will help."

"Igna," voiced éclair, "-about the choice of attire. I have a recommendation."

"Which is?"

"Why not pay homage to Kniq."

"Homage to Kniq, there's something I never thought I'll hear again. Is the uniform a fashion statement now?"

"No, we found it alongside old items at the mansion. It has thy name written on it."

"My name?" paused to think, "-did I order one myself... can't remember, happened so long ago. Whatever, if it's there, can you bring it?"

"No worries, I have a messenger on his way."

Mechanics clanged away at their products. Most of the shops stood close except Gayae's. Three knocks, "-coming!" returned a female's voice.

"So sorry about the inconvenience," stood with injuries and battered clothes, "-is Gayae around?"

"You're Igna?" she paused with her long hair.

"Yes, can I see him?"

"Yeah, over there," she pointed, "-under the tree."

"Alright, thanks," tipping the head – a slumbering mechanic laid upon healthy grass.

"Slacking off?" commented he in jest.

"Igna?" lifting his cap, "-it is you," he sat with a yawn, "-welcome back. How was the journey?"

"My state says it all, doesn't it?" he facepalmed.

"What brings you here?" wondered he more or less pleased by the sight.

"Came to ask for some help."

"You want to freshen up?" he stood, "-should have said so earlier," playfully messing the hair, "-come on, let's get you dressed and pampered." An hour later, after the shower and a cheerful talk around a warm bowl of soup, the door knocked with a well-dressed man. He handed over a case to then leave without much explanation.

"Hey, Igna," yelled Gayae, "-this came in for you."

"My clothes," said he, "-thank you for the help."

"Don't mention it," the door opened, "-just lock the door once done, I'll go check on my girl."

"Have fun," he winked.

"You know it," he returned the wink – a secret message between youthful and growing men. Neither big nor small, sufficient space for two people to live in. As far as the clothes on the sofa and mess dotted about were concerned, they lived as one.

'Waking every day beside someone special. Fighting, loving, helping and supporting, must be nice having a partner. I can only draw on the experience from spending time with Xula, what a shame, people move on and so must I. Can't help feeling betrayed. Whatever,' flipping open the case, "-this is old. Still has the maker's information. Did I somehow forget?"

A white envelope laid amidst the folded clothes, '-letter?'

"To our dearest Guild Leader, we know time's been hard on you. Here's a little gift of appreciation from everyone, we all saved up and got the money to buy the uniform. After all, Kniq can't exist without its wings, and you are said wings for us. From everyone, please accept this little token of gratitude, we hope it finds you in good faith. Remember we're all glad to have met thee. Especially young Lizzie, she's very eccentric. Avon and Auic are growing into a lovely couple, Achilles' a little jealous of it, anyway, I best leave. Good luck on the journey ahead, guild leader, we wish you the best for the future." Signed by everyone. Their names were written with different styles and illustrations. 'What's this?' the nose warmed; '-how did I not see this?'

"Must have been kept hidden until the appropriate time. Don't know much of thy past, suppose all came to an end hastily?"

"Yes, too fast I'd say." Dawning the outfit, dark-grey pants striped with black neatly tucked inside black boots. A leather belt perfect for carrying weapons and items, a black-shirt embroidered with the emblem, to top it off, a grey jacket. An emblem at the front and one at the back. Tharis holstered nicely inside the jacket, Orenmir's stained scabbard strapped to the belt. Lack of potions and scrolls left empty spots around the waist. 'Fits perfectly.'

"Settle down," shouted Fletcher, "-I hope everyone's prepared for today's monthly expedition." Those previous in Military-Arts were granted permission to join the Adventuring class as well. The talents left untouched didn't please the higher-ups.

"Sir."

"What is it, Leonard?"

"How long will the trip last?"

"No idea," said he strongly, "-it depends on the status of the Azure Wall. Things have gotten rather delicate; the trips will be made more frequently as you've all entered the third year of training."

"Thank you, sir." Sharp and earnest, many witnessed the terror of monsters and vowed to study harder. Friends butchered like animals; traumatic experience for anyone involved.

"On another note," he stared the door, "-we'll have a new student join the class from today. He'll be under special watch from the instructors and team-leaders. An early graduation for an exemplary student," it slid open, "-welcome the newest addition." Stern and strong, a step weighted heavily on the students.

"Greetings everyone," stood at the center, "-Igna Haggard from the Trader's Guild."

"Good," said Fletcher, "-your uniform, does it have special meaning?"

"Yes, sir. It's a gift left behind by my uncle. He was unable to make use of it."

"Good," giving a faint smile, "-ready everyone, we're leaving in ten minutes."

Clap, clap, clap.

"Damn," the aura lessened, "-Instructor Fletcher's harder now that he was at the start."

"Shush, don't make noise, idiot. Get your shit ready."

"Yeah, yeah..."

"Excuse me," said a girl with short hair, "-Igna, can I help you?"

.....

"Yes, is there anything I should be doing?"

"No, no," her face flushed, "-use my chair."

"I appreciate the offer, truly. Yet, I cannot afford to have a lady go to such trouble for my sake. Please, let me help if tis not too much to ask." Charming and kind, an arrow struck the hearts of many, less could be said of the boys.

"Could you help us pack instead?" her hands coyly hid behind her slender back. She faced the floor as not not match Igna's gaze, "-c-can you?" an embarrassed hiccup escaped.

"Sure, please lead the way," said he with a nod.

Chapter 552: Onwards to Reforge

A tip of the head from the back row – the name called into the class left Jen and Rena awestruck. A jolt of regret and embarrassment coursed through their veins. Leonard and Lampard were more or less neutral to the matter at hand. Graduation meant fighting or taking an exam, time wasn't abundant, thus, said outcome was predictable. 'How should I act, do I say hi, do I smile, do I show that we're acquaintances?'

Question riddled the tedious relation. Without much effort, a single smile from Igna had the class representative in shambles. She nervously guided him to their lockers at the back. Oily, grimy, not a very lady-like status of their items.

"Could you help us pack?" asked she knelt before a big case.

He passed Jen's table, gave a single glance, and faced forward as if strangers. It stung, she carelessly stared at Rena who hid behind her hands. Leonard and Lampard held breaths; the hilarious state of the girls made it harder to think anything else.

"Why's a member of the Trader's Guild in the Adventuring Class?" argued one emanating a strong aura. "-Igna Haggard, who are you?"

"Didn't I introduce myself earlier?" fired he nonchalantly. "Alright, let me help," he knelt and aided in cleaning the used equipment. The way the girls looked with shy gaze and subtle coyness. One could have guessed the feeling brewing in the hearts of the 'prideful'.

"Thank you so much," said they softly and nicely.

.....

"Listen here boy," said the tall and broad man, "-I asked a question, give me an answer," he walked over.

"...Yes, that goes over there," instructed he.

"Don't ignore me," voiced he loudly.

"Do apologize for my lack of interest," glaring back, "-my ears aren't well accustomed to the blabbering of a drilling ox who'd strike another without so much as saying his name."

"What do you mean ox!"

"Oh, dear me," he sighed, "-kind gentleman, a waxing of thine ear is in order. Well, considering their god-awful size, I'd have figured otherwise. Must be a paradox, big ears who can't perceive sound. Will lobbing them off satisfy the minor inconvenience?"

"Grr,"

"Growling?" he chuckled, "-Mr. Big ears, do make thyself scarce. If not, lend us a hand."

"Mister Big Ears?" the cheeks reddened, the class laughed, some hid, some out loud, "-the humiliation," he cried, "-I'll cut your tongue!"

"There, there," he stood, "-there's no need for violence. What can't be resolve through words, and be done so in a battle."

"Are you going to fight me," armed crossed, steam emanated off the shoulders, "-fighting a weakling doesn't seem too bad." The class mauled over the proposition.

"Yes, a battle to the death," said he leaning close.

"To the death?" he gulped, "-n-now?"

"Yes, the worst kind of battle." The tension builds, distraught stares fly to one another, 'someone should stop them,' wrote across the numerous faces. "Would you like the name?"

"P-please..." the breathing grew erratic.

“Rock, paper, scissors,” turning back, “-come on, there’s no need to fight between comrades.”

“Rock, paper, scissors, ah yes, the worst kind of battle,” eyes shut and the face of ultimate control, “WAIT WHAT!” the shoulders dropped.

“Ahahahahaha...” the class broke into hysteria. Heads to desks, others holding stomach, the tension of a battle to the death turned to a childish bout. “Drop the act,” said a whisper, “-there’s no need to fight. Let’s just get along until the graduation is over. Besides, I don’t have any interest in the ladies here. You like the class-representative, don’t you? Just bend down and help me, she’ll see you as a caring person. Not better heart-tucker than the kindness of a harsh man.” Returned to help, he realized one thing, Igna wasn’t as good as he portrayed.

“Fine, let me help,” to everyone’s surprise, he joined the fray.

“I didn’t know you were such a caring person,” cleaned and ready, “-forgot to introduce myself,” giving a curtsy, “-I’m Ling Kole. Call me Lingling, the class representative.” Black short hair, almond eyes, and rosy cheeks. Pimples dotted about the cheeks and forehead. “Good to have you with us.”

“Igna Haggard,” returned he once more, “-call me Igna.”

“I’m Hado,” said the boy of before, “-nice to meet you,” said he reluctantly. A face of hardship and sternness, flat and large nose, small eyes with the body of a bear. One by one, the class introduced themselves, each took to Igna easily. A charming and handsome boy without pride or a condescending attitude. He came off as someone they could relate to, the dark-jokes muddled the nice-boy act – an added bonus to relatability.

“Alright!” the door slid to a slam, “-to the battle arena!” shouted Fletcher.

“Yes sir,” they exited in line.

novelusb.com

“Igna, wait up a moment,” to which he nodded. The class emptied, multiple glanced for a sneak peek.

“Anything the matter, sir?”

“Yes,” said he, “-we’ve got trouble. I’ll explain it in more details at the Azure Walls. Are you sure about this, you’re wearing Kniq’s uniform. Not hard to put one and one together, is it, now, Xenos’s Nephew,” shadows overlaid the man’s stare.

“If that’s everything, I’ll take my leave.”

“Kinless. A word of advice, be careful of the monsters. They’re stronger than ever before. You defeated the top of our class; don’t get a big head, they’re nothing more than child’s play compared to the damned invaders.”

“Not to worry,” said he, “-as long as I graduate, there’s nothing more to it. If people die, sad, if some survive, good, if monsters kill me, I was weak. No more, no less, it’s a cruel place out there,” staring the outside, “-people are far worst monsters than they themselves.”

The words struck a chord, the hefty weight of said sentence brought the battle-hardened Fletcher into doubt. The profoundness of a Wiseman, for someone recently turned twenty, the way of thinking was more of an elder than the impulse of the youth.

The arena stood cleaner, there wasn't any sign of the prior battle. Fletcher, Lady Haru, and a few other instructors stood in the middle.

"Stand straight!" cried Fletcher, "-teams of five will be assigned to different adventuring parties at the Azure walls. Take your pick and make rows of the assigned teams. One more thing, Igna, you're the exception, come here."

And so, the class divided into teams of five. "-You'll be fighting alone," said Fletcher, "-it's a harsh world, those are your words. I can't risk the team-work of my students on someone who fights better alone. Remember, this is for the good of my students, I will not hold anything back."

"Better that way," said he, "-the graduation?"

"More on that at the Walls." And so, the journey south began by train. The arrival of Meke was short-lived. The Adventuring town's cacophony reached the station. The differing teams made for the respective guilds, each assigned at other outposts.

"You get it now," said Fletcher, "-the students are allied to their guilds," they stood before Pegasus's headquarters. Frost walked in to joyfully meet the workers inside. "I don't have much to say," he handed a letter, "-that's the assigned position. Go, the path ahead is yours alone. Forge it well."

'Graduation?' the streets soon forced him out to the sidelines. '-what's this?' the letter read, '-all review and testing will be handled by individual parties. They've been notified, head for Reforge.'

"Hey, Igna!" waved a cheerful girl.

"Hello," he returned, "-Lingling?"

"Why say it like a question?" her lips tightened, "-anyway, meet my team. From left to right, Anne, Lucia, Goldie, Kein, and lastly me. We're part of Ordan's Guild."

"Ordan's Guild?"

"Yes, a mid-tier guild," she breathed as if remembering troublesome memories, "-the guild leader is a bit of a nutcase. Want to join us?"

"I'm headed to Reforge."

"Better," flicking a thumbs-up, "-we're stationed there for the trip."

"I don't see an escort..."

"We've already gotten our Tier-8 Steel ranking. Makes us eligible for independent expeditions. Less chitchat, more moving."

"It's good to make your acquaintance," said Anne, "-Lingling's been going on and on about this charming prince." Dark-brown hair tied in a pony-tail, a shorter stature, and standard adventuring attire. Longing eyes, glistening lips, and a perky nose. "-I'm Anne."

'Self-introductions again?'

"Lucia," said another with blueish hair straddling down her face, her dulled blue eyes complimented the hair color."

"Goldie," added she with a wink, "-feels nice to be walking with a prince." Blonde hair covered by a cap, "-looking forward to our time-fighting."

"Kein," said the last clad in black.

Transit for Reforge arrived in haste. Lingling's party was very talkative. They forced him into the conversations and laughed. Hardened adventurers glared back in envy, those who hadn't witnessed the true terror were always bright.

Camp jumped in sight after the tall-vegetations. More than that, the robust wall stood ever strong over yonder. The outpost grew larger and wider, more buildings laid about to even accommodate a proper bus-station and military trucks. Guards were strong on standby.

Walking down the same path many took to their deaths gave courage and excitement. "Come on," said Lingling, "-we need to meet with Corporal Tommy."

"Corporal Tommy?"

"No questions," said she, "-just follow us." Skipping normal pathways, dipping into alleys, they soon arrived at the military-quarters. An inn-like building stood guarded by two armed soldiers.

"Hello," waved Lingling.

"Excuse me?" glared the soldier, "-what do you want?"

"We're from the Adventuring Academy," said she confidently.

"Oh," facing the other soldier, "-See, I told you they would be coming here sooner or later. Guess it's that time of the week. Alright, go in, Corporal Tommy's inside."

"Thanks," she skippe into the tight building.

"For a student, that's a very nicely shaped ass."

"Thank you for the compliment," winked she, "-not that you'd ever have a chance." They followed one by one.

"Not so fast, hotshot," blocking Igna's entrance, "-I've never seen you around here."

"Will this suffice?" he pulled out an adventuring tag.

"-P-Plat-t-ium," they gulped, "-please, go in."

"Huh?" stood inside, '-what about my tag?' staring the porcelain-tag, '-oh, shit, they must have confused the old one for mine.'

"Igna, stop wasting time, come here!" voiced Lingling.

A small office, a single window, an old fan churning away in the background, and a load of paperwork, “-Lingling, didn’t think they’d send the recruits here so quickly. You could have always gone to the walls directly, I’m certain the academy’s informed of the arrival.”

“No,” she snickered, “-I’ll never miss the chance to meet my big-brother before heading out.”

“Stop it,” he facepalmed, “-so embarrassing.”

.....

“Oh, come on, big bro, I know you missed me.”

“Enough, go away, you’re annoying.”

“Stop giving me the cold shoulder,” she pouted, “-you sang another tune when we were alone...”

“STOP,” he jumped, “-there’s no need for that memory. Go, go,” pushing them out the office, “-good luck,” sweat poured.

‘Did she?’

‘Don’t,’ said Goldie with her expression alone.

“I feel refreshed,” said she, “-let’s head to the walls!”

A walk led to the feet of the beast. Roads linking each outpost usually held trucks carrying injured fighters or support for the other side.

“Lingling’s adventuring party,” said a sternly dressed lady, “-climb on up, the other students are already here,” facing Igna, “-you stop there a moment.” The elevators lifted without a second thought.

“Who are you?” asked she, other adventurers used the not-so-stable ladders.

“Kinless, I’ve come for the graduation.”

“Oh, it’s you, give me a moment,” she signaled to another officer.

“Security’s quite tight,” commented he.

“Yes, we ought to be,” voiced she, “-there have been stronger monsters prowling on the other side. Can’t be too careful.”

“Anything the matter?” spoke the uniformed man.

“Here’s Kinless, take him to the lieutenant.”

“Oh please,” he begged, “-not him,” a tired exhale escaped.

“I know, I know. He’s a bit of a slacker, still, orders are orders. Take Kinless to him.”

“He threw a guard off the wall for disturbing the nap. I don’t want to die like that.”

“Those are rumors,” she facepalmed, “-besides, the guard who fell was pushed by a gust of wind.”

“Yeah... a gust of wind that has arms.”

Chapter 553: Abnormals

The overhanging quarters of the Lieutenant stood a few meters from the elevator. Parties of fighters stood ever so close to the edge, some sat, some watched, some held binoculars, others used the scope of their weapons. Monsters after said wall were slow, sluggish, but active. None seemed to be in a fight. Promenading along told one thing, the gusts were very much strong; one misstep and tis a trip to a harsh fall.

"Might I ask why you're shaking like a feather?"

"Feather?" paused the startled guard, "-I guess I'm a little concerned. Heck, the lieutenant isn't that good a person. He's renowned for bursting into ire for being woken from a nap."

"Isn't it a lie?" refuted Igna.

"No," refusal by shaking of the head, "-I saw the whole event play out. Not so much a push than a kick." From there, the conversation dulled as they came closer. An ajar wooden door left ample space to sneak a peek.

"Stay here," gulping for the door to push further, the guard vanished in the ever-present shadow of the inside.

Screams rattled inward out, a glance at the surrounding guards showed bored glances, they sighed, '-here we go again,' whispered some to others.

.....

"The sun feels nice," a man dressed in uniform exited. Murky curly hair slapped to the forehead and cheeks, redden marks of waking from a nap, the tales were true. Grimy and shining, the face shone like a newly varnished piece of wood. "You're Kinless?" a few listless steps led him to sit on the edge, "-join me, standing around does the body no good."

"Alright," side by side, "-lieutenant Mello, I've come for the -"

"No need," he interjected, "-I know the details. Call me Mello for short, I don't care for military stuff. This job is like any other. Now that I look at you," the eyes narrowed, "-weren't you the boy Misna found beyond the walls?"

"Yes, that's me," said he quietly.

"Fate brings you to where you were found. A tasteless job," reaching for the pocket, "-care for a swig?"

"No, thanks."

"More for me," he gulped, the stench fluttered to the nose.

'Whiskey?'

"Don't get distracted," said Mello, "-you sure about going alone over there?"

"I guess so, I mean, it is a graduation exam."

"About that," facing the outpost below, "-it's pretty simple. You'll fight, the grading will be done by the wall-guards," to which he pointed to the left, "-see those guards standing atop the quarters?"

"Yes, what about them?"

"They're strong fighters and very competent soldiers ordered to guard the walls if ever the threat is greater. Think of them as a special team of elite tasked as the last resort," checking the watch, "-I ought to catch up on some sleep. You've gotten access to fight, go there and don't die. It's always a pain to clean up dead-bodies. Take care, and don't show off, Misna will be disappointed," he stood.

"May I ask where she is?"

"No idea, not here anyway," a goodbye turned yawn, the man disappeared within the shadows of the quarters.

'What a weird individual,' thought he moving to the other side. Few parties were already on the move below, running towards a horde of beasts.

"Igna, Igna," signaled Lingling, "-are you heading out?" her team scurried behind.

"I guess." Veterans kept scowling at their lack of seriousness. Dagger-like glares stabbing their backs in cold subjective judgment.

"Noticed them?" added Goldie, "-always staring us, kind of a bad environment to train."

"Well, best get to fighting," said Lingling, "-you coming with?"

"Sure," said Igna, "-I'll do what I can."

novelusb.com

"Follow us then," without notice, they leaped off the side, *Protection of the Wind Spirit,* cried Lingling – an upwards gust slowed the fall till a bubble of air held and stopped the landing impact.

'Crazy idiots!' And so, Lingling and her team jumped into battle. The monsters were weak, goblins of low ranks. For the most part, Igna stayed at the back and killed any stragglers. Their team were coordinated, anticipating the other's move and so on. Acrobatics from Anne, a cold-hard defense from Kein, overwhelming attack power courtesy of Goldie, support in terms of healing and enhancement from Lucia, and lastly, the coordinator; Lingling.

'Killing off the small fries is boring,' thought he looking about. Frost and Pegasus were spotted to the right, Lampard, Rena, Anna, and Jen were to the left engaged by their targets. The veterans stood back, helping in finishing, whilst other ran in head first to steal the glory. Monster drops were valuable after all.

'Something doesn't feel right,' thought Igna stood by a dead-tree, '-there's this weird feeling in my chest. The signet ring's weirdly acting up, are the monsters reacting to me?' The atmosphere changed, the sun hid, the clouds loomed overhead, the mist of Totrya extended onto the battlefield. 'The ring,' clutching the fist, '-something's bad!'

“Master,” resounded a heavy whisper, “-get ready to fight. Monsters fight to train, and so must do our leader. We’re sending the humanoid-goblins who’ve evolved beyond the normal capacity. Be careful and enjoy.”

“Vesper,” thought he, “-éclair, scan the area!”

“Can’t,” said he, “-the signal is jammed. No way to help, toggling to battle-mode, good luck!”

“ARRRR,” a fading scream ended in a crash, the tree broke, blood splattered across the face. The lifeless mutilated body of a veteran, broken bones extruding out the skin. ‘-Disgusting,’ he gagged. Deathly shouts surrounded left right and center. A pair of glowing eyes whisked out the mist, a five-meter-tall humanoid with features of an ogre mixed with a bear. Sharpened claws as opposed to nails, muscular features, and the smile of a kid. *BANG,* a downward slam cracked the very ground, sending Igna back a few meters. It soon sank, the humanoid wasn’t goblins, a new breed of monsters, unknown and unreported. The wall sounded the bell of retreat, sadly, there were at least five kilometers between them and safety. ‘-We need to get away,’ he ran to the nearest tree. The fog lessened in intensity, ‘-where’s Lingling and her team?’ he scanned to no avail.

“HELP US!” cried a lady running for her life. She faintly caught Igna’s eye, a sense of relief flushed her expression, *RARR* to no avail, the monsters pounced to tear off the upper half of her body and stare coldly. Entrails dangled off its elongated jaw.

“RUN, RUN!” screamed Lingling unknowingly passing Igna.

“OVER HERE!” he screamed.

“Finally,” she slid into cover.

“Were you chased?”

“No,” a blank expression, “-they’re dead.”

“What?”

“Anne’s dead!” cried she,” those monsters came in ambush, it cleanly took off her head. I couldn’t do anything...”

“What about the rest?”

“No idea,” she wept. Fighters fought in attempts of retreat, death, mutilated arms and legs landed at their feet.

‘We’re going to die,’ mumbles of terror, “-I left my team to die...”

‘I need to move, will the death-element react to my orders. It’s awakened, I feel the mana... how will it work, I-I.’

“OVER HERE!” cried a lady with an eyepatch, “-WE’VE CLEARED AN EVACUATION PATH, MOVE!”

“Lady Misna?”

“Igna... no matter, GO, JUST RUN, WE’LL HOLD THEM BACK!”

“Ok,” grabbing Lingling’s wrist, “-LET’S MOVE, IT’S OUR CHANCE!” carnage followed, bodies tossed left and right.

“Igna, hey, long time no see,” nodded Arnold.

“Arnold,” a flash of red-beady eyes stood behind the unknowing boy. “-NOT TODAY,” he dashed to block the incoming strike, *CLANG!* the shockwave split the fog.

“Take her and run!” cried Igna, “-there’s no time to waste,” he buckled per the monster’s swing.

Fear drilled him to the ground, “-understood,” to which Arnold escorted the traumatized Lingling. *CLANG,* another slam cracked the shin, ‘-fucking hell,’ gritted he, ‘-how strong are these bastards?’

“IGNA, DUCK!” *BANG,* a bullet tore through the chest, “-GET MOVING!” screamed Konne holding her rifle.

Meanwhile, the status of the wall grew dire. The alarms for the retreat were sounded, the Wall-Guardians leaped into the fray, helping in the evacuation. Panic had many hysterically clambering up the elevator. The few who made it did so with mortal wounds. A few died on the way up the wall, their bodies forced to lay upon the stone. The chain of command broke into madness, Mello snapped from the listless persona into the full-on competent leader.

Only the bells of retreat were sounded, none know the actual status of the battle. The fog doubled as a labyrinth for the unlucky – some made it deeper opposed to the walls.

“Take over the evacuation!” screamed Igna, “-leave me alone, GO, GO!”

“BUT!” argued Misna and Konne visibly on edge.

“No, forget it, I’m stuck, my legs are broken even if you were to lift this bastard. Go, just take care of the other.” The fog intensified, “-GO, LADY MISNA, KONNE, GOO!”

“WE GET IT,” footsteps disappeared into the distance.

‘God damn it,’ face up to the greyish mist, ‘-she shot and killed the beast without thinking. Heavy, my legs are shot. Damn it,’ the eyes closed, ‘-I can barely breathe,’ a burning sensation guided the hand towards the stomach, ‘-blood... damn it,’ one of its claws pierced the stomach. ‘Losing blood, light-headed, I’m going to die.’

“Anna, this is getting out of hand!” cried Lampard desperately fighting off a single monster.

“I’m sorry,” said she, “-I can’t use mana, someone or something is sucking it out the atmosphere. We need to run, Jen, can you fire one of those arrows?”

“No,” her head shook, “-I lost my hand in the last encounter.”

“Rena, what about you?”

“Blades are broken,” said she panting.

“We need to run; they’ve sounded the alarm to retreat.”

Earth-spikes, hands to the ground, a pillar rose to break off the fight, “-let’s run, COME, LAMPARD, WE NEED TO GO!” screamed Anna. Making it back would be easier since they were on the way back before the invasion. Still, the red eyes in the thickening fog heightened their senses.

“Who’s there!” cried a tier 5- Ruby adventurer.

“Students,” said Anna, “-we managed to survive.”

“Scale-up the walls,” said he, “-we’ve dropped rope-ladders. The Lieutenant’s ordered a full-scale retreat.”

“We’ve made it,” clambered over an injured party of novices, “-thank the gods.”

“WATCH OUT!” cried the Ruby-ranked fighter, red eyes swung to leave mutilated bodies onto the wall. Splatters of red, the novices were killed. It marched forth undamaged by bullets or arrows.

“QUICK, QUICK!” said those at the top, “-CLIMB!” On the last man, the beast clung onto the ladders desperately trying to scale up, “CUT IT!” said they.

“But,” refuted Lampard pointing to another surviving party.

“Either us or them,” commanded the guard, “-sacrifices have to be made, CUT THE DAMN ROPE,” veins thickened at the forehead and neck.

.....

Along the walls laid a make-shift graveyard. Some lost their eyes, others their legs and arms; many succumbed to the deathly injuries. “AHHH, my hand, MY HEAD!” shrieked a boy, “-help, help, help,” nails dug deep into his face, the eyes shot black.

“HE’S CURSED,” screamed an attending healer, “-HELP ME HOLD HIM DOWN!” cried he.

“We can’t afford to give you any more men,” said an exhausted guard, “-he’s a lost cause.”

“Kill me, kill me, kill me!” tears flowed, “-I WANT TO DIE,” the legs burst into a darkened mist, “-PULL THE FUCKING TRIGGER!”

BANG, brain matter smeared across the stone wall. “Be ready to kill anyone who shows signs of the monster’s curse!” ordered a commanding officer. One by one, distant echoes of bullets clung to their hearts. Someone died, those unsaved were killed out of mercy, the devastation, the deaths.

“Is this...” gulped Lampard.

“Don’t,” cried Rena, “-be grateful we made it out alive.”

“I can’t,” whimpered Jen, “-how c-can we celebrate with a-all this d-death.”

Elevators pulled upwards; bodies dragged onto the cold floor. Healers running to and fro, potions, scrolls, supplies were exhausted in mere hours. Ladders cut in desperation, few abandoned to the massacre below. Friends crying over dead bodies, others wanting to jump and save those at the bottom. Veteran fighters fought the monsters without care for their lives. Despite landing a fatal blow, the

monsters regenerated to continue the onslaught. A call for support was issued to Ground-Zero and Stonegrove.

"T-this is hell," sniffled Lingling, "-we're going to die."

Chapter 554: The Battlefield

Singed in heat, scarlet-colored vapor, mushed bodies, entrails, limbs, brain matter, eyeballs, the list went on without end. Destruction, devastation, a full-bodied massacre. Aside from the giant humanoid gluttons, crawlers (beast-like figures) loomed about, hanging in the shadows to strike. Taller and larger than the average man, a single swing of its sharpened claw made mincemeat of the survivors.

Panic of unmeasured proportion traveled along the walls. Stonegrove and Ground-Zero timed their forces to enter the battlefield in hopes of helping. Instead of coming face to face with the enemy, the Sergeants called in to lead the coming forces were left distraught. How could one fight an uphill battle of undenounced proportion? Any sliver of courage trampled; the mist stopped a kilometer off the walls. Bells rang periodically. Guns, spells, throwing spears, naught but ineffective.

"We're dead, we're dead," very few escaped. Anna stayed to heal; their party joined with Frost's who aided in the evacuation. Priority was to save those directly below; thing was, the unnamed killing devils, prowled to and fro. Discontent on approaching the wall, yet, if an elevator lowered, the crawler would jump in for slaughter. Bordering the fog, stood the giants, and laying in wait, were the crawlers. A new breed of monster given the rank of Tier-5 Ruby. Not even that, the rank was subject to arguments – so far, no information about their actual combat prowess existed. Those who came face to face were either dead, traumatized, or on the verge of death. Reliving the massacre, seeing friends die in a worthless endeavor was worth the effort as some contemplated ending it all.

"Good," panted Fletcher stood in the shadows of the lieutenant's quarters, "-we can have a private talk. Ling, Frost, Anna, I want a report on your parties?"

"I'll go first," said Frost being tactful around Ling, her howling expression of grief and sorrow could have made the hardest of man – cry. "We were ambushed after a strange sparkle, the battlefield fogged up and those devils jumped at us. We lost a few men just to retreat." The distant deathly screams paired with gunfire didn't help either. Thunderous shocks as the next spoke.

"No casualties," said Anna more or less relieved, "-we were lucky to make it out alive."

"What about you?" asked he to Ling. The latter remained silent, thinking, breathing, crying, "-I asked you a question," voiced Fletcher sternly. Between the blurred vision of welling tears, her visage lifelessly faced up, "-Anne's dead. No idea about the rest. I managed to live thanks to Igna and lady Misna."

.....

"Shit," winched Fletcher, "-you're dismissed. Go take a break, Anna, Frost, help the casualties."

"Over here!" exclaimed an officer, "-supplies have arrived, any abled body, rush over, we need help!" And so, the three leaders diffused into the hellish scape of oppression and the ultimate display of power.

"Lady Misna!" out in the middle of the piling bodies, "-might I have a word?"

"Fletcher?" a bloodied-white cloth covered her mouth and nose, "-what are you doing here?" it lowered with a pinch.

"Out of the way," yelled another bumping shoulder against Fletcher, who buckled slightly forward.

"Come," said she moving to the edge, "-what's the matter?"

"Igna, what happened to him?"

"Oh..." a moment to gather her strength, "-what if they breach the walls and make for Reforge, worst yet, make for Meke. How bad will the casualties be; these monsters are unlike anything we've seen. Each is a Dungeon-level boss. Imagine what more secrets and death-defying beasts live in just beyond the aurora (the name given to the border of Totrya)."

"Don't avoid the question, I need answers."

"Fine," she glanced over, "-he's most likely dead. We left him to die, the legs were crushed – it was either him... or... us."

"I get it," he retained the straight-face, "-no more need be said. Go on, I won't take much of your time." Bodies piled even after the two-hour mark; supplies didn't suffice. Those scarred by abandoning comrades – jumped into the battle to only be slaughtered. Revenge, wanting to make a difference. The death-toll and defeat were equal, if not worse than the first-appearance of monsters; second to the Tower of Aris.

'Damn it, my head. Why's everything so dark and hard to see. Am I under a tree?' Sniffles and whimpers murmured to his left. Crawling up the trunk, '-the growls and the murderous gaze of the monsters Vesper summoned move about, this is bad.'

A pale, expressionless girl sat beside him; her hand stretched out as if holding a barrier. "Kein?" *thud,* "-hey, are you ok?" a single tap sent her crashing down.

"Don't move too much," sniffled Lucia, "-s-she used up her last strength to erect a barrier."

novelusb.com

"Don't talk too loud," gritted Goldie keeping a strong persona. The trembling hands and horrific stare could have said otherwise.

'They saved me, we're under the same tree. It's faint, but I sense her mana... wait, I sense her mana?' quick to check the legs, '-I'm healed, fully healed. The d-death-elements awakened. Strong, I feel it, each pulse is like a hammer against my body.'

"What's the plan now?"

"Don't know, we wait for backup," said Goldie.

"What happened to Anne?"

"She was the first to die," mumbled Lucia pinching her nose and mouth.

‘There’s only one thing to do,’ using the tree as support, “-we need to escape. I sense the monsters closing in on us. Kein can be saved if we give her a potion. Her breathing is faint, she’s just unconscious.”

“We know that already,” gritted Goldie, “-sit back down, we can’t let them see us, ” a defiant glare showed mistrust. “Just for the record, we did so because Kein begged us to, what now, going to throw away the life she fought to save?”

“No,” said he softly, “-I’ll repay the favor in full.” *CRACK* the barrier broke, a murderous pair of daggers lunged for Igna’s neck. ‘-Don’t get so cocky,’ a side-step had him under the beast, ‘-Magical Bullets, good night.’ *BANG* a blinding beam of light broke the fog upwards. Those on the wall noticed and stared in terror, the light was the sign of a coming disaster, everyone thought the same.

“WHAT DID YOU DO THAT FOR!” cried Goldie, “-now they know where we are, fucking idiot!”

“Guess what,” he smirked, “-we ought to run now.”

“URGH,” she made for Lucia as he made for Kein.

“Quite courageous, you who trembled like a leaf now running like an athlete, I’m impressed.”

“Shut your damned mouth, I’m scared shitless. My friend died by the hands of those devils; do you have any idea how badly I want to die.”

“Yes, that I do,” a compassionate response; reference to the massacre of Dorchester, the day when everyone he cared about died.

“Hey,” said she panting, “-we’re getting close, I can see the lights beyond the mist.”

“Good.”

“This is going better than I expected,” they emerged out the fog; a blink and blood splattered across his visage, “-SAVE ME,” cried Lucia. A crawler pounced and took her legs from out of nowhere. Goldie fell headfirst onto a rock in the sudden exchange.

“WAIT!” yelled he trying to reach out a hand, the crawler didn’t so much as pay attention, it violently shook its head, repetitively slamming her injured self to the ground, until tossing her towards the walls.

“ANNA, IT’S IGNA!” cried Leonard.

“OFFICER, PLEASE, LET US GO DOWN!” argued she.

“NO!” voiced Lieutenant Mello, “-I can’t afford to waste manpower. The beasts might scale the walls at any minute, the body count is high as is. Stand down, every one of you.”

“BASTARD,” screamed Ling in retaliation, “-LET ME GO.”

“Stop her,” ordered he. A Wall-Guardian flickered into the light to knock the erratic girl out.

“How cruel can you be?” cried Rena, “-this i-isn’t fair.”

“Life isn’t fair, princess,” levied a bystander, “-my friends died too, I want to go there and fight, give my life for the sake of others. Look at me now, a Tier-6 Emerald couldn’t do anything, what can you, a Tier-8, accomplish?”

"Let it go," whispered Lampard, "-don't be selfish."

'Why's no one helping?' *smack,* an unexpected headbutt sent him directly opposite Kein, Lucia, and the unconscious Goldie. The glutton of the fog, smaller in stature, rushed as if starved beasts. Lucia's wailing stopped – the little ones stood atop Kein, readying their claws to sink into her flesh.

'Why not,' time slowed to a snail's pace, '-why can't I activate my element. What's wrong with me. We're so close to the end... did I do all that for nothing?' the shoulders slumped, "-fuck no, I'm not weak!" He hit the wall with a loud explosion. The girls were about to be slaughtered. 'Alright, Vesper, is this what you wanted?' blood dripped down the forehead, 'let's go then,' he scrambled to a stand. *Death Element: Unleash Aura,* an avalanche of pure dark mana exuded, he limped over with a hand-stretched forward, '-don't kill them.'

Heed mine call, I, Igna Haggard, call upon thy strength to stop all who dare oppose mine own will. Death Element: Magical Barrier, Pentagram Variant, Abyssal Orbs. Ancient runes materialized in mid-air. Dark balls engulfed Lucia and her friends. Those at the top watched in awe – complete silence. The monsters reacted to him, of which, each gave a deafening growl.

"LIEUTENANT MELLO, I'LL LEAD THE MONSTERS AWAY FROM THE WALL, SAVE THE GIRLS!" the broken leg healed, no other word said, he dashed off into the fog, carrying the devils with.

"Lieutenant," voiced an attending officer, "-what are your orders?"

"What do you think," asked he sternly, "-Corporal Zoey?"

"I don't think sir, only give orders and I'll follow."

"Can I order you to lead me into battle?"

"No sir," she refused, "-I dare not play the war of wits with you."

"Fine," facing the able fighters, "-lower the elevator. We have an opportunity to bring back a few survivors," in stride, support from Aris arrived in form of a renowned adventurer, else known as the Climbers.

"What's the status here?" asked she leaping onto the wall, the platinum tag shimmered, "-Mello, care to explain?"

"We were ambushed by a new breed of monsters. The casualties... well, it's plain to see. There are a few more left below."

"Alright," she etched ever-so-close to the edge, "-I'll help in the evacuation, I presume some lucky devil led the beasts away?"

"Yes," he nodded.

"Understood," long blond-hair levitated after she dropped on the opposite side.

The unexpected arrival stole the ability to speak out of the multiple fighters. The support from Stonegrove and Ground-Zero, adventurers who didn't do much but watch as kids were slaughtered, rose

into files. A decisive aura rose the morale to undo the cowardice. And so, a search and rescue began. The orbs of protection soon vanished, leaving the girls fully healed.

Meanwhile, the farther he ran, the denser grew the mist. After a few minutes, the fog cleared; he reached the aurora. Nowhere else to run, the monsters stood menacingly in a semi-circle. 'Damn, a newly awakened element is just a baby. However potent it is, if I can't let it sharpen itself, I'm done for. The constant regeneration takes precedence, that much I can't help.' *sniff,* '-the smell of blood. Dead-bodies, alright.' *Blood-Arts: Bloody Mary.*

"Time to go back to sleep," a shiny apple hovered above the palm, '-if not for the bodies, I'd have to use my already drained blood. A stroke of luck," *crunch,* wind burst out the feet, *Blood-Arts: Orenmir, Blood-Blade of the Queen,* '-the weapon is only a skeleton, the true strength lies when it's materialized from the Blood.' Readied to fight, the beast lashed for his head. Each strike broke him piece by piece, they moved fast, adapted to the fighting style, and countered.

'Damn it,' forced the parry, '-my sword style doesn't work well for defensive battles!' a diagonal strike threw him headfirst onto the rocky land, '-I'm weak...'

"Majesty," said the signet ring, "-how was the training?"

"Vesper," he coughed, "-why?"

"To show our power, these beasts were nothing more than the scouting party, we have scarier beasts. I shall retreat for now, may you train well, my lord." The saddened sky crumbled into cries; rain befell the stained battlefield. 'Look at me, broken to pieces. I'm already out of mana, out of blood, and out of strength. I couldn't even kill one of them, what a shame,' he snickered, '-I love it, I'm weak, the pleasures of getting strong, I can finally experience it for myself!'

Chapter 555: Fallen Comrades

Who am I kidding anyway. There's no way to grow strong from defeat. Well, perhaps I'm just being ignorant. The veil of battle is lifted, Vesper pulled a fast one. Can't blame her, I'm the one at fault here, the supposed King of monsters, what an awful joke. I can barely save a party of girls; how can I imagine saving an entire race. Our purpose is to fight; but for what, Scifer bestowed the will of finding Origin, Lord Death gave the element, Goddess Nike and Kronos, they all trusted in me. I never made much use of it, always keeping my cards to my chest, playing them when necessary. Using others to do my bidding; the method worked, look at Phantom and the others. The fight told me one thing, I'm weak, the element's a baby, might have to start from the beginning. Depends on how the mana reacts; considering I died more than often in the past, figures the element to be powerful. Now, there's not much to it, a single death won't matter. It hurts, each death, I feel it, I don't want to die, hell no. My emotions are strong, my feelings are right, no way I'll keep dying to get strong. Besides, Creation's Nevermore Gate is active, unlocking them might break what little spirit I have. Best saving the Element for serious situations; I rather it works on regeneration and keeping the immortality. Blood-Arts is far superior. Still, Orenmir's full-bodied apparition did no damage to those monsters. Damn, reality hit, and it hit hard.'

The mist of battle rose, a bloodied field of lifeless mutilated bodies was scattered about. The search and rescue began four hours ago, normal monsters surveyed the land. No sign of the 'abnormals'. Injured

were taken off the wall and stacked inside the Medical camp at Reforge. Many died on transport, some succumbed to the curse of the monsters. Good men euthanized, lack of potion and supplies.

"Order the advance party to go further inside," voiced Mello from inside the quarter. Multiple dots indicated the situation of the battle, spotters in form of the Wall-Guardians laid in wait about his perimeter.

"On it," returned another. Messages were sent across the battlefield. Lack of fog meant the parties could be coordinated easily.

"Look at this for a chance," said the Climber through the coms, "-Lieutenant Mello's working for once." A small remark braking the high-tension.

"Shut it," gritted he, "-head on to back the advance party. We're sending carts to recover both the living and dead, hard to imagine someone could have survived," switching channel, "-heads up to everyone, don't remove the adventuring tags unless said so, bring them to the wall."

'So cold,' sleep broke, '-where am I?' the visage felt sticky, the air felt lighter, stragglings monsters were busy ransacking bodies. 'What was that self-talk earlier?' wiping the eyes, '-the uniform stands strong even after that?' Looking around showed nothing but emptiness, people were sensed a few kilometers away – blocked by trees and broken remains of barricades. Standing sent thunderous pain down the neck till the heels, '-damn,' he lost balance to grab onto a nearby tree, '-what's wrong with me?' The phone remained out of charge, no connection to éclair, "-what the hell..." breathing deep, '-better head back, he's probably alerted Phantom.' He broke off a branch, '-my right leg is shot, don't know what happened,' a makeshift walking stick.

.....

Injured with the Death-Element not being able to regenerate, he moved forth. The more he walked, the more grew the sheer devastation. Groups of people dead without drawing weapons.

'Isn't that?' a beheaded body came in viewing distance. Flies circled, bugs and insects weren't tactful, '-her uniform...' crumbling to his knee, '-Anne, I found you.' Her battered head, noticeable by her pony-tail, laid a few steps from her body. Alas, it lost its charm. Dark-brown hair muddled and stuck by her blood; bangs awry to the skinless cheekbones. Teeth exposed to the wild, the jaw pulled beyond its limit, the eyes and contours stuck to the terror she must have felt.

"Don't worry," he listlessly carried the head to her neck, "-I'll do my best." *Blood-Arts: Crimson Threads,* the index finger flicked opened; the threads sowed her parted selves as one. 'This is the only thing I can do,' forehead to her stomach, '-I'm sorry. Even if we barely knew each other, I felt something between us, we could have become good friends, I truly believe that. It's my fault... so many people died, and I have nothing to account for it. I wasn't strong, I didn't get strong, instead, I stood by, left others to save me. What a pathetic joke. It feels hopeless, just like my final moments, I couldn't do anything, not even now.'

Minutes turned to hours, he remained at Anne's side, fighting off the monsters wanting to ravage her body. Keeping her safe in death, questions about him and what to do next rose on without warning, doubt, failure, a painful smack to the illusion of happiness.

Hooves galloped to soon neigh behind, “-we found a survivor!” cried the adventurer.

“Really?” those in the immediate vicinity rushed over, including the mysterious lady of before.

“He’s the kid who fought off the monsters,” voiced one.

“The decoy?” added the powerful lady.

“Yes,” firmed they, “-he bravely saved a party and ran off into the mist to give others a fighting chance.”

“Is that so,” she locked onto Knig’s symbol, “-boy, what’s your name?”

“...”

“Boy!” a smack later, “-wake up, what’s your name?”

‘Did I fall asleep on a dead-body... wait, my leg, it’s healed. Man, slothful.’

novelusb.com

“Boy, can you hear me?”

“Stop referring me as a boy,” he refuted, “-I’ve got a name,” spinning around, “-I’m Igna Haggard-”

The eyes met, a connection spurred from within, without warning, the lady jumped into his arms, “-you’re alive,” said she unwillingly shedding tears.

“Impossible,” he gulped, “-Viola...”

“Yes,” breaking the harsh embrace, “-where were you,” she tilted her head in a comforting manner, the warm tears stopped at her lashes then soon dropped.

“I died,” said he, “-honestly, I thought you’d have returned to the Hall of Rebirth.”

“Shut up,” said she holding his hand, “-no way I could abandon this world. You left without saying a word, the presence vanished, my blessing shattered, do you know how worried I was?”

“Well,” he sighed, “-I’m not the man I was before. Not the boy you knew, I’m worse, a weakling who couldn’t even save a stranger.”

“Leave us alone,” ordered she, “-I’ll brief the boy.”

“Yes, ma’am,” and so the unwanted crowd scurried off.

“Igna Haggard,” gripping his shoulder, “-or Staxius Haggard, it doesn’t matter. You’re still the boy who swept me from my duty as an envoy of life and death. To be fair, I couldn’t be any happier. Life is good, nothing changed from when I sent the letter. Let’s catch up later, I ought to get back to work.”

“Wait,” he stood, “-I’ll help.”

“What about the injuries, and the lady you so tightly hugged and slept.”

“She’s dead,” the strong stare lowered, “-couldn’t do much in life, what can I achieve in death. What’s done is done, I’ll just keep moving forward.”

“See,” she smiled, “-not a weakling. Come on then, help me recover the bodies. There should be carts at differing points.”

“Alright.”

The aftermath had yet to be dealt with. The many guilds who lost members furiously argued against the wall and their lack of support. Mello had to give an impromptu report to the higher-ups, the center guild of Rosepire got in touch as opposed to the branch of Meke. One by one, till sundown, bodies piled on to head for the outpost. There, those identified were either taken by truck to the mortuary or the crematorium.

‘What’s happening here?’ thought Leonard scanning the outpost. Rena and Lampard walked with arms crossed, a commotion gathered a crowd around the center of town. Army officers were faced by the angry adventurers, “-sir, calm down,” said a Corporal.

“No,” refuted he slapping his chest, “-where’s Lieutenant Mello, that lazy son of a bitch stood there and allowed my guild to die,” he breathed, “-everyone here’s lost a friend, lover, and even family. We have a right to take our fallen comrades to the capital, they have the right to meet their families before death. Where’s your fucking humanity, why won’t you...”

“Enough,” voiced she, “-I understand how you feel, still, these are express orders from the Lieutenant. Those tainted by the curse will be burnt – or do you want the population to suffer at the hands of a plague?”

“...URGH, fine,” spitting at her feet, “-this isn’t over, trust me.” He burst into the crowd, leaving many unsatisfied by the outcome.

“Is this over?” asked she.

“No, we want an apology from the lieutenant!” said a coward hiding amongst the crowd.

“YES, WE WANT AN APOLOGY, THE DEATH OF OUR COMRADES WERE IN VAIN!” the crowd joined the protest.

“BRING OUT THE LIEUTENANT.”

“BRING OUT THE LIEUTENANT.”

“BRING OUT THE LIEUTENANT,” stomps, chants, the fallen stood in protest against the incident. The whole situation divulged into mistrust towards the already incompetent military – or so was reflected by their actions in other similar circumstances. Unable to calm the crowd, the officers returned to headquarters and closed their gates.

“Where’s Mello anyway?” inquired Corporal Tommy through the squeaky fan.

“Left for Meke, the guild’s angry at us,” reported Zoey sneaking a glance outside.

“Where’s Sergeant Appy?” wondered he going over the report.

“Leading the evacuation,” returned she, “-it’s getting bad outside. There might be a mutiny, adventurers don’t trust us as is...”

"I know, nothing much we can do."

"Tommy, I heard your sister's party suffered a death. I don't know who died, but..."

"WHAT?" slamming the table, "-IS MY SISTER OK?"

"Don't ask me," refuted she, "-knowing her, she's probably fine."

An hour passed; dusk loomed over yonder. Footsteps frantically made for the office, "-Corporal, we need support. A few adventurers stole a truck, broke into the crematorium, and forcefully stole tainted bodies."

"Oh, for fuck sakes," they dashed out the office, "-you get a hold of Sergeant Appy," ordered Zoey, "-Tommy, gather the soldiers, we might need to fight, load the guns."

Radio coms reached up the walls, "-Sergeant Appy, we require assistance. The adventurers are threatening the safety of the country."

'What's with them?' crushing a half-lit cigarette, '-can't a guy rest a little.' The figure leaped off the quarters with hands in the pocket. Meanwhile, the crematorium rumbled by the threats of armed fighters. Bodies were placed in the stolen truck. Soldiers soon surrounded the perimeter, "-forsake weapons and come out with hands in the air. We can't allow the corpses anywhere near the capital." A building kept outside Reforge on a gentle hill. Graveyards were to one side, a church on the other, and the Crematorium in the middle.

"Fuck you, the resting place of our comrades is up to us, not the spineless military," the gates broke with a loud crash. "FIRE!" bullets rained from the escaping truck. Everyone soon rushed to see the commotion; few soldiers gave their lives to stop the truck which soon crashed into a neighboring tree. The fight didn't stop; 4 Tier-5 Ruby fighters kept on killing the novices of the army. One by one, despite training, normal humans couldn't keep with the rawness of the fighters.

"Retreat," cried Zoey, "-stand in the tree-line, don't move. We can't afford to lose any more men."

"Draw a barrier," ordered Tommy, "-we can't allow bystanders to get involved."

Gunfire rattled away at the otherwise silent night. The tranquil hill livened by muzzle flashes and spells.

"What's happening over there?"

"Sir, sorry," said a guard, "-a party of adventurers decided to lay siege in the crematorium. We're currently fighting off their forces. Please stand by, there needn't be any more deaths today."

"THIS IS OUR CHANCE!" said the same coward of before, "-LET'S RUSH THE MILITARY AND CRUSH THEM. OUR BROTHERS HAVEN'T DIED FOR NOTHING!"

"Wait," terror flashed on the guard's faces. The horde's aura changed, complacent to belligerent. The barrier broke, mindless angry folks trampled the garrison and went for the crematorium. Out of fear, weapons were pulled by faceless fighters. 'I knew it... mindless idiots,' reports broke the chain of commands. "Engage the machine guns..."

Chapter 556: "Do you accept?"

Off the side of the walking path, under a big enough tree – a guard jumped out with a mounted gun. The Adventurers cared for none, they trampled and killed those who'd interfere. The ones in the truck held one side as for the bystanders, they jumped into the fray.

"Kill them all, don't let a single son of a bitch live!" intent was clear and readable.

"Corporal..." gulped he behind the mounted gun, "-are we sure about this?"

"Shoot the damned gun!" cried Tommy, "-They took some of our best men, this is war, don't care about those spineless cowards, JUST SHOOT."

For a moment, those inside the camp were curious about the menacing silence. A premonition of things to come, or so thought a few. The wall didn't seem restful either. Jen and Rena sat at the cafeteria whilst Lampard looked all over for Ling. Night meant switching to outside lamps, the full moon aided in vision.

On her last bite, the distant sound of gunfire snuck to strangle the ears. '-This is,' she glared the approximate location, '-a mounted turret...'

"Jen, hey, hey, are you ok?"

.....

"No," added Anna, "-that sound isn't good." Swiftly reaching for their bags, the trio made it outside to investigate. Lampard was already at the broken barricade. A never-ending flash of light rattled the summit. People groaned in pain, some cried, some hurled insults until a black figure flew above the head.

"What happened here?" asked Lampard.

"Some adventurers decided to steal a truck and get the corpses away. It didn't go well so the military intervened. Don't know the rest myself, I just saw a flash of light, and when I rushed in, the barrier was broken and the horde ran up after slaughtering the guards," replied some stranger.

"Are they alive?" asked another.

"Healers are trying their best," a greenish hue shone over the mortal injuries.

Bodies dropped left and right, no blood for they were blanks. The pain had many on their knees and feet. Lethal force was allowed... hell, in case where a guard died, the military had the right to charge in and exact revenge. The central guild couldn't intervene, even if the fighter was killed on a baseless accusation. Still, the Military's hand was tied, hurting the fighters meant risking the lives of the populous. Tis the mutually beneficial relationship established many years ago, now though, things were different.

"I GOT 'EM," said a young boy jumping back after stabbing the gunman.

"GOOD JOB, SCOTTY," cheered the crowd.

'What a bunch of idiots,' *Crack,* "-are you really going to fight?" spoke a deep-voiced man landing before the crowd.

"Who are you?" cried the leader of the horde.

“Sergeant Appy, Tier-3 Silver Adventurer. Is there a reason why so many people laid waste to the military?”

“Shut up, we don’t have time for a traitor!” yet again, the same voice welled from within the crowd. “-Will you let good men’s death be for nothing, or will you take up arms!” the few unconscious snapped to reality, “-we’ll fight,” said they in a mumble.

“Sergeant Appy!” cried Corporal Tommy, “-it’s Zoey, she’s been hurt. We can’t keep up with the adventurers.”

novelusb.com

“Why are you outside?” asked he with hands in his pockets.

“I came to back up our gunners. The battle is lost, we’re surrounded from all front. Zoey got hit badly by a fire-ball; I barely escaped thanks to her. Come on, do something!”

“I see,” glaring the mindless horde, “-hear me, the military’s duty is to uphold public safety. Well, that is what I signed up for. Taking bodies to the capital, tainted one at that. Hurting my fellow comrades for the sake of hurting. Instigating a battle after we lost so many men; you should be ashamed,” he held out an open hand, “-the decision is final,” a blackish-white flame materialized, “-for the trouble you’ve caused.” *Hell-Flare,* a kindling of fire hovered to the center.

“RUN AWAY!” cried one.

“Too late,” said he sternly, “-suffer.” The kindling broke into an enclosed sphere of black-fire – swallowing everyone who dared fight.

Beyond the hill, smoke rose from the broken truck. Bodies of guards laid head first in bushes. The fighters threw spells, used guns, and bows. Then and there, Zoey’s injured self laid beside a small rock wall leading towards the crematorium.

“Look at you,” sighed he, “-here,” a bubble of blue liquid crashed on her face. Greenish-blue hue healed her injuries to leave her fatigued.

“Stand here as a guard, Tommy, I’ll take care of these idiots.”

Behind the truck’s cover, “-come on man, reload the fucking pistol already.”

“Shut up dude, the boss said adventurers will come to help.”

“Are you dumb?” voiced the other, “-we’ve killed military personnel, ain’t no way we’re leaving here alive. Come on, reload the gun, we need to survive.”

“Is that so,” said a dark silhouette with a foot on the wreckage, “-let me see those guns of yours?”

“Is that you, Appy?”

“Oh, if not the Horned Devno’s. Quite a mess you caused, should I applaud or...”

“Come on Appy, let us go, we ain’t done anything.”

“Oh, you did, that’s the problem,” skipped behind their backs, “-how about dying for me?”

Crunch, crunch, crunch, “-Sergeant?”

“No worries, they’re restrained. The others should be unconscious. Take Zoey to headquarters already. The helpers will cremate the bodies. I’ll stand watch in case anything happens. Some of our men died, they need to know the repercussion. I’ll leave the rest in your hand, Tommy.”

The figure went and vanished behind the heavy crematorium doors. Zoey’s arms wrapped around Tommy and another badly injured soldier, the trio made it beyond the hill with angered glares. Adventurers came in to help, some offered to carry and others to heal.

“Gather everyone,” said he coldly, “-call an emergency meeting.” Red-lights flashed across the outpost, panic ensued. The signal gathered all around the town square. One by one, big and small, young and old, anyone residing in Reforge or any other camp knew to gather around. Tommy stood at the center.

“What’s the matter?” voiced one loudly, “-we have patients to tend to.” Many were furious about the sudden meeting.

“Will you shut it!” screamed he to the noisy crowd. A spotlight beamed on his person; “-I’ve got a few things to say. A party of three stole a truck and tried to head for the capital with tainted bodies. How would you feel knowing idiots brought about the plague. As if that wasn’t enough, Corporal Zoey was badly injured, we lost men in times where we should have been caring for our injured. If not for Sergeant Appy, the mindless horde, yes,” pointing strongly at them, “-you little fucks who aided in the breakout were left to live. I don’t give a shit, good men died for the sake of fucking sentiment. Screw military ethics, anyone involved in the shooting, and I mean, ANYONE, will be sent beyond the walls and tasked with rebuilding the forward base camp. Don’t bother calling the central Guild, Lieutenant Mello’s already negotiating.”

“SCREW YOU!” said the same voice as before, “-we lost men too, how are you going to compensate?”

“Fighters are there to save the populous from monsters, military is there to save the populous from other countries. If a war breaks out, who do you think will fight, you bunch of spineless cowards or us? Think about it, we swore to not hurt our people, and those who we swore to protect turned to backstab us. For what purpose, taking CURSED BODIES TO THE FUCKING CAPITAL?” the rawness and sheer grit had the fighters staring the floor, “-my sister also took part in the fighting, I don’t know if she’s alive. And even if she died, I’d gladly have her be cremated. The safety of the living is most important than those of the dead.” None would have guessed, during the assault on the crematorium, just as the last batch of bodies hoisted over the walls; horses landed as if cannon fire. The garrison buckled, supplies exploded sending men, women, and children off the walls. The alarm of retreat rang. A boulder made for Reforge, *Smack,* to land straight in the center. A charred and repulsive body broke in the company of the rock.

Terrorized glances loomed about the walls; smoke and fire rose from beyond. “CORPORAL,” screamed an intel-officer, “-THE WALL IS UNDER ATTACK BY THE MONSTERS AGAIN.”

“Again?” he gulped, “-call for reinforcement, we can’t let them cross the walls!”

“Too late,” voiced a scared lady, “-it’s over, we’re doomed.”

Ghastly howls of a crawler echoed till the very ground trembled, big red eyes perched atop the unbreeched Azure Walls.

"Oh god," said the few survivors. Its beast-like head veered to the right, the nostrils visibly moved. Drool left puddles, fear froze them in place. "-G-GET AWAY!" exclaimed a wall-guardian.

No time to react, nothing, the crawler went on a rampage, eating, killing, and breaking any fortifications.

"They're getting over the wall," said Tommy, " -EVERYONE, ARM UP, WE CAN'T LET THEM INVADE!"

Meanwhile, beyond the walls, Igna and Undrar were locked in battle. 'Hello again, dearest master. Seeing there wasn't much result earlier, the beasts are returning for a visit.'

"Vesper," gritted he, "-why now?" Two giants pinned them, Undrar did most of the fighting, stamina and mana were low for Igna. A downward swing ended per a single punch, the head of the beast exploded, drenching her in red. "Run, Igna, RUN. The crawlers are rushing the walls. Look behind us, if something isn't done, we're doomed." The defeated beast rose once more, the head healed, "-fuck me," turning around, "-IGNA, GO, I CAN'T AFFORD HOLDING BACK!"

He ran, unable to speak nor do anything. Undrar remained on the other side to fight the coming army. If only he could reach éclair, if only he could ask for help. Ifs and buts clouded the mind as he scaled the walls. A guardian stood strong with sword drawn. She halted the rampaging Crawler on the wall.

Clang, sword against claw, the beast's unhesitant attack had her desperately holding for backup.

Reforge sent no words of support; a single glance told what was needed. A singular crawler managed to force its way inside.

"Mages, summon barriers!" ordered Tommy, "-marksmen, take aim, we'll slow it and give time for the vanguard to strike." It galloped and tore through any innocent bystanders, the glare fixed onto Tommy.

Fletcher ordered students to escape, a bus arrived to forcefully pull them from the battle. Anna, Frost, and Lampard stayed behind per their guild's orders. Everyone else left.

"Sir," voiced Lucia, "-is Ling here?"

"No," said he softly, "-no signs of her, they think she's dead. Don't worry, we're heading to Meke to call for backup," thus, the trainees escaped into the night.

'One at the camp, two on the walls, and multiple engaging Undrar. Vesper, are all these deaths necessary, why are you trying to kill the humans now?' *ROARRR,* the sudden tremor startled him to jump inside the Lieutenant's quarters. There was no sign of life, the screens flickered with the blood of officers. Broken seats, tables, cut wiring, and dangling lights, all pointed to a fight. 'Is that ash?'

Grrr '-behind the counter,' vaulting over the control panel, '-a goblin, here of all places?' *slash,* coins dropped after the black-mist. Sniffles caught his attention, '-below the table?' he pulled a makeshift barricade. The one inside hid her face as if bracing to be murdered, arms held to bear the first blow.

"Lingling?"

"Igna... is t-t-that you?" her petrified expression warmed to cries, "-it is you!" she leaped into his arms and sobbed, "-I thought I was going to die." He crashed against the table, she melted into his arms,

crying and wailing, letting go of her terror and guilt. Her hair and clothes 'were drenched in sweat and vomit. "The officers tried to help... the g-g-goblin w-wasn't alone, t-there w-was a demon with him. A devil, s-stronger than t-the new m-monsters."

'I get it now. The crawler must be following someone's order. And I guess it's someone under the Scifer's army. The devastation has gone for far too long. No way I'm letting another friend die.'

"I-Igna, w-what are we going t-to do?"

"Ling Kole, I have something important to say," he faced the ajar door, "-are you willing to help me, no matter the cost?"

"H-help you?" her cheeks reddened, her hands warmed, the heart raced.

"Yes," breathing an exhale, "-do you accept?"

Chapter 557: A Butler

"Accept what?" her face froze.

"Truth be told," broken screens flashed, "-I'm a vampire."

Screams of help, the sound of bones breaking, the gluttonous groan of the crawler. Mild tremors diffused per their steps.

"A vampire?" she gulped, "-what then?"

"I need, "caressing her neck, "-blood. Your blood."

"I trust you," said she in a soft-spoken tone and compassionate expression.

Slam! the door flung open; a tall figure entered with a pig-like creature in his arms. Fierce eyes submerged in a black veil, rounded white spots marked the retina. A strange symbol ran from the forehead, down the nose, and spread around the mouth. A dark complexion, short hair, and protruding horns. Ling's grip nearly pierced skin, her face paled.

.....

"It's him," she let a whimper.

The seeking gaze struck Igna and the cowering lass. "You there," patting the pet, "-what's your name?"

"My name?" returned Igna.

"Yes," said he, "-I'm searching for a certain individual. My master sent me to evaluate his strengths."

"I knew it," said he under the breath.

"Igna?" her face fearfully stared upwards; "-do you know him?"

"I'm afraid so. Ling, sense that aura. There's no way anyone's getting out alive. Sorry about this," he bit into her neck, a warm tingling sensation ran down her whole body. Her legs and arms involuntarily contracted in wait for something else. Her tears warmed to steam, the cheeks and ears boiled, 's-stop,' asked she in an unconvincing manner.

‘Good, she’ll do. I can just about manage to recover.’ Quick to locate the splattered blood, ‘-if there’s a massacre, all the better for me.’ *Blood-Arts: Bloody Mary.*

“Once again I ask,” the tone came across impatient, “-what is your name?”

“Igna Haggard,” he stood whilst Ling rested inside the makeshift hideout, “-you’re a demon from Scifer’s army?”

“Correct. To be precise, a low-level demon, a butler. Don’t be confused, butlers are more suited to combat than our masters.”

“Demons follow a hierarchy?” he chuckled.

“What is so funny?” the unmoving pale face rose a brow, the petting stopped.

“Where does the inheritor of the Founder land?”

“Very shrewd of you,” the wind blew strong, carrying the vaporized mists of blood and broken skin, “-the inheritor is the rightful king. Though, all considered, most of the lords and nobles haven’t accepted thy claim. Lady Vesper and Lady Kul might have done so, we, speaking as a proxy, haven’t recognized thee as the king. We follow the simple law of survival – the strong rule and the weak follow. What will it be?”

“This supposed to be a fight, right?” ambled till the door, “-don’t worry, I’m not running away,” said he feet away from the demon, “-quite rude of me, I forgot to ask, what’s thy name?” A dead body crashed against the adjacent wall, splattering bone fragments across. ‘Good,’ thought he, ‘-the plan’s coming along.’

“Please, refer to me as Butler. I haven’t been granted a name by my master yet. We of the demon race follow different rules.”

“To each their own,” he stepped onto the broken roof, a fire rose in from Reforge. The singular Crawler spewed fire before reaching the camp. The adventurers broke into teams to fight fire and monster. It wouldn’t take long for support to surround the beast.

“I’d say this fight is getting along nicely,” said the Butler, “-a single Cawn managing to destroy the Azure wall and its fighters. Quite sad, considering their place in the demon-army.”

“Are they not monsters?” inquired Igna walking along with the troubled surrounding.

novelusb.com

“No, they are the ants of our world. Those abnormals there,” pointing to Viola’s fight, “-are a tiny bit up the scale. They’re throw away lives, fast regeneration, and instinct to fight, adapt, and win. The more people fight one, the stronger it becomes.”

“The perfect pawns,” sighed he, “-listen, Butler, are we going to fight?” over yonder, the wall-guardian neared her end, the blade broke, she stood before the hunter and its prey.

“We’ll fight, that much is sure. I’m in no rush, I quite enjoy the sight of carnage. Go,” said he, “-rescue those who need so,” a blink later, “-I’ll be taking this girl as a hostage. Can’t have the inheritor running

out on me,” glancing to the lonesome tree beyond the walls, “-I’ll be there, waiting. My patience has its limits,” a deafening pulse marked his teleportation.

‘A low demon without a name. Guess I have to learn more about the other races. How the hell can he be that strong. Well, at least I know those beasts aren’t monsters. They’re servants of the demons. The beast-like one is named Cawn. Anyway,’ multiple threads stretched as if spider-webs. ‘-all this death hasn’t been lost.’ A halo slowly built around above the head, five dark-crimson orbs hovered at the back. ‘My blood is replenished, let’s fight for real.’

“Runa!” cried the injured, “-save yourself, guardian, we’re a lost cause.”

“Shut up!” strong with a broken blade, “-I’ll uphold my responsibility. I can’t let my sister’s aspirations be in vain.” The blade dropped; a purple-cape materialized at her back; a bow conjured from thin air. The wind swallowed into a vortex.

‘A saint,’ he leaped over.

“BEHIND US!” screamed another.

“She’s open,” gritted Igna, “-well,” using the first Cawn as a springboard, he flew as if a bullet.

“No you don’t!” the arrow fired to hit and summon a black hole. The beast collapsed, blood spewed, the inner-organs crushed, it was as if juicing a lemon with the skin still on, all the liquid poured onto the wall. ‘-I did it,’ light-headed by the first shot, ‘-next target,’ spun to draw another, ‘-are those wings?’ a figure went straight for the head, multiple strokes and it fell.

‘Never underestimate the power of a true-blooded vampire.’

“Who are you?” asked she falling to her knee.

“Kinless. Take the wounded to the lieutenant’s quarters. It’s the safest place on the wall, we don’t know if there are more coming our way.”

“We can’t hold out anymore,” cried Frost stuck in battle, “-between defending and attacking, we drew the shortest straw.”

“Come on,” fired Rena, “-let’s win this fight already, I want to sleep.”

“FOCUS KIDDOS,” screamed the veteran signaling for an incoming volley of spells. ‘Can’t do much with the outpost inches away from destruction. We lose this and innocent people will die.’ He stood on a boulder.

“Sir, Beast-wolves have engaged support from Ground-Zero and Stonegrove.”

“Fucking hell,” the view over the battle didn’t inspire courage. ‘Novices are fighting the monsters, our true might were dealt with in the first engagement. This is a well-coordinated attack. The fast-regeneration, a battle of attrition, don’t think we’ll last. Stamina is running low; our magic users are stuck healing fallen comrades.’

A flash of red burst into an explosion, a lonesome swordsman sliced the limbs, effectively halting the advance. "Everyone, retreat," screamed he, "-unless you have a cursed weapon, there's no way to deal damage."

"Igna?"

"Frost, get back, protect the rest," said he jumping into battle. As quickly as he took off the limbs, the monster regenerated staggeringly fast.

"Anna, you heard the man," cried Frost, "-order a full-scale retreat."

"Go," screamed she at the others, "-I'll summon a barrier!"

'Good, they're backing off.' Three Earth-walls erected, '-how does she have so much strength left. Anyway,' holding one of the orbs, '-don't have to waste time on you, ugly,' *crunch,* the presence exploded into a whirlwind of crimson. Senses heightened, the eyes closed, mana-lines flowed to and fro, the weak-spot shone in black. '-Over,' a thrust ended the fight. 'You're not getting away,' *Blood-Arts: Bloody Mary.*

The halo hardened to reflect the moonlight; '-the real fight starts now.' *Woosh.*

"What happened?" wondered the veteran, "-where's the monster?"

"Defeated," said a messenger, "-a single swordsman defeated it. The wall's free of the uncommon. What now, Sergeant Appy?"

"My orders were to protect the Outpost and not leave under any circumstances. They must have figured its weak spot."

"Report from Stonegrove and Ground-zero, they've cleared the way and are beelining for us."

"Good," leaping onto the grassy hill, "-everyone, retreat. We've won the battle."

Meanwhile, Igna scaled the wall and made for Viola who defeated three on her own. The numbers increased; her stamina ran dry. Going all out would mean more harm than good. "Over here," screamed he in mid-air, "-leave these two to me!"

"Alright," she faced the other two. Weapons drawn, they vanished before making contact.

'Is he toying with me?' glaring the tree, the butler stood grandly and waved. 'Annoying.'

"Igna," exhaled Viola, "-I'm falling back. There's no one to evacuate."

"Could you contact Cousin Julius?"

"How do you?"

"Long story," said he, "-tell him to dispatch supplies and soldiers to aid Reforge. We've taken a massive hit, there's no telling if there could be another attack."

"Alright, take care then," she ran off into the dimming night. Clouds grew to hang before the moon. The cold breeze didn't help but sway the bloodied weeds.

“Commendable, I see you’re not weak. The aura’s changed very much so. How very delicate.”

“Drop the act already,” he breathed, “-let’s fight.”

“First,” the pet imploded into a rapier, “-a contract is in order. If you manage to defeat me, I’ll grant any wish. However, if you lose, I’ll claim this girl’s soul as mine.”

“Deal,” a seal hovered above each party.

“We may be revered as devils, cruel beings who care for devouring souls of others. All is true. The only thing binding us is our unfaltering will of upholding contracts. I hope you understand what this means?” the tall upright figure lowered into an unorthodox stance; “-I’m going to claim her soul.” *Woosh,* a combination of thrusts had Igna in a defensive position. Out of five, he parried one, narrowly dodged two and the remainder landed. ‘Fucking hell,’ injuries flared up left, right, and center, the battle turned into a one-sided onslaught.

“What is this?” laughed the Butler, “-can you not fight off a lowly Butler?” The movement grew faster than he could react.

‘Damn it,’ forced to consumed another orb, the burst of aura made some distance.

“Oh, getting strong, are we?” he smirked, “-not to worry,” the aura around him increased to match and surpass Igna’s, “-don’t leave the back so open,” not even a second, the presence stood at his back. The ghastly white visage licked his lips with blade nearing Igna’s heart.

Blood-Arts: Crimson Threads, dropped to the floor, the forward’s momentum of the Butler led into the sharpened cage of threads. Besides, Igna had Orenmir ready to thrust.

“Smart, very smart,” the body grew heavier, “-leaving an open spot as a trap. Sadly, there’s something you ought to know, I have power over Gravity, *Snap,* four black balls dropped onto the feet and arms. “And now,” smirked the Butler, “-the weight increases every time you struggle, the more one moves, the more it crashes.”

“If you have power over Gravity, I have power over Blood,” the halo broke into massive spikes.

“Well, good try,” he conjured a vortex to swallow the spikes.

“Don’t get so cocky,” crystals broke into splinters that soon made for the Butler’s neck.

“What is that going to do?” he smirked, “-you cut me only a little.”

.....

“That’s the whole point,” *Blood-Arts: Extra!*

The smallest of cuts gave an advantage, blood ruptured the skin into a fountain.

“Good,” he laughed and held the wound, “-sadly,” a giant ball materialized up on ahead, “-blood or not, once someone’s under my control, there’s no way to fight back – gravity is unbeatable.”

Panic set in, the four orbs formed a circle below his body, the ball above broke into countless runes.

“What happens when someone is crushed to death?” coily ambling around, “-it’s been a pleasure,

Igna." The symbols activated immediately pushing him onto the circle, "-there's no escape." Each minute, the pressure heightened.

'-Can't move,' Blood-Arts failed, he could no longer control blood. The Death-element spurred to only go dormant. Out the corner of his eyes, the demon made for Ling, lifting her chin and cackling at his win.

'-Can't hold out for any more,' the skin tore, the pressure grew beyond the body's limit. 'Losing consciousness.'

"Her soul is mine," runes formed on her forehead, "-watch, inheritor, this is the truth of those who are weak." Her consciousness returned, a dagger was drawn, "HELP ME!" she screamed, "-I DON'T WANT TO DIE, IGNA, HELP ME!" the cries of help stung deep, her face, the demon, it all blurred.

'don't...Don't... DON'T' *Crack.*

Chapter 558: Origin

'Silence, ignorance, weakness; am I strong, am I weak. Who am I?' background faded into a paisible 1scape of white and spots of black. Stomach turning screams halted, the bone-crushing pressure vanished, a spot of red floated in the weightless sphere.

'Awaken!' echoed a voice, '-the death element hasn't been awakened yet.'

'I know, I'm weak, there's no way the element will be strong as it was before.'

'Wrong, the time is nigh, a singular rule separates the chosen from the norm. Not luck, not fate, not ability nor aptitude, tis sufferance. Those who are weak know what it means to be strong, those who are poor know the real worth of a fortune, those who've lost all, know the real meaning of gain. You, Heir to the God of Death, have been around the scale of fortune and misfortune. Weakness to strength to the loss of a friend, family, friend, child – being poor, starving for days, and living off the spoil of wars. Forced into cannibalism, nearly dying at the hands of a poison well. The past, the present, and the future, all reflect one thing; the misfortune carried by the heir of death is tremendous. Struggle, fight, and most importantly, rise to a higher plane. The fight will eventually lead to thy downfall. Tell me, art thee willing to sacrifice everything, when the time comes, to allow the world, and time in of itself, to survive, does thee vow?'

"Who are you?"

"Some know me as the all-creating god, some the all-destroying devil. Space, air, time, from the ants on the soil to the birds in the sky. The planets to the meteorites, I'm all and all is me."

"Who are you?"

.....

"Persistent. I'm nothing, just a name, just a thought, an idea, a being without birth and death, one excused from the rules of reality – Kronos's heir made strides, attempting to see and contact me. My name, my title, Origin, the creator of creation, the point where all come in life and leave to death."

"Scifer wanted an audience, you already knew, didn't you?"

“Right. I have no form, no concept of what is good or bad, the balance of life and death has been left for my offspring to handle. Creation and Death, they maintain the order, gods, and demons; angels and ghouls, they perform the same. The world will go down the path of destruction, tis the test of how the next world will be made. In all sense of the word, Origin or not, my job has always been to watch. Everything needed to change. The course is there, available for the chosen to take.”

“Why am I here then?”

“Simple; the death-element broke. You fought fire with fire, revoking life to redo thy birth and take away the misfortune. I admit it was my doing for such a limiter. I watched, I’ve seen, I’ve sensed, the experiences, the relations, all you built – having them crumble... it must be sad, painful, regretful. How am I to judge, how am I to say what is right and wrong. Staxius Haggard, words are sometimes more powerful than actions. Tell me, what is it you want, what will you do, what will happen to the world?”

“I don’t know. The answer to said question is convoluted. Humanity could end today or tomorrow, a plague, a war, an unfortunate accident. The possibility of when the world is annihilated is endless. I was given the will of Scifer to find and uncover the mystery of Origin. I suppose there was nothing more to it, the all-watching being of above, an entity beyond creation and death, the very foundation of reality, the core to eternity. I’ll say one thing, the fate of the world is on the humans themselves. What happens is on them, if death is the path, then death shall come, if life is at the end of the tunnel, then so be it. My role in maintaining the peace has long outlasted its welcome. Controlling a continent for the sake of peace; for the sake of some worthless relations. There is more to the world than meets the eyes, the continent of Marinda. I don’t have any proof to back up my claims... said land was the first host to the gods, the advancement in magic and eventual growth to now, tell me, were you waiting to create the perfect human?”

“Correct,” the translucent tone sighed, “-Creation was able to produce a new reality from your excess of power. How does it feel, to be the foundation of a realm similar to the one you reside in?”

“No idea and I don’t care. It was the payment, and I paid. The question now is, Origin, I understand the concept of good and evil doesn’t apply to thee. I know why.”

“Know what?”

novelusb.com

“The truth. When I referred to you creating the perfect human, the evolution of mages, the start that is Marinda, it all adds up. Someone must have planned it; someone must have had a greater plan in mind. Not like I knew it from the start, it adds up now, Origin. The truth is, you wanted a host, a perfect vessel, someone who rules over life and death. Your true form, isn’t that right, Origin?”

“Who would have thought. Yes, I wanted a strong body to inherit part of my conscience. It’s been too long, so long many can’t even imagine the length it has been. As the foundation of everything, I don’t know how I was, who I am, and how I will be. All is in the hands of the earthlings, their gods, and so forth. I watch, stand in the sideline, move from ant to bird, bear, plants, fish, to the very mana – the boredom I feel... it’s annoying.”

“Origin!” cried he, “-you brought me here for a reason. I care not for what it is, I know one thing – the burden of many people rests on my shoulders. Avenge deaths, take control of people, caring for those I

love, it's all-encompassing and troublesome. My element buckled under the pressure, I was weak, am still weak. The world is too big to rule over, I've had it. My time spent on the realm you so admired was torturous, the fleeting moments of happiness were swiftly taken away. I worked to create an empire to destroy the very world... it all seems pointless."

"Staxius Haggard, why do you speak so openly?"

"Simple, I've met Creation, Lord Death, made Creation's heir my son, and more. Meeting Origin itself doesn't feel any more than another day at work. Henceforth, I'll extend the same offer to you, Origin. Remove the shackles binding my element; in return, I'll grant you a place in my conscience. Bind yourself to my soul, break it, reforge it, I don't care. Push comes to shove, once I eventually acquired Creation's symbol, you'd have to step it and taken my body. Quite the act, who cares about good and evil. As long as we have a mutual understanding, I can put my trust in you."

"Quit the lies," said it, "-no way a human would give up his very soul for something so pathetic."

"Listen, take all of me, I don't care. As far as I look at it, the only answer I find is my death. People, friends, heck, even now, there's a girl who made quite a show, getting her soul stolen. What am I supposed to do, I'm weak, heir to death or not, the repercussions are worst than the actual strength."

"..."

"Why are you silent?"

"I'm at a loss, heir to death, former god of death. You've lost divinity, the ascension crumbled into naught but a vampire with an affinity of magic."

"The Supreme God is on a rampage, awakening titans and fiends of old. Tis what lord death said, the balance has been toppled. The foundation of reality isn't a matter of care."

"Are you suggesting I forsake my duties?"

"Correct," he smiled, "-forsake the duties of carrying the burden of everything. The way I look at it, the foundation has served its purpose. Multiple pillars have been erected to support additional laws. There's no reason to be bound by a never-ending show as a bystander"

"True, no one even knows of my existence. As far as the world is concerned, Creation is the real founder, I'm naught but..."

"-reason enough!" he interjected strongly.

"Staxius Haggard, do you understand what you're requesting. Extending a hand means giving most of what you have, my consciousness could easily rival and replace thee."

"So what? just means you have a vessel for personal use. I'm honestly done. I thought I got stronger... my attempts in trying to save those closest to me ended in naught. Override my very being, I grant the permission."

The endless scape of white marred by black trembled, the color bloomed into a lovely meadow of flowers and green trees. The blue sky shone brighter than ever before, the sun, of which was an unnatural pinkish hue, added more sweetness to the surrounding. The body landed firmly, a whiff of the

wind carrying the fragrance of the flowers gave a cleansing feeling. Warm tinges of heat on the skin, the relaxing caresses from the all-encompassing breeze, an unreal sight.

"A nice place, is it not?" said the same voice as before. A slender figure climbed the gently sloped hill with a straw hat and a light-blue dress.

"Origin?" asked he squinting through the bright path.

"Correct," said it, "-also," a snap later, "-I'm a man as well." The straw hat changed into a normal cap in addition to a t-shirt and shorts.

"It doesn't matter," said he, "-man, woman, who cares."

"Good answer," he moved to a standoffish tree, "-Any questions?"

"Not really," he smiled, "-I know. You've decided, haven't you?"

"Yes," staring the blue sky, "-this place is my recreation of an idyllic landscape. The creative vision is limited, when I think of beauty, I think of nature. How about you?" he glanced over.

"When I think of beauty, experience comes to mind. An old building that has stood strong over many years. A charred battlefield – it's beautiful, everything is weirdly enough. Honestly," breathing deep, "-this being my resting place doesn't seem too bad. It's truly beautiful."

"Staxius Haggard," said the fair-skin man, "-I've decided. I'll accept your offer."

"Good to hear," he sighed, '-I guess this is the end for me. Origin's going to take over my body, soul, and mind. Feels rather unpleasant... forsaking my responsibilities and carrying into a never-ending scenic world. Death can be quite pleasant...'

"Don't jump to conclusion," said it.

"Excuse me?" the brows knitted, "-what ever do you mean?"

"Let me explain. Most of my powers are used as the foundation; there's nothing more to it. Thanks to that, my consciousness is allowed to wander around without goal nor drawback. In the context of your world, I can't use magic, I can't fight, and I can't help. What I carry is knowledge, and that's all. I've experienced the start to the eventual end."

"I get it. Merging with me will most definitely break my conscience, maybe my soul and even my very existence."

"Yes, the risk is too much. Believe me, I want to escape this never-changing scape of boredom."

"Well," he held out a hand, "-I'm a man of my word. I said I would give my vessel, and here it is. Break it, I don't care. I'll accept the risk and more. What I want, is a mutual understanding, I want to trust you, for that, you need to trust me."

"I don't understand, why go through so much trouble?"

"Because," he smiled, "-deep down, I'm an idiot."

“Not that I get it, but,” he held out a hand, “-I accept your offer, Igna Haggard. May we merge as one, may we be the same in mind and in soul. I, Origin, give my all to you.”

“And I, Igna Haggard, accept and give my all to thee, Origin.”

Hand in hand, the imaginary world shattered, “-thank you, I’m grateful.”

“It’s been a good existence,” the eyes shut, “-farewell.”

Chapter 559: Conditions

Piece by piece, like water down the drain, the picturesque landscape faded into nothingness. White smoke marked the end of multiple scattered pieces. An undone puzzle, a world of confusion and fear. Origin stood strong beside Igna, both held hands, the bodies closer than before. A blinding light carried on into reality; the crushing sensation stopped.

Dark and vile, as multiple nights had been, the harbinger of the worst deeds humanly performed. Dagger to her neck, “-Hey, don’t squirm so much, I’m not as gentle as you’d think.”

“Let me go,” the nauseating sound subconsciously forced her to sneak glances at Igna. ‘Wake up...’ thought she – what had been a body was naught but a pile of sludge. Not bone from blood, not organs from the skin, nothing... a blob and that was it.

“You see now,” said he, “-it’s not worth resisting. Besides,” throwing a glance at Totrya, “-they told me to test the inheritor. Might have taken it a bit far. If the man couldn’t handle my powers, then it’s done for. I’ll take my prize and leave.”

“WHAT ARE YOU THINKING,” backed to embrace the tree trunk, the visage slumped, the bravado of rushing adrenaline channeled into fear, plain and simple.

“There’s nowhere to run,” said he drawing a magical circle, “-I’ll lay claim to thee and thy soul, be my servant for the rest of eternity.”

‘Igna...someone, save me.’

.....

From the genesis to the eventual restart; else referred to as the end, the never-ending cycle of creation and destruction; merging with Origin shattered the already cracked Death Element. The consciousness, memories, soul, and his very existence, the memories living in other people, all were subject to tension, a slight miscalculation could rupture everything. Still, ambling down the tunnel, Igna found himself holding hands with another entity. No thoughts crossed the mind, not the ulterior motive – subconscious left alone and unsupervised. The vortex assaulted the defenseless consciousness to a multitude of attacks, emotions, possible futures, and many more. Origin kept on walking, hand in hand, guiding the self-proclaimed idiot down the path of ultimate trial.

“Welcome to the kiosk of all.”

“Kiosk?” asked he in a drunken stupor.

“Wake up,” cried Origin.

"My head," a yelp forced him onto the ground, '-where am I?' looking back, nothing was visible, there was something there, then again, there was not. The eyes didn't see yet it was present. Suddenly, when the eyes could see, he couldn't sense. "What is this place?" the head boomed at a regular interval – a feeling closely associated with standing in the middle of a giant bell and having it be hit.

"Difficult to explain," said he looking down an upward shaft, "-look here."

"I'm looking, what is it?"

"Origin," smiled he.

"That's you?"

"Yes, it's taken the form I wished it to take. Normally, there's just nothing. You've experienced it – looking back to see something than not, tis the same amplified. We're at the start and end of all. Many deities have tried to reach this level of power, the true ascension, I'm sure Zeus wants to do the same."

"Interesting," he sat with legs dangling off the edge, "-I mean, why show me this. I'm going to vanish anyway," glancing backward, "-see, my body is at the start; figments of myself are stuck in the tunnel – reminds me of a filter."

"Yes, that's right," said he giving in to the natural charm, "-it's a filter. We came here for a purpose, I accepted the offer, though, my conditions haven't been met yet."

He nodded and expressed the will to listen closely. This feeling of being wanted had him startled a little, "-excuse me," he coughed. "-To put it simply, you're now the purest form of yourself, the soul, and your very existence. Here is where we merge." The other Igna's were the manifestation of the Death-Element, dormant powers, Blood-Arts, and countless hidden traits all separated and held in cages. Some volatile and some docile, everything made sense, or so he thought.

"I know, I know. Shall we get this started; I've already bid my farewells."

novelusb.com

"Wrong," said Origin sprawling on his feet, "-my conditions are as follows. We're to become one, and to that end, I want you as my ally, my friend, my everything. Do you hear, heir to death, no, never mind, right at this moment, you're nothing but Staxius Haggard. A soul in the sea of eternity, a nonconsequential plant in a forest."

"Listen," interjected he, "-what good will it do, hearing all of this?"

"Don't you realize, I'm offering another deal for us to become the same."

"Wasn't it the same as the first time?"

"No," the head shook, "-not at all, what you offered was for me to take over YOUR body and mind. What I propose is that we both become one."

"An alter-ego?" asked he perplexed at the preposterous offer, then again, the whole thing was absurd as is.

"More than an alter-ego, something better," paused at a heightened pitch, "-sorry, got carried away. Staxius, thou said to trust in thee. I ask the same, trust in me."

"Honestly," he paused, "-I had made amends in leaving everything up to Origin. Looks like there's more to come. Go on then, do as thee wishes."

"Good," he jumped in to hold hands, "-thou accepted me and my burdens. Igna, let me tell you, the weight I carry is more than one could ever hope to imagine. Things might not be the same when we return, I've said it before, I can't increase your strength, that is something you'll have to do on your own. My goal is simple, to experience everything, to stop the boredom, and to see what is there for me to see."

"What will I lose in the process?" asked he.

"My consciousness will take up a lot of space. You need not worry, tis been settled. We're to join as one," both figures merged, the tunnel seemed to move in reverse. Soul pulled to join with the other figments, one after another, the vision blurred, the vortex spiraled to engrave onto the side of his right hand.

'The pain, the suffering, fleeting moments of bliss, what a troublesome life he's led. He survived bonding to me, we're now the same – sharing memories, I don't have any personality so it shouldn't affect much. It's true, that soul of his is close to a miracle, haven't seen anything like it before. Being able to hold an unlimited number of symbols of power – he's handling my symbol for what it's worth. There's no name to describe such a being. The death elements healed, we're back to reality. Time to wake up, Igna.'

"Time to collect my payment," smirked the Butler.

Over the wall rose smoke and ambers of a rising flame. Sounds and cries barely made it to where they stood. 'It's happened,' the body rose in from the sludge, healing itself at a faster rate, '-I'm back. The memories of Origin, I know, I see,' the skin grew pale, the crimson eye turned vibrant like a crystal inside which one could see the whole of eternity. The disrupted vampiric transformation returned to the norm, black hair, the skin darkened in color, he stood the same as before with exception to the eye color.

"Quite a troubled past," said a voice.

"Is this the alter-ego you referred about?"

"Yeah," said it smugly, "-you've seen my memories. I don't know what you had to give up to assimilate me, should be fine, I don't sense anything amiss."

"Well," he stood unknown to the butler, "-one thing is for sure." *Blood-Arts: Extra,* "-I feel stronger than before." A simple gesture sent the demon flying. "-What was it about not having magical abilities and power?" he dashed after, landed a downward punch, plunged the butler deep into the ground, then skid to stop. The remaining trail was left to steam.

"Well, I never said I was going to be useless. Besides," a snap later, the consciousness swapped, "-I can take control whenever I want, and so can you. Heck," another snap, "-we can share the same body at once." In that transformation, when Origin took control, the pupils changed to pure white, when Igna was in control, tis red, and when both were one of the same, crimson and white.

"It doesn't feel weird," said Igna, "-even when you're in control, still feels like me, like I'm doing the things I want."

"That's the beauty of it all," said he proudly, "-we're the same. A shared consciousness, meaning, everything I do is your doing, and everything you're doing is mine."

"I see," clutching the hands, '-I wonder what I gave up for this?'

"You're alive?" asked the Butler crawling from the crevasse, "-I thought I killed you."

"Yeah, I did so, honestly speaking," he turned without care and held the demon by the neck, "-why... tell me why?"

"A test, a test," said he begging for life, "-Majesty, I did so per orders of the other demons."

"Other demons," the grip lessened, "-so, what about them?"

"They asked me to test you, the carnage here was nothing more than to provoke a reaction."

"A reaction, from all this death?" scanning the surrounding, '-should I not be angry at this... I don't feel anything, why am I calm, what's the matter. Look at Lingling, she's injured, I should be angry, still, I don't feel anything.'

'I figured it out,' said Origin swapping forth, '-you've lost your emotions to accommodate me. Weirdly enough, once I'm at the forefront, I feel the anger and hate, all this destruction for the sake of provocation, it... it makes me b-boil.'

'Alright then,' they shared the body, '-if you can feel, its good enough. I can't feel anything when I'm in control. Well, Origin, this is a good experience to learn. Feel what it's like to be human. I'll experience the emotions through our shared bond.'

'Damn it,' he gritted.

'Alright, I'll take over for now. Origin, emotions are a powerful asset. I'd say it pains me to have lost them... would have been a massive lie. It's the same as before, I'll slowly become a killing machine. Walking down the same path as I did. I envy you, being able to experience the finest details in life, romance, camaraderie, familiarity, all born from the emotions.'

'Don't be like that,' said he, '-I can feel yours too. The regret, it hurts.'

"Majesty," gulped the demon, "-what now?"

"I won the contest. Go back to Totrya, I'll hold onto the singular wish for a better time, is that alright?"

"Yes," nodded he, "-thank you for the mercy, majesty."

'It's not mercy, I just don't care.' The butler disappeared into the night. A gust blew hard and strong. Ling cowered under the tree; stuck in terror, head between the knees, sobbing and waiting for death.

"Ling," said a monotonous voice, "-wake up, hey, this isn't the place to sleep."

"I-Igna?" the shell broke, "-it's you," tears flowed, "-I THOUGHT I WAS GOING TO DIE!"

"Me too," said he, "-come on," she jumped into his arms, "-we need to get back."

"Igna..."

"Yes?"

"W-why are you s-so calm?" she subconsciously backed away.

"Oh, so you've noticed," knelt to give a helping hand, "-the experience of seeing death in the face has scarred me for life. I can't feel anything anymore. It's the truth, I want to be angry at the carnage, but I can't. Even now, I say this as if to justify myself. I know one thing is for sure, I've lost my humanity."

"You can't be serious," taking his hand, "-who cares. You saved me, that's reason enough. Thank you, Igna."

"No thanks needed," he stood, "-can you stand?"

"Y-yeah, somewhat." She clambered with the tree as support, a lonesome branch cracked after too much strain.

"Careful," wrapping his arms around her waist, "-don't force yourself, come on," in a quick motion, her head rested on his as was per a piggyback ride.

The graduation turned horror; one could say he graduated. Not as an adventurer, but as a higher being. Someone harboring Origin itself for the price of his emotions. Some things were best left as is – Igna slowly made way to his prior self, Staxius. Who was he, the question remained. With another consciousness thrown in the mix, the world moves on into perhaps its darkest hour. A few people died, the pain seemed naught, 'I met Origin. Heir to Kronos, Scifer Rethem, I've completed the quest.'

Gunfire and explosion grew by each step, 'this world is cruel. There are more things to come, thank you, Igna. I understand more than I would have. I can let go freely, my conditions have been met – good luck on the adventures ahead, dearest partner. I'll take my rightful place in the subconscious alongside thy emotions. Till the day comes where thee calls on me, goodbye.'

Chapter 560: Reforge's aftermath

'All I saw at that moment, was the view from above, from behind someone who rescued me. The ruin that had rained on camp Reforge, the many years of peaceful fights against monsters turned to a massive failure. In my mind, as well as the others, we knew, today's incident was only begging to arrive. The amount of death, blood, and bodies all over, the decomposing corpse of the new beasts. I was hopeless, my friends were killed, I don't even know if some survived. Still, on those warm solid shoulders, I found myself praying for it to never end. Reality and expectation were different, from where we stood, the mild fire seemed like nothing but a distant flame.'

"Hey, are you alright?"

"Yeah, I'm fine," replied she stuck winding the moments leading to her friend's death.

"Don't fret too much," they leaped off the wall, "-all if this happened because we were weak. Good men died protecting the youth, no way can we back down." An elaborate lie to put the fearful mind at rest when in pain, either combat with another fiercer emotion or let it ruin thyself, or so he thought. Now,

the world through the shiny-white eyes felt different. Everything seemed to have a different form, a nostalgic feeling. Halfway till the camp, Origin stopped talking and said to call on him if ever things got out of hand. Thinking nothing of it, they continued. Occasionally trampling over perished men; disfigures, disembowel, others, just an arm or leg. Thus, on Monday the 8th of March X100, the sun rose bashfully to the east, lighting the road coming from Stonegrove. Stamina ran low, mana was naught, not to mention, a pretty lady on his back. Putting another foot forward, the once deserted road came in view. Trucks and ambulances went up and down, the aftermath of the battle was handled with much experience. Teams, mostly the military, broke off to handle and care for the injured. A makeshift healer's camp settled at the center of the outpost. Damage sustained was to the defensive walls and watchtower. Reforge stood without much harm. The fires were unfortunate trucks caught under attack.

"Heal my comrade, please, he's barely alive," cried one.

"Are you dumb, my wife has priority, is that how you treat her for having served your useless asses for years?" screamed another.

'What is this?' ash and dust hovered from the ground, people in bandages were left to rest under the shadow of broken walls. Both men and women buckled under the pressure, supplies ran low – few arguments broke. Unable to see much, they passed the main gate. Lines separated injured, only a limited number of ambulances were present. Those considered at death's door were given priority, however, those without hope of rescue were left to die a painful death. The triage held no regard for gender, race, and age. To make matters worse, the curse of monsters grew to infect more than a few.

.....

"You there," voiced Corporal Zoey, "-is that Ling?"

"Yes," answered he curtly, "-she's sleeping."

"Good, take her inside, Corporal Tommy's waiting," to which, her strong gesture continued in guiding the survivors. The strain on healers wasn't to be desired, forced to drink mana potions and heal without rest. Casting a wince of discomfort; the door opened to the cleaner interior of the headquarters. Medics ran along the halls, another makeshift medical camp for injuries beyond magic's reach.

"Is she injured?" asked a flustered nurse, "-take her inside, follow me."

"No, no," he interrupted her jog, "-I need to see Corporal Tommy, this here is his sister, she's just exhausted."

"I see," glancing up and down, "-fine, sorry. The influx of patients is too much – I wonder where the doctor is. Take care," and off she scurried with a knee-high uniform and curly hair. Watching her felt even more exhausting, running here and there to engage anyone who entered, trying her best to save the lives lost.

Knock, knock,

"Come in," said a rough voice.

"Excuse me," said Igna, "-Corporal Tommy, I've brought Ling," the table wasn't alone, as the guests spun in curiosity.

'Viola, a sergeant, and the corporal.'

novelusb.com

"I see," said Tommy, "-thank you for bringing her, is she alright?"

"Might have sprained her ankle, apart from that, she's ok."

"Good put her on the couch. I'll ask the officers to prepare a reward."

"No," he refused, "-use the money for more supplies. Outside's a mess. They could start fighting any second."

"Well Corporal," voiced the sergeant, "-that's the boy I was talking about. He single-handedly killed a few Crawlers by reports from the Wall-Guardian and adventurers. A very courageous lad, there's another report about him rescuing three girls and running off into the fog to bait the beasts." Though the words felt encouraging, the mannerism and tone didn't match. A suspicious glare, hard-pressed brows, and a rigid stance.

"Come out and say it," said Igna nonchalantly, "-what's the underlying intent. Let me guess, you think I'm a traitor... I guess having survived the fog, killed the threat, and rescued a few girls isn't enough, now is it. A Silver-ranked adventurer should have been on the front lines, not a porcelain rank. Tell me how that is fair, huh?" slamming the table, "-I tried to save my friends, but they were killed. Ling over there barely managed to survive; do you know how bad the fucking battle was... I guess not, you were busy fighting amidst yourself."

"Igna," voiced Viola.

"No, I'm not done giving my report. Guess what, a low-tiered demon was behind the summoning, we barely escaped, everyone else died. Still, I'm a traitor; or so what sergeant Appy figured. Matter of fact, I wish I was the one responsible for this fucking massacre, culling the incompetent is one way to get rid of bastards like you off the continent."

"That's enough," voiced Tommy, "-Sergeant, the boy has a point."

'Why did I lash out... I thought I lost my emotions...'

'Hey, being heartless isn't good for discussions. Leave that side to me,' said a faint whisper.

'Origin's doing, whatever, still my doing.'

"I apologize," he side-glanced the window and spun, "-if not for some imbeciles, this could have been avoided."

"Sergeant, with all due respect, I find it hard the adventurers would instigate a rebellion for the sake of fighting. I was there, I know how hard it was."

"No, Tommy, there's someone behind it, a voice that birthed all this misunderstanding."

"Should I really be hearing this?" inquired Igna.

"It's fine," said Appy, "-go on, get some rest. The Lieutenant will handle the rest."

“Alright, I’m off then.”

“Wait,” voiced Viola, “-here, have this. I’ll talk to you in a bit,” the door locked.

All the noise and confusion led him to a quiet boulder at the back of the cafeteria. Here, the shadow covered from the sun, and the ailing fighters weren’t complaining. Sat against the stone-brick, reality sank in. ‘Origin’s soul and mine are merged. I can see his memories, the amount of knowledge – a walking library. It’s like the Arcane Library from the Boon of divinity but way better. I wonder why he decided to sleep in the subconscious. That outburst earlier...’ the phone toggled on; ‘-Viola brought a spare battery. Scary how fast it swallowed the power.’ Accidentally pressing the front camera button, ‘-huh?’ opposed to the usual brown and crimson, the eyes were white and red. A white marred by little specks of light-blue, purple, and more running along to the pupil. Colors only noticeable up close. ‘The mark of Origin too, the increase in power earlier was nothing more than the Death-element healing itself. A boost from our binding, a rush of mana similar to a rush of adrenaline. I’m beat, he’s right and wrong. Even if he can’t fight, I was granted the greatest weapon of all, knowledge, unparallel and unrivaled. Noticed it early,’ the head hang back, ‘-the outburst was an automatic response. I didn’t think, only acted – had a few outcomes in my mind, and they turned out to be correct. Mana manipulation, the waves, the foundation of the arts I created, Mana Control, I can visualize them without effort now. The very core of what is real and what is not. From the ground, the sky, to the building, everything has mana and life bestowed on it. Maybe,’ holding up a finger, *Mana Control: Vortex,* the thin lines broke to lock onto the index, *Mana Control: Regeneration,* it swallowed to refill the element of which was a famine glutton. ‘Gathering mana from the outside is more effective than producing on its own since it’s more unlimited here. Plants to animals, everything produces mana, it’s like air. I wonder if there’s a way to bypass my element and conjure magic from memory alone...’ paused for a few minutes, ‘-there actually is a way to bypass it.’ Without effort, balls of different affinity of magic hovered over each finger. ‘-Origin, you’re an angel, I swear.’ *Dispell.*

An argument arose in the distance. “Come on, hand me that potion, my kid is about to die!”

“You damned fool, who brings a kid to the fucking outpost?”

“Dude, seriously,” the father drew sword, “-if my kid isn’t saved, I’ll slaughter everyone till I kill myself, you hear!”

“Sir!” interjected a few survivors, “-everyone’s doing their best to survive,” said Jen trying to break the fight.

“Shut up, I don’t want to hear anything from you, woman,” refuted the father; the intent grew murderous.

“Anyone who’s fool enough to bring kid must suffer. My wife is more important, she’s nearly dead, come on, the curse’s going to reach her brain any second, understand.”

“Come on,” added Frost, “-there’s no need to fight.”

“Shut up,” cried the father, “-my daughter’s going to die if you don’t give her the potion. The bleeding won’t stop, come on, take pity on her!”

“The doctors said they can’t help the girl,” added Rena, “-the wife has a chance at survival.”

"Yes, that's why give me the damned potion," the sword unsheathed, "-I'll take it by force, I swear," the eyes watered, "-I'm sorry panda, father has to take care of a few things."

"Papa, i-it's f-fine."

"No, don't worry, I'll save you," said he falling back to her side, "-I'll get the potion and you can stay here with me."

"No," chubby rosy cheeks lifted in bliss, "-I'm going to see mother and the angels. Don't worry papa, it's fine." Silence befell the medical camp, nurses and healers were ashamed. The adventurers hid in fear.

"All of this happened because a few idiots tried to save a dead body," exclaimed the man, "-my daughter never did anything to deserve this. You fools rushed in to fight the military, how smart was that. Once you were defeated, you turned, ran, and shot my girl in the folly. ARE YOU SERIOUS? NOW THE ONE RESPONSIBLE IS DEMANDING TO SAVE HIS WIFE, A FUCKING WHORE WHO LED THE FIGHT. My girl and I sat and watched, we didn't do anything... if you think I'm going to stand here and do nothing," he stood, "-you're wrong. I'll kill the damned bitch if I need to!"

"My comrades were killed, doesn't matter if I kill a father and his kid to save my wife, you hear."

"Back-off," cried Lampard, "-no one needs to get hurt."

'Is that what happened,' he stood atop the cafeteria, '-Tommy did mention someone instigating the fight.'

"Come on," the fighters split into halves, one for the kid and one for the wife, "-I'm going to kill YOU!" Overwhelmed, Rena drew her sword in self-defense – a traumatized helper leaped with a dagger in hand. *Slash,* blood-splattered both sides, Leonard turned to utmost horror.

"-R-Rena..."

"Chill out," said Igna pinning the helper with a dagger through his back, "-this one's a bit on the mental side."

"Let me go," he gritted till foam escaped, "-I have to avenge my sister, she died trying to save worthless pieces of shit."

"Slow down there, buddy," the dagger dug deeper forcing a deafening cry of help, "-else I'll have to kill you."