

Death Magic 581

Chapter 581: Investment

"You drive a hard bargain." The multitude of questions was yet to be answered. A plan to build a wall stretching from one end of Arda to the other. It would cross across countless forests, plains, meadows, hills, and much more. The task in of itself was impossible if not for Julius's presence. Lack of material, lack of money, and lack of people. Before the Vorn incident, he would have rejected the offer without mercy and care. Witnessing the feat accomplished in mere hours spawned the will to follow, the will to see what amazing things Igna could accomplish. For the first time in ages, he witnessed the cunning of the man who founded the Federation. The schemes responsible for breaking the toughest of men, a negotiation style of which Serene inherited. Never go into a deal without aces. Always control the field from before the battle, start the war at one's discretion and end it at one's peril. Tis the way the world raised Igna. The newer generations didn't understand how cruel war could be. Weapons and machines made the prospect of death more or less swallowable. The same couldn't be said a few decades prior. The era where sword and magic tested one's might. Death didn't come easy, swords were dulled, uncleaned, the spells were slow and potent. The mere mention of battle would have shivers down anyone vaguely familiar with the idea.

With a heavy shoulder, the night went on till one in the morning. The star stuttered night flickered by approaching the jet. Another bus was readied at the airfield. Igna stood with arms closed whilst Julius dozed off inside. 'A shooting star,' he thought.

The jet landed without much trouble. It taxied to a hangar. Opened to a chilly outside. Dimly lit surroundings and distant footsteps were common and frightening. Massive iron gates gave way to the abyssal night.

"Where are we?" the interior sparked into a clean white and grey area.

"Ladies," said the prior well-mannered man, "-we've arrived." They exited one by one; each scanned the new location at their own pace. Some checked the ceiling, others the floor, and some didn't care.

"Good," leaned on the bus with arms crossed, "-welcome to Rotherham, member of Vorn." The enigmatic man who left a great impression stood distantly.

"Young master," bowed the butler, "-I've brought them as was instructed."

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"Thank you," replied Igna, "-was there any incidents?"

"A few men were killed."

"Our side?" he glared.

"No," the butler returned, "-we exterminated the wretched pests."

"Excellent. The services were most satisfactory."

"Please, young master, you praise me too much."

“Good job must be rewarded,” said he, “-please, ask of me anything you’d wish.”

A few meters away, “-Nola, any idea what’s happening?”

“He’s noble,” said Enna with mouth opened, “-I didn’t expect him...”

“What makes you say that?” wondered Sheiwai, “-looks the same to me,” voiced she.

“I can’t put it in words,” said she kindly moving a stray braided wisp behind her ear, “-there’s a familiar aura of grandeur, one inherits to a noble-born.”

“You saying he’s stuck up?” added Yuna in jest.

Clap, clap, clap, “-was the journey troubling?”

“N-no,” stuttered Enna.

Looking about, “-ok, everyone’s here. Tis rather late. I’ve arranged for lodging, follow me.” In the bus and towards the hotel, the streetlamps snuck through the windows and onto the sleeping idols. Igna sat at the back in the company of the slothful Julius. On the opposite side sat Nola, her head rested against his shoulder.

“Igna,” mumbled Enna, “-who are you, tell me the truth.”

“I’m the son of the Duchess of Rotherham. This here is my cousin, a member of royalty. I’ll explain the details later tomorrow, rest up for now.”

“No, I need to know,” argued she, “-else I won’t be able to sleep.”

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“Fine, go ahead, ask away.”

“Were you responsible for the termination?”

“Yeah,” returned he nonchalantly, “-I won’t go into the details of how. Just know, I paid 2 million Exa for the freedom. The ball is in thy court, I’ve invested. Without a contract, idols are basically jobless.”

“I know,” she exhaled, “-well, as long as Nola doesn’t have to suffer, I’m fine with anything.”

“Say it with chest,” interjected Yuna, “-you know, Igna, Enna here was dead worried after hearing about Nola’s suicide attempts. We tried arguing against the leaders of Ansoft...” a chilling stare from Enna halted the flow.

“Don’t stop there, carry on,” urged he.

“-Fine,” ignoring the mother-like glare, “-they blackmailed us into staying silent. If we disobeyed, not only would Nola be hurt – the reputation of Vorn was at risk. They were adamant about treating us like shit. Faced before power, it’s better to kneel than fight.”

“A fair judgment,” nodded Igna, “-take the punishment face down. Endure to survive, I respect it. No one is in the wrong, don’t trouble yourself.”

"I have too," argued Enna, "-I decided Vorn should run. We're in god knows where and no options going forth."

"Take a look around you," said Igna, "-look at the buildings, look at the streets and scenery." The dark outlook on life shook, words alone didn't do Rotherham justice. The place was a scene straight out of a movie, peaceful and active, warm and chaotic, the perfect balance. One side lit the three towers and the other, the actual town. A calming blueish hue. As if by telepathy, the driver softly turned on the radio to a mixture of jazz and pop.

"Where are we?"

"I said it before. Rotherham" said he in proudly, "-everything around here is owned by the Haggard Dynasty. In Alphaia, I was a guitarist trying to make a name. Once in Hidros, the responsibilities are more so troubling. Anyway, I have a habit of rambling. We've arrived at the hotel. The waiters should be courteous enough." On his feet and out, "-I'll see you tomorrow." They parted ways on the stairs leading into the hotel lobby.

The 4th of April, time 06:00. The alarm rang, sleep broke with a carefree arm sprawled onto the face and chest. "-Cousin," mumbled Igna, "-wake up." They laid on the living-room carpeted floor.

"What a great night's sleep," yawned he.

"Cousin."

"Why so grumpy in the morning?" asked he utterly clueless to the situation.

"You're strangling me, get off."

Apparently, they passed out on the floor right after arriving. The strain of the day prior caught up. Time showed 09:30, the hotel lobby sprawled in activity by the leaving guests. Vorn was still asleep, to which, Igna took the time to handle a few things on the exchange of yesterday. Julius made for the capital, preparation for their arrival.

"Young master," called the receptionist, "-the ladies will be down at any minute."

"Thank you," he nodded. The restaurant opened to the pampered streets and walkways of Rotherham was a treat unlike any other. The more attention one paid, the greater became the attention to detail. Many took it for granted, those in the know of reality, were most often stunned by what the town offered. The food was very delicious for a moderate price. Igna wasn't one to forget favors. Sai of the Eiko Dynasty, the stagier that worked at the Guild in the capital was offered a job here, at the hotel, a prestigious and sought-after place of work. There was no greater honor than working besides legends of the culinary world.

One after the other, the six ladies ambled into the relatively full restaurant. Once at the table, half of them laid their head without care for tact. "May I take your order?" asked a friendly waiter. "Yes." A few moments later, the aroma watered their pallets.

"Is the farce over?"

"What?" shrugged Morgaria in a forced squint, her choice of clothes risqué to say the least. As a model, her curvy physic and natural beauty would have men flocking with a single snap, "-I don't understand."

"Ladies," he breathed, "-there's a limit to patience. Would it so much to ask than to properly act in public. This isn't some lowly bar, there are guests. Please, be respectful to them if there's any shred of decency. I don't know and frankly don't care about the lifestyle in Alphaia, this is Rotherham. Idols should lead by example, and I don't mean learn proper ethics, or fake your persona, at least behave like humans. Do we have a deal?"

"Sorry," she laid back to straightened the posture.

"We're still tired from last night," added Nola.

"Excuse us," bowed Enna, "-won't happen again."

Breakfast arrived, "-I do apologize for my harsh tone earlier," said Igna.

"Don't fret it," smiled Yuna, "-the scrumptious meal makes up for it."

"Enna."

"Yes?"

"Have you decided?"

"About what?"

"The future of Vorn," said he in a brazen tone.

"Care to explain?" inquired Yuna, "-We came here under the assumption that you had a job for us."

"That I do," said he, "-still, forcing my will doesn't seem right. Being bound to another contract wouldn't be fair. It's the same as escaping prison to be locked in house arrest. The scenery might be better – freedom is still forgone."

"Well," spoke Nola, "-anything is better than the damned freaks of Alphaia. The town, the people, the overall atmosphere is so much better. I feel like I'm at home. They're people who believe in me, I want to play the guitar and sing without constraint. I want to join Apexi, Suga of Xius is the guitarist I aspire to meet."

"I'm joining Apexi too," firmed Morgaria, "-Nola's too explosive, she needs her limiter," with a coy smirk, "-besides, I'm empty inside. People see me for what's on the outside and never for what my heart holds. Depressing, I know. I want to learn more about myself, which is why I want to experience the climb to the top again."

"I don't normally fit in," said Yuna, "-my outfits and style are darker than what people expect. Still, I started this journey because of friends. Leaving those two alone is a ticking bomb."

"You granted us a miracle," proclaimed Enna, "-I don't want to fail the expectation. My doubts are cleared, I'll willingly join Apexi."

"Where ever Enna goes, I'm following," mumbled Nerilina.

"Guess it's my turn," said Sheiwai, "-I failed as a friend. I should have stood up for Nola. Nothing like the present. I'll work twice as hard from now on."

"I see," he nodded, "-the mind is made up. Guess I was worried for nothing. Welcome to Hidros once again. Vorn will step into a new age from today forth."

"What next?" asked Enna, "-do you have a plan?"

"Obviously not," he smirked, "-all I promised was to invest in Vorn. My job is done, what comes next is up to my cousin, Julius. He'll handle matters going forward."

"You're not going to be our manager?" inquired Nola.

"What gave that idea?"

"..." silence went about the table, "-I mean," said Yuna, "-going through all that trouble just to leave?"

"Ahh," he pouted mockingly, "-you girls are going to miss me?"

"Shut it," fired Sheiwai, "-don't make me puke."

"Jokes aside, I'm not competent to have six lives entrusted to me. I'll help in whatever way I can. The rest is up to Apexi. Make me proud."

Five hours later, they arrived at the capital, the headquarters of Apexi. The second time he had been there. A massive compound of various buildings and workers. A radio station to a studio and even equipment for broadcasting across the continent. Not only was it a place for Apexi, but others could also rent the massive infrastructure and shoot their own shows. Alongside the brick wall stood a gymnasium. Most game shows were filmed here. Talk shows about upcoming idols and such were in a separate area.

"Julius, is it true Igna's coming?" wondered Alicia.

"Yeah, he's escorting Vorn."

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'Vorn's coming to Apexi. I never expected such a move. Six highly competent world-class idols. The agency's going to grow even farther.'

Chapter 582: Travelers

A well-made investment, the ladies of Vorn were quick to sign the contracts. Skipping over the trivial discussion and tour of their new working environment. The team arrived at the reception hall where Xius had previously hosted their nightly escapades. Few workers were left traumatized. Even so, they wanted to party even more. The two groups met and instantly hit it off. The conversation was gentle, hectic, and subtle, depending on who led the charge. As a whole, their welcome party was well received. Many up-and-coming managers and their clients were present for the signing. The news soon made it to social media. Apexi's page boomed in follower counts. Not only so, but Phantom's other companies also reached out to the ladies to model various products. Some other television shows extended offers for them to participate. The second coming of Aceline's era, or so thought the foolish. Not a second coming, rather, the genesis of Apexi's claim to world dominance. Vorn and Xius made the outrageous goal graspable.

"Quite the party," commented Igna. The room emptied, leaving Vorn and Xius to bounced about random ideas.

"I know right," said Julius, "-this will only grow our influence. The sheer potential is unfathomable, I can't believe my eyes. They're gems, unrefined gems waiting to be polished. They have so much potential, I can't stress it enough."

"Igna," called Enna, "-about the contract," she smiled, "-thanks for everything," the others followed to bow.

"Now, now," said he in a cool manner, "-don't sing my praises yet. There's much to be accomplished. Don't sell a bear's skin without killing it," turned to face Alicia, "-ladies, I'd like you to meet my partner."

"Hello," said Alicia in a very befitting outfit "-nice to meet you."

"Pardon my asking, are you a model?" wondered Yuna.

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"No, no," she gently shrugged off the attention, "-I'm nothing more than a manager."

"You're very pretty for a manager," said Sheiwai suddenly stood behind, "-very gentle hair smells nice too."

"Thank you for the compliment," said she stepping back.

"Cousin," spoke Igna, "-I have a proposition."

"Go ahead," said he.

"I'd like to make Alicia the new manager of Vorn," turned to the concerned parties, "-if they don't mind, of course."

"But Igna," argued Alicia grabbing his hand, "-I'm your manager."

"Sorry, I don't think much of the world of music. More pressing issues wait far in the distance. I can't leave you idle. Help Vorn grow, it's a favor for me."

"Don't look at me like that," her eyes averted shyly, "-I'll do it."

"I knew I can always count on you," he smiled, "-Enna, is it settled?"

"Sure," they nodded with a certain look of disdain. The question was clear but none wanted to speak. "Are you two dating?" inquired Nerilina nonchalantly.

"Yes," replied Igna.

"We're a couple. Sorry for the confusion. Shall we discuss what to do next?" the ladies soon parted to a different room. Nola and Enna chuckled on the way out.

"Goodness," smiled Julius, "-you're as popular with the ladies as I remember."

"Cousin, surely you jest, they were most definitely attracted to thy princely charm."

“Oh please.”

5th of April, the jet reached the border of Arda and Dorchester. Serene waited for the courteous welcome. A tall bridge went over the bottomless canyon. A single glance down and vertigo would punch the strongest of men. For the only access point, security was lax. Most of the faction's forces were in border skirmishes. “I still can't believe the absurd plan's happening.”

“Leave it to us,” smiled Igna, “-guide us to Apid's village.” The trio moved south on an off-road jeep. The lush forest was as strong as memory served. Over a few mild hills and across the denser forest, the voyage came to a stop at around 17:00. A whole day's worth of driving. The scale only became apparent, Serene's pessimism didn't aspire much confidence.

“Here we are,” said she. Thatch roof, bricked walls protected by a broken wooden fence. The land was clearer as trees were lesser common. A village of demi-humans, one of the lucky survivors from the invasion. “Here,” at the entrance, “-Igna, Julius, the rest is up to you boys. Believe me, when I say this, no one will be angry if you give up. We'll be in touch. Keep strong and watch yourselves. Monsters are very frequent.”

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Wings sprouted, “-I'm off, take care,” and off she bolted into the clear sky. Julius threw a worried glance; the villagers weren't very inviting. Mothers called on the children, the door was locked.

“Cousin,” called Igna, “-we're stranded in a waring province.”

“No need to make it dramatic,” grinned he, “-I've always dreamed about going of an adventure. This is as good as it gets.”

“Let's do this then,” a brotherly fist bump marked the start of the journey. A week, a month, vague numbers, the flight from one end of the province to another took on average 5 hours. Thinking about it made it even more depressing.

“First order of business,” said Igna, “-we'll follow the plan. The wall follows the outline of the border villages. The more we head West, the louder will be the battles. 12 villages and 2 towns, we'll help in the war effort along our journey.”

“We represent the Blood-King's faction. Anyone who gets in our way will die,” a long-sword firmly held on Julius's back. No armor, rather, enchanted clothes courtesy of Phantom's alchemic and enchantment division. Orenmir and Tharis were at arm's length.

“Supplies will last us at least three months,” said Julius checking inventory, “-mana induction as fuel. Spare weapons, a sniper rifle...” he squinted, “-Is this necessary?”

“Cousin,” smiled he, “-we're in a foreign land. Who knows what danger lays ahead. Phantom sure was nice to give the armored jeep. I just wish it had a mounted gun.”

“Don't get greedy,” refuted Julius, “-let's start the quest then.” Parked near the broken gates, a quick walk inside gave chills.

‘We're not invited.’

"There's been reported kidnapping from this area," commented éclair, "-adventurers turned rogue. Slavery is a good source of income for the decrepit."

Ruffling from a bush caught their attention. Doors and windows were sealed shut. On closer inspection, a wild fox jumped to flee into the forest. "False alarm," said Igna, the pressure had both on edge. The village well sprouted into the distance after a few houses. The dried ground felt most unusual. "Help me, father, don't leave me to die!" clambered toward the southern exit.

"Cousin," said over the earpiece, "-we've struck gold. The timing couldn't have been any more perfect. Follow me, we're going on the roofs, don't make noise." They hovered aided by green-colored cloak embedded with wind spirit.

Men stood in an arc as younglings were dragged by the heels. Rough-looking men in armor violently punched and stump if the captive resisted. 'éclair, enhance the image.'

Toggling to infiltration mode, the image zoomed, the noisy lips transcribe to transmit over the channel.

"Good on ya to send away the kids. The boss said to pillage the farm. Looks about right, the war effort has cleaned the fields. As long as they're something of value, we'll be on good terms. Don't bother contacting the guild, our gracious king has decreed the extermination of any inhuman beings."

"What about the women?" asked one with a knee to a young boy's throat.

"Don't care about 'em," said he, "-worthless old hags. My client likes younger boys."

The men watched hopelessly; two boys were taken away. Alas, the one who cried earlier had a boiling knife slice away his tongue. The pitiful soul had his face dragged along the dirt with a trail of blood.

Crouched an on the lookout, "-cousin, isn't the war supposed to be westward?"

"You're right. Probably bandits working for some higher power. Starting the wall will bring attention. We should reach at least 25% completion before alerting the army. I'm quite impressed, don't you feel anything towards them?"

"Why would I?" he sighed, "-war is a harsh reality."

"Alright then," they jumped, "-let's go talk to the village elder."

The hoodlums vanished over a meadowy hill, "-hello," said Igna.

"Who are you?" inquired the village elder, the men's hairs stood to no avail.

"Wandering travelers," added Julius.

"I'm sorry, we cannot afford to provide rations or give basic courtesy. What is it you want?"

"Information," smiled he, "-those bandits. Do they have a hideout somewhere around here?"

"Judging by your sword," a comment to Julius, "-are you intent on fighting the bandits?"

"No," refuted Igna, "-I'm interested in knowing their leader. Killing bandits will never bring closure."

Thus, the interrogation led the cousins to a cliff overlooking a fort a few kilometers from the village. Soldiers were garrisoned, the stables were loaded and so was the on-lookers. "Are we still in the same era?" wondered Julius.

"Yes, traveling by horse is more efficient farther out the capital. Don't judge yet, they have rifles."

Unbeknownst to the leader, a middle-aged fighter in military-issued uniform, the earlier scouting party returned with prey. "-Is that all?"

"Sorry boss."

"No matter, our lord's off to parle with the council. We'll hold the fort until further orders," salutes rocked the cacophonous outside, "-adventurers, head on to the other villagers. The mistress's looking for a young able man to recount mythical stories."

"Oh, mythical stories, huh," they winked, "-nobles are weird. Consider the job done."

Down the cliff, "-cousin, follow the bandits. Don't kill them, if they resist, kill the weaker member. We'll need to keep leader for information."

"What about you?"

"Isn't it obvious?" he stood; "-I'm going to lay siege to the castle."

"There are at least a hundred soldiers in there."

"The worry is misplaced. Cousin, I was never meant to defend. Swordsmanship to magic, my strength lays in death and destruction. Don't ever forget that."

"Alright then," and off they parted ways.

"Who are you!" hailed a guard.

"A traveling adventurer," said Igna, "-I'm looking for work." A nod to the opposite guard, the message carried on inside. 'A square fort, a single entrance, plenty of open areas to get shot from. The aging looks about right, must be recently occupied. From the looks of it, no strong foes.

"No word," returned the guard, "-go on and scram, filthy adventurers."

'Alright then,' * Void Aspect: Flame Bullets Variant,* two shots, and two dead. 'Better make quick work of this mess,' *Death-Element: Shadow Step.*

"SHOTS FIRED!" cried the onlooker, "-sound the alarm, we have intruders," the garrison scrambled to the yard with guns in hand. A bustling mess of gunfire and blood gathered a crowd. Fighters fired and fired without result; the lonesome shadow seemed to teleport leaving flash images. The brave who tried close-combat was killed instantly by a single punch, *Mana Control: Fire Element Variant – Azure Touch.* The slightest contact burnt the victims in a scorching blaze.

"Corporal, we're getting slaughtered," barged an injured guardsman.

"How many?" asked he grabbing a rifle.

"One."

'He's there,' a punch transitioned into *Mana Control* '-here's to you, old friend, *Purgatory Flames Variant – Mynsa,* a beam of fire howled through the crowd.

"What the-" the walls broke leaving the yard open. A single man stood surrounded by corpses and a raging inferno, *Blood-Arts: Bloody Mary.*

"CORPORAL," the remainder crawled to form a defensive line, "-leave it to us," posited and ready, "-FIRE!"

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"How childish," a blink left a line of headless men, "-guns are supposed to be the strongest weapon known to men." Blood dripped from the glimmering blade, "-doesn't do much against someone faster."

"Who are you?" distraught by the slaughter.

"No one special," replied Igna sat on the desk. The scarlet nectar channeled into a single dark orb.

"Kill me already," cried the man.

"No need," the orb flung up and landed in the mouth, "-my comrade should be here any minute."

"I didn't expect this place to be clear," commented Julius dragging the adventurer's collar. A few minutes later, the pair of Corporal and adventurer were tied to a pole. "Time for a pleasant chat."

Chapter 583: Empire's Invasion [1]

A disgusting scent of burnt flesh loomed. The destitute fort stood weakly per the earlier mess. No bodies nor blood, for the slaughter of a garrison, the place stood ignorantly. Prior evidence was left for the vultures and roaming monsters to relish. The two returned to the village.

The land and people had strenuously changed over the past month. For once, the peace taken for granted was stolen without much effort. The demi-humans, speaking for all the communities, weren't as taken back as one might expect. The short-lived peace would run dry eventually. Said doubt remained; with it, they lived abstractly, distant from the potential of being betrayed. There was an example of an inexperienced maiden. A single heart-break and the lass figured all the be the same. Looking down on relationships, spouting self-gratifying nonsense about pain, and not trusting dogs. In reality, the hardened attitude and wounded heart aren't much to be feeble about. After a while, sadness turns into pride, and it's said pride that so many confused with sadness. They so easily refute relations to not be in pain. Bracing for impact, or so they say. There and then, similarities of the people and the maiden can be drawn. Not that it would help. A person who finds satisfaction in self-pity, loathing, and depression, will never make an active effort to see the light. In word they might say empty sentences without much substance. The fact became apparent the more time spent at the village. People were in poverty; children were sold to slavery. The parents, cried as they did, were empty. Empty to losing their flesh and blood. Most often than not, to drown the pain of losing one, they made another. A woeful night glimmers by the sweet tender sound of love. A pinkish hue of disgust from Julius.

"Can you believe them?" asked he around a campfire.

"Don't trouble yourself," said Igna. The village was far enough to not be of mention. A short drive through rough terrain led to the border.

"Cousin, wouldn't it be possible to use the border as a trading route for boats?"

"I don't think so," returned he, "-the downward current might prove difficult. The ragged edges and uneven passage deter the strongest of monsters. What does it say about humans then?"

"Don't know and don't care," said Julius readying two bowls, "-about the kids," a pot bubbled over the open fire with the aroma of some low-level monsters. Igna worked his magic in Dungeon-Style cooking; the basics anyway. A good meal would last them the night.

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"Leave them," said he, "-didn't the Corporal say they were offerings for a warmonger noble of the holy church's faction. We're adventurers, no better way to infiltrate their ranks."

"Are you honestly saying to sell the kids?"

"Not sell, we'll gift them. Besides, what good will it do? The parents have given up hope of seeing their children. Famine will strike the village soon; they'll be sent out to survive. It's a cruel place. Don't forget, we have a job to do. This isn't a vigilante mission."

"I understand," he paused, "..."

"Cousin, if something is bothering then say so."

"Fine. I don't agree with leaving the innocent to perish for our gain. I see why using them as bait might benefit our efforts. Still, I don't think it would reflect beneficially on the task ahead."

"Dear cousin," the bowl emptied, "-virtuous as they come. Fine, we'll rescue the children on one condition. The wall must be erected. Time's 17:30, we'll work the entire night."

"About that," he stood confidently, "-I have an idea." A plan soon laid on the jeep's hood, "-I'll create the wireframe of the wall first. It'll give us plenty of time. As long as I've mapped it mentally, when the trip is over, I'll only need to activate the spell."

"And it shall form like an erupting volcano."

"Questions?"

"About the frame, is it tangible or visible?"

"No," he smirked, "-tis the advantage of being the heir. Such trivial things aren't praise-worthy. Let us take the empire by surprise."

"For someone who refused at first," grinned Igna, "-I'm glad you're on my side."

"Likewise," he alluded to the prior blood-bath.

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Dusk until dawn, the two worked in full. Bypassing the internal reserves aided tremendously in conjuring the wall frame. éclair drove the vehicle, Julius sat cross-legged on the roof with arms stretched out. Igna stood at the back and provided the necessary mana. Bit by bit, the long night flashed in an instant.

Shadows landed on the path ahead, the sun rose behind. For an arduous night, Julius awoke from the half-dazed state. “-Fully refreshed,” said he.

“Speak for yourself,” exclaimed Igna. Monster flesh vaporized, items were dropped, greenish-colored liquid marred the visage. “The monsters are a rowdy bunch at night.”

Leaped to a stumble, “-are you ok?”

“No worries. I’m a nightwalker, sleepless nights are fair game. Creation sure requires a lot of mana.”

“I know,” said he, “-my reserves would be more potent.”

“No need for concern,” he held out a hand, “-we’ve barely made progress. Let’s continue till the village.”

And so, a few days passed till the 7th where they crossed the village. Between hunting, cooking, and creating, their bonds tightened. Along the way, both relinquished the title of cousin, it was simply Julius and Igna. Things were hopeless to the west. Another village was laid to waste, the holy-army marched for Noctis’s Hallow. Any village or town was naught but supplies. Tending for so many forces didn’t aspire confidence.

A castle-town named Hect, controlled by the Blood-king’s Faction, stood peering a violent river. For those in the know, Hect was both an unbreachable fortress as well as a merchant town. The dividing river Cell was one of the longest and widest in Arda. Any attempts in crossing carelessly often ended in tragedy. The viable way was to take Hect’s bridge or move thirty kilometers south to another castle-town.

One could confidently say, Hect’s bridge linked the north and south. Earlier said day, messengers escaped to the castle. “My lord,” said one on his knees, “-intruders have breached the perimeter. A force of 600 is approaching.”

“I see,” wine-glass in hand, “-notify the council. I, count Sebat of Hect, shall defend the town with all my strength,” a nod later, he reappeared atop the castle walls. “How goes it,” he asked the onlookers, tribesmen of various besieged villages.

“My lord,” said one, “-enemies are approaching at a steadfast pace. They have two flame-shooting machines leading the assault.”

“When do you expect them to be here?”

“Three hours I’d guess,” said he.

“Good,” wings sprouted, “-I’ll handle the affair on my term. Close the castle gates, and ensure we have enough men guarding the four cardinal points. Notify me instantly if we’ve been breached.”

“As you order, my lord.” A flap and the slender, pale, black-hair Count flew over yonder, in his stead, sat a cat-shaped ghoul.

Tanks at the front, trucks at the back, and a few jeeps with mounted turrets. A battalion’s worth. “Ready up, men,” headquarters moved to a clearing in the forest. The behemoth’s stationed with sights on the castle. Launching a strike would deter any potential of squabble.

'Same old, same old,' hovered Sebath, '-they're always sending their men to die. What's the purpose of these meaningless battles?' No moments rest, he slammed onto the first tank, used his blood-arts the slice the other cleanly. Guns fired to no avail; ghouls of the dead rose to turn on one another. "Another battle lost," said he.

"It would appear so," retorted the Lieutenant Colonel.

"May you rest well." A merciful death. Thus were the battles at various locations. Day in and day out, people were sent to their deaths. Not that the army knew any better. The reports always returned the same, a loss after a grievous exchange. Both sides lost quite a lot of fighters. A battle of attrition, the information network was controlled by the nightwalkers. A few had already infiltrated the enemy's force. Alas, all the intrigue would perish at the arrival of the inquisition. Figures dressed in white and golden outfits.

On the 10th of April, Count Sebath was bested after a hard-fought battle. He managed to kill the entire platoon until a face-to-face with the inquisition. A shy-looking boy with a crest of their gods on his cheeks. Bystanders said they fought on equal terms. An arm lost for the boy whilst the Count lost his life.

'I was bested!' the body revived inside the fortress; '-they're using the powers of the vampire slayers.'

Same time, at the neighboring castle-town, deathly screams plagued the day. Gunfire echoed; the grass smeared with the blood of comrades. Onlookers were shot instantly.

"Let me go," cried a man, "-their blood, let me cleanse them from this earth!"

"Wait a moment," returned a muscle-man of a specimen, "-orders are to stay put."

Primed and readied, the signal to assault arrived in stride. "-Attack," ordered the first lieutenant.

"We've made it past the village," exclaimed Julius. The date showed the 11th of April. Cracked skulls replaced by the chirping of birds. The scent of blood overwhelmed by the flowery grassy aroma. Muffled deathly yelped turned whistling of the wind.

"This is bad," said Igna, reports came from éclair.

"What's the matter, you look gloomier than usual?" inquired the prince making breakfast.

"The Holy Army's called onto their inquisitor. Castle-town Ect was breached and laid to waste."

"It shouldn't be a problem," said Julius, "-Hect's there for support."

"That's the troubling part," he watched daringly, "-the count was bested in battle. Hect couldn't be conquered. They baited us into fortifying the wrong stronghold. Ect fell almost instantly. Two inquisitors led the assault. Those were the last reports from the defenders. No words yet. Any strategic advantage Hect had is gone. A siege without conquest, the strategist is smart."

"I guess they'll launch campaigns from Ect." firmed Julius.

"Yeah, we're not out of trouble either. More forces are gathering in the capital."

A morning chill blew, the sun rose – there was much to do. The kids returned home a few days ago. The softhearted Julius created lands of golden-colored wheat to fight famine. The villagers accepted graciously.

Meanwhile, a council of the clan leaders was called. “Good morning ladies and gentlemen,” said Aurora, “-we’re in a dire situation.” A flashing globe showed the state of war, “-Count Sebath can do only so much to hold off the attack. The enemy’s moving to surround Hect.”

“So what,” argued Alaric of the Onyx’s clan, “-the count should be strong enough to fight.”

“I’m afraid that’s not the truth anymore,” said Serene regretfully, “-the inquisitors are using Vampiric slaying arts. We’re vulnerable.”

“Vampire slayers, they must have made a pact with demons,” proposed Lord Balthazar.

“Not so simple,” added Serene, “-they were blessed by the king himself and granted a crest of power.”

“He’s their source of power?” inquired Julia of the Sabbath clan, “-we should aid a fellow noble.”

“No,” refuted Elvira, “-Sebath is a member of the Blood-King’s clan.” (Blood King’s faction referred to the alliance. Blood King’s clan referred to Elvira’s clan) “-it’s our responsibility. I say this not in disrespect, we’re thin in numbers as is. The inquisitors are an immediate threat. Losing Hect would be our end.”

“The more reason to call levy our forces into a frontal assault,” said Gabrielle of the Lie par le sang clan.

“I kindly oppose said idea,” nodded Serene, “-we’ll lose worthy members for nothing.”

“What then?” fired Alaric, “-are we to stand here and do nothing?”

“Wrong,” smirked Elvira, “-I have someone who’s an army alone. Don’t worry about a thing. We’ll reclaim Ect and destroy the others. Losing now will mean defeat.”

“Tis the first I’ve heard of such a man,” added Julia in suspicion.

“Oh, he exists. A certain individual upon whom the god of war watches fondly. A boy birthed from war, bound to war, and will live for war, Igna Haggard.”

Chapter 584: Empire’s Invasion [2]

‘Why did it happen now?’ a barrage of bullets plastered the castle walls. Daring fighters were knelt behind the battlements, taking time to peak and shoot. Attackers were on both sides, Count Sebath laid in bed, bleeding and panting from the revival. Servants ran and begged to be used as food, “-please, master, have our blood. My children are at home waiting. We can’t let the castle fall!” pleaded an injured demi-human. An ear was chopped. “If not for the help you gave, we would have died as sacrifices to their gods. It doesn’t matter, my lord. We owe our lives. Look at me, look at us,” he pointed back, “-we’re wounded beyond recovery. Some of us might not last the month.”

“Silence,” resounded the heavy voice, “-how dare you,” feet to the cold floor, “-I will not take my people’s life for mere sustenance. This blunder is my fault, the people shouldn’t be blamed. I’ll fight with or without your blood, understand?” Words of courage, the howl of a dying beast. An oval face drooped

to a frown, the wrinkles beside the nose were at odds with the cheeks. The tension sprawled to knot the glabella into an expression of determination.

Way to the east; Lady Elvira contacted Igna. "Hello," he answered.

"I'll get right to it, we're at the risk of losing our stronghold."

"Ect's fallen and they've moved to pincer Hect?"

"Yes, éclairs kept you informed."

"I suppose," glancing at the progress, "I guess I can help. What are the orders?"

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"Repel the attack and reclaim Ect. We've already levied an army to fortify the garrison. They should be there tomorrow. Have the castles be cleared then, can I count on you?"

"What's the reward," asked he, "I'll do the job regardless."

"I see, you want an incentive. How about becoming a lord?" Her decision garnered initial scrutiny. The task ahead was tremendous. With that in mind, the clan leaders nodded in agreement.

"A lord," he paused, "let's go over the details after the battle."

A gale softened the meadowy scape ahead. "Julius," voiced he, "we may need to head for Hect."

"We can't make it even if we start now."

"Oh yes we can," he faced the front with a resolved expression. Things were about to change, there were but a few tells to decipher Igna. Between the soft gentle smiles to lower guard and the emotionless expression, the latter was a sign of a plan. 'Here I thought I'd never use this spell.' *Ancient Magic: Gate,* a vortex spiraled on the path.

"Come on, Julius, let's head out."

A blink later, the jeep appeared behind a thick line of trees. Hect stood before them, a castle of immense proportion. Between the castle and them, laid the Empire's invading army. A fatigued figure hailed atop the rear exit, tanks were lined and ready to strike. A single shot and the walls would be decimated. Down to the bloodied stone path, bodies of previous fighters were impaled and put on display. Few of them breathed, the fortunate died – a nauseating sight. Sebath's blood-arts were but the ability to cleanly cleave objects in half. As many Count-ranked noble vampires, the fighting ability was strong. 'I'll fight as long as I can breathe. They were so sincere in offering their blood, I wish I could have taken their offer, the drawback to my arts is drinking the blood of a virgin. The worst limiter possible. For a half-blooded nightwalker, I've made it far enough.'

"Who are you?" wondered a boy with a mushroom-shaped hairstyle. Freckles were heavy down the nose and chin. Multiple daggers rested at the hip and across the chest.

"Count Sebath of Hect. I'm the lord of this castle-town."

"I see," returned the heavier-looking man, "-we're the inquisitor of his majesty. Our noble duty is to clear the land from inhumane and slay the devil's offspring. You, nightwalker, are the servant of the devils."

"Then so be it," said he proudly, "-I've defended this castle from your kind since the dawn of the invasion. I'd rather die than to fall!"

"Elan, have at it," ordered a stern-looking man in uniform.

"As you wish," said the boy, "-consider the job done, Major Eiol."

BANG, "-arggg," the distant sound of breaking, sprinting troops. The front castle gates were broken. 'Damn it,' stuck in combat. One moment at the front, the second at the back. Multiple enchanted daggers dug into legs and arms. Blood poured, no regeneration, the ability of a vampire slayer isn't in raw strength. Tis the gift to injure the nightwalkers. 'This is bad,' he coughed, "-the inquisition is too strong for my level."

Flaming red hair ambled onto the battlefield, an inferno lit on her ankle and wrist. "Who are you?" returned the muscled man, "-a witch?" he glared.

"Shut it, concrete face," *snap,* a mist-like entity dashed to punch, a second later, the castle walls cracked by the inquisitor's body.

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"Who are you?" wondered the major pushing up his glasses.

"Me?" turned to stare, "-I'm the herald of death. I serve the one true ruler of this pitiful dimension."

"I beg to differ," a smirk had him fade into a crowd of soldiers. "-Heed my call, loyal servants of our god. Look down upon thy scopes and take aim. The heretics must be killed else the land will be sullied by their filthy blood."

"Dear oh dear," whispered another, "-the words mean so much," a fragile silhouette blocked the retreat, "-don't run away so fast, dear major," tickling whispers sent the mind into a frenzy, "-else, you might lose out on a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity."

"UNHAND ME!" he cried.

"Too bad," an arm went through the back and out the front, "-I'd rather claim thy soul instead," the beating heart crushed. "Disgusting, I've soiled my outfit."

"Your fault," said Intherna, "-could have used magic and avoided the mess. Adete's going to be angry. She hates cleaning the blood of cloths."

"Don't take the high moral ground," refuted Gophy, "-I'll scrub the damned shirt myself."

"Good luck," winked she, "-those frills aren't going to be easy."

'Who a-are they?' face to the hardened ground, '-why's the army not fighting. What's happening here?'

"Impressive," resounded a distant voice, "-you have angered the will that burns deep in my heart," rocks crumbled, the muscled man stood without trouble, "-tis a mighty blow!"

"Ond, are you ok?" asked the boy.

"Yes, our gods blessed us with immense power, none shall dare land a hit."

"I understand," said Elan, "-we ought to take it seriously."

"Let's," a white spiral burst on towards the skies. Angelic wings sprouted, "-heathens who dared sully the good name of our Lord shall pay with their lives."

The petty squabble about laundry halted, "-Gophy, look, their magical power's increased."

"I know," nodded she, "-how very comical."

"YOU DARE MOCK US?" a scream and they charged to hand-to-hand combat. Each strike sent shockwaves, the ground rattled, the speed went from normal to inhuman, trees flung, tanks lifted with a single hand, the monstrous battle bared no logic.

Meanwhile, inside the castle, the sieging army rushed to kill on sight. "-GIVE UP WEAPONS!" said a nun, "-our lord is graceful to bestow hope onto the believers," pink-hair cloaked, a golden staff bearing a jeweled orb, "-we need not fight." Fighters were forced into a circle. Habitants of the town were dragged into the yard. Men, women, and children were separated. The pink-haired priestess stood atop the walls with hands stretched out to the gods. "-fighting isn't necessary," said she. A convenient lie as the hostages were held at gun point.

"GO TO HELL!" screamed a bystander, "-YOU PEOPLE KILLED MY FAMILY IN THE NAME OF GOD. TIS NOT JUSTICE!" the people revolted. "GO TO HELL, GO TO HELL, GO TO HELL!"

'hell... hell.... Hell?' faint murmurs wrapped about the entrance in a malicious tone, "-HOW DARE YOU!" the soft-hearted visage drowned in a psychotic hue, "-SLAUGHTER THEM," her nails dug deep into her reddened cheeks.

"My lady, they've surrendered, there's no need to kill them," said a presiding officer.

"You dare defy the will of a priestess?" she latched onto his stead.

"No, I apologize, priestess, I was a fool." The arm rose to give the order. Once a place for joy and happiness, the muddled yard was often a playground for the children. Traders often brought toys of which the Count generously gifted to the newer generation. In the people's minds, Hect was the only place to live and survive. A friendly lord and a cooperating community. All changed, the blueish sky socked in the grey sadness of the fallen. Friends killed, parents lost, the guard's bravado leaked away.

Woosh, "-where there is a will, there is a way." Two figures hovered onto the walls.

"What your names?" glared the priestess.

"A lowly servant doesn't have the honor of knowing our names," returned Miira, "-Would you please do the honors?"

"As you wish," said Julius aiming the rifle.

"MEN!" screamed the officer, "-TAKE AIM AT THE INTRUDERS!"

"How very thoughtful," snickered Miira, "-too bad," her shadow passed by, "-they can't move." *bang, bang, bang.* The battle ended with the inquisitors being dragged outside.

"Count Sebath, my name's Igna Haggard, I've come on order of Lady Elvira."

"I see," the head rose, "-forgive me, my strength's lost."

"Don't worry," a kick sent the nun crashing onto the floor, "-there, she's a virgin. Go on and drink."

"DON'T YOU DARE, I WILL NOT BE DEFILED BY SOME LOWLY NIGHTWALKER!"

"Defiled?" glared Igna, "-lady," he grabbed her throat, "-you don't understand the mess you've caused." He ripped her clothes, leaving only the undergarments, "-the people you've killed, they linger. Count Sebath, would you kindly wait a few minutes. There's some business we need to settle."

"UNHAND ME!" she cried.

"What are you up to?" wondered Intherna.

"Crest," said he, "-look for her crest. She has the blessing of the king. Once that's taken away, she'll be nothing more than a peasant."

"DON'T," her lips tightened, "DON'T LAY YOUR HANDS ON ME!"

"Gophy," he stood, "-please, take care of her wretched personality."

"Ouh," her cheeks flushed, "-a chance to play. Don't mind if I do."

"G-get a-away," her hands trembled to pull the weight, "-d-don't t-touch m-me."

"Stop moving," sighed Igna. A pole pinned her to the ground, the screams echoed inside the town.

Blood-Arts: Bloody Mary. "-Here's a gift," said he, "-eat the apple, we'll speak in a few moments.

Gophy shook in anticipation, '-can I?' said her face. "Take them to the dungeon," ordered Igna, "-Miira, Intherna, the other two are ripe for the picking. Do as is pleased, get information first, afterward, kill 'em or set 'em free, doesn't matter. As for you, Gophy, Count Sebath doesn't seem intent on drinking her blood. Ravish her as you'd like." Long were the days gone where the goddesses cared about humanity. Torturing the heart of the living, testing their will, claiming their souls. They had the authority. In a way, torturing the inquisitors was justice to the fallen. Albeit sadistic and cruel, tis the world. The plea for mercy echoed empty, the dungeon came to life.

"Igna, who were they?" asked Julius. The starry-night befell a melancholic landscape.

"My friends," replied he, "-Goddess Gophy, Intherna, and Miira. We've only recently reunited. Look down there, the people are celebrating the deaths of their comrades. It's admirable, to send off the fallen with a smile. The battle isn't over, Ect stands over yonder."

"With them on our side, there's no way we'll fail."

"I agree," he smiled, "-they're my trusty guardians."

Clop, clop, clop, "-Igna Haggard."

"Count Sebath, how are the injuries?"

"Much better," said he peering over the edge, "-the townsfolk are grateful."

"It would have ended very badly," added Julius, "-why didn't you take the blood of a virgin before heading to battle?"

"I don't want to force my people into my battles. It's selfish and inconsiderate. Hect is a peaceful place, I wish it to remain so. Might I ask something?"

"Go ahead."

"What happened to the bodies?"

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"Turned into ghouls," replied he nonchalantly.

Chapter 585: Empire's Invasion [3]

The crack of dawn, 12th of April rose upon the bodies filled bridge of Ect. The Empire's forces gathered. A temporary headquarters erected under Captain Ursela's command of the advance recon unit. Counting among their Company was four platoons. Two of which were sent as scouts in the prior sieges. After the defeat of the first platoon at the hand of Count Sebath, the second platoon split into staged attacks of 4 squads. A strategy to buy time, the remainder followed behind, once the Inquisitor joined, the rest was history.

The Empiric flag flowed majestically atop the conquered fort. Hostages were treated as slaves, chained and bound for the capital. Transport would arrive later in the afternoon. Currently, the third and fourth platoon remained at a hundred strong. Those dispatched to Hect were yet to be heard from. Three inquisitors on a single mission was overkill, a thought shared amongst Captain Ursela's men.

Blood on the clothes, burnt flesh, ripped out hair, broken teeth, swollen face and cheek, a walk inside the dungeon blasted the repugnant smell innate to decomposing bodies. "Igna," waved Gophy, "-what time is it?"

"Good morning," said he, "-quite an artwork," a comment to the naked unconscious body of the priestess. Her pink hair awry off the table, metal cuffs bound her upright, scars layered about the stomach. At some point, the goddess forcefully ripped out the lass's fingers. The crest of the king laid in between the breasts. "Just look at the state she's in," he watched closely. "-Seriously," a worm-like beast wiggled about her ribs, "-Orwal, really, where did you even find them?"

"A lady shan't reveal all her secrets," a coy aversion.

'Orwal, the name of an insect monster that thrives in the darkest reaches of dungeons. They have a habit of infiltrating living beings to survive, the pain's reportedly the worst a human can experience. The hotter and more active the host is, the better the chance of survival.'

"I'm not done," said she, "-let's wake her up," freezing water slammed onto the lass's face. The right eye barely opened, her jaws shivered, the right hand trembled.

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'Hh-help m-me.'

"Why not pray to your god?" wondered Igna, "-here, have some hot coffee." *AHHH,* "-her scream sure is satisfying. Anyway, where's Intherna and Miira?"

"Two cells away," said she, "-I'm returning to the Shadow Realm. I need a shower, the battle isn't won yet."

"What about information?"

"Already reported to éclair," they hugged, "-see you in a bit," said she.

"Thanks for the help," replied Igna.

"Don't mention it."

"H-help m-me," begged she, "-I'll d-do a-anything y-you w-want."

"No thanks," a kind rejection, "-looking at the aftermath of Gophy's invasion. There's no way you'll survive the week. She's replaced the blessing of Lucifer with the Curse of Akina, the princess of Balone. As a woman of God, thee must know, Balone is the mythical realm of fallen demons, Akina's their goddess, a lady killed by nonother than the god of Kreston."

"W-What?" the eyelid forced open to no avail.

"Sorry, the wrong name, she's known as Akina the whore princess of Balone in the holy scriptures." Unable to properly display her emotions, the dulled glimmer in the eyes said all. "-You understand now, don't you. The Curse of Akina, the defiled princess, is for the victim to endure her pain and bear the seed of countless demons. You're now a breeding ground for Balone. Enjoy the week, I'll be expecting great things," stood at the gateway, "-here's a little present for keeping my friend company. *Mana Control: Healing Element Variant: Full body Restoration.* By the restful green hue, the priestess's face returned to its prior angered self. The psychotic expression seemed to be engraved deep in her soul.

"T-the c-curse of A-Akina t-the whore. I-it c-can't be real?" she cackled, "-i-impossible. I'm a child of God, he will never allow one of his to be sullied."

"You're right, he'll save you, at least that's my hope." The ground rumbled, "-because, the curse's activated," malevolent and crazed energy spawned off the ceiling, walls, and floor.

"D-don't," despair engrained the prior look of supremacy, "-g-g-get off ME!" claws dug into her hips, the following scene was one not for the faint of hearts. Stomach turning screams cried for mercy between violent grunts. Through the narrow passageway of moist bricks, other ungodly muffled yelps escaped two opposing cells. "Intherna and Miira," he stood at the center, "-how are the esteemed guests?"

"To be frank," said Intherna, "-for humans," her head lifted amidst the den of screeching rats, "-they're weak." No tell to her state of mind nor current mood. "-I'm heading back," two steps and she melted into his back, "-they're weak, too weak, information's been sent to éclair. I'm off to rinse my hair."

"Sorry for the unsightly order."

"Don't worry," said she, "-I had fun. Anyway, I'm off, see you."

'Rats and a metal bucket laid bare on the muscled man's stomach. She added heat – forced the survive, the pest dug down. Did she burnt him alive then asked Miira to turn back time... ok, y-yeah, I better not disturb her work.'

"Igna!" waved Miira, "-how's the morning."

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"Good," glanced inside, "-what about you, what of the boy?"

"Nothing much really, I toyed with the psyche instead. Enough of that, what about the monster-army, you met Vesper?"

"Correct, I'm supposed to be the next ruler of monsters."

"I see. She's competent enough. The boy should wake in a few minutes. I'll head to the Shadow Realm."

"Thanks for the assistance."

"Don't mention it," a fist bump and off she was.

Drip, drip, drip, 'time to get ready for battle. Should have enough power to conjure onto the immortal army. I've managed to make 96 ghouls from the bodies, low-level undead. More useful as food for stronger foes. The 200 fighters from the AN-U will come in handy. Each one of their auras borders around Tier-3 Silver. I can't believe I have 26,000 immortal ghouls from Jei Lo's army, a total of about 28,300 fighters at my disposal. Numbers alone aren't going to do much. I can summon 200 at the moment. My dream of an immortal army's coming to fruition.' The priestess' screams amplified on the way out, a glance forced him to avert the gaze. 'Pathetic,' thought he climbing the stairs.

"Young master," hailed Count Sebath, "-a very good morning to you."

"Good morning, Count. How are the people feeling today?"

"More or less the same, morale is low – we've suffered a lot of losses. I doubt the garrison could hold off a surprise attack."

"No need to fret," they stood under an arching overpass, "-we'll launch an attack soon."

"Alone?" he asked sincerely

"No, there are a few tricks up my sleeve. We can still play the hostage card. The inquisitors are respected figures in the army, they're like nobility."

"..." he scanned about, "-surely you refer to what is left of said nobles."

"Ha-ha, very well, Count, I'll take my leave, do give the townsfolk my best wishes in such trying times."

'A hundred soldiers currently stationed at Ect. They've lost two platoon's worth of fighters. From what the interrogation gathered, after seizing control of the castle-towns, troops stationed in neighboring towns and villages would gather and reinforce until the next campaign. They have nothing to lose in defending Ect, the advance party's only here to die and gather information. Should make my job easier.'

“éclair, what’s the status on backup?” he strolled outside.

“Should be here at noon. I heard a Baron’s coming to personally guard Ect.”

Down the rear gate, a pair of lights drove with Julius at the helm, “-did you sleep well?” inquired Igna.

“Yeah, slept just fine. Today’s the day we face off against Ect?”

“Up to the challenge?” wondered Igna.

“I’m excited, the battle doesn’t feel important. I don’t have any particular attachment to the town.”

“I get it,” replied Igna, “-we came here on orders of Lady Elvira.”

“Seeing the relieved faces of the townsmen sure felt nice.”

“That it did, we can’t share their pain, but we can share their brief moment of bliss. It’s a weird situation.”

An hour later, after restocking ammunition, ration for the trip, and guests at the back, “-Count Sebath,” said Igna, “-stay strong for both you and the people. The smiling faces even after such a tragic event show their trust. Tales will speak of the generous Count Sebath in the ages to come.” The jeep headed on for a suicide mission; so thought the people and the Count. Off the path and onto rocky terrain; a smoking pile of rubble reflected against the mirror.

“Priestess,” said Igna, “-how was it, the pain endured by Akina, did the curse give a perspective on reality?”

“D-don’t t-talk to m-me,” her gaze lowered, “-I w-was d-defiled and toyed with by t-those d-demon. H-how d-d-dare you, d-d-damned h-heretic.”

“My dear,” he held her chin, “-look at me in the eye, the pain you suffered was only a trailer, the worse is yet to come. The demons whomst had their way are servants of Satan, one of the four princes of hell. Guess what, the god of Kreston is part of said family. In other words, the pain is directly related to him. Go on and pray – Hidros’s suffered enough at the hands of your god.”

“Igna,” said Julius, “-look ahead, it’s Ect.”

“You’ll never win,” said the boy, “-the king is stronger than anyone I’ve ever seen. We, inquisitors, are nothing more than pawns. We were sent to gauge the strength of the enemy – the real inquisition will be upon Arda soon, ha-ha-ha-ha. YOU’LL ALL DIE PAINFUL DEATHS!”

“Don’t worry kid,” he replied smugly, “-they’ve yet to face the wrath of my companions. Watch and learn.”

“What’s the plan, Igna?”

“Pull into the tree-line and wear the uniform,” nature provided ample cover. “Come with me,” two kicks sent the inquisitors off the jeep. “MY ARMS!” cried Elan, “-I-its b-broken.”

“Shut your mouth else I’ll sow it shut.”

“Cousin,” breathed Julius, “-where’s your humanity?”

"Lost it a long time ago."

Four figures struggled up the rear exit, guards were quick to call onto Captain Ursela. The latter rushed out with a perplexed squint, "-Master Elan and Lady Malley, what happened?"

"I'm sorry Captain," added Igna, "-we were defeated by a monster. The vampires kept their forces hidden. We barely escaped the slaughter; Lord Elan broke his arm trying to shield us."

"I've never seen you before," he glared, the guards gathered with trigger happy fingers.

"Private First Class, Connery Hamond, squad four," saluted Igna.

"Private First Class, Johns Snitch, squad four," saluted Julius.

"What happened to the sergeant?"

"Killed in action. We were lucky to guard the inquisitors. Please, sir, I beg, Lord Elan and Lady Malley are seriously wounded."

"Take them to the medical camp. You two, come with me, we ought to debrief."

Stood in one of the watchtowers, the captain watched the rear exit with much seriousness. Any sterner and the eyes would pop off their socket. "Tell me, Connery, who are you actually?"

"We've been found out," said Igna, "-what gave it away?"

"The mannerism," returned the Captain, "-privates would never have the guts to stare an officer in the face. I'm quite impressed, making it here is an accomplishment of itself."

"Actually, Captain," he smirked, "-the objective was never to cleanly infiltrate. As long as we were inside the castle, nothing else mattered." *Woosh,* a gust spun about the room, *clink,* "-nice ambush, if only it worked," the sword resheathed.

Ding, ding, ding, the alarm rang.

"Captain," said Igna, "-please take a seat, we haven't been debriefed yet."

"How foolish," said he, "-giving me orders, how cocky can a person be?"

"It's not cockiness, tis confidence," he smirked, "-as we speak, a platoon of elite gunmen is slaying thy forces."

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"We have the advantage," snickered the captain, "-getting inside will be hard without cover."

"Wrong--"

Souls of the dead, thee who've sworn to serve me in life and death, come to my side. Blood-Arts: Ghouls Requiem.

"-here's another platoon from within the walls."

Chapter 586: Empire's Invasion [4]

‘The time with Igna’s been eye-opening. I would have never expected someone of this level of intrigue to be real. He’s like a character from an ancient war, a strategic genius. Not that the title would befit him. Look at the Captain, he’s stunned and unable to act. The siege alarms went off, the 200 force made for the walls. It’s a pity really, all of this was a spur-of-the-moment plan. I remember the expression clearly, one of utmost confidence and determination. Despite the precautionary measures the Captain had in form of hidden fighters, the fact remains – a single stroke beheaded the hidden. Blood drips from the wet-wall painting, a lovely rendition of the surrounding turned matt.’

Downstairs, at the foot of the watchtower, a bubbling muck of darkened aura condensed from ethereal to physical. Strong and powerful men in bullet armor and the latest rifles rose. A lack of emotion in the glare, they turned to nod affirmingly. Communication was present and telepathic.

“Bluffs aren’t much to go off,” said the Captain, the visage tightened angrily.

“Bluffs or not, the death of the supposed ambush must have been a shock,” a smug reference to the failed capture.

“Ok, really, who are you?” the eyes widened.

“Take a seat, we’ll discuss the matter over a warm cup of blood,” just then, a soldier stumbled into the doorway, “-Captain, we’re getting slaughtered. The communication link has been shut; we can’t contact headquarters. Ect is about to fall, the invading army wears unbranded uniform,” blood-soaked hands and pants, “-C-captain?”

“Julius,” called Igna.

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“As you wish,” he spun and thrust.

“Stabbed through the heart,” commented Igna, “-merciful.”

‘Why?’ he thought, grip on the dagger loosened per the blood loss, the faded glimmer of a person blemished before him, the feeling of taking a life. In his last moments, the soldier clenched onto dear life, Julius’s wrist reddened, ‘-I don’t care about humans much, still, taking their lives feels so wrong. Has Igna been killing for all this time, is he numbed to the pain?’ a petrified gulp led to the supposed negotiation.

“See,” said Igna, “-the castle is efficiently under my command,” he stood and moved to gaze upon the rear gate. “Don’t try to resist.” Bullets ended in faint cries and yelps. Screams of which were;

“-I’M SHOT. I’VE BEEN HIT.”

“CALL THE MEDIC!”

“THE FRONT’S BEEN BREACHED!” echoed about.

The blank eyes of the curious man had the Captain on guard, ‘-who is he. Our force’s getting slaughtered. He even saw through my ambush. What does he want, am I next – is Ect fallen?’ the questions blurred reality until, “-Captain,” a sudden mention startled the breathing.

"Yes?" he forced between the rigid lips.

"Do you hear it," said a calm and composed voice, "-the sound of people dying. It's nauseating. Bullets aren't enough to kill a person, living things are far more resilient than we give credit. Someone could be shot; have their lungs collapse, stomach pierced, and spleen destroyed, and still make it out alive. Not by magic, but by sheer will. In a way, faced by the ultimate fear, people are often granted a second chance. Fight and discard their limits or surrender. Not that it matters here," a cigar lit. "-Are you willing to talk now?"

"First, answer me a few questions," fired the captain.

"No reason to do so," he puffed, "-you'll die anyway."

"You jest," he smirked, "-we have the inquisitors, once healed, they'll slaughter each and every one of you."

False hope led into an annoyed sigh, 'Julius,' he gestured and resumed to watch the fight.

"Captain," said the prince, "-the inquisitors have been bested. They were nothing more than mere bait to grant entry. Once the siege is over – fighters from the blood-king's faction will exterminate the remainder. This land was invaded without reason, the traitorous king will pay, that I promise."

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'Such a fierce aura, a seething rage. I mustn't be scared; I need to stand strong for my subordinates.'

"éclair, how's the infiltration?"

"Completed," commented he, an annoying sticker of completion flashed, "-I've transferred their orders to Lady Elvira. We have the advantage. Such weak encryption, truly a waste of time."

"Julius," called Igna, "-we've bought enough time," *bang,* the last bullet hit its mark. "The siege of Ect is over," proclaimed he. Half of the company headed to the Shadow Realm. "Restrain the Captain, he'll be a good bargaining chip."

On the 13th of April, forces from Noctic's hallow arrived at Hect's Castle. The expectation of a blood-soaked battle was foiled. The presiding noble welcomed Baron Tagn, a young nightwalker recently given the rights to a landed title. For a new noble, the reputation of a successful defense against the Empire preceded him. Scars on the forehead and cheeks, bandaged hands, and a blade longer than the user. "What happened here?" asked he strangely, speech was impaired by an arrow.

"The young master held off advances from Ect and saved the castle town. They've gone to secure Ect."

"I see, how many men did he command?"

"Four I'd say."

"You jest!" he argued.

"No, tis the truth. The secondary forces sent to Ect should arrive at a conquered castle. I'll say one thing, the young master is a force of nature. If he were truly intent on taking back the province, I'm sure he'd be able to. The way the subordinates fought, begs the question, what kind of fighter is he?"

Troops rocked the bridge, the front gates opened. Men in uniform approached. No armor nor weapons, in many ways, they were the same as normal folks. Light clothes and a special scent inherit from fighters of the BK's faction. "Spread out and look for survivors. Kill anyone bearing the Empire's crest." Nods led into mists; '-they can use Shadow magic,' thought Igna.

"Greetings, you must be the young master?" wondered a taller man with a brown complexion. By the crest, a member of the Lié par le Sang clan. Average features and a feel of a competent leader.

"Well met," returned he, "-might I ask what the title of young master is about?"

"As the son of our king's twin sister, you have his blood coursing through thy veins. Pretty self-explanatory. If I were to give an origin, I'd say the clan meeting. News travels fast, Lady Elvira announced our victory in the battle of Hect by the hands of the young master."

"Cousin," hailed Julius, "-I've brought the prisoners." The youngest was gagged, the priestess stared empty whilst the Captain kept calm.

"Here's the chains to the prize of the battle. I have bad news, the inquisitors, as strong as they appeared in the battle, were novices. The real force has yet to leave the king's side. They have more in reserve, the advance party truly was but that," heavy words and heavier revelation.

The arms crossed, "-Hmm," thought the leader, "-no idea," a shrug later, "-the brass will think of something. My order is to keep the castle's safe."

"My job's done here then," nodded Igna, "-I'll be taking the priestess. She's got the potential to be a great asset."

"S-sure," he squinted, "-whatever floats your boat, young master." Hence, as the sun dimly came to life, the jeep returned to their mission. A day had passed. Not that there was any change to the scenery, even the lighting was similar. "Time to work, cousin," winked Igna, the gate closed.

"Breakfast first."

A small lake hid amidst drooping trees and grunts of monsters. Crystal clear water was abundant in the pure child-like energy of the forest. The jeep stayed a few meters away, a tent was erected, stools arranged carelessly around a campfire. They needed rest, three days of fighting, mana ran low, summoning those fighters wasn't the least bit easy. Afterward, turning the remainder into low-level undead, a tedious day when said and done.

"Hup," bait flew, '-why did he bring the girl along?'

Thirty minutes passed, "-how's the fishing?" wondered Igna.

"Normal I guess."

"Not normal," paused Igna, "-the buckets full, are you troubled by her presence?"

"Yeah," said Julius, "-I'm worried. Why would someone willingly bring an enemy, especially one as hard-headed as her?"

"She's been cursed," said he nonchalantly, "-demon's plagued her day and night. The torture's taken its toll, she won't even speak let alone fight. Don't worry, once's the seed's been sowed, something interesting will happen. Don't worry, just wait and watch."

"O-ok," shrugged Julius.

Firewood crackled, stew boiled over the pot, "-here," said Igna, "-have some."

She watched without much effort. "-Stop acting crazy," returned Igna, "-eat some food else you'll die."

"It's better than living this curse," said she under her breath.

"Look, the lass has her voice back," commented Igna. "-Should I summon the lady?"

"NO, please don't summon her, I won't be able to bear it. I'll leave, sorry, I'll eat."

'What in the world did Gophy do to her?' wondered Julius. The battle of Hect took more of their precious time. Back to the actual quest – the next matter to consider was the abduction of children. The information led to two parties, a noble and a mistress, typical sadists for the sound of it. Between fishing and hunting, the 13th ended in a normal fashion. Night rose, the curse of the whore princess lit to heed to the coming of devious entities.

"Let's go," said Igna, "-we'll come to get her in the morning."

"Seriously, leaving her to suffer the assault of the beasts?"

"I'll summon a few guards for protection. Are you perhaps feeling sorry for her situation?" glared he.

"N-no, it's fine," giving to the stronger presence, "-shall we start?"

"Cousin," placing a hand atop his shoulder, "-I'm cruel and don't care about what method to use for results. She's an enemy, and my companion saw fit to punish. We shouldn't stay around; she'll be gone in a week; the screams of terror will only serve to make you feel pitiful. Keep strong, I'm the one responsible, I'll carry the burden. In return, please help me save the province."

"Cousin," a hand atop Igna's, "-no need to lower thine head. I came to help, and I'll help."

Far, far away from the heart to heart – the clan leaders of Noctic's Hallow returned for another council. The good news of a successful conquest spread over a circular table. A small-scale replica of the Ardanian province rested atop, multiple figures represented differing forces.

"Greetings, dearest clan leaders. Today we meet as the servants of the Blood-King's faction," said Serene. "As secretary and heir to the mantle of representative, I bid thee a warm welcome."

"It's been quite a while," commented Aurora sat before the banner of the Nox's clan.

"I agree," said Julia, sat similarly behind her crest.

"We're here to decide the fact of the nightwalkers," said Alaric, "-much pressure."

"All the same to us," said Gabrielle, "-the people demand answers."

“So is the noble faction,” added Aurora, “-the dukes are rather tense. They know we’ll be dragged under by the arrival of refugees.”

“Please,” said Serene sat behind the Faction’s crest, “-before we start, I’d like to invite the newest member of the council, Lady Elvira. She’s been very proactive in uniting the differing independent factions under a single name, the Blood-King’s clan.”

“Do pardon our lack of decorum,” added Aurora, “-Serene, shall we proceed?”

“Yes, let the war council begin.”

A moment of doubt and hesitation sank the atmosphere, the pressure of being called the Blood-King’s faction wasn’t one for the faint. The decision could affect the lives of the secluded vampire kin. “I’ll go first,” said Elvira, “-the battle of Hect has been won. Here is the information the young master obtained. Vampiric slaying arts are being used. The ones responsible for the massacre are referred to as the Inquisitors, who were able to best Count Sebeth. Goes to show the cunning of our enemy,” stopped to let the information assimilate, “-we should be more careful from now on. The inquisitors who bested the Count were novices. Or decoys I should say, the real force has yet to be seen,” *dong,* the words resounded as if bell, low and terrifying.

Chapter 587: Empire’s Invasion [5]

“What then,” cried Alaric, “-nightwalkers aren’t weak. Vampire arts or not, our kin is at the top of the food chain. I’m not being proud either, we’ve survived countless encounters with unnamed foes.”

“Alaric is right,” added Julia, “-don’t forget, the Sabbath clan has yet to step onto the battlefield. I wouldn’t count us out of the fight yet. Also, not to be insulting to lady Elvira, Count Sabbath is a half-blooded vampire. The innate strength is significantly reduced.”

“Underestimating foes is never the greatest of ideas,” said Serene, “-Lord Alaric, Lady Julia, please be considerate.”

“Understood,” said they rather comprehensively. No bad blood nor hard feeling, they spoke out of admiration for their kind, in a way, the table felt united.

“Moving on,” said Aurora, “-the Young master has completed the assigned task. The Blood-King’s faction must pay as agreed.” Silence sprawled before their might, what to do and what to say. A job well done needed compensation, and compensation would be in form of land. The prospect felt simple and easy to follow, not that the other nobles would accept. Questions on nepotism might rise through the ranks, vampires were strong and also the most finicky to work alongside. Either rule with might or give and be forced to match their pace.

“I have a suggestion,” said Elvira, “-the quest was given on part of my clan. I’ll be sure to explain the situation. I doubt my nephew has the time to take care of a granted fief. I’ll ask the reward to be in another form, perhaps a landless title.”

“Or perhaps,” interjected Gabrielle, “-why not reward lady Elvira’s clan. Here’s an incentive, any noble who recaptures a sieged castle or village has claim upon said property regardless of station.”

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"I see," nodded Aurora, "-this will motivate the neutral parties to take action. They'd be more interested in gaining than losing."

"More inclined to go into a fight with treasure instead of risking one's position. I like the thought process," nodded Julia.

"How about it?" asked Alaric, "-lady Serene, shall we vote?"

"Let's," said she. Six out of six, a unanimous vote.

"Have it be known, any occupied land shall fall to the ones who've successfully claimed ownership. Condition is that the occupants have to keep control of said property till the war is over or is otherwise decided," a safety switch to prevent chaos, Serene's shrewdness knew no bounds. The effect of said condition would be beneficial. The rich would risk much and the poor would stand to gain, in either case, the effort was a must. And so, the council continued. Baron Tagn was granted control of Ect. The prisoners were in Elvira's custody.

"Might I ask something?" inquired Gabrielle, the table attentively listened, "-I have a plan of action to force a non-aggression pact."

"Go, we're listening."

"Here," she stood over the map, "-the invasion began here, to the west of the capital. Currently, most of the empire's forces are on a campaign to the East, they're planning to hit Town Eden and cause a civil war. Divide and conquer, the upper half of Arda's too tedious for air support," a glance flung towards Elvira, "-let's conquer the airfield and Castle Eldo. The two are undeniably linked, securing a perimeter should be easy as the forest is denser here. Dark tree and a single road from the castle, to the airfield, and then the capital. Everyone's realized it by now, we'll have to call on help."

"It's easier said than done," added Aurora, "-Castle Eldo's a pillar of Ardanian defense magic. Once occupied, the barrier and magical weapons are traps for any invaders. The last war proved its might. The airfield's another death trap; it's been reinforced."

"Even if we secure the airfield, who's going to support us?" wondered Alaric.

"We will," smirked Elvira, "-Phantom's special ops might be of help."

"Won't that be harmful to relations with the other?"

"The Haggard's have long left the Federation. Phantom's a free mercenary group, we choose when to fight and when to cower," elbow on the table, "-a single message and I can have their headquarters be reduced to dust."

"You have such a weapon?" squinted Aurora.

"We have more in store than is necessary. If such methods are implied, I'm afraid the forest might never be able to grow."

"No need to include the doomsday bombs," said Alaric.

"Phantom can provide support to a certain extent," firmed Elvira.

"What about the border fight at Elendor," asked Aurora patiently, "-aren't the forces thin?"

"Just say the word," she turned to Serene, "-the council must decide. Phantom will take up arms and lay siege to Castle Eldo. In return, Sabbath must take control of the airfield."

"We'll forge a new supply route along the western border," said Gabrielle. "-Fighting head-on is foolish."

"All is good," said Julia in a suspicious tone, "-what will it cost. We already owe Lady Elvira quite a fare."

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"Control over the airfield and castle Eldo," demanded Elvira.

"I see," all leaned to think, the offer was too good to be true. A countless number of other factors might affect the course of the war. On the outside, the fight was a stand against the Empire's invasion.

"We must decide," said Serene, "-all in agreement with lady Elvira, please raise your hands." Once again, they agreed.

"Then it's decided, Phantom will launch an attack on the 20th of April. Lady Julia, Lord Alaric, the airfield is yours, please do not disappoint." That being said, the council went on to discuss the budget and allocation of sacred weapons of the progenitors.

"Ota, wake up!" yelled a lady, the words came to slap him who slept. Birds chirped, cows mooed, and people moved about outside. No response came from the room, footsteps marched loudly to barge the door, "-OTA, WHERE ARE YOU?" sweat down the tensed forehead, flour stained on the cheeks and in between the fingernails. "-that boy," she breathed, her cat-ears lowered, "-what am I going to do with him?"

ding, ding, "-lady Aoi," greeted a gentle old man, "-why such a hurry?"

"It's Ota," she scurried behind a table, "-the boy's run off again. I'm at my wit's end."

"He's at the age of discovery," said the old man, "-don't mind him, I'm sure the boy's just full of energy."

"He probably is," a loaf of bread handed over, "-we're lucky famine didn't ravage our village this year around," said she kind in mien.

"It's the goddess of harvests grace. Good day to you, Aoi." The roof creaked; bread cooked in a stone oven. Customers arrived one by one. Streets of stone and grave, robust-looking houses with wooden roofs. Oda village's prosperity came from being a merchant's village. Traders came from all over the region to trade. The skin of the honed rabbit and mushroom cow were prized in the thousands of Exa. Many adventurers stayed to try and make easy money. In all but title, the village was as prosperous as some of the towns around. A brand of the guild stood at the outskirts, adjacent to the southern path. The latter led to hectares of crops. Olden couples were strict in keeping the youth off their land, more tough love than animosity.

In the shadow of the guild-house, swords sang the melody of battle. Bullets were shot into empty targets. Few bestowed by the skill of magic horned their mastery. Quests were rare, one of the many ways to make money was hunting, the forest to the north were battlegrounds for the mighty.

"Ota, Ota, where are you?" shouted a girl aged around 9 with a round face. Few of her missing teeth were often subject to praise.

"Where are you headed?" asked the same old man of before.

"Old man Elm, have you seen Ota?" asked she wearing boyish farmer clothes and a straw hat, "-lady Aoi is angry."

"Young Annie," he hunched over for a caring pat, "-go check the guild, the boy's steadfast on becoming an adventurer."

"Ok, thanks old man Elm," she skipped away.

"Hey there Annie," waved a lady drying laundry a few houses away, "-looking for Ota again?" asked she.

"Yes ma'am," she smiled whole-heartedly, "-he skipped out on doing chores again."

"Oh, how rude of him," she knelt and gestured, "-come here."

"Yes?" asked she with an adorable expression.

"Why not take Honye to play?"

"He's back?" her face flushed.

"Mother," came a rougher voice of an 11-year-old, "-you wanted this laundry basket?"

"HONYE!" yelled another, "-you dropped the socks," shuffles came at the wooden door, "-if it's not young Annie, you've grown a little, haven't you?"

"Father," gritted the boy, "-I forgot, ok..."

"Yes" she proudly showed her teeth, "-I lost one yesterday."

"Good on you," gently messing her hair, "-go play Honye, return before sundown."

"Alright," and off they bolted towards the adventuring guild.

"Honye, did you fight big scary monsters?"

"Yes," said he loudly, "-father killed a goblin with a single stroke. He taught me the fire-spell incinerate."

"Wow," her eyes glimmered, "-that's awesome."

Clang, clang, clang, "-look, old man Elm was right," said she, "-follow me, Ota's in the secret hideout."

Scuffles against the tall grass led to a rotten busy tree, "-is he here?" asked Honye.

"Yes," said she, "-lookup." Fondly enough, there sat a boy perched atop a branch. A wooden sword locked to his back alongside an eyepatch.

"OTA!" cried she, "-come on, get down. Lady Aoi's looking for you!"

"Who is this Ota?" asked he in a condescending manner, "-I'm divine blade Raulf Serlo, the strongest swordsman in Hidros."

"Stop fooling around," her pitch rose, "-lady Aoi's mad because you didn't do chores again."

"Oh, oh," said an adventurer leaned over a wooden fence, "-looks like the divine blade's in trouble by the queen."

"Shut up," he snapped and leaped, "-fight me one on one." A bold proclamation ending in embarrassment.

"Oh look," laughed the adventurer, "-the mythical blade's locked," he vaulted over to dislodge the blade from the boy's pants, "-come on, don't be such an idiot. Taking care of the people is also the duty of an adventurer. Go help lady Aoi first, then come hang out, I'll even teach you a few tricks."

"You mean it?" the eyes glimmered.

"Yes."

"Ahem," he blushed, "-no, I mean," one hand cupped the eyepatch, "-my power's fighting against my will. If we fight, my power's might unleash. Farewell, my rival," and off he scurried to the southern path, "-Honye, Annie, come, we're going to fight the monsters."

"OTA!" sighed Honye, "-stop running around, lady Aoi's going to get mad."

"You've been possessed by a demon," said he loudly, "-princess Annie!" sword stretched to the duo, "-how dare you steal princess Annie, vile monster, I'm going to slay you."

"I'm the Demonlord huh?" he smirked, "-then feel the power of my fire-spell, " *psst.*

"Noooo!" he dodged in slow-motion, the on-lookers happily watched. Kids having fun was bliss on its own.

Smack, ten minutes later, "-Ota, we're going back home!"

"Mommeee," he begged, "-princess Annie's in danger, I have to save her."

"You stupid boy," she chopped his head, "-clean the inn first, then go play, didn't I say this before?"

"Fineeee."

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Out on the southern road, a horse-drawn carriage loitered to a stop. "Who are they?" wondered a judging adventurer.

"Some nobles by the look of it," returned another.

"Guild master, we have visitors."

Out in the distance, Igna and Julius found a more effective way in erecting the barrier using a degrading posture. Igna flew and held the prince by the armpits, a little out there in the fatigued department. Nonetheless, the speed quickened. Progression was 3/4 till Oda village.

"Nicely done," said Igna on firm ground.

"Yeah, sure," sighed Julius, "-I was held as if excess baggage." Guards surrounding the tent vanished with a snap. Whimpers came from inside, the doorway unzipped to a nauseating sight. Her face had drowned in snot and tears, clothes were ripped as well as claw marks all over the back and legs.

"I c-can't e-endure t-the t-t-torture."

"Too bad," *Mana Control: Healing Element Variant: Restoration.*, "-go wash, I'll get breakfast started."

"Cousin... don't you think that's a bit too much?"

"Not really."

Chapter 588: Empire's Invasion [6]

"Village leader," curtains to a little hut parted, "-we have guests."

"Is that so?" stood an older man, "-very well. I'll head for the guild house, how's the guild leader doing so far?"

"He's doing just fine," said the young man, "-I'm afraid the guests aren't people we can trifle with."

"Don't say so," he walked in a perpetual hunch, "-it's disrespectful to the humble visitors. These eyes have seen many o' things, dearest nephew, you need to start seeing what the world truly has in store. Sense the soil, feel the wind, be in-tuned with nature, for she's the only guide in our limited escapade in the living world."

The presumptuous horse-drawn carriage remained in plain sight. Multiple curious folks peeped to be turned away. The adventurers held their guard, many of them remotely said to scam. When safety was dire, the fighters always did their very best to safeguard the quaint little village. And so, in respect for the protectors, the villagers did as was told. Aided by the young man, the village elder stepped into a claustrophobic room. Two guards clad in white and gold bore the Krestonian crest. Between them stood a smaller-sized emissary.

"Good day, traveler," said he.

"Silence," fired one of the guards, "-don't dare speak to our lord in such jovial manner."

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"Slow it down," said the emissary, "-no need to bust a cap. The village elder looks just about right."

"And what does that mean?" inquired a tougher-looking beastman. Sharp canines stood ever so watchfully. As a member of the black-wolf tribe, the guild leader had the boon of emotional sense. The ability to read a person's emotion and see a few seconds in the future. Many o' ambushes had been won thanks to said skill. Adventurers about were few but fairly high-ranked, the lowest being Tier-6 Emerald.

"Calm it, Rody," said old man Elm, "-there's no need to be rude."

"Ahem, elder, I've come with a message from our lord. The village of Oda is required to give 90% of the harvest to contribute to the holy church's campaign against evil."

"How rude," cried Rody, "-are we to give up food to aid in our brethren's extermination!"

"Kotfa," said the emissary, "-don't do anything stupid."

"But sir," he raised an arm, "-the demi-humans are being far more insolent. We should have them burned to the stakes, what's the deal in keeping this village safe?"

"Silence!" *smack,* "-don't speak outside thy station, do you hear me?" he glared, "-go on outside, worthless piece of turd, this room doesn't need thee."

Tsk, '-this is all your fault,' screamed the expression, the curtains flung aside, whilst the hand immediately made for the hip.

'Something's wrong,' squinted Rody, '-why would a messenger send away his guard. No one would be so foolish,' an eyebrow rose towards the nearest adventurer.

"If you would excuse me," he followed behind.

"Can we get back to the topic?" asked Elm, "-if 90% of the supplies are taken away, we won't have any food left for the winter. Things are tough as is up north."

"Doesn't seem that way to me," remarked he, "-the village is very prosperous for one located so far into the wild. Isn't Noctic's Hallow after the northbound forest?"

"No, no, the land of the nightwalkers is sacred. Even our people are scared to approach their territory. It's quite a distance away, perhaps a 4-day walk, maybe 5, I can't quite remember."

"What about the harvest, let's suppose, the village refuses to contribute?" interjected Rody.

A gale carried dust and stones, '-why was I the one reprimanded?' he leaned against the carriage. '-This village sure is empty for a land of heretics.'

Pew, pew, ambled few giggles towards the village center, "-Demonlord, I'm going to slay you with my divine weapon of destruction!"

"Ha-ha!" grimaced Honye, "-rubber bands isn't going to hurt my devilish armor. I stole the power of the gods, and now," arms around Annie's neck, "-she shall be my goddess, mwahahahaha."

"Oi look," they skid to a stop, "-a shiny carriage."

"I wonder who's inside."

'Kids?' thought the guard, '-they look normal enough,' the eyes narrowed, '-forget about it. They look disgusting.'

"Hey mister!" waved Annie, "-are you an adventurer?"

'Who, me?' he pointed to himself.

"Yes you," laughed Ota, "-who else is around here," they broke into hysteria.

'Why you little,' he scowled to be met by equally perturbing grimaces.

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"Hey mister, answer me," said Annie, "-are you an adventurer or not?" the adorable expression watched in awe, "-so pretty."

"Annie, don't go close to him," cautioned Honye, "-he's a guard of the church," quick to grab her collar, "-come on, run, father said to not get close to them," and off they bolted. Actually, one would expect so, Annie dodged to have her hat fall, tiny little horns revealed her race.

'By the grace of god,' he held his crest, "-you're a demon," the face petrified.

"Mister," said she, "-are you an adventurer, or not?"

"GET AWAY," *clang,* blades met followed by an explosion.

"Are you ok?"

"W-what happened?" the cheeks felt warm, "-Is this my blood..."

"Annie are you ok?" pleaded the man, "-are you ok Annie?"

"I'm safe," she smiled, "-my wounds heal quick. Thank you for protecting me, Olaf. I guess I was a bad girl."

"Not your fault," he reached around for a tight embrace.

"What in the hell happened?" the village folks ran to the carriage. The meeting promptly halted. A menace of a presence exited the guild-house, "-Olaf, tell me what happened this instant?"

"It's him!" cried Ota, "-the white man tried to kill Annie."

"You pieces of shit," *woosh,* claws made for the envoy's neck.

Poof, "-Elder," exclaimed Raulf, "-why did you stop me?"

"A man mustn't always resolve to violence," a secondary apparition of himself sprawled out the back to halt the strike, "-natures granted us the boon of life. One mustn't be so quick as to take what isn't theirs."

"I'm sorry," the claws retracted. Even the guard couldn't react.

"As for you, envoy, go to the master and say, the village of Oda isn't going to comply. Our protectors, the clan members of Noctic's hallow will stand as our beacon of hope. A man who lets his subordinate strike at an innocent child shouldn't get his ego stroked so much."

"GO AWAY!" chanted the crowd.

"GO AWAY!"

"GO AWAY!"

Visibly annoyed, "-whatever, we're leaving. Heed my warning, Village elder, this isn't the last you've seen of us. Our masters are less patient than us," hooves faded into the distance.

"Get out of here!" cried Olaf, "-you damned coward."

"Here, the hat, you dropped it," said Honye timidly.

"Thank you," her smile had him blush.

"Ota, Ota," quick to change course, "-did you see old man Elm's technique."

"Of course, I did," said he with chin up and arms crossed, "-the movement was far too slow for me, the divine blade."

"Is that so?" chuckled Elm, "-then I guess I'm getting old," they all laughed.

"Don't worry, Honye," said a little whisper.

"Father?" he spun, "-what are you doing here?"

"The repugnant smell of righteousness caught my nose. Don't worry about Annie, she'll soon see you as the stronger boy."

"Shut up dad," he shied away into the open-field, '-what is he saying anyway. It's not like I like her or something.'

The father followed after, "HONYE, don't stray off course."

Righteous being that dwells in the very fiber of what is real. I, humble servant of the true God, call upon thy favor. Bring forth calamity to the impure, cleanse the earth, and rid the world from what I deem unworthy. Come forth, Eglanta.

A shining suit of armor dashed from the carriage and onto the field. Chatter followed Honye's father as did Ota and Annie.

"GET AWAY FROM HIM!" cried the man pelting across the field. All played in slow-motion, the elder gestured, Rody leaped to no avail. *Thrust,* blood smeared across the golden field, the blade ran across his father. "D-dad?" he stared.

"-Why did you run off, damn brat."

"I didn't m-mean," no other words muttered, the blade dug further to pierce the boy's heart. *click,* the handle snapped 90 degrees, both father and son were dismembered and flung in an explosion of blood. A golden canvas painted red, it was only a few hours ago that the boy came around the play. A mutilated arm crashed against the tree. Honye's head rolled over to Annie's feet, the expression stuck between relief and fear. Reality set in, panic lit the path ablaze, women hastily grabbed their kids and ran. The men effortlessly stood at the sudden events, "-COME WITH ME, YOU TWO!" screamed Olaf, "-we're RUNNING."

"B-b-but," she mumbled, "-what about Honye... he gave me my hat. I haven't said thanks yet..."

Rage burnt into the throat, claws, and muscles bulged, a single pounce cracked the very ground.

Yah, whipped the coachman, "-come on!" begged the envoy, "-the beast is after us."

"Foolish entity who dared lay his hand on my family," ambled Elm, "-the patience of the wise is long, once at a stop, the never-ending descent into darkness foils even the believers," the second-self blew exponentially, giant palms slammed to crush the fiend.

Clap,

"What's the matter now?" sighed Igna.

"Mosquitoes," returned Julius, "-what else."

"There's repellent in at the back."

"Should have said so earlier," a few little sprays later, "-where are we headed now?"

"To Oda Village. We need supplies. The fish's all but eaten."

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"What about the wall?"

"Should be half a day's work. We also have the secret technique." The jeep pulled into the village's vicinity at around 14:30. The sky muddled into a grey stop, rumors and information from éclair said the village to be a cheerful place.

"Did something happen?" asked Igna toggling off the engine.

"I don't know," replied Julius, "-the feel sure doesn't seem right. Kind of like the one at Ect."

"I get it," circled to the back, "-priestess, what will you do, stay here or come with?" Her response was but a distance stare. "-Silence means staying, have fun." *click,* her ankles were cuffed to the jeep.

"Might find some job, éclair said there's a guild on the southern passage.," closer to the center, the heavier the feel. 'The soul,' a jolt went up to his spine, "-they linger."

"Pardon me?" glanced Julius, "-something the matter?"

"People recently died. I can feel the presence of a darker entity. They weren't killed by weapons... it's repugnant, the same odor from the church followers, louder than the crest."

Villagers were gathered around Honye's house. The lady lost her child and husband in a single day, the moments burnt deep in her heart. Parts of their body were missing. The stain of blood on the dried stone path was fresh. The women mourned, Annie and Ota sat silently beside their comrade not knowing if he'd wake. The lass's always cheerful expression stuck the same as him.

"Mother," whispered Ota, "-Honye's a liar, why won't he wake up. He hasn't defeated me... how can he leave without the princess..."

"Shut up," said she, "-enough is enough, at least be silent for his funeral. Honye isn't going to wake up anymore."

"TRAITOR!" he bolted into the street with teary eyes.

"Someone stop him," cried Olaf, attempts were fruitless, the nimble brat escaped into the dim outside. His mother made after him. Those inside were too mournful to care, the whole village saw what happened without exception.

"Where are you running off too," wondered Julius quick to stop the boy.

"My lady," spoke Igna, "-is this the escapee?"

"Yes," she nodded, "-thank you for stopping my bratty son."

"No thank you needed, ma'am," said Julius. Asking questions would be rude. An exchange of glances led inside to a modest yard. People stood around with heads hung low.

"Hello, may I help you?" asked an adventurer.

"We apologize for the intrusion."

"It's no problem," said the elder, "-by the looks, you boys are adventurers?"

"Yes," firmed Julius, "-I'd greatly appreciate if we could stay and pay our respects."

"Don't worry," he gave a soft pat, "-I'll be off to gather some herbs."

"Might I be of assistance?" interjected Igna.

"What a kind boy you are," he grinned, "-come on, follow me."

Chapter 589: Empire's Invasion [7]

Visitors aren't rare in our little village; might I ask your name?"

"I'm Julius Haggard," said he, "-looks like the war's done its fair share of hurt around these parts."

"Yeah, I suppose," said the young man, "-I'm El, the nephew of the village leader. My jobs to see who comes in and comes out. I guess I failed," the heaviness weight on his tongue, the slowed speech, the destitute demeanor, muffled cries, and coughs. Nothing felt right, "-can I pay my respects?" asked he kindly.

"Sure," nodded the nephew, "-go on inside, they wouldn't mind."

"I appreciate it," he reached the little room overlooking outside. Shoes off, he stepped inside with a cat-like silence, those watching over the bodies were open-minded and nodded as a way to say '-hi'. Portraits of the fallen rested atop chairs, the lady of the house secluded herself in the corner stained by the horrors.

Out to the north, before the forest, the old man stopped and stared. The wind whispered to a caress, the plants and trees seemed to recognize the man. "-The wind speaks of your exploits," he said in an enigmatic fashion.

"Exploits?" paused he, "-I rather not call it so. The wind is but the watcher, what I've done and will do is evil than good. Those who died today were victims of the war, am I right?"

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"Might I ask how you know?" he turned after much effort, "-are you a seer?"

"Might I ask about the mentioned exploits?"

"Ha-ha, you're a shrewd one, aren't you, boy."

"I'll take the compliment," nodded Igna. "-Village elder, if my exploits have been heard, would you consider aiding my search?"

"Exploits," now atop a small meadow of similarly formed plants, "-the wind speaks of the conquest of the fort. The village of Apid's stuck by famine. A few of my people were sent to provide food and supplies, they were sadly ransacked along the trade-road by bandits, ex-adventurers by what they recounted. Say," the balding head perked up amidst the hue of flowers, "-might lending this old man some help. I need some Acalina plant, they look like this."

"éclair, scan."

"Alright."

"Something like this?" the plants highlighted.

"Good, yes, gather as many as you can," the collection resumed. "Where was I, ah yes, the situation at Apid. Oda village's lucky, the nobles don't want to impose too much on our little village. Adventurers come and go; some tell stories about the Empire's holy invasion. I couldn't care less, as long as my people are safe and sound, the world could very well go to hell."

"About those bandits," the smartphone reached out, "-Is this them?" a photo showed their faces.

"Yes, yes, they're the ones who pillaged the supplies we sent. When was the photo taken?"

"Around a few days ago. My companion and I laid siege to the castle. Our quests forces us to travel from one end of the continent to the other. Discovering the province for what it is, tis more of a boon than the task."

"What happened to the bandits?" he pulled a straw-made sack, "-are they still around?"

"No," the head shook, "-we killed them."

"I see," the opening tightened, "-why though?"

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"Why we killed them?" he paused, "-they were in the way, the villagers gave up on living, their children were taken away without a fight. Famines loomed and a crazed noble with a lust for unblossomed flowers ordered the kidnappings."

"I get it," sighed the old man, "-you killed for no good reason."

"And?" the face emotionlessly returned, "-what of it. I'll kill whoever stands in my way. Those without the will to fight aren't worthy of survival. Even if they fight, the strong will always win. I refuse to be crushed by any higher power, I'll stand at the top and cast a shadow of refuge for those dearest to me."

"Not my place to judge," the head lowered.

"Elder," said he sternly, "-you have the spirit and eyes of a cold-blooded killer. The horns on thy head speak for itself. A demon-kin, participant in the war of Dorchester in the Era of Mages. There were rumors about a demon-kin who slaughtered countless mages with a simple stroke."

"So," he turned, the sack lowered, "-who are you?"

"I'm the son of Tempest Haggard, the exiled mage who once reign death atop many o' folks. My home was destroyed, my family was torn. From I lived on the battlefield for a decade, killing parents and children alike."

"I've heard of you," said he, "-the rumored kid who developed a style of fighting considered merciless by even the strongest of foes. Is this where you've been hiding?"

"Should I answer that?" he smirked.

"Don't get cocky," the air changed, "-you killed and slaughtered the people of my village so many decades ago. I remember the village burning into the night, horses galloping and beheading anyone in sight, do you not repent thy actions?"

"Pause it," he held out a hand, "-Old man Elm, fighting now doesn't do us any good. You've killed a fair share of my people too."

"I won't accept it," the head shook, "-those who indiscriminately kill are but murderers."

"Preach it to someone else." Two ethereal hands flung for his head. *Death-element: Magical Barrier,* a black circle materialized to momentarily stop the momentum. 'He's using some ancient arts...' crimson to white, the mana-waves and impression of reality itself flowed before him, '-Origin's sight,' thought he. Vivid and clear, staring into those eyes was hypnotic in a way. '-I see why the old man was feared.' Hands split into arrow-shaped projectiles. *foup, foup, foup,* '-that was close,' the arrows landed beside. 'Keep on dodging. I can't close the distance – going all out will be foolish. It's a test,' he focused onto Elm's inner self, '-else, he'd have unleashed the power of the Guardian by now.' Left, right, up, the volley kept on firing insistently, dodging became increasingly hard, '-no matter how nimble I am,' the edges clipped to draw blood, '-the endless barrage's serving to waste my stamina.' A puddle of gooey purple tentacle summoned to impair mobility further.

'Damn it, I'm stuck,' the arrows stopped.

"Are you done, boy?" he passed through the hovering arrows, "-you're not him, are you?"

"Yeah," he chuckled, "-I'm not Staxius Haggard," the face slowly stared upward, "-my name's Igna Haggard," *Death-Element: Mana Cancellation,* the web of mana threads around Elm crumbled, the shackles shattered effortlessly, "-still, I know a lot about the war my uncle fought," he smirked with hands on the elder's shoulder, the irises flipped into a vibrant scarlet hue, "-the battle is over."

"The rumors were true," said he, "-the mage killer did exist, a boy who possessed the power to nullify any spell as well as greater swordsmanship. A true weapon of war."

"You give too much credit," said he, "-the Haggard's turned to a new page. Old man, are you blind to the world outside?"

"Excuse you?" he squinted; the spells deactivated.

"Here's a question, what's the name of the Blood-King?"

"Staxius Haggard, is it not?"

"And?" he smiled, "-doesn't that mean?"

"Oh," he exhaled, "-I didn't realize. The mage killer's name is lost to me. Wait, are you royalty?"

"No, I'm not. The boy inside is, the exiled prince of Arda, Julius Haggard."

"Wow," he breathed, "-letting loose is quite the treat. Thank you, boy."

"Call me Igna," he smiled, the eyes returned to red and white, "-will you answer a few of my questions now?"

"No, not now," hand on the sack, "-we ought to head back."

Cloaked in a ritualistic cloth, the elder chanted and rang bells to awaken the spirits of the elements. The people stared in awe, prayers were said, respects paid. In a way, the means of speech the old man used was reminiscent and clear, those who saw the events would forever remember the horrors. Bodies were carried on makeshift caskets to be burnt at the northern side of the village.

"Here we gather to mourn and celebrate the death and rebirth of the people dearest to us. Honye and Ilina were always cheerful and ready to help if ever things went wrong. The village breathed safety when Ilina went hunting, the days of his immense generosity will never be forgotten. Flesh and body, soul, and spirit must return to the earth, it must return from whence it came, the spirits of fire shall carry them high onto the divine realm where Elysium wait. Let's join in prayer to bid them a warm farewell," a ceremonial bell rang to engulf the bodies in a warm and idyllic white flame.

Back to the empty house, multiple villagers came to bring their offerings. Warm words were exchanged and off they were. She had lost everything, the materialistic gains were naught, her pain reflected in an ever-melancholic expression. One by one, the yard cleared leaving Igna, Julius, and the elder behind.

"Lady Yonea," said Julius in a soft manner, "-I'm sorry for your loss. May this little gift help for the future," an envelop with Exa notes slid to reach her hands.

"I can't," she took a look, "-there's no way I can accept such an amount."

"My lady," said Igna sharply, "-no matter what we do and say, we're strangers and have no business in thine life. How about this," the room fell into a pin drop silence, "-I promise to bring those responsible for such an absurd deed to thy doorstep in chains. Give me the word, and it shall be done."

Her hands trembled to grab his closed fists, "-d-do y-you promise?" the white-colored iris suddenly pulsed. 'Her face, her soul, I can see and hear her thoughts... she's going to kill herself. It's the visage of someone who's given up on life.'

Conflicted at the sight before him, a nudge from Julius returned the sense, "-yes, I promise they'll suffer twice the pain inflicted. I, Igna Haggard of the Haggard dynasty, vow to exact revenge on thy behalf."

"I, Julius Haggard of the Haggard dynasty, swear on my name and title to slay those who'd dare perturb such an idyllic landscape."

"Thank you," her head lowered till the floor, "-i-it t-t-truly h-h-helps."

"Keep the money, my lady. Consider it our payment until the job is done," said Igna, "-we'll be back very soon."

The stone paths were lit by old lanterns, "-the rite of passage," said the elder, "-the lights are a path for the harbinger of death to follow, he who travels on a steed shall swoop onto the earth and carry the fallen to their rightful place. They also represent the stars, the light goddess Syhton died to conjure." Dusk loomed over the horizon; the cousins paid no heed in the time lost as they helped around the village. A feast was soon erected at the center; people gathered to celebrate the fallen's rebirth.

"Very different from how we celebrate it," commented Julius.

"I know, they're sad but keep a smile to ease the soul's departure. I prefer this to the doom and gloom of the funerals back home. Attending those in flashy suits as a member of the familia is tedious."

"I get it," said Julius, "-the dark-guild and territorial disputes. How many agents have died in securing asylum in Alphaia."

"Igna, Julius," called the elder, "-a job well done, we couldn't have made this happen on our lonesome."

"The pleasure's ours," said Julius, "-still, I'm very baffled by how strong they are."

"Appearances my boy," said he, "-appearances."

"Elder, about lady Yonea, she had the look of someone who wanted to die."

"How perceptive of you," smiled Elm, "-she's gone through a lot, that young lady. Ilina was her second husband, the first one died in a goblin assault not too long ago. Honye's the child of the first husband."

"Are you sure we should be hearing this?" frowned Julius.

"Yeah, it's fine," said he calmly, "-the whole village knows."

A tall figure emerged out of the shadows hauling heavy objects, "-elder, I'm back.

Chapter 590: Empire's Invasion [8]

'The stench of blood and murder. He means business.'

"Please let me go," whispered muffled cries.

"Shut yer mouth," showing his bareback, a stomp recoiled with cracks and a guttural screech, "-elder, meet me at the guild house, we need to talk."

"What was that about?" asked Igna.

"No idea," replied Julius. The elder changed course and made for the edge. The celebrations didn't bode well with what was normal. Young Annie moved about at a snail's pace; eyes fixated on a starry night. Ota remained by her mother's side; the latter grew to be sterner than ever before.

Tik-tok with the clock, a turn later came malignant energy oozing off the building. Thrust against the once golden wheat fields came the inky black outlines of constructions and trees up ahead. Random

flashes of light would dart about countless meters away. Redden hue of merciless will to kill and pillage. “-goblins,” commented Igna.

“Around these parts?”

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“Yes, they’re more active at night. Damned little pests. I do hope the village has a warding spell, else, if a tribe attacks, they might not live to see another day.”

Mid-way across, “-Igna,” halted Julius, “-we forgot to release the priestess.”

“We should stay away,” said he, “-the night means her curse is live and well. Is the wrath of demons that pleasant a thought?”

“Cousin,” firm and logical, “-I’m going back. She might need help.”

“Soft-hearted prince,” grinned he, “-go on then. I’ll return after the celebrations are over and done with, we’re spending the night at the inn, understood?”

‘Now then,’ the footsteps echoed away, ‘-the guild house. The smell is awful,’ at the doorway, ‘-guess we’ll see what they have in store.’ The ajar door split into two men stripped naked and a smaller one being lashed. Few adventurers, Olaf included, stood in utmost silence. Rody’s onslaught intensified, lashes drew blood. A makeshift gag prevented damning sounds from escape.

“Enough,” said the elder, “-Rody, why are you drenched in blood?”

“I paid a little visit to their mansion,” he growled, “-didn’t the master, but I found guards wearing the same attire. Those who dared pain the village much die, and die they did,” the hand-turned paw rose, blood-soaked the hairs into plumps.

“I see,” exhaled Elm. “-Everyone, please meet Igna Haggard.”

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“An outsider?” fired Rody.

“Calm thy tongue,” refuted Elm, “-he’s a good man of strength and intellect. An adventurer currently on a quest to find those responsible for such horrors. I’ve personally acknowledged and vouched for his power in battle.”

“Good evening everyone,” said he calmly, “-Guild Leader Rody,” a single glance told a multiple of things, “-is it possible if I take a look at these rough-looking men?”

“S-sure,” the behemoth of a beastman slowly backed away to rinse off the stench.

“You’re the one who helped out earlier,” commented Olaf, “-thanks for taking care of the kids, they’re quite a handful, especially Ota.”

“After witnessing such a sight,” referenced to the murder, “-they were pretty much nonexistent.”

“So, Igna,” said Rody wiping off the water, “-where are you from, and what’s the deal in coming to our village?”

"For work, obviously," said he, "-or I would say so. My intentions aren't so clear, I doubt anyone here could understand. Elder, might I?"

"You may."

"Grand," knuckles cracked, "-hello," the gag untied, "-are you the supposed envoy?"

"Go to hell."

"Oh," smiled he, "-we have a fighter here, don't we," down on to a squat, "-Hey there, little man, things won't go great if you die, will it now?" Mana Control: Healing Element Variant: Full body Restoration.* An angelic light dowsed the room in green, the onlookers stood in awe, it even caught the eye of those celebrating. "A fresh start for me," he smirked, *Souls of the dead, thee who've sworn to serve me in life and death, come to my side. Blood-Arts: Ghouls Requiem.* The fabric of what was real split, a vortex summoned in the middle of the room; the size and presence had many bolted to the floor. Stunned speechless, a scrawny tall figure clambered out, the vortex vanished, he waited with an emptied gaze.

"Man previously known as Agnet," ordered Igna, "-heed my words and do thy duty. Torture this man till he loses the will to resist. Beware, his death means yours as well, the soul of the unrested."

"Yes, master."

"We wait and watch," said Igna, "-let's have a seat and allow a master go to work," they moved behind the reception desk, leaving the guests in the care of a very hospitable man. 'Good thing Adete told me about the various people we captured. This one's a military officer working as a torturer against war prisoners. Asking my companions to do such evil acts doesn't seem great now, it's a waste of their time and mine.'

Out on the banks of a stream where the jeep rested, grunts and whimpers echoed against the flowing water. 'The chain's broken,' thought Julius, foot tracks led to the water. '-There she is,' he walked onto an army of shadowy figures. Her head and body were forced on all fours, ghouls lingered about, she cried and begged to no avail, the suffering grew into gasps of plea. 'Cruel,' thought he, '-why did she even escape to the stream?' *Crunch, crunch,* twigs and leaves cracked, "-priestess, are you ok?" the innate light bestowed upon to superior-beings made short work of the mists. The cursed crest's molten hue cooled to black.

"Who a-are you?"

"Julius," returned he, "-I thought I'd come to check up on you. The curse is quite potent," said he kneeling to her side, "-I dare not say I understand the pain."

"No," she rolled over, "-I'm starting to get used to it. After the first assault, the pain fades into a living nightmare. I see my life flash before my eyes every single time it happens. Then, the next thing I know, I'm healed and given food. I don't know anything about the outside world. My life's been spent inside the church, du matin au soir¹, the teaching of our great god was what kept me alive. Other beliefs are heretics, anyone and anything not known to us is dangerous. We must obey the law passed on from our ancestors. It took me a while to realize it, the world is full of unimaginable things, moments that defy the reality I know and have learned to accept."

"Here," he wrapped a coat around her back, "-tell me more, I'm here to listen."

Tears rolled, her cheeks flushed, “-I never knew my parents. I was an orphan left in the care of the church. As a girl, the priests were never interested in teaching the true way of god. We were used as cleaning machines and an easy way to do chores and cook. For the most part, life was normal. Then, one day, a younger boy from our dormitory returned with burns and bruises, he was sent a few weeks ago to a nobleman’s house. Instead of a warm welcome, the priests beat him even more until he died. The next thing we knew, another boy was picked and sent off. The horrors continued. My friends and I were pretty lucky, the head-priestess in charge of our dormitory was quite the sadist. She enjoyed tormenting the injured. If we wanted favors, her only request was to spend the night at her side. We did so, gave ourselves willingly to her. What waited behind her door chambers was a room filled with torture devices. Her most favorite prey were young priests sent to learn the ways of our god. In a few scriptures, reference is made to our god being the projection of charm and affection. Love comes in many shapes and sizes, and hers was more on the physical side. Maiden are virtuous and chaste; her teaching was in how to make men answer her demands. Dogs to their master. We’d often had to take part and whip the priests. A girl two years older than me was soon assaulted by a novice who didn’t know the ways of the head-priestess. The humiliation he endured in coming here was enough to break the cycle of ‘love’. The next thing I knew, I was ordered to torture the man until death. They watched and cheered, I made him cry and scream mindlessly until my sanity snapped, I found pleasure in beating others. To forcefully shove our morals down the throat of the uneducated. Years went by, I received a letter to join the holy army as an inquisitor. One thing led to the other, my beliefs were further validated by the conquest of villages up north of the main continent. Those nonbelievers were killed and subjected to unspeakable things on my order. We prayed in the day and slaughtered in the night, the culling of the profane. The concept of good and evil eluded me until we arrived here, in Hidros. My orders were to capture and enslave the demi-humans. My only wish was to kill them, nothing more, nothing less. However, things didn’t go according to plan, a certain man jumped in to slay our forces without mercy. For the first time, the roles reversed, I was the one being tortured and played with. My chastity’s gone by the hands of the ones we prayed for. You reap what you sow. I can’t argue nor fight. Being treated like garbage is somewhat relieving.”

“You take pleasure in abuse?”

“No, no,” her head shook, “-I never said that. The punishment is like repenting for the suffering I caused. What about you, the energy is different from the man you call cousin.”

“Nothing much to say really. I’m but an adventurer traveling in the company of my cousin,” he smiled.

“I see,” she exhaled, “-I suppose opening up to a stranger isn’t the wisest thing to do. No matter, I have but one regret. I was never able to experience true love. A life of constant withdrawal from my womanly side.”

“Love isn’t a word to easily throw around,” he stood, “-come on, his calling, we ought to head inside.”

“Are you sure?” she clambered to her knees; “-won’t I cause more trouble for the villagers?”

“No, I’m sure it’s fine,” said he, “-come on, let’s go.”

An hour passed; the questioning session proved helpful thirty minutes in. The adventurers, Olaf in particular, left the room feeling nauseated. ‘How can someone so easily dish out pain, I never expected

a human body to bend and suffer so much.' Bonfire lit, chanting, and dancing drew their attention. Drink away the events.

"Igna, you're a devil, I swear," commented Elm.

"Perhaps yes or no, the question remains to be answered. Am I good or bad, at the end of the day, I have information and you have closure? Now, if you'd excuse me," he headed on towards the fire.

"Elder, is this wise, to trust that boy so," wondered Rody suspiciously, "-he so casually ordered the men to be slaughtered after they begged for mercy."

"Weren't you going to do the same?" refuted Elm, "-one mustn't be so quick to judge."

"As you say, elder, as you say..."

The eastern side of the village gave onto the muddied stream of before. Footsteps climbed up the gentle hill, "-hello cousin," waved Julius. Lights from the lantern reflected off their faces.

"Hello," he glanced towards the timid priestess, "-I see you've gotten close to her."

"Not really," returned he, "-she broke her cuffs and tried to get some water."

"Let me guess, she spoke about a tragic backstory," he mounted a menacing wall, "-she spoke the truth, I know she did."

"Why then?" pleaded Julius, "-if she's saying the truth, why not accept her?"

"Cousin," he breathed an exasperated sigh, "-it'll only hurt more when she eventually dies. The curse of the Whore princess is to have the host bear a direct descendant to the ancient demon's lineage. Affection will only be a hindrance," the hands motioned into a facepalm. '-a resolved expression; the mind's made up. You're a fool, cousin, a loveable fool.'