

## Death Magic 601

### Chapter 601: Empire's Invasion [19]

A long time ago, on the ominous Iqeavian soil, a place where the sun rarely shines, a place where the buildings climb to heaven, and a place where night never mattered, Vlaiwia, the capital city of the Empire. Off by a few miles, atop a swerving hill, lays the temple of Dustina, the Goddess of Destiny, weaver of fate, and proprietor of future.

An ancient legend tells of her story, a young goddess bloomed from a miscolored bud. The guardians of the heavenly garden were stumped. Her identity unknown, and powers a mystery, until the great collapse. An event referred to as the 'Attenuation' in the scriptures of Hexna. Many gods were dethroned and exiled, the then supreme god, Kronos, marred the very fabric of fate. The prophecy of one's own demise brought forth reckoning on unproportioned consequences. As the flow of time subtly altered, Dustina's want for confirmation guided her astray. A voice called out, one of utmost purity and charm, a light in between the darkness. The heavenly garden, where her light never measured nor drew attention, was presented with a place where even a glimmer seemed as if the sun.

Thus, as the Attenuation gave way to conflict of which soon evolved into the war between Gods and Demons, the princes of hell brought over many gods – one of them, Dustina. Venerated as a being of utmost power, and acknowledged by the princes, her mind, body, soul, and powers, were laid at their feet.

As time progressed, the powers amplified till she rivaled the ability of Kronos. And so, after centuries, the supreme god was defeated, and Dustina was hailed as a harbinger of good fate. What came of it was a goddess who wished to serve her master.

The Hill of Giendo, resting place of Dustina's corporal being and temple to the lady of Destiny. Before death, the master gave a certain order. Life spirited away, and the body turned to ash. A single figure stood at her side, cupping her pale hands till all ended. As a result, after death, the hill spawned an anomaly. Mana was abundant, fuller than anyplace on the planet. Beside it was another boon, one known to only the Imperial Family and the Church. Kyeno, the ancient symbols of summoning. Similar to how many gods were tempted by the princes, the temple served a similar purpose.

On the day the heir to Death's presence vanished, the elders of the Dustina sect called forth a being from another world. A young man arose from the pits of blood and rotten flesh, countless sacrifices led to his awakening.

Kion Hurworth, a hero of another world. 'A lady called out to me, her soft voice and angelic visage swallowed my sufferance and pain away. I awoke inside a church not knowing much of what happened. I remember jumping off a building, life was hard, until now. The church of Kreston called on me for help, they relied on me, and I soon realized, I bore the Mark of Dustina, the goddess who forever altered my destiny.' For the years to come, the Empire trained and sent him on various campaigns, killing monsters, killing nobles, anything and everything. The better performances begot richest and fame, 'one crucial fact, I'm unbeatable, Destina's boon is to never lose.'

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To the present, the noise-filled room resounded per Lilith and Gophy's argument. At some point, fatigue forced open a portal. Lilith tactlessly followed after, "-I need to rest," said she.

"Fine, come along," sighed Gophy.

"As if I'm listening to you," snarled she first to leap inside.

"Goodbye, Igna," waved Intherna, "-take care, I'll be back soon."

"Same here," nodded Miira respectfully "-till thee call on us again."

"I ought to leave," yawned Adete, "-good job on bringing Lilith over, she'll be a great asset."

Tranquility and solitude befell the hall, "-Cousin-

"-No need to worry," interjected Igna, "-I don't care for apologies, tis a small price for my cousin to experience love."

"Softie," mumbled Malley, "-never expected the emotionless killer to accept me so easily."

"A quick reminder," he glared, "-I did it for Julius's sake. If the news ever reaches my ear that you cheated or broke his heart, then I promise," she gulped, "-the curse of Akina will seem childish in comparison."

"N-n-n-n-n..."

"It's fine," smiled Julius, "-we'll be alright."

"On another note, have you created a portal between Glenda, the first manor, and this manor?"

"Yes, I did," he winked, "-tis all linked in the attic."

"Excellent," the chair screeched, "-the thought of being a third-wheel doesn't particularly interest me. Malley and you can have this manor, I've got matters to see in town."

"You sure?"

"On one condition," an eyebrow rose.

"I got it," he nodded, "-I'll see you later tonight then."

Handshakes led to Igna making for Glenda. Conveniently enough, the town itself had a place for the lord to reside, a large enough room built on the south-western wall. Frankly speaking, the room wasn't much to be praised of – a watchtower repurposed for nobility, what much else would one expect. Nonetheless, the created portals are linked there.

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'Good, my items are here,' a light-brown table held so, '-a panoramic view. Eyes on the whole town and then some.' Toggled, '-éclair, are you there?' No response came, '-now that's weird. Isn't he supposed to be my butler?' Another few tries led to an annoyed '-STOP!'

"Someone's feeling cranky," a holographic display rested atop the phone, "-I've been gone for quite a long time. I need the information of what has happened since."

"Information huh," sighed the butler, "-I'll tell you."

He squinted, '-something's wrong with éclair today.'

"After the forces captured Castle Eldo and the Airfield, the next operation was to catch the retreating forces off-guard. It should have been an easy victory; our army's pincer formation should have won."

"Then what, Nightwalkers are strong, we won, haven't we?"

"Sadly not. The Onyx and Sabbath clan were beaten to a forced withdrawal. We didn't lose any men... the first stage of the battle was ours until he showed up accompanied by the real Inquisitors. Four splits into two's to battle both the northern and southern assault. Four against our combined army, do you realize the absurdity, they soundly beat the nightwalkers. Much destruction remained in its wake. In the end, the advance forces lost a third of their men as well as the death of Major General Alpath."

"We won."

"Wrong, the Church had yet to play their ace. I guess the conflict of information delayed their arrival. The moment those four entered the battlefield, it ended, we were beaten regardless of the vampire's rank. The leader, Kion Hurworth's a true hero, never once tried to slaughter our members. In him lays a dormant power, or so says a report. He fought off squad after squad with a sheathed sword, the inheritor of Dustina's boon, an untouchable phenom of nature."

'The real depiction of a goddess's will.'

"All and all, the Empire has beings with far greater power than Hidros does. They could wipe us out at any minute."

"Chill will you. Think clearly, no matter how strong a person is, they'll never be able to shoulder the burden of an entire empire. This Kion fellow sounds interesting. éclair, if I were to fight him right here and now, what's the chances of victory."

"Zero, null, nada."

"Not even a slight percentage?"

"Strength doesn't matter. The Boon of Dustina makes him impervious to damage. The fate bestowed onto him is to never lose."

"Talk about being overpowered."

"Same applies to you, Igna," chuckled éclair, "-in any case, I've handled the political side of things. Our forces are stationed at Eldo and the airfield, the King has sent for a non-aggression pact."

\*Knock, knock,\* orangish-white ears ambled, "-my lord Igna, might I enter?"

"You're already in," commented he, "-how goes it, Undre, is Glenda recovering?"

"Yes," he bowed, "-my lord, the central guild has asked for thy presence."

"Central guild," off the shabby dark-oak chair, "-let's go," pistol holstered and sword strapped to the waist, '-time to work.'

"AY POPS," a rocket-like silhouette slipped through the ajar door, "-don't leave me behind," he climbed up to sit atop the shoulders.

"Draconis, didn't you leave with Lilith?"

"No, I don't want to. It's more fun to stay with pops. Come on," the head hung upside down before Igna's visage, "-pretty please."

"Such a pain," \*smack,\* "-don't move too much."

"Okay."

"My lord," gulped Undre, "-who might this child be?" his voice echoed down the spiraling staircase.

"Good question," paused Igna, a small opening allowed for slight visibility, "-I don't-"

"I'm Draconis Haggard," firmed he loudly, "-this here is my dad."

"My lord, you have a child?"

"Seems like it," exasperation dulled the already lifeless expression, "-let's go on to the guild." Ambling around town, checking on the traders, passersby and guards told one thing, the overall tenseness had disappeared. No longer were the demi-humans oppressed. Young Draconis brattled along the merchant street, entourage consisted of prattling housewives.

"Take a look, that's the new Baron. Quite the charming stud, isn't he?"

"Very much so, I heard he single-handedly defeated the ex-lord. Good riddance."

"The town is so much livelier nowadays."

A narrow alley gave onto the guild area, "-excuse us," twins came in ambush, "-are you Kinless?" inquired they without reservations.

'-Humans?' he paused, "-yes, what's the matter?"

"Great," cheered one, "-we're from the adventuring Academy," added the other.

"My names Ella," from outfits to hairstyle, they were fully identical, a far cry from the Lymsey sisters."

"Mines Ellie," returned the other.

"Excuse us, young ladies," interjected Undre, "-my lord here has business to attend to. We're not disposed to partake in frivolous chatting, might this take place at another time?"

"Ok, rude," said Ella, "-who in the hell even are you, mister?"

"Don't interrupt us," frowned Ellie, "-we're here to meet the infamous Kinless."

"No need to pop a blood vessel," whispered Igna. Veins of ire bloated upon Undre's forehead. The latter wasn't much known for having a patient side. A warm hold of the shoulder calmed the grossly mingled gnarl.

"Ella, Ellie," stepped forward, "-nice to meet you, how can this humble adventurer be of assistance?"

“Well,” they stared one another, “-it’s the central guild in Oxshield. They’ve asked for our assistance in helping the populous. We haven’t stepped out of Glenda, waiting on the Baron to make his appearance.”

“How many adventurers came, what was the quest order?”

“Let me think,” fingers to her chin, “-egh,” a distant stare, “-got it. A request from her majesty, Queen Gallienne. News of the uncalled invasion of Arda has reached social media,” quick to bring the phone, “-see. Alpha’s strongly against the unjust invasion. The Empire’s only avoiding the situation. The Federation’s too busy fighting off mercenary troops from the belligerent King Juvey.”

“Why would the adventurers get involved here. The reward is nothing, your tags read Tier-7 Sapphire. No matter, are the others here?”

“Yeah,” winked Ella, “-multiple guilds refused the offer. Seems like only members of the Adventuring Academy answered the request.”

“Yeah, yeah,” nodded Ellie, “-we should help people in need.”

“Good sentiments.” They arrived at the guild building. A crowd of familiar faces stood on inside. The guild assistants mounted up the counter with slumped shoulders; a doorway led to a tavern on the right side. Most regulars there ran amok with drinks and innuendos.

“Baron Igna,” said the assistant. Lowered heads of fatigue rose.

‘Why them?’ \*clop, clop, clop,\* “-Good afternoon Nassie. Where might I find the guild leader?”

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“Upstairs, he’s in midst of conversation.”

“With Lady Haru I presume?”

Her face flashed in bafflement; “-how did you know?”

“I’m psychic.”

“For real?” she squinted.

“I’m joking,” he replied monotonously. ‘Never expected this turn of events. Why are they here, Frost, Group A, B, and C. Wait, that’s Lingling. I’m not looking forward to the reunion.’ The arrival of past friends brought cause for concern. How to deal with the situation, what to do, and what to say. Were they friends or not, no matter the answer – it felt awkward.

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Drunken babbles whisked into a growing tense room. Ella and Ellie ambled to Lingling’s side. Her party had changed a fair bit to include the twins, herself, Kein, and Goldie. Opposite them stood Jen, Rena, Leopard, Leonard, Ila, Cole, Frost, and lastly, Anna. Their tags and hardened auras told of their progress, the adolescents with dreams grew into a fierce bunch.

‘He’s here.’

'How are we supposed to approach him?'

'Should I say hi or will that be rude.'

'The aura around him, I can't imagine being so careless,' these thoughts and few of the same context traveled.

Composure remained strong, Igna's idle expression made breaking the ice all that harder. "Enough with this awkwardness," mumbled Lingling, "-hey there Igna," she jumped on to stand face to face, "-long time no see, have you grown taller?"

'What a crazy chick.'

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'May her soul rest in peace.'

"Lingling. It has been quite a while," the sudden change of tone stumped multiple expressions. Group C, a bunch who'd always been at odd ends were the timid ones. No matter the time elapsed, if people parted on a bad note, the reunion would leave an even bitter taste.

"It has been," said she in a friendly manner, "-Ella, Ellie, Kein, Goldie, come on guys, no need to be scared of this fellow," she playfully pinched his cheeks, "-see, big ol' Igna's a good friend."

"Hey again, Igna," whispered Kein in her reclusive persona. Her bangs grew to cover her eyes, god knew how she could see, let alone fight. The Tier-7 Sapphire tag told another story.

"What is up with you these days," inquired Goldie. The overzealous party girl previously oozing her person felt lesser of a phenom. For once, the outfit wasn't as over the top as before, her makeup days swapped to lip balm and short ponytail. Tier-6 Emerald swung around her neck.

"Quite the jump in ranks from Tier-8," remarked he.

"Oh please," added Ling coyly, "-don't compliment me too much," the undertone was of, "-keep 'em coming."

"I rather not waste my breath," refuted he coldly.

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"There we go again," she pouted, "-back at it with the cool persona."

"Igna, I have a question," whispered Kein softly tugging his shirt.

"What is it?"

"What's the deal with Ardanian and Hidros ranking?"

"Oh," taking a step back, "-Nassie, mind explaining my friend here?"

The sudden request caught the assistant at a bad time. A mountain of unfulfilled requests toppled. "-M-M-MY BAD."

“Don’t get so worked up,” said he, “-go on, tell them about the ranking, I’ll handle the files.” The paths crossed; he manned the counter as she manned the group of curious adventurers. Fondly enough, those inclined on keeping their distances inched closer. In the end, she stood atop a stool as if a singer about to perform. A mosh pit worth singing for.

“Hello Adventurers,” her voice changed, the face seemed fiercer and more direct, “-welcome to town Glenda. Tis an honor for us to welcome fighters of another country. We of the Ardanian guilds have been stumped by the age of war and civil unrest. Matters in the province aren’t beneficial for tourism and adventurers. People are more concerned with survival. As the ones who accepted the trying task of aiding us in our time of need, on the behalf of the guild and the townsfolk, I’m grateful,” her words charged into a lightning strike. The thunderous roar of passion and encouragement choked up the bystanders. “Let start with the basics, guild tags. For Arda and Hidros, our standard of ranking adventurers varies. Here, it’s harder to be promoted and easier to be demoted. Our ranking system is very arduous and difficult to handle. Tis because of the many races, for example, Dark-Elves are especially adept at magic, whilst Light-elves are very good marksmen. Their roles can be quite pivotal in a battle. We also have beastmen who are fighters, other healers, their abilities and strength are gauged on a merit system as opposed to one’s mana and physical capability. To ensure the survival of recruits, they must choose one of the four guilds: Fighters, Mages, Smithing, and Traders. Once chosen, they must complete basic training and acquire an adventuring badge. Only then that they are allowed to accept the quest. Hard, complicated, and boring, those who drop out are most often saved from a worthless death. The strongest resolve to get better, no matter how weak one is, will be picked, the decision is up to the examiners. A culmination of those affects how Ardanian’s are ranked. Compared to Hidros, the ranks held by our people are mostly grouped between Tier-9 and Tier-5.” Long as it seemed or felt, the pronunciations, the body language, and prompt intonation made the speech very much enjoyable. “-Enough of the basics – I should get to the real matter at hand,” a glance to Igna begot a nod of confirmation. “-the quest posted by Queen Gallienne was done so on her own volition. The Ardanian Guild will not take responsibility for the death of unregistered fighters. It’s harsh and unjust, I know. We can’t afford the trouble, numbers are few, the guild has been taken over by the Empire. Our Guild masters managed to escape, though, our strongest of members were captured by the enemy. I hope the non-aggression pact allows for some to escape and rejoin our cause. Arda’s currently divided into two, around 70% of the continent is being occupied by the Empire, whilst 30% is under the control of the Blood-King’s Faction. I’m sure reality will hit soon; the coming quests will bring upon a new revelation. The pay will be meager, the threat of death lingers in every nook and cranny. I ought to be truthful, I’m certain some of you will die. Our province isn’t an idyllic place of magical advancement and natural beauty, we’re a heaping pile of despair,” her hair violently wrapped around the chin, cheeks, and neck, the gestures sharpened, and so did her visage. “-My goal is to discourage the foolish adventurers of Oxshield. The pay is bad, the risk is high, and recognition is none. Here’s the situation, decide right here and now,” the one-sided onslaught ended in heavier pants.

\*Huff puff\* “-if you’ll excuse me,” her feeble fingers innocently draped the stool.

“Good job out there,” winked Igna, “-I’ve sorted the quests. Should be an easier job now.”

“Oh my god,” her face flushed, “-you’re an angel,” said she more content about the paperwork, “-this’ll get me home early.”

“Nassie,” chuckled Igna, “-you’re quite a soft-hearted lady. And please, refrain from calling me an angel,” he vaulted over, “-I’m far worse than a righteous leader.”

‘Me, soft-hearted?’ she locked onto his back, ‘-no, can’t possibly be true... wait, did he realize I was willingly painting our continent in a bad light. I mean, I did say it out loud,’ the brows felt heavy, ‘-oh no, by the mercy of Tharis, I’ve done it again. I went overboard,’ papers held up to hide the self-conscious expression, ‘-damn it, damn it, damn it.’

Tense to being crushed by the pressure of hopelessness. The minds finally attuned to the surrounding. Until Igna showed up, the room had been an asylum. Neither wanted to speak nor go explore, the flight to Arda was long and tiresome. Glenda didn’t display the poverty as it ought to be shown. They were in great shape, considering the others. Shy of the town wall, after the bushes over a stream, laid an outpost for travelers.

Travelers, a fa?ade and sugar-coating way to say slums. People there lived in abject poverty, no clothes nor food, sustenance came in form of clear water. The forest was angry, fruits and vegetables stopped growing, the monster rampant activity increased. Help wasn’t an option either, the slums, also known as Vanesa’s cave, was once a hideout for the Cult of Vane, the Aedric Mistress of Plague and Illness. Any miscalculated act of heroism could spring country-wide devastation. The power of sickness is one far too fearsome to be trifled with.

Right after landing, the visitors were purposefully taken on a route to showcase the miserable state of life. Consciously or not, the situation engraved into the coming reasoning. Similarly, the door upstairs opened, the parley ended.

“Greetings Adventurers,” said a loud beast-man of the tiger’s demography, “-my name is Ronen Akton, guild master of Glenda. I bid thee a warm welcome.”

“Judging by the expression,” interjected lady Haru, “-Nassie must have recounted of province’s state.” Lowered heads and clenched fists, hopelessness at its finest.

‘About time I made my introduction,’ up the stairs and presiding over Haru, “-Hello everyone, my name’s Igna Haggard, else known as Kinless. I recently graduated from the Adventuring Academy. I’m sure, you know of Lady Haru here, she’s the master of the Trader’s guild.” A destitute countenance gave much of their worries away, “-I’m the Baron of Glenda. As lord of the town, I’ll say one thing, any granted help will be much appreciated. There isn’t time for motivational speeches. I won’t make promises nor force anyone to work. The plane is ready to leave at a moment’s notice.” A makeshift runway was built next to the secondary manor, courtesy of Julius. “-Our numbers are low, money is tight, and we’ve just started rebuilding the town. The Guilds are full as is trying to feed the populous. Leading a province without the actual support of the populous is difficult. The inhabitants already know, we’re facing a tremendous hurdle. Hope isn’t lost, we’ve called onto help from scattered adventurers. The immediate goal isn’t to fight but help. Countless villages have fallen, Glenda is ready to expand and welcome survivors. I need everyone’s support to provide a better place for the unfortunate. War is a pain; it brings nothing of value. From a lord’s point of view, I see it as nothing more than a pest. Sadly, as the son of an arm’s dealer, I see it as profit. Think what thee may, the facts have been laid out, the choice is thine to make. Will you risk your lives for nothing, to accomplish nothing and to gain nothing,



purely for the sake of a few nods of gratitude, or will you head on back to Oxshield where life is good and the pay is nice?"

"That's unfair," added Lampard.

"I agree," nodded Frost, "-the sentence was phrased in a way to make us feel bad. Quite the shrewd politician."

"I'm in," added Leonard, "-not that you care for it Igna!" pointing up, "-I know you forced my mother to accept me into my family. If not for the help, she'd have never accepted my decision."

"We've got a whole lot of favors to repay," winked Jen.

"You still tick me off," grunted Ila, "-though, I admit, you're very dependable."

"Where ever Frost goes, I follow," nodded Cole.

"I don't care about money," fired Rena, "-I want to fight with my friends and help others."

"With me at their side," added Anna caressing her hair, "-there won't be cause for concern."

"THAT'S BECAUSE WE'RE COMRADES OF THE SAME ACADEMY!" the battle cry soothed the resolve to do what was right.

"There you have it," smiled Igna, "-Lady Haru, Lord Ronen, here are highly capable warriors. They'll work for free and we're to be excused if any of them die. A win-win situation."

"Hold on a moment, Igna," said Haru.

"What is it?" her fingers interlocked with his.

"How did you know what we were after?"

"Lady Haru," gently loosening the grip, "-a simple matter of using one's own brain. Glenda's unofficially the central hub for Guilds around Arda. The overseer of the four guilds must have had some kind of plan in mind. Bringing academy students is a smart idea."

"Actually, Queen Gallienne recommended the idea."

"Oh wow, never would have guessed so. I believe the matters can be handled from here on forth?"

"Yes," she nodded.

"Very well," down the stairs he went. 'Being clocked out for so long is really bothersome. Julius built an airfield, fighters from the academy were called into town. There's the existence of slum outside the walls, I guess I did fall in a coma right after becoming baron.'

Chapter 603: Empire's Invasion [21]

"Right then adventurers, please make for the counter and register. We should have a few quests to get started," the excitement of a new journey in a foreign town. Moments later, a notice board full of tasks showed lesser pay.

"Extermination quests, monster problems," read Frost, "-they're all offering cheap change. I knew this was a bad idea."

"Don't say so," snickered Anna, "-let me guess, the mighty icicle cannot handle a job without reward?" inched closer, "-how about we do that thing as a prize?" a coy side-glance bamboozled the brute into worthlessness.

"Not fair," exclaimed Rena, "-who does he think we are?"

"Chill," returned multiple whispers. The team was divided into three. First was Ling, Goldie, Ella, Ellie and Kein. Next, Jen, Rena, Leonard and Lampard. Lastly, Anna, Frost, Cole, and Ila. The last two were more of an eight men unit, members switched around depending on the fight and task.

"Alright people," gestured Ling, "-we're heading out to the inn. See you later."

"Understood," returned Anna, "-see you girls later."

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"Lampard," squinted Jen, "-what this about forcing your mother to accept our relation?"

"Oh yes, didn't I explain this before? Igna used his standing as noble to pressure my family. I heard even the Queen reprimanded my mother's action, thus our situation. Not that it matters now, he's a young baron of the Blood-King's Faction."

"What of it?" inquired Lampard, "-he's just another noble then."

"Wrong," he dismayed, "-being baron in a war-torn province is an effort, a lot of it. He's not only responsible for his life but the life of the populous as well."

"Which means," said Rena, "-I don't get the whole politic thing. Come on, Lampard, we're going on a date," no reservations, hands on the boy's ears, the date seemed more of a mother scolding her child.

"We should get moving too," proposed Leonard, "-we've already picked out the quests. Best get acquainted with the lay of the land," the second party diffused to the wonder of the unknown.

Frost's team remained sternly, "-What now?" inquired the blue-haired prodigy.

"You tell me," said Anna, "-the man must take the lead."

"It's as my lady said," glared Ila, "-show her the way to happiness, else I show you hell."

"Now isn't the time to fight," whispered Cole.

"-Shut it!" fired the ladies.

"We're doomed," sighed Frost, "-I agree," despaired Cole. Along the way, Ila suddenly asked Cole on a date. Things went from friendly to a relation. In search of strength, the academy students invited a romantic endeavor, an opportunity to find inner power. The importance of protection, fighting for a dream, or achieving greatness – emotions were strong.

New faces slipped in around the general populous. Time elapsed, work led Igna to scour along the town wall. The expansion was to be made towards the north; a suspended bridge would lead into the start of

a craggy hill. Deforestation began as soon as offering to the dryads were made. Dubbed Svein's hill, home of Vanesa's cave – a purplish taint and minute miasmic particles of Aedric energy hovered.

'I didn't notice it before, maybe because of the forestry. The main entrance faces the bothersome hill of illness. Well, the bridge will span a long distance, the stream's rather arduous to built upon. Undre reported the details earlier, the architects suggested using the hill as material and support to carve out a new district for Glenda. It's going to take a few years to complete,' a half-smile proved otherwise, '-we'll get it done in two months. A new district for the refugees. This project's my personal quest.' Noon shifted into the afternoon; the brightly lit sky dimmed per greyish clouds. A side-glance showed a couple ambling along the walls.

"IGNA!"

'Damn it,' he snarled, "-hey."

"There's no need to look so disappointed," remarked Leonard, "-you're a landed noble now, quite remarkable for one of our same age group."

"I suppose. What brings a couple here of all places?"

"Exploring," they sat overlooking the town, "-Glenda's an awesome place. They're very much amiable, I can't imagine this place being affected by the war."

"Oh, is that so," he joined, "-Glenda seems free because of the pile of bodies I left," leaned to stare Jen, "-I have a question."

Her guard went up, the visage broke into a frown, "-go on."

"You're from Iqavea. A saint of the Church," he squinted, "-mind tell me more of that. The power you used in the dungeon, I found it weird," index to the stone, crimson crystal dispersed to halt shy of her palm, "-tell me, are you a friend or foe?"

"F-friend," she gulped.

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"Good," the scarlet crystal retracted, "-what church?"

"Temple of Dustina, Goddess of Destiny. My sister and I were humble followers of the church. We were trained to be protectors of the Empire. Due to circumstances, we fled to Hidros and began a new life. I attained the rank of Saint from the constant practice," she pulled onto her turtle neck shirt, "-here's the symbol of sainthood, a boon from goddess Dustina. Without this, I'd have never been able to survive."

"As long as there's no threat to the town and its people, the story doesn't interest me."

"Igna," her expression dulled, "-how long are you going to keep us at arm's length. Come on, it's about time we clear the misunderstanding and move on, I don't want to feel so miserable the rest of my life."

"Miserable huh," he stood, "-look over there," he pointed, "-see those men and women, they're survivors from the ex-lord's treatment."

"Yes, I remember them, they're the kind folks who welcomed us into town."

“Correct, they’ve been abused and treated like animals. The disparities between humans and demi-humans will never end. King Staxius vowed to promote an alliance and set differences aside. The dream was half accomplished – adventurers are free to mingle and garner deeper bonds. The Azure wall’s complete with our people. Goes to show the effort didn’t totally fail. The Empire’s tactic of divide and conquer has worked.”

“What then, what can the populous accomplish?” wondered Jen.

“No idea,” said he, a gust carried the hair, “-the decision is in the hands of the higher-ups.”

“What about you?” inquired Leonard, “-will the Haggard dynasty get involved?”

“We’re already involved,” he laughed, the aura darkened, “-information’s abundant. Trips to the inns and taverns should paint a better picture. My goal is simple,” spun to stare the imaginary wall, “-I’m going to protect what little semblance of safety we have.”

\*Woosh,\* a flash of white flames darted along the walls, “-POPS” screamed Draconis.

\*POOF,\* a violent cloud of smoke carried on after Igna. Parts of the stone cracked, he caught the ball stood with an arm stretched out, “-Draconis,” he mumbled, “-care to explain this interruption?”

“Let go of my head first,” struggled the boy, “-I just wanted to say hi.”

“A boy shouldn’t go around spearing another for the sake of saying hello.”

The fog of chaos dwindled, Jen and Leonard remained utterly silent. ‘Such power, I thought we were dead,’ gulped he. ‘-An explosion and then he stood with a kid in hand, what happened?’

“Igna... is that a demon?”

“No,” refuted he.

“Yes, like pops said,” out of the iron-clad hold, “-my name’s Draconis Haggard, age 2,” he stood with arms crossed and unzipped pants.

“Two years old?” they exchanged meaningless expressions.

“Don’t mind him,” said Igna, “-this little fellow here’s my son,” up and sat atop his shoulder, “-too much energy for such a tiny frame.” Tiny fingers began pinching the cheeks and nose into various contours.

“BWAHAHAHAHA.”

Down below hailed Undre, “-I should get going.”

“Already?”

“Jen,” stopped on the edge, “-about the misery, tis thine insecurities. I care for one thing; results. Stay well and don’t die,” he jumped.

Back in the private quarters, “-Lord Igna, we have trouble,” pleaded the steward.

“The cave right?” commented he.

“How did yo- never mind, few locals were lost in forests. An aedric presence lingers.”

"What about the adventurers, I noticed a quest about investigating the area."

\*Knock, knock,\* "-SIR UNDRE, THE INFIRMARY!"

"Gather yourself, man," said he with much haste, "-what happened, explain?"

"The adventurers found the lost children. They were brought into the infirmary," the skin paled in the rapid of breaths, "-p-plague, n-nurses w-w-were infected."

"UNDRE," he dashed out the room, "-I'm heading to the hospice. Gather the mages, we might have a serious situation on our hand."

"Hey pops, what's the matter?"

"Trouble," said Igna sprinting down the stairs, "-the Aedric plague, also known as the monster plague."

"Sounds fun," he grinned, "-let me help."

The crowd of people gathered, most were curious, the malignant energy crashed in waves. A few guardsmen blocked the entrance, "-what's happening?" inquired Ling on her promenade. "The plague," said a bystander, "-I heard they found the lost children."

\*Crack,\* wings retracted, "-are they inside?"

"Lord Igna," bowed the guard, "-the hospice is too dangerous to enter."

"Doesn't matter," the door opened, "-the mage's unit should be on their way. Have a perimeter of five meters summoned around the building. I don't have to speak of the gravity of what it poses."

"No sir."

Support arrived soon after, the curious crowds were pushed behind a certain point.

"What happened?" inquired an annoying bystander, "-you're blocking the road."

"Silence," fired the steward, "-we may be faced by a potential epidemic of the Aedric plague."

"The plague..."

"Bad, we've been cursed," panic ensued.

"RUN AWAY!" the street cried till a morgue-like silence. The story of Drine, a ghost village far to the west has always scared the populous. Until then, many took the monster curse lightly. The day a brazen fighter waltz with heavy injuries inflicted by the curse was also the last. The plague-infected the very mana in the atmosphere, creating a breeding ground for the victims, pain comes harshly and death arrives at a snail's pace. In a matter of a week, the village grew into a dungeon. Even now, the place is taboo to wander into.

"Lord Igna," nodded the nurses, "-why are you here?"

"I've come to check on the survivors. Where's the children?"

.....

"In the basement," said they, "-the doctor's performing the rite of cleansing."

"What of the other patients?"

"We've already summoned anti-curse barriers around their rooms. The halls and basement are subject to the illness."

"Fast response to the problem, good work."

"My lord, I wish not to sound arrogant, but is it wise to wander in a potentially fatal environment?"

"I've had my fair share of experience dealing with such curses. Did they have lesions on the faces or hands?"

"I don't think so."

"Yes, one of them had crinkly skin."

"Bad, lock the hallway and don't allow anyone in or out."

Entrance to the basement locked to a deep 'boom'. Screams and chants wandered, the energy intensified. 'A lesion means the plague has already affected the child's element. The body's next to follow.'

\*Rite of cleansing, final form!\* skin marred in purple, shattered round glasses gripped the nose. A broken right arm and slumped figure.

\*Grrr.\*

"I'm not letting you die!" cried the doctor, "-I'LL SAVE YOU!"

\*Woosh,\* a possessed figure leaped lifelessly to end the misery. \*Death Element: Magical Barrier.\* It missed to perry and slice the legs.

'Damn, I'm late,' the cursed dagger infected the doctor, the body soon changed to resemble the possessed child. Dark skins, purple eyes, tiny protruding horns, and vile grins. 'The other three seem to be hanging on, the plague's yet to reach its final form. Well then,' the sleeves rolled, '-time to get serious.' The thumb split, \*Blood-Arts: Crimson Threads – Crystal Prison,\* cross-shaped lances dug to bind the possessed figures.

'The plague can be cured by cleansing, death, or entrapment. Death isn't much help since the bodies infect what's around. Cleansing's out the question, don't have enough mana to slowly clear the infection. The only option, entrapment.' \*I call on thee, Box of Alche.\* the chest opened, brownish parchments circled atop the tapped zombies

\*I am he who slays without fear, I am he who shall be the last of what thee see. Heed mine call, thou whomst dared to fight the natural order, tis the day thou ought to be destroyed, Ancient Magic – Astral Binding.\*

Chapter 604: Empire's Invasion [22]

Laid on a fine mattress of blood and bodily fluids, the necrotic skin of the alas possessed doctor and unfortunate child dispersed around. The cast of Astral Binding took a lot of power. The minute mana reserve was once again teetering on the verge of uselessness. 'Phew,' arms to the nearest walls, '-a striking headache. I feel so bad.' The overall Aedric energy soothed to a stop. The parchments drifted weightlessly in a purple hue. 'I've sealed the curse. Time to gather strength.' \*Mana Control: Wave,\* lay lines of spirit energy permeated throughout the room. \*Mana Control: Vortex,\* dormant outlines flowed into a fixpoint atop his index. A subtly present breeze spun, \*Mana Control: Regeneration.\* Invisible hands clawed up the arm to strike the neck, '-should keep me up for a while. Too bad my element's still recovering from the outburst. Just have to make do with what's available.' \*Blood-Arts: Crimson Threads.\*

Afternoon led to dark out, the blackened night-lit per a million flames, taverns, inns, households, and torches. Compared to the more technologically advanced towns and cities, Glenda stood on the lesser side. Most things were done using mana and magic. The flames were gentle and nice, warm and peaceful. In a place where dark meant death, the tranquility aided in many quantities.

\*Click,\* the hospice door opened, "dark out already?" remarked Igna.

"My lord," hailed Undre, "-are you well?" he rushed over.

"No need for being overprotective," he returned coldly, "-seems this part of town has been closed. There's no shred of light nor presence of the populous, care to explain?"

"The Aedric curse, my lord," said he, "-we know of the gravity it imposes. There lays no better cure than safety."

"Yeah, I get it, no need for further explanation," the sleeves unrolled in an albeit less amiable state. "-The hospice should be cleansed from the plague. Issue this order to the guild, no one is to venture out into the northern hills. Vanesa's cave is to be deemed a threat to the town's folk. Have I made myself clear?"

.....

"Yes, my lord." Few deep footsteps and off was the steward into purer light. The nurses worked as hard as they could, magic and medicine, quite the humble profession. Hands in pocket, the solemn nightfall felt appeasing. 'Someone's here,' he ambled forth till an intersection.

"My Lord Baron," pleaded a housewife, "-is my child, ok?" her eyes watered as did her sharpened canines. A shadow cast just above her nose, covering the most damning place for reading a person.

"What did he look like?" inquired Igna in less of a tactful demeanor.

"Short, red hair-"

"Yes, he's fine. Matter of fact, everyone's safe. It shouldn't be news," he frowned, "-I've sworn to protect this town. I'll do whatever it takes to undo harm upon my people, is that understood?"

Harsh with an added undertone of 'I don't care,' the heavier words befell the cat-lady's ears. An onslaught of which rendered the feeble heartbroken beyond repair. "My lord," said she, "-addressing citizens in such a manner will bring about hatred and mistrust."

"So, do I care?" the arms crossed, "-listen, June of the Nisel tribe, your people might have failed to protect thy land, Glenda will not suffer the same fate. Look at the boy, he was sent on god knows what errand to said vile cave. A mother should be more responsible for her child. If it's all you asked, then I'll be on my way."

The distance grew, her hopeless plea resolved to stand, "-lord of Glenda," came a rather obnoxious tone, "-would you care for a dance?"

"No thank you," returned he smugly tipping his head, "-such a pathetic attempt at assassination."

"What the?" her feet were bound to a scarlet light.

"Scared, are we?" he smirked, "-may thee have a not so nice afterlife," \*Blood-Arts: Extra,\* a snap, her circulation reversed to burst from every pore. \*Blood-Arts: Bloody Mary.\*

'Never expected for a spy to be in Glenda,' \*crunch,\* '-such a small apple. Not enough to quench my thirst. Anyway,' the walk resumed brazenly. Night followed to beyond the town. Draconis ran amok fighting off monsters and destroying much of the surrounding. Keeping him in check was hopeless. Joined by Julius and Malley, the initial task of the wall resumed. "The speed's increased," commented Igna.

"Yes, I've been working hard," returned Julius, "-got over my limits, creation's power is awesome."

"We're just getting started."

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Morning rose to a noise-filled guildhall. Most of the quests were somewhat linked to Vanesa's cave. An absence of job meant trouble; the local adventurers took on private quests issued by their individual guilds. This meant, they could possibly be ordered to kill a person for the sake of money. The Central Guild couldn't do anything to protect against such threats. Between freedom and imprisonment of the falling economic situation, mistrust sowed the seed of conflict.

"What's up with them?" wondered Ella sipping on tea,

"Perhaps a bug crawled up their bottom," returned Ellie.

"Please you two," sighed Goldie, "-no more disgusting images, especially during mealtime."

"But Goldie," argued Ellie, "-the posteriors must hurt from all the-"

"I'm going to hurl," cried Kein, "-p-please m-m-make them stop."

"I mean," said Ella, "-what if it was the meal, look at the soup, looks as if the innards of a roach."

"At my limit," tears of discomfort fell, "-I need to run," she gagged and darted for the washroom.

"We did it," winked Ella.

"She hurls once more," \*clap,\* a high-five, "-good job sister," grimaced Ellie.

"These two," complained Ling, "-I'm at my wit's end."



On another table for eight, Leonard and Rena were at it in an argument. Lampard leaned vulgarly, Cole and Ila fought in an intense staring contest. Jen and Anna were the only two who spoke humanely, meanwhile, Frost had dozed off onto the table.

“Ok guys, listen up,” said Anna, “-we’ve all grown accustomed to common sense and life here in general. We should get to work, the teams will be the usual split. Here are two quests, one’s an investigation of Apid Village, apparently, there have been monster sightings. The next one is an escort mission to Upen Village.”

“We’ll take the Apid quest,” said Jen.

“Alright, we’ll take the Upen quest then,” returned Anna.

Meanwhile, outside the town; \*Gate,\* “-I’ll see you two tomorrow.” Glenda stood directly to the left.

“Later,” returned the couple.

A full-night work, ‘-I want to sleep,’ he dove straight into bed. Time showed 07:00. ‘Made a lot of progress, we’re looking at completion in three months. I’ll rest awhile.’

Far, far away into enemy territory, perched atop a gigantic branch, watched an ever-melancholic princess. “Princess Eira,” bowed a man in white and golden armor.

“And you are?” she returned without much intrigue.

“Kion Hurworth, summoned hero of another world, it’s nice to make your acquaintance.”

“The pleasure isn’t mutual,” she snarled.

“Please my lady, I wish only to exchange a few words,” the friendly smile kept on radiating.

“Look at you,” two steps later she reappeared in a white mist, “-hero of another world. Are you perhaps intrigued by my vestment, my visage, or my aura, what is it. I smell the perfume of multiple ladies in waiting.”

“Figured me out already,” the warm tone dropped, “-well, no matter,” he moved to sit before a display of nature’s marvel. “Lady Eira, I have a favor to ask.”

“What is it?” she joined and settled.

“Would you kindly lend me an ear? Out of the whole castle, her highness feels different and standoffish. For one, the sight of demi-humans doesn’t seem to bother.”

“And, what’s the conclusion of the simple observation?”

“Nothing much really,” he leaned to gaze the heavy foliage, “-my world and this world isn’t so different. The class system, disparities, and the everlasting will to fight. I’m at a loss. I once blindly obeyed the church and did their bidding. The Empire’s a strange place, dictatorial and ominous. Even so, the Emperor doesn’t feel much inclined in conquering the world or whatnot. He has charm and authority – we only came to fight because of the Church. Is it right or wrong, we invaded an otherwise peaceful place for the sake of righteousness. I say this out of pure curiosity, why do humans hate non-humans so much. I was once rewarded by countless slaves to be made playthings by a curious man from Alpha. It

disgusted me. In my past life, I was nothing, no power, no authority, no sense of accomplishment or dreams. It led to a sad ending, I decided to end my own life. It was in those last seconds that I realized; life wasn't meant to be thrown away. Well, look at me now, a supposed hero who's killed for the sake of cleansing. I don't know really, what is right and what is wrong..."

"I don't know either," returned Eira, "-the good and bad, what's the reference for such measurements. Hidros' a place of hypocrites and selfishness. I've seen the noble greed first hand, I was rejected as an infant, thrown in a river to die," she unknowingly stared off into the distance, "-this continent was once part of the Empire. Until the Holy Krestonian invasion. Queen Gallienne, my birth mother, was quite the sadist. She single-handedly ruined my childhood by taking away the man who rescued me from death. I was then raised by the companions he made along the way, trained in the ways of battle, living in a war-torn country. Her ascension to the throne would have been the end of the province... and I say, would have. Instead, the man I call father vowed to ally the provinces. I lost everything; the church took away the people who raised me."

"The Empire's not far from what Hidros did. People were wrongfully executed, burnt to the stakes for being deemed a heretic. King Lucifer is a good man, his ambition is to unite Hidros under the Empire once more."

"Unity can never be achieved by constant fighting," refuted Eira.

"In a way, it's true. Still, words can only do so much. The Blood-king's faction kills without restraint. They smugly burnt Major Chod in retribution for the extermination of the lizardmen. I knew him personally, a father of five, married to a baroness. He was a very loved lord. What about her highness, why do you fight, why partake the side of the church, didn't they take what was precious?"

"I realized it along the way, the father who I venerated so much was the one responsible for their deaths. If he hadn't done what he did, my family would still be around. In the end, I committed patricide. His defeat awakened a part of me I never knew existed. I no longer live in his shadow, no longer bound by his extreme grandeur and presence."

"Ha-ha."

"What's so funny?" fired she.

"I meant no disrespect. It's just, the way the visage softens when thee reminisces is lovely."

"Whatever, mister hero."

"I ought to get going," two lovely ladies teleported in complete silence, "-my companions wait."

"Sure," she whisked away, the tender expression froze.

"Kion, what happened between you and her highness?" inquired a very elegantly dressed lady.

"Nothing much, just a pleasant talk. She's not a traitor," returned he, "-her motives are pedestrian at most. We should focus on the next attack. The pests of Arda will know the pain of hurting my countrymen."

"You tell 'em," said the second smaller lady.

"My friends, please accept my gratitude," he knelt, "-if not for thy support, I'd have never made it to where I am now."

"Stop it," they knelt, "-we're forever bound to you, Kion. Our journey has only begun, the Empire will get his way."

"We shall clean the garbage left on our doorstep. Hidros is rightfully ours, none shall ever take it away!"

\*ACHOO,\* the bed rocked, "-MY LORD!" screamed the steward.

'What a strange dream...' time showed 07:50, '-a hero and Eira.'

"ARE YOU WELL?"

"Shut it!"

Chapter 605: Empire's Invasion [23]

Stumped by the sudden '-shut up,' Undre's posture slumped a little, "-I was only worried," came a subtle mumble.

"I know, I apologize," said Igna, "-where's my phone."

"Over on the desk," he pointed. "My lord," stood idly, "-there's an important matter to discuss."

"Take a seat then."

"Thank you."

Bedroom, study, office, the full package in a circular tower. The minimalist approach was more convenient than overbearing establishments. The minute hand passed the 12-hour mark, time read 8:00. The duo sat before a projection, "-my lord, éclair has reported the sudden involvement of a spy. We found clothes and scattered belongings on an earlier patrol. The guards question how vestments and items came to be. The person seemed to have teleported away."

"My doing," said he snacking on fruits, "-it was late, didn't have much strength to painfully kill the lass. Her name's June of the Nisel tribe, a mother of one of the plague victims."

.....

"I beg your pardon. Was she killed?"

"Yes," proudly sat back, "-should I ignore an assassination attempt?"

"N-n-no, tis not the matter. Why couldn't she have been captured?"

"Waste of time," the fruit bowl emptied, "-Undre, my patience's running a little dry."

Brief shakes of the head, "-construction is ready to begin. Vanesa's cave has been placed under close watch. There are reports of tremendous power wandering the woods."

"Right. I'll see to their willful dismissal," the door opened.

"My lord," catching his hand, "-I hope you don't slaughter the refugees..."

"Impudence," he pulled, "-Undre," the aura grew, "-don't overstep thy station. This is an order. I'm sure there are more competent stewards at the ready if a certain someone met his demise," the handle creaked, "-you really think me a monster..." the door shut, '-I guess I am.'

'Why did I have to stand up to the baron,' a facepalm echoed, '-I'm so stupid. Calm down, no need to get worked up... HOW CAN I BE CALM. June was one of my best friends, HOW DARE HE KILL HER!' \*DRING\* '-who is it now?

"Hello?"

"Hello, éclair speaking."

'Nice, the loyal butler,' he sneered, "-how can this worthless steward be of assistance?"

"Launch an investigation on the Nisel Tribe attack. I've compiled a list of suspects. There's strong evidence of a potential civil uprising."

"I know," gritted he, "-Baron Igna doesn't seem to realize the people are angry at the sudden changes. What is he thinking, allowing a place for refugees, a safe place for foreigners, it's unacceptable."

"Keep the malice in check," returned éclair, "-do as was said. The Baron's saved this pitiable town from the savagery of the previous lord. Would it be better to disfigure the townsfolk?"

"No, no, I understand. I'll forward what information we have on the Nisel Tribe."

"Good day, Steward Undre."

"Good day, éclair."

\*Beep,\* '-enough is enough. Things have to move along,' a sinister grin beckoned greater trouble.

Out onto the northern gate, '-I see,' multiple key points scrolled, '-good job, éclair. The traitor is indeed one among us. The little assassination attempt yesterday was botched. I realized it after killing the mother who acted the part. The killing intent I sensed must have been her special ability. What's done is done,' he leaped off the walls headfirst, \*Crack,\* '-her death should bring call for a change of plans.'

"Lord Baron," saluted the scarce guards.

"Good morning, how was the night."

"Nothing interesting happened sire," returned one, "-same ol', same ol'."

Horse-drawn carts clopped, "-ello Toen, how's guard life treating ya?"

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He desperately tried to signal, '-be silent.'

"What's the matter," laughed the old man, "-Cat got your tongue?" a metal bottle flung over, "-have a swig of grandpa's lucky drink." Embarrassment emanated off the poor boy's face, the adjacent guard could but contain his laughter. "-Who's this pretty girl?"

"Grandfather, that will be enough of fooling around. Get going already."

"What... forget it. I want to know who this lovely young girl is."

"Igna Haggard, Baron of Glenda. Nice to make your acquaintance, old man."

"Oh-ho-ho," bushy faced hidden under a sports cap, "-tell my son I'm dead."

"Grandpa..."

"Listen, Toen," the hat came off, "-I've disrespected a noble of the Empire. They'll surely execute an Ardanian..."

"Old man, you misunderstand. Glenda's under the Blood-King's faction. No one will be executed on my watch."

"Oh... HA-HA-HA-HA, you're a funny one. Give me a moment," he pulled on a ragged sack, "-let see here... FOUND IT, HA-HA-HA-HA." Igna frowned.

"It's a little dusty," whatever object he pulled was soon cleaned by a dustier piece of cloth, "-catch."

'A bottle of liquor?'

"Courtesy of my old man, the best booze in the whole of Arda. Consider it a gift for being hilarious."

'Old man's Scrum,' the eyes narrowed, '-brewed in Squindale.'

"Oh, I get it," paused the old man, "-the name, it's funny. Get it, Scrum. Rhymes with rum and c-"

"THAT WILL BE ENOUGH!" fired a female voice leaping off the wagon, "-I apologize dearly for my grandfather."

"There's no need for concern," returned he, "-I'm sure to thoroughly enjoy the taste of an old man's scrum."

"AHAHAHAHA, SEE, THE BARON GETS IT!"

"My lord, let me apologize on my grandfather's behalf," the guard knelt, "-he's being disrespectful."

"Raise thine head," hands-on the shoulder plate, "-a jovial old man's a gift to be proud of. Keep him happy and sane. Moments like these are few and far-fetched, treasure them."

Horses neighed, "-see you at the tavern later, Lord Igna," the cart moved.

"-don't leave me behind," cried the girl.

"Once again, I'm deeply sorry."

"Don't mention it." A darkened mist teleported the bottle. No other words exchanged; a tall order was at hand. The investigation of Svien's hill. Tall weeds and the muddied path led into a degenerate bridge of mossy stones. The stream so many spoke about was a rapid river of unmatched strength. Here he thought of a peaceful galloping bed of water. Only a few meters in, the entire atmosphere altered. Trees on the other bank grew horizontally, a weird triangle-shaped opening laid as an entrance.

'I haven't seen my little trouble maker, where's he at?'

“POPS!” exclaimed a distant voice.

‘Above?’ he gawked, time seemed to stop, ‘-a shooting-star?’ he focused, “-no, it’s just Draconis riding a...” straining for a better look, ‘-A WYVERN?’ They plummeted into the river to form a giant wall of water.

“THAT WAS AWESOME!” the gleeful proclamation didn’t quite match Igna’s expectation. Clothes were soaked to the bones, “-Draconis,” a murderous smile had the boy tremble, “-where have you been?”

“I went wyvern catching... I heard the town’s kid run around catching butterflies. When I asked a girl if I could join, she said, ‘ew no’ then ran off. I asked the boys, they said, ‘-real men catch birds’ and kicked me away. My horns picked up on strange auras beyond the hill... I ran to check and saw that dragon-looking thingy.”

“Draconis,” they pointed to the other bank, the ground carved, “-if I didn’t intervene, you’d have died.”

“I know,” he laughed, “-that’s why I flew the bird to pops.”

“Honestly,” palms hopelessly clenched the forehead, “-listen carefully. Kids shouldn’t go around wyvern hunting. I mean,” glancing the carcass, “-it was at least a Tier-8 Steel ranked monster.”

“No, no, it just proves I’m manlier than a man,” cackles escaped into the hill.

“Shut it,” warmly patting the head, “-Draconis, how old are you?”

“I’m eighteen and a strong boy,” he asserted confidently.

‘Hopeless,’ he breathed, “-I don’t get it, are you an ancient demon or not?”

An innocent tilt asked, “-does it matter?”

“I guess not,” \*Mana Control: Fire Element Variant – Amber.\* “Come along then,” hand in hand, “-let’s go explore Svein’s Hill.”

“Let’s go,” said he loudly.

Every sound resounded; the somber scape brought by heavier foliage heightened his guard. Dead animals wrapped in strange matter littered about, some hung from the branches. The stench of death and marks of struggles and smeared liquids. An uphill climb into a potentially fatal battle. “We should be wary of a strong monster.”

“I only sense weaklings,” said the boy, “-there are signs of demonic rituals. I feel the presence of a fellow friend. He’s close to awakening,” sniffing about, “-inside the cave, way over there.” Signs of meager living accommodations clambered into view. The slope eased into a flat-enough land. Lifeless children curled in a circle and watched. None showed any sign of interest.

“Who are you?” wondered an older woman in a robe, “-you’ve wandered too far into the hill,” she said holding stale bread. “There you go, little pests,” the food flew harshly onto the kids’ marred faces. “Still here?” returned a mosaic response.

“Does it look otherwise?”

"Attitude," she snickered, "-do whatever you want kid."

'What's up with them?' he ambled past the starved children, '-is this the extent of the slums?' Draconis's tightened his grip.

"What happened?"

"The cave, the presence. It's getting stronger."

A tiny wooden door blocked the passage. "Draconis, mind waiting here for a second?"

.....

"Why?" he frowned, "-I wanna go explore inside."

"No," the head shook, "-it's better not to come with. I have a sneaking suspicion the cult's performing a ritual."

"Fine, whatever. If pop says to remain outside, I'll obey."

"Don't wander off, it's an order."

"Whatever, I'm a twenty-year-old strong boy, I can handle myself."

Moist rocks, slippery steps, a slightly cramped passage into the deeper parts. No source of light nor sound, the tunnel went on for a few minutes. '-I don't sense anything unusual,' rays signaled the end.

\*Thud, thud, thud,\* rhythmic stomps bellowed as did the air. Chants, moans, screams, and laughter permeated; a purplish cloud flowed per the currents. '-Narcotics?' he wondered and snuck in behind a makeshift stone wall.

'A saturnalian party of indulgence. What a blasphemous sight. I was right not to bring Draconis. They're drugged and humping like rabbits.' Settled back behind the cover, '-the Cult of Vane, worshiper of the Aedric Mistress of plague and illness. The children must have accidentally stumbled on one of their rituals. Here I thought they were gone. Slums huh, quite the ordeal on our hands. What are they trying to accomplish?'

\*Infiltration mode, toggled,\* commented éclair. A scan of the area showed naught but nameless individuals, an approximate number of three hundred. 'Only reason a person would venerate Vane is to bring about potentially world-ending catastrophe. Are these Ardanians really going to sacrifice their lives for a curse? The payment is in carnal pleasures and whatever bodily fluids brought on.'

\*Doup, doup, doup,\* '-I know that sound,' the face froze.

"POPS" the entrance crashed, "-HELP ME!" a monstrous fiend barreled on behind. Quick to catch the boy, he leaped back onto the ground below. A tall stake-like construction held a naked lady prisoner by the head and on all fours. Her tears and pain left to dribbled onto a cauldron. The edifice carried stairs upon which men and women alike took turn climbing.

'Close one,' the stone cracked, "-what happened to the strong twenty-year-old?"

“Shut up, that old lady turned out to be a demoness,” boulders peppered the crowd. Some died on impact, others had legs and arms crushed. “I see,” grimaced young Draconis, “-you wanted to look at the ladies alone. Didn’t know my pops was a pervert.”

“Shut it,” palms veiled the unsightly proceedings from the boy’s mind.

“Lady Rouge, why have thee been angered?” they prostrated. The demonic body sunk into an older woman.

“Those two,” she pointed, “-they dared intrude on my reawakening.”

“Lady Rouge,” said a random bystander, “-please allow me to remedy the situation.” The figure swapped from unbecoming to a murderous beast of unknown origin. Drool slumped down the yellowish canines, white pupils, skin of a nocturnal, and the repugnant smell of Aedric strength.

‘Save me,’ muffled the lady atop the stakes.

“Draconis,” settled facing the wall, “-count the holes in the rocks. Whatever is heard, don’t turn back. Promise me and I’ll give you a present later.”

“I’ll count the rocks, it’s a manly promise.”

“Good,” a gentle pat swapped into a demonic presence. “-Now then,” a heavy aura emanated, “-care to dance with death?” \*Woosh.\*

Chapter 606: Empire’s Invasion [24]

“How presumptuous,” groaned the salivating aedric beasts. It pounced looking for blood, the claws struck to no avail, the immediate rock face crumbled into boulders. Blades stained by the life of many others slid off the sheath, the figure blinked to reappear beside the creature, a brazen upward slash cleanly beheaded the monster. No turning back nor standing on guard, the blade returned as quickly as it entered the battle. No mercy nor emotions, the tall figure promenaded in to stand before the crowd.

“NO, JONAS!” cried the supposed leader, “-HOW DARE YOU SLAY ONE OF OUR BROTHERS.”

“Lady Rouge,” Tharis left its holster, “-a question, mind entertaining this humble traveler?”

“What is it?” her eyes narrowed to say, ‘-what a fool.’

“Vane’s cult,” he leaped onto the precarious edifice, ‘-her back has been burnt and inscribed with many curses. Can’t quite get the read on their intent.’ Rivaling her one more, “-what’s there to accomplish?”

“My revival,” cackles echoed, “-the girl who’s so diligently worked as our slave will soon bear the embodiment of our struggles and pain. She’ll give birth to a demoness, the reincarnation of lady Vane.”

“In comparison to the ancient demon Draconis, how does her strength measure?”

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“Why would you ask that... hell, where was that blasphemous name even heard. Lady Vane is second to our greatest goddess, the Curse Princess, Lady Akina.”



"I see," the face hung low to stare the captive, "-what about the townspeople. I've seen them suffer tremendously..."

"Devotees," exclaimed lady Rouge, "-look at the murderer, he's realized the foolishness in his actions." The lips murmured a few words, the captive's eyes and mouth widened; her face flushed, a few words were exchanged.

"Tis our god's work, the afflicted illness is a conduit for my goddess's rebirth. The ceremony is over, today's the day of celebration, nothing can be done to undo what we've accomplished," her arms climbed to celebrate confidently.

"About your rebirth?" wondered he.

"Doesn't matter, my duty as a servant has been accomplished," her exalted visage dropped to a daring stare-off.

"Last question," Tharis's barrel locked onto the crowd below, "-would thee consider peacefully leaving this cave?"

"..." Silence and perplexed thought tremored the room, "-leave peacefully?" snickered a bystander, "-we're heretics, the worst of the worst. Tis a matter of time till our deaths. We've served our purpose; the rest is in lady Rouge's hands!"

\*Astral Aspect – Disintegration.\* 'Time to clean up the trash.'

"YOU'LL NEVER WIN, NOW MY SERVANTS, ATTACK."

"Heard that one a lot of times," \*bang,\* an instant hit, the impact imploded to swallow her arms, the striking pain knocked her mind out of consciousness. 'So much for that,' he floated down, '-a single shot, and my mana goes haywire. Whatever,' the stance lowered, '-guess I'll do it the old fashion way.'

\*Blood-Arts: Bloody Mary.\* An imaginary voice of Adete said, '-on it,' flash images of her controlling the blood lingered.

'She's still at my side.'

"Toggled to battle-mode," said éclair, "-go give them hell." Orenmir's aura alone chilled the already freezing cave. Instinct cried. The participants altered their forms to demi-demons borrowing powers from Balone, the realm currently ruled by Lucifer. Hordes of tens darted for vital spots, '-I feel it,' he smirked, the crimson eyes dulled into a tranquil lake, '-the weightlessness of a fight to the death. My muscles, my mind, my reactions,' each strike, albeit faster than normal humans felt slow, '-the cries of the battlefield,' memories of the childhood crept from the darkest part of his mind. '-No one deserves a fate such as mine.' Orenmir sprawled into action, heads, limbs, minute movement ending in sprouts of speed, one moment before the enemy, the next behind. Blood soaked the ragged walls, in a matter of minutes, the numbers plummeted to the remaining ten. \*cling,\* the crimson halo sparkled in the dim lighting.

"Wait a moment, this fight is over," they begged.

A monotonous reply said, "-no, it's not."

"Yes, we yield," they knelt, "-no more fighting."

"Impossible," returned he, "-fighters who'd give up the fight are not worth my time," he vanished leaving a timid afterimage, "-be ready for thine execution." A seamless stroke beheaded the last of the cultists. Half of the visage was drenched, '-such a pleasant feeling,' Orenmir cried in ecstasy, the energy took material form – an ascending white flame. 'Those slain by my blade are subject to never-ending suffering,' wisp-like critters levitated from the corpses, '-forever trapped in the hell of slaughter. The blade returned; as did the spirits who flocked onto the scabbard.

'W-what happened here?'

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"Perfect timing, Lady Rouge."

"What... my p-people, t-t-the humble f-followers of my f-faith. T-they w-were all granted with the boon of beast conversion, how c-could t-they be defeated."

"Simple really," returned Igna nonchalantly.

"You," she stood and turned, laying her eyes on the result. "Drenched in blood, an aura of a demon, canines of a nightwalker and a shadow as dark as the abyss. You're him, the harbinger of death."

"Correct," he left the kind cover of shadows, "-Igna Haggard, heir to death, how might I be of service?"

"I didn't expect it to happen so promptly," she laughed maniacally, "-my quest's accomplished," the posture and mien drowned into insanity.

"Do drop the crazed behavior."

"Never," she giggled, "-I'm the apostle of Vane, lady Rouge. She foretold on the day of her awakening; an inconspicuous man would arrive to take her hand. Her revival is complete," the fingers trembled towards the edifice. A surge of Aedric energy blasted the area, '-nearly lost my footing,' complained he.

"It begins," she leaped, "-IGNA HAGGARD, WE'RE SERVANTS OF LUCIFER," the body splattered against the mossy canvas.

A beam of dark aura shot out the cave and into the clear sky. White clouds drenched in the color of woe, the weather altered, jovial to sorrowful, rain and thunder strewn across the land. Bullet-like raindrops showered, the forest and hill whimpered anxiously.

"DRACONIS, come back."

"Can I look now?" the horns innocently side-glanced. There, in the corner, Igna furiously signaled.

\*Woosh,\* fire spewed off the soles.

"Got you," they twirled to a stop, "-don't burn off the shoes..."

"Sorry pops," returned a brash apology, "-it's her, my friend, I can sense her presence. She's going to awaken soon, just like me."

The body hovered, a greenish light imploded to purple, the lady disintegrated. Rotten petals spiraled to a sizeable tornado. Jolts of electricity sparkled; a ravenous growl beckoned the age of torment. The elements intertwined. Tremors snuck into the neighboring villages and towns. An earthquake or the

eruption of a volcano. One after the other, the piled-up events reminisced of what the end of the world might be like. The clouds turned red; the lightning flashed in purple. The curious caught glimpses of Svein's hill, the epicenter clouded in a deluge of cursed power. 'Are we going to die?'

Inside, the remains of what Blood-Arts failed to assimilate amalgamated in a hefty orb. 'There's some serious power.'

The eyes of truth subconsciously bleached the blood-soaked red. Fabrics to reality shredded, a vile portal cracked in to spew tentacles and sludge. A stench thousand times worst than of death invaded the space, tiny feet clambered over and out onto her back. \*Clap,\* everything halted, "-go back home, will you?" the portal grew to an all-swallowing vortex. The aedric presence left for whence it came. Heavy rainfall and thunder remained as witnesses.

'Up we go,' they leaped towards the charged entity.

Down on one knee, "-who are you, little girl?" inquired Igna presiding over her glowing aura. Draconis maliciously snuck his face over the shoulder, "-bahh," the jaws widened comically.

"AHHH," cried she, "-BROTHER," a high pitch scream nearly ruptured the eardrums, "-WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE."

"Shut up," an instinctive grab of the mouth gave solace. Side-glancing Draconis, "-who's she?"

"A fellow ancient demon," replied he, "-her name's Vane, Mistress of plague and illness. We're not related... she chose to call me brother, I don't know why."

'Lady Rouge spoke the truth, the lady of plague truly awakened. The last words bother me... why are ancient demons being revived, what's your deal, Lucifer. Isn't Balone enough to rule over?'

\*Crunch,\* blood poured, her brows smugly contoured.

"Do refrain from biting others," returned Igna, "-promise to lower the voice."

"Un-huh," countless energetic nods brought a headache.

'If she's the same as Draconis...'

"Sorry for the outburst," her petite self straightened, "-my name's Vanesa, or Vane for short. My personality's usually calm and composed," the air felt heavy, "-the excess mana proved harder to manage," her expression sank. Dark circles bellowed beneath her eyes. Long dark green hair messily waterfalled atop her back and shoulders, the complexion paled to a sickly sight. "-I feel much better," the speech slowed, her darkened green eyes held not of a child's glimmer.

"Vanesa, my name's Igna Haggard, I'm the Baron of Glenda."

"Good to see you," said she as if despairing, the vigor all but vanished.

"I have a question. Are you friend or foe, lady Rouge referred to being allied to Lucifer."

"Ohhh, I don't c-care a-about him," \*hic,\* "-who would serve a traitor anyway. B-brother, w-why a-are you h-here?"

"Oh, because lady Lilith summoned me. She's sworn her allegiance to my pops here. "

"The queen picked a side," the brows feebly rose, "-I see," \*hic.\* "-I guess I'll swear to you too... pops?"

'-Not again,' he cowered behind an altar, '-I've got another troublemaker to content with... no use complaining.'

"Vanesa, might I ask how old you are?"

"Don't know," she yawned, "-maybe around eight or nine. My real age is too much to count, who cares..." she turned to Draconis, "-brother, give me food."

"Well," he stood, "-Vanesa, Draconis, welcome to the Haggard Dynasty. Thou art my son and daughter, deal?"

"HELL YEAH," exclaimed the brother, "-about time."

"H-hell y-yeahhh," said she monotonously, her arms gave midway up, "-I want to sleep," the head bobbed into a deep slumber.

"Draconis, is she alright?"

"Don't worry, Vanesa's always lazy and sleeping."

"I'm not sleeping," said she, "-just resting my eyes."

"Whatever you say." Vanesa and Draconis claimed a shoulder as transportation. A rather comfortable piggyback ride for two, the former laid her head and slept whilst the latter peered over the shoulder with an annoying jingle; "-Linzie Borden took an ax, and gave her mother forty whacks, and when she saw what she had done, she gave her father forty-one," and again, "Linzie Borden took an ax, and gave her mother forty whacks, and when she saw what she had done, she gave her father forty-one."

\*Ancient Magic: Teleportation.\* A reckoning of a thunderstorm rampaged the area. The starved children grouped even closer. The will of God thundered; fear blinded the conscience. 'The area's still crawling in Aedric energy. Should be a few cursed beasts prowling about.' Stopped before the tiny figures, "-you six," voiced he, "-does thee wish to live?" No response came, "understood," he kept on walking, "-children who've surrendered to their fate mustn't be helped," said he, "-being weak is not a shame, grow strong and learn to survive. Grab whatever opportunity presents itself and move."

"M-mister," said the oldest of the group, "-w-will w-we be sold as slaves?" he sniffled.

"No."

"Take us with," they flocked to his side, "-please, we'll do anything to survive, help us."

"I like the determination. Grab on tight," the feeble grips told of the state, "-let's go,"

\*Ancient Magic: Teleportation.\*

Inside the lobby at the secondary manor, a wandering maid caught notice and gasped, "-LORD JULIUS," she cried, "-A MURDERER'S ON OUR DOORSTEP."

"An enemy?" blond hair ran out the first floor, "-state thy name and business."

"Don't move," ordered Malley, "-else I'll burn thee to the... stakes? Why are we attacking again..." the paced sprint slowed to a stop. "-An attacker?" she squinted.

"Curse of forgetfulness," yawned Vanessa sloppily conjuring ancient symbols, "-I smell foood," and slumped, the mind drifted to the realm of dreams.

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"My word cousin, is all in order?" he ran over, "-I apologize for the rather rude welcoming."

"No time to explain. Take these children to the bath, I've asked for someone to bring clothes. Is the kitchen full?"

"Y-yes, I think so."

Chapter 607: Empire's Invasion [25]

May thee rest in peace, Vanesa's sacrifice. We exchanged a few words, the wish on thy mouth was of death. Parted having accomplished a purpose, few are fortunate to truly proclaim so.' The stove burnt on high, a fragrant smell of deliciousness barbarically barged on in the large empty corridor. Malley's hand was full bathing the refugees.

"Cousin," spoke Julius lent against the nearby fridge, "-can I have an explanation of what happened?"

"Why are your arms crossed?" side-glanced Igna, "-not a great posture when asking for something," nonchalantly tossing over ingredients, "-bear that in mind for the future. Before I give my story, are Vanesa and Draconis well?"

"Yes, the two are playing at the back. The little lady's more on the listless side," the arms relaxed, "-let me help."

"Great, set the plates," he moved to another dish.

"Igna, please work with me. I don't understand what happened. The retainers are stumped, the weather and tremors of before, the country is in a dire state. For the love of God, you returned in blood-soaked vestments. The insanity of fabric swallowing that much of liquid is tantamount to jumping in a pool of the damned thing."

"Fine, fine, no need to get so fussy. Here's what happened, I headed into Svein's hill to investigate a recent spurt of Aedric plague. Turns out, the information fed was altered a little. Reports said the caves were a slum. Tis truth to some extent," a wooden spoon accompanied the speech, "-I've my doubt on Glenda's current administration, even the guild isn't clear."

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"What information?"

"Vane's cult," tender meat sizzled innocently over a devilish loud flame.

"Never heard of them."

"Yeah, I doubt anyone knows about her. The mistress' a pretty hard to hear about the legend. Long story short, Vane's cult was responsible for infecting the child yesterday. The relaxing excursion took a turn for the worst, they had planned on infecting the land. My bloodied outfit speaks for the rest."

"How many people were there?"

"Around three hundred, maybe, I didn't pay attention."

"Hold on," the chopping hands stopped, "-Igna, is that true?"

"Yeah," the flames died, "-the food's ready. Those kids are the survivor from said place. Best not to question them further. There are more pressing issues at hand. The Empire's involved."

"What brings that conclusion?" they carried the dishes.

"I'd take the word of a dying person over that of a democrat."

A courier arrived shortly, "-Lord Baron," interjected a maid.

"Great timing," he handed over a hot pot, "-do take this to the dining hall," and off he was nonchalantly.

"Let me help," said Julius, "-my cousin's not the kind of person to notice trivial things," a reference to her being pregnant.

"No my lord," her head shook, "-I must finish the task bestowed by the baron. Accusing the lord is a mistake I must rectify as soon as is possible." Carton boxes heftily plumped inside the lobby.

"And this concludes the order," said the courier.

"The payment should have been done already?"

"Yes, I've confirmed it with the owner. Says to pass along a very grateful thank you." Lightning lit the sky, '-working in such weather, I admire the dedication.'

Blond hair turned the corner, "-need help?"

"Take these to Malley. Should be enough clothes to last those kids a few years at most."

"There's too much here."

"Stop complaining."

The dining table was later filled with random guests. The situation was explained in greater detail, the priestess came to tears, her motherly side rubbed off the mistrust of the starved kids. Good clothes, warm food, a nice place to stay, and plenty of space for more. Lunch ended, dirtied plates were replaced by dessert. "-mister," said the elder of the group, "-we're thankful for the clothes and food... I hate to ask, do you want something from us?"

"How dare you insult our lord's benevolence," harsh words had the children tremble, the faces paled into utter misery.

"There's no need for shouting," a once-over, "-you're the maid from earlier, the stinky one, right?"

"Hello..." she shrugged, "-See, I've curled my hair to look better, younger and cleaner. No gentleman would dare say a lady reeks, no matter her station."

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"And no lady would let herself harbor the pungent smell of fish," the maid who had called him an intruder and wandered about was her from before. A fierce nameless servant. "-I must ask a thing, care to lend a moment?"

Tall white bunny ears inched closer, "-what is it, master?"

"When I gave the pot earlier, the posture seemed a little off. Are you perhaps, pregnant?"

"Oh my," she coughed, "-yes, I'm a soon-to-be mother. Lord Julius and Lady Malley know of my situation."

"First time?"

"Yes, why the sudden interest, sire?"

"A simple reason really," a piece of gold playfully surfed atop the fingers, "-catch," it flew to the boy's hand, "-starting today, seeing we don't have many retainers, these children will be trained to become excellent workers. The gold piece is a symbol of the newfound freedom. Good work is rewarded," glancing the bunny-lady, "-might I have your name?"

"Estelle Worn."

"Julius, Malley, Estelle is to be the guardian of these lovely children. In addition to said responsibility, you're to be promoted to as head-maid. Don't worry, I'll have my butler join the workforce.'

"You're butler?" queried Julius.

"Yes, éclair. He's a competent man, even more so than I am sometimes. Regardless, the fellow should be at thy doorstep soon enough," facing the children, "-think of Prince Julius and Lady Malley as family. The Haggard Dynasty will always endeavor to respect those who've sworn to serve us. We'll never allow our family to be hurt, understood?"

"Yes," and thus the table dismissed. Estelle's demeanor wasn't the least bit pleased. Having a pregnant lady work harder than others.

Heavy rainfall eased into tiny specks of water; a rainbow arced in the milieu of an elaborate garden. Tiny tables and comfy chairs viewed said woeful outside. A few hours passed after lunch; "-Malley has taken to the children," they sat inside the enclosed porch. The wind sure did rattle the architecture.

"Is that so," returned Igna, "-the lass does have great things going for her. I suppose tis the nature of a woman of the cloth."

"I'm baffled at how meekly you can say that," the immediate forest swayed per the gust.

"How's the tea," they sipped in relative tranquility.

"Warm and gentle, a pleasant drink," placed on the tray, "-say, cousin, I've been meaning to ask."

"Vanesa, right?"

A suspicious frown followed into a doubtful, "-yes. I've done my research. The Cult of Vane means trouble..."

"Look at her," he pouted, a break from the constant stoic expression had the prince spit out the remaining drink, "-fine, no need for tangible disgust." Dark green hair spilled off the lap and onto the floor, "-look at her sleep, there's a certain charm to her."

"Igna..."

"Fine," he sighed, "-this here is Vanesa, the mistress of plague and illness. She's the entity summoned by the cult. Happy now?"

"Really?" he facepalmed, "-you bring home a potentially world-ending catastrophe and give me attitude to boot, how very dare you, Igna."

Faint shuffles came from the doorway, "-stop sulking around already," fired Igna.

"I'm sorry," gulped Malley, "-it felt wrong to interject. You guys fight like a couple, I'm wary..."

"We fight like a couple?" their eyes met, "-I guess we did kiss that one time... reminisced Julius. "-Yes, there's also the time we spent at the hotel..." added Igna.

Her face burnt, "-m-m-my i-i-i-i."

"AHAHAHA,"

"Julius," the white pupils watered, "-Malley's reaction was priceless."

"I know," coughed the other, "-my stomachs in pain," rubbing his nose, "-Igna," the laughter calmed, "-today's the first time I've seen you laugh."

"Is that so," the posture straightened. Vanesa managed to cradle herself around Igna, "-feels nice to know I have other expressions. Back to the serious topic."

"I should I-leave."

"Hold on there, Malley, this concerns you too."

In a deep embarrassment of which was a bright red nose and ears; sitting beside her lover amplified said emotion. Julius tried hard to hide his feelings. The result; slightly flushed cheeks, prior laughter had already reddened the visage.

"Similar to Draconis's birth, Vanesa here was also brought to the mortal realm using a ritual. In her case, the offering had to endure tremendous pain and constant assault by the cultists. Her pain and sufferance took material form, and they harnessed as concoctions to conjure the other demons. I see it brings bad memories," her face paled. "-Forgive me, I'll skip the details."

"I appreciate it."



"I've given up on assigning age to them both, who cares at this point. All I know is Vanesa and Draconis are my daughter and son, ancient demons. The mistress of plague was summoned by followers of the church. There's no lead as to why."

"How does this concern her exactly?"

"Cousin Julius," a slight smirk raised the guard, "-wasn't the whole point of rescuing Malley for a courtship. My efforts better not be wasted, if you two are in a relationship, vow here and now, it's courtship for marriage. I'll hear no excuse; do I make myself clear?"

"No need to say it out loud," he hid his face, "-I've already decided to marry her."

"Wait," she stood to cover her mouth, "-Julius, are you serious... a prince... marrying someone as tainted as me?"

"I told you," he went to grab her shoulders, "-none of the past matters. I fell, and I fell hard. It's not remotely befitting to say these words so carelessly," he dropped to one knee, "-Malley, I know it's been a few weeks since we've known each other. I earnestly want thee by my side. Life has been so much better, I wake up next to someone I love and cherish, what more can a man ask." A red box lined in frills of gold emerged with an engagement ring, "-will you-"

"Yes," she leaped into his arms.

\*Clap, clap, clap,\* "-congratulations on the couple," smiled Igna, "-Vanesa," he whispered, "-wake up, your uncle got engaged."

"Y-yeah, clap, clap, clap," she murmured, "-I'm tired, good night pops."

"There she goes, saying clap instead of actually making an effort."

"I've got quite the troublesome niece," chuckled the prince, the face completely drenched in red.

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\*Doup, doup, doup, doup,\* '-I know that sound.'

"POPS, I HEARD CLAPS," a bullet darted across the manor, "-WHAT DID I MISS."

"Nothing much," he casually grabbed the boy and spun to a stop, "-Julius got engaged."

"CONGRATULATIONS!"

"Enough," hastily blocking the mouth, "-yeah... they're the complete opposite." Facing the boy, "-keep the energy at a minimum, else you'll pop a blood vessel. Being too loud is rude to others," escaped a rather strange scolding.

The couple cluelessly waited on the other for answers. Their lovey-dovey mien was fully killed by the outburst. '-so heavy... my fingers are shaking,' gulped Julius, '-even Malley's on edge. I saw the personification of wrath bolting for us. What's more impressive is Igna, he casually caught the demon as if he were a kid...'

"Julius, the aura..." she hinted, "-those seemingly innocent children are strong, stronger than us. I know Draconis was a phenom, not to this extent. What about her... how can your cousin handle them?"

"It takes a lot of power to raise a demon, who better than death himself."

"You say something?" her brows knitted.

"No, forget it," he grinned, "-come on," they locked fingers, "-we have a new life ahead."

"I forgot," interrupted Igna between the boy's shenanigans, "-I've asked for ownership of this manor to be transferred."

"Why?"

"It's my present to you, cousin," nodded Igna, "-from today forth, tis thy home. I but make a single request."

"It's about the kids," said he.

"..."

"Ha, I got you. The reaction's priceless, how does it feel to have the tables turned?" asked he in rhetoric smugness.

"Pretty annoying," he exhaled, attention diverted to Draconis.

"Can we go monster hunting," he begged.

"I want food," groaned she.

"Monster hunting."

"Foood," they threw a tantrum.

"Good luck on caring for those two," winked Malley.

"Don't patronize me," he lifelessly stared at the ceiling, '-I'm tired.'

Chapter 608: Empire's Invasion [26]

'Not possible, it can't be,' good news of the baron's victory at Svein's hill caught the wind. Many doubtful individuals were lesser pleased, a few mishaps may occur during those long-pressed days.

"You," shrouded in nothingness, "-give the unfaithful a rude awakening. The plan shall continue as is meant. Baron Igna, we'll find our victory, my close compatriots haven't died meaninglessly." Strangely silhouetted bodies froze into an open door. Architecture sprung of olden dwarven style.

A few days elapsed; the town subtly returned to somewhat peaceful air. News about the disastrous thunderstorm of last week affected trade tremendously. Paths were blocked from the floods, stumbled trees, and overall inaccessibility.

Apid Village; a place of poor harvest. A team of adventurers arrived to handle the run-of-the-mill monster clearing quest. Sadly, and not for the greatest of fate, a bizarre gate opened at the empty fortress.

"Hold on," said Leonard, "-the mana's ominous."

"Yeah, I can feel it," nodded Lampard.

"Two rodents (insect-like creatures of green complexion and the head of a mantis) near the entrance."

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"They're resistant to elemental attacks," added Rena, "-the guild gave Tier-9 ranking. What's the plan, leader," glanced upward, a bow and arrow perched onto foliage. The branches crackled, Leonard's visage – gleaming sweat, spoke volume.

"Should be fine," the arrow pulled, one eye shut, '-now.' The tree buckled, a hiss and a hit. "-Two down, let's move in, Rena, Lampard, GO!" A perfectly normal operation turned sour. On a closer look, shy of the entrance – iron gates melted and solidified.

"Be on guard," ordered Jen. The team moved in a diamond formation at a snail's pace. Split in two and back to the mossy bricked arch, '-let's go,' she signaled. Drawn and ready, she leaped, Leonard followed.

'The mana,' the eyes widened, '-a high-tier spell.' A moving beam of magma flung across.

"Enchanted Ring of protection, grant us asylum," the gemstone cracked, a flash of greenish-blue marred to hold the glowing liquid. "GETAWAY, RIGHT NOW!" screamed Leonard.

Meanwhile, at Upen village, Anna's team completed the quest in a great effort. The produce safely made for Glenda. '-Why's the hill less ominous?' wondered she.

Between caring for the new addition and creation of the wall, days flew instantly. The scattered adventurers joined in Glenda where the guild master Haru proclaimed the reopening of the border. Those in lack of a home and work were free to leave for the Azure wall or the Dungeon tower of Plaustan.

Date; Tuesday the 6th of May, \*knock, knock.\*

'Who is it so early in the morning,' a yawn led the blurred vision, the door flung to blond hair and a heavily wounded person. "-Igna, I n-need h-h-help..."

'Leonard?' he glanced over, '-why did he have to come now of all places...' A heavy sigh disrupted the slightly crowded bed.

"Pops, too early..." sighed the boy, the girl's slumber remained untouched.

"You're staining the floor," returned a crude remark. '-Burnt marks, a sword slash, and few projectile wounds. Didn't he go on a monster-slaying quest, they look more man-made...' \*Mana Control: Healing Element Variant: Restoration.\*

Blacked-out curtains and no alarm meant no sense of time. In when the mind thought to be 05:00, the truth spoke of 08:00. A greenish hue halted the bleeding, "-come on," a merciless kick toppled the man, "-have this," \*Box of Alche.\*

Consciousness returned, "-a healing potion..."

"Welcome back to the land of the living," said Igna, "-Leonard, care to explain what brought said sudden visit?"

"I'm sorry," he coughed, a terrified expression froze the room, the shoulders slumped, any sort of bravado faded into despair.

"Speak up," \*Smack,\* "-don't give me the sad boy act. What happened, who did this to you?"

"W-w-we w-w-were ambushed on the way. I managed to escape; the others stayed to fight."

"Bandits?"

"No, t-they were strong and experienced in the art of war. The moment the guard lowered; a bullet narrowly missed my organs; I used a scroll to teleport into town."

"Understood," the aura dropped, "-head to the guild, I'll take care of the little inconvenience." Light from the vexing stairs shut as he left, a loud echo boomed. Vanesa's dream broke, "p-pops?"

"He's in a bad mood," explained Draconis.

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Kniq's uniform flung about the shoulders, sword and weapon readied, "-Draconis, Vanesa," paused at the desk, "-want to join?"

"Seriously?" the eyes shone, "-Pops... can we FIGHT?"

"Yes," nodded he gently, "-we've slept on our laurels long enough."

Gunshot fired incessantly, "-this is bad," exclaimed Leonard, "-I don't know how long Leonard's make-shift bunker's going to last," a curved wall protected against direct fire. Dash for the forest. A good idea in thought – a deadly one in reality. The distance was too much for the already exhausted warriors. Rena's right shoulder bled, a bandage wrapped in attempts to stop the bleeding, "-go on ahead," said she, "-no use for us to die on my account."

"Not going to happen," said Leonard, "-I'd rather stay here than leave, you hear me?"

"Idiot," she fell against his shoulder, "-I'm glad."

'There's no way we can retreat. Lampard's injured from the earlier attack. Wait, is it possible the monster-slaying quest was a fake; it's possible, what if it was all a set-up,' using a mirror to peep, '-that crest, it's the Krestonian emblem. They've made it this far into the province... If only we had the power to fight, they've won, there's no way to win this. A perfectly executed ambush.' The barrage of gunfire halted, a strange form dazzled atop the long winding road.

"Here we are."

"Pops, can I go all out?" requested Draconis, "-I want to kill them a little."

"Sure, go on. Leave the leader alive, ok?"

"Awesome, thanks pops," a dark line dropped from the horns to the forehead, an ancient symbol danced its way into a menacing stop. "-Time for battle," three tiny steps and off he was, the resulted gust nearly suffocated the others.

"Too much energy," complained Vanesa, "-I'm going to sleep," an outline of curving dark veins wrapped around the chest, giving freedom of movement. She essentially became a backpack; her fatigued expression would frequently look over the shoulder and yawn.

'The wings...' they watched in awe, "-Igna..." gritted Rena, "-w-why a-are you here?"

"Be quiet," he returned coldly.

"You came?" gawked Jen.

"Here, healing potions."

"You'll be fine now," said Lampard, "-stay with me, Rena."

"Silence," ordered he, "-she's not mortally wounded. Tis mana exhaustion, what happened?"

"We were ambushed," said Jen, "-the quest was a trap," her gestures intensified, "-they bare the crest of the Empire... did you plan this?"

"Nonsense," an unimpressed side-glance swallowed the spurt of bravado, "-I'm a noble of the faction," he casually held out a hand, "-get up."

She fully expected to have a deluge of complaints and insults, '-w-what?'

"Get up already," he grabbed her wrist, "-staying in cover doesn't befit a student of the academy."

"Igna..." they clambered; Rena's health deteriorated.

"Hey, hey," cried Lampard, "-don't give out on me now."

"She's cursed," remarked he. Another flask opened, "-pour this on the taint."

Over yonder, fiery punches evoked a festival motif, opposed to fireworks, bodies flew on to explode leaving a trail of organs. \*Smack,\* the last punch made contact; the massacre stopped, a body flew straight for them. The snotnosed Draconis could be seen smirking in the background. \*Magical Barrier.\* Bones cracked to instant death.

"Did he just exterminate a whole squad?"

"Correct. My children are very talented in the ways of war," a proud smile welcomed the hero. An exalted look of pride and confidence led the demon-child to charmingly skip.

"Pops, look, I did good," he leaped for a hug.

"Hold on," quick to grab his head, "-what condition did I make?"

"Oh..." feet off the ground, "-hmm," confusion run amok, "-I'm sorry?"

"..." the eyes narrowed.

"Popsss," yawned Vanesa, "-look here," a puddle of black tentacles summoned, the stench of rotten flesh permeated, Jen hurled and so did Rena.

"Come on Vane, don't summon that thing here!" argued Draconis, "-you'll curse the whole land."

"It's fine," said she listlessly, "-my powers are strong..." the carcass of human flesh sunk and dissolved. "I seeeee..."

"Care to explain?"

"I know their intent... let big brother go..."

"Fine," the grip eased, "-get rid of the pit already."

"I'm tired... later pops, good night." The suffocating odor eased.

"I can breathe," squealed Rena, "-fresh air," she panted.

\*Stuck in limbo unfaithful wretches, may the gods divvy judgment, may the devil claw thine soul, and may thy body be subject to an eternity of torment. Per the contracted oath of Rethal, I, humble sacrifice to the lord, surrender my soul for the entrapment of a vile being, summon forth, eternal realm of torment, prison of heathen, Klonsia.\*

'The mana,' glared Igna, '-too late.' A crazed individual smirked and killed himself, a horrifying presence howled into reality, large claws moved to cup the targets. Chains of symbols spun to seal their area.

"I forgot to mention," babbled Vanesa, "-the ambush is a trap, the t-target i-is G-Glenda."

'I was right,' scanning the barrier, '-we did have a traitor. The adventurers were bait. Else why would they hire students for what the province has in store? Contacting the other guilds would have been simpler... it was said the independent factions refused. Quite the convenient lie, I believed Haru and this is the result. Did she change sides or be forced into the current situation. There's the matter of this party's expedition. I briefly sensed an overwhelming presence from the abandoned castle.'

"Igna, what's happening?" inquired Lampard, "-the barrier is potent, my mana's being sucked away."

"An ancient binding spell... Klonsia, originating from Rethal, the angel and acolyte of Tharis."

"... how is it yo-?"

"Simple really," the hand stretched out, "-I've studied a lot." \*Ancient Magic; Spatial-Arts: Disruption,\* '-no matter the potency, the moment the base is ruptured, there's no going back."

A pillar of smoke rose, a portal opened at the riverbank, countless soldiers marched to stand in formation. "-this is bad," cried a guard, "-grandfather's inside."

"THE KRESTONIAN CREST," exclaimed the other, "-BRING DOWN THE GATES, WE'RE UNDER ATTACK!" The alarm for battle rang, panic raged.

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A lonesome guard pelted from inside, “-DON’T SHUT THE GATES!” he screamed, “-WE’VE BEEN BREACHED,” a torn impaled the heart, the last cough, the vision blurred, ‘-g-get a-away,’ momentum carried into a nearby fence.

“How very unpleasant. These guards are so weak, and so few in numbers,” thigh-high socks led to a personalized magical robe, the buttons shimmered in a golden hue.

“Don’t overdo it,” said a smaller girl in leather armor, “-our master might get impatient.”

“Oh, I’m sure he’s doing fine,” said the elegantly dressed lady, “-he’s marching from the south, Glenda’s all but ours.”

“Hero Kion riding on a white steed, I can’t wait for him to get here.”

“My lady, we’ve apprehended the guild and the adventurers, what should we do about the populous?” reported a messenger.

“Leave them for now,” a long-bejeweled pipe shyly caught the sun’s reflection, “-this town is weak. Here I thought we’d have more of a resistance.”

‘G-grandfather...’ an image of cruelty spawned in the distance. Those at the taverns were dragged out mercilessly, some were given curb stomps others had tails cut without reserve.

“Our fighters sure are confident,” said the little one, “-too bad the guards are weak to protect the people.”

Strength or courage, it didn’t matter. Pillars of smoke soon rose, the town’s presiding flag swapped to that of the empire. The gates reopened, a force of two thousand ransacked supplies, looted the armory and treasury. An additional force of five thousand snuck past the border. Courtesy of insider information, they were a few meters away.

“Tell me,” knelt with hands around the hairy neck, “-why is it the people look unbothered. We’re pillaging and capturing your kind for our kingdom, why is it they remain silent and unyielding?”

“Ha-ha-ha-ha,” he laughed, “-you’ve encroached onto the devil’s territory. Ha-ha-ha-ha, we have faith in our lord. Death will come, and it will repay our sufferance ten-fold, believe me.” \*crack,\* the neck snapped.

“-weakling.”

Chapter 609: Empire’s Invasion [27]

‘Did they honestly think I would allow my town to be taken over so easily?’

“Igna,” murmured Jen, “-why are you smirking?” the seal shattered without so much of an effort.

‘A nonaggression pact, what a load of bull. They’ve broken the treaty; wars upon us.’

“Igna, what’s happening?” Lampard’s phone rang. “-yeah, hello?” he answered. The other side panted, Leonard’s word barely made the trip, cacophony and carnage had drowned the sound.

"We've lost the town, the Empire's risen their flag... GLENDA IS LOST," the line cut into static. A look of disdain mounted the strong visage, veins and muscles tensed; the palpable tension grew in ire.

"Don't worry," he vaulted over the mud wall, '-whoever underestimated me will pay dearly,' a brief stroke of the earring led into the lens making direct contact to people of interest.

Meanwhile, at the secondary manor, news of the attack had yet reached Julius and Malley. The household bustled, between chores and caring for the kids, the head maid's mind went dry. A perpetual murmur of bickering garnered many frowns, especially from the other attendants. The words all but pointed to, '-Igna's a jerk.' However, not so long ago, a very well-mannered and handsomely dressed man in a tuxedo arrived on a private jet. The entrance was flashy, neatly combed hair, a frameless pair of glasses, a curved mustache, and a pointy goatee.

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"éclair, could you kindly see to the laundry?" requested Julius adjacent to the study on the first floor.

"Already taken care of," bowed he, "-lady Malley, I've drawn a relaxing herbal bath to tend to the sore joints."

"Awesome," she stretched, "-alright children, we're done for today. Take note of what we learned; the rest of the day is off."

"éclair, I must say, a butler like you is quite a boon."

"Highness, your words are wasted on this humble servant."

\*Beep, beep,\* his casual half-smile straightened, "-Master, is something the matter?"

"éclair, I'm deeply sorry. I know the new body and experiences have taken quite a toll on thee."

"No master, I feel absolutely amazing. Since we moved my core to the other realm, I've been feeling better than ever. Especially this body, I'm grateful for everything."

"As long as it makes you happy," the tone deepened, "-say, we have a slight problem."

"Which is?" the eyes narrowed.

"Check on Glenda," said he softly, "-the town's been claimed by the Empire. I have no idea as to the status."

"My lord..." the aura dropped, "-they dare lay hands on thine dominion?" flickers of black lightning carried throughout the body, "-I'll forever be your personal butler. Anything thee owns, is my duty to protect and care for. I swear on my pride as a high-tier demon," the necktie loosened a little, "-they'll pay dearly."

"Just what I wanted to hear. Take over for the next hour or so, I ought to make a few phone calls."

"As is wished. I'll hack through the neighboring channels and figure how best to approach the situation."  
\*beep.\*

"éclair, what's the matter?" inquired Julius.



"Highness," glanced back, "-Glenda is under attack. Things are unknown as of now."

"Is that so," he turned towards the armory, "-I'll join the fight."

"Won't be necessary," assault rifles dropped from nowhere, "-as lord of the manor, thee should care about thine family. The children are my master's precious servants. As the personal butler, my duty calls for a fight."

"I guess you're right..."

"What's with the aura here?" asked Malley covered by a bath towel, "-so scary..."

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"Nothing to worry about," tipping the head, "-if you'll excuse me." \*Poof.\*

The nonchalant atmosphere felt frightening. The vanguard of the hero's party, the elegantly dressed Alta, and short and mildly fanatic Ulia wandered the stone walls. Two thousand soldiers diffused through the vicinity. Anything of value was brought to the town square, there, merchants and other unrelated parties were held in a nearby warehouse. Men, women, and children were separated. Adventurers had it the worse, Captain Tells, Chief-Inquisitor of Dustina's Cross sat in full armor. Head to toe, behind the visor's gate, laid dormant a beast. Tells reputation of burning an entire village preceded onto Ardanian soil. Alongside him were two fully armored disciples, adventuring tag showed Tier-5 Ruby.

"Akton... what's the meaning of this?" whispered Haru. The hall turned into a cell, hands tied and weapons stashed away, empty glances swapped faces.

"Oh, you didn't know?" he smirked, the door opened.

"Captain Tells," smiled a familiar face, "-long time no see, helmed one."

"Don't address our lord so amiably," cried the assistant.

"Mind keeping your dogs on a tighter leash?"

"Cut it out," a hand rose, "-Steward Undre, were you the mastermind of this plot?"

"Obviously," he laughed, "-don't call me Undre," the visage altered, "-my name's Inesa, a companion of Kion."

"My god..." they fell onto their knees, "-Priestess Inesa, we apologize for the rude comments."

"Our hero's trusty strategist. A pleasure to make thy acquaintance," said the Captain.

"Bury the pleasantries for another time," she scanned the tied hostages, "-Akton, where are you?"

"Over here."

"My trusted comrade," they hugged, "-the plan went off without a hitch," her open-minded glance locked onto Ling's party, "-part of it I suppose. As long as humans are spared, our cause march as need be."

"Guild leader Akton, have you betrayed the adventurers?" fired a random bystander.

"Worms aren't worth my attention. I'd advise silence. Words from the mouth of the heretics are as disgusting as I've imagined."

"Enough, Akton," said Inesa, "-return to the true form," a tap crumbed a layer of concealment. A child emerged, "-finally, I can freely move around."

Out on the clouds, darkened wings flapped, '-Glenda's in trouble. I count close to two thousand soldiers. There's even more approaching from the south. They used the cult's remaining power to fuel the teleportation device. A deeply layered plan, I suppose Eira was only planning A. This is plan B – not to be surprised, she did occupy the town for a long time, not hard to imagine backdoor entries. I suppose the massacre of their hideout didn't suffice.' \*Sense Aura.\* '-bad... they bear the blessing of Dustina. The church's sent out their greatest ace, the summoned hero of another world. Things are about to get interesting, wouldn't you say, my lord?'

Sunlight scattered between the foliage, Jen and her party rested under the idyllic scape, or so one would wish. Muddy, moist and cold, over in the distance... bodies in less than admirable shape. Draconis sprinted up and down the path; Vanesa's slumber intensified. A constant feed of information flooded the lens, '-Plan B he says,' the arms crossed whilst in thought. '-The casualties are guards, the townsfolk are safe for now. No idea till religion blinds their sight. Leonard's stuck in my watchtower, the adventurers are at the guild. Thankfully Glenda isn't so much a fortress, good men and a strategy should reclaim the land quickly... tis a last-ditch attempt at winning the way. If they occupied Glenda, we're done. Trade routes will be stopped and accessing Noctis's Hallow will prove easier. Luckily,' the phone rang, '-I have my ways around this mess.'

"Hello, Elvira speaking."

"Good morning aunt, it's Igna."

"Rare for you to call, what's the matter darling, ran out of money?"

"No, much worse..." the information forwarded, "-Glenda has been invaded. A force of five-thousand is marching forth, the town's already occupied."

"Bad... this is bad," her voice cracked, "-our forces were beaten, no way we can defend against that many of enemies. What about the pact, did the church break it?"

"Speaks for itself, doesn't it?"

"Y-you're right... Has the information been made to the Blood-King's faction?"

"Yes."

"What then, if it is support, then I'm afraid we can't spare men. Phantoms engaged in a border conflict at Iqavea, the conjunction of the events makes me wonder."

"I'd like to know if there's a way to contact Emperor Paradus Essin?"

"Are you crazy..."

"No, I'm dead serious. I'd like to have a word with the Emperor, can it be arranged?"

"Obviously not!" shouted across, "-are you dumb?"

"It can be done," interjected another voice, "-Hello son, is everything well?"

"Mother, it's good to hear from you again. About the proposal, is it doable?"

"Shouldn't be much of a problem, why though?"

"To send a message," he smirked, "-might the arrangements be done?"

"Certainly," a mild argument sprung, the constant bickering gave to yawns. An hour elapsed till the call. 'Is my demand a little bit too much... come on, the Dark-Guild should have enough power to contact the emperor, I'm sure the Overlord's taken to the task.'

Clan leaders were called on for a sudden war-council, the situation loomed on their doorstep, the haven was in direct line of fire. The revolution might end if push came to shove.

"What were you thinking?" facepalmed Elvira, "-contacting the Emperor directly, there's a limit to absurdity."

"Don't sweat it," winked Courtney, "-Igna's a smart boy. Who knows, he might just turn this battle around."

"What can a single man do against seven thousand..."

\*Dring,\* the call finally connected, "-Hello, Emperor Paradus Essin of Iqavea speaking, who might this be?"

"Greeting, imperial majesty. I do apologize for the sudden call, there are a few matters I'd like to discuss."

"Nonsense, I haven't the time to waste on petty chatter."

"Before hanging up," the motion halted, "-hear this, Emperor of Iqavea. The church has overstepped its boundaries. Sending Kion Hurworth was a mistake, one the Empire's going to regret. Great men most often have three defining traits; charisma, strength, and an open mind, three of which thee lack."

"How insolent of you, have you any idea who thou art addressing to?"

"Yes, a puppet," he snickered, "-listen very carefully. I'm willing to strike a deal. I'll be in touch after the Church's army is soundly defeated. Be careful, a single spark might light the flames of civil war." \*Beep.\*

"WHO DOES HE THINK HE IS?" the device crashed against a vintage portrait, "-how dare a nobody threatened me, the emperor, so carefreely."

'Should suffice,' he laughed, '-empty threats are often the best way to smother a person's composure. Imagine getting a call from a nobody during a blatant infraction of an honored pact, I'd lost my mind. Quite the nice self-made grave.'

\*Dring,\* "-hello, how did the deliberation end?"

"No idea," he shrugged, "-aunt Elvira, call onto Queen Gallienne and the entirety of Phantom's forces. Images and evidence of unsolicited belligerency of the Church will make worldwide news."

"How shrewd can a person be?" laughed Courtney, "-an ingenious plan. They see Glenda as the goal whilst thee sees the falling of an entire monarchy."

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"I'll mobilize the VT10-BSQD," fired Elvira, "-we'll fight fire with fire." Scandalous images and video of basic rights flooded the Arcanum. Hidros to Iqeavea, Alphaia, and more, the many independent nations trembled. Alliance or whatnot, true fear of the disrespected pact riled ministers, nobility, and royalty.

"Draconis, Vanesa, it's time to go."

The overwhelming confidence slipped into anarchy, the blind followers built stakes. Those accused of heresy and blatant blasphemy of the lord were stripped to rags and thrown onto the street.

"This should put into perspective the world of hate of which thy kind have beckoned," proclaimed a uniformed man, "-those who haven't shown remorse are to be purified. I guess these girls will suffice."

"Why are you doing this!" cried a merchant, "-the town has already given money and supplies, what else must you take, isn't this enough?"

"SILENCE!" fired the officer, "-I don't care about money, my job is to purify, and I shall do so," a nine-tail lash embedded with spike flung across the lady's back. "-We'll first purify those wretched demi-human features, god must see thee as was meant, and tis clear and without mutation." Dirt paths were wiped in the color of red, resistance was futile. Light-brown rags dowsed; each strike chipped and even fractured bones.

"Don't cry for us," said she first on the stake, "-our race has cried enough," they watched on woefully, "-don't be mistaken, filthy pretenders of the church. Our hatred will manifest. I trust in our master, he will come, I know he will!"

Chapter 610: Empire's Invasion [28]

"Whatever, filthy demis," the arms waved to another holding an open flame, "-burn the heretic." Hatred, solitude, hopelessness, they piled as would a farmer preparing for the winter, resentment kept at a hearty distance from one's life. What now, what then, will the fight ever end? Flammable liquid dowsed the dried hay, the end of a person's life, the worst possible way to die, burning to death.

\*Bang,\* soldiers fell like flies, headshots.

"Get down," the crowd gasps.

"Our pain..." said the lady, "-IT'S BEEN MANIFESTED!" a heart-breaking howl flashed a shadow atop the stakes, unidentified beings circled.

"Everyone," a portal split, Alta, and Ulia manifested, "-get back," the latter conjured a high barrier. Gunfire raged on from above, the stray Kreston uniform-wearing men scurried under the cover of unoccupied buildings. A single volley separated the town from the enemy.

"Feel the presence?" inquired Alta, her arms swirled in symbol to conjure hovering spikes, her aura amplified from body enhancement.

"Yeah, it's strong," returned Ulia maintaining the barrier.

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\*Demon-Arts: Xael Ragna,\* the ground leveled to further give cover, buildings and roads themselves climbed onto a higher stage. Bystanders were left awestruck, 'the power to raise buildings and roads, how strong a mage is that?'

"Fellow townsmen of Glenda," a demon hovered to a graceful stand, the ever-stretching dark wings pulsed menacingly, "-my name's éclair, I'm the butler to Baron Igna. I've come to aid thy escape. Please," he pointed through the crowd, "-there's a portal leading to Oda Village. The town will be subject to an absolute bloodbath, there's no saying how many lives will be claimed. If thee value survival, go and don't turn back. Hopefully, this situation blows over."

No questions asked nor hesitation, they dashed for the opening. Oda village would soon be crowded beyond recognition. Back on his step, '-looking down on those pitiful servants of the church makes me angry. Master will be here soon, I ought to restrain a few.'

\*Here me, o' servants of the underworld, time is scarce and the enemy is strong. Demon sealed in the farthest reach of Elxnai, the world beckons a rude awakening. Pseudo evil have soiled our reputes, the despair reined on by our ancestry shall be realized today, ARISE!\* black lightning struck, the streets promptly emptied. Those at the adventuring guild were clueless to the situation, far as was concerned, the weather grew inconvenient. Things were never so simple, especially when the Haggards were involved.

Struck to holes, smooth-surfaced paths spawned countless dips. From in, after an oppressing gust, humanoid figures rose to bear the definition of evil, horns, sharpened teeth, and pointy nose and ears. No care on gender nor ability, the oppression had the men of god cower.

"How cute," snickered Alta, \*Heroic-Arts: Dragon's Breath.\* Scorched into ash, the demons crawled farther. If one died, two took its place, the ashes revived at an astounding pace.

"What now?" shrugged Ulia, "-they're useless in this battle," a reference to the officers, "-the monsters are weak, we can easily overpower them. Remove the limiter and ask for god's grace."

"Good idea," sneered Alta, "-holding back never was our style." Lovely white and rosy-colored chains ripped off their necks, a sudden power surge rose onto the skies.

'Phew,' whistled éclair, '-look at them go,' hands to the forehead, '-they dispelled my weather control spell. Y-yeah, these girls mean business.' \*Sense Aura.\* '-Looks they're ready to march on the path of divinity. I understand now, the hero's not normal, he's attained divinity, hence the reason for never being injured, normal weapons and spells could never hope of scratching such an entity,' he leaped.

"Are you the one who summoned the horde?" inquired Alta, angelic wings sprung, whitened halo sprinkled snow-like particles, "-damned demon, I never thought we'd meet in such a way."

"Well, well," stood a few meters apart, "-humans who've walked the path of godhood. Quite a rare sight. Tell me, mortals, where did this power originate?"

"Exchanging words before thee dies, how very befitting a demon," glared Ulia, "-thy kind are always the same. Using others to do the dirty job, what about fighting us?"

"Surely thee jests?" shaking the head, "-why would I willingly partake in a meaningless fight. Are the hero's companions so wary of a lonesome demon to not spare a chance of parole?"

"Very well," the wings rested, "-I'll answer a few questions on one condition, thee answer ours first."

"Suit yourself."

"Who do you work for?"

"Baron Igna Haggard," he returned, "-what sort of query is that?"

"Shut it," fired Ulia, "-what's your purpose in coming here?"

"Me," he paused to stare up, "-my purpose was to rescue the people."

Then and there, the summoned minions vanished, no sign of life, the demi-humans disappeared. "WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?"

"A simple trick," winked he, "-I sent my minions to rescue the people. By now, the whole town must have evacuated."

"Impossible..."

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"Lookey here," he laughed, "-are the heroic companions concerned? Did thee think the power of teleportation extends only to the church?" Palpable anxiety told what was needed, murderous intent spiked.

"Time to die, demon!" cried Ulia, \*Conjuration: Blade of Woe,\* the handle spawned above her shoulder, a single diagonal motion sent an arc of condense energy.

\*Demon-Arts: Reversal,\* the strike reflected into a loud crash.

"Be careful," panted Alta, "-we nearly died," the wall of dust cleared.

'Where are they?' the auras vanished.

\*Light Magic: Lighting Rampage.\*

'Behind?' he spun, '-too late,' a multitude of spikes impaled him to the ground. Vibrant yellowish rods stained per flowing red.

"The application of teleportation in combat," chuckled Alta, "-don't drop your guard so easily."

"Drop my guard?" he laughed; a shadow covered the sun.

'Insolent creatures,' a heavy aura of death loomed, '-they've killed my guards. I promised to share a drink with the boy's grandfather. How dare they defile my people... seven thousand highly trained fighters.'

"Girls," grinned éclair, "-don't let your guards down," the fist clenched, the spikes shattered, "-here's the reason why the people never lost faith," they followed his warning.

Wings flapped to a light entrance, "-who's this joker?" gritted Ulia. The figure calmly ambled into their personal space, he didn't pay attention nor dare acknowledge their presence.

"-éclair, are you well?"

"Don't get cocky," passed their stead, "-die." \*Heroic-Arts: Dustina's Will.\* An arrow of unproportioned strength fired.

"Same to you," returned he catching the projectile, "-was that supposed to be an attack?" a murderous over-the-shoulder glare stumped the companions. The walk resumed, "-get up."

"Good to see you," accepting the aid, "-are preparations in order, master?"

"Yes," he patted éclair's shoulder, "-I'll leave Glenda's protection to my trusty companions." Four portals erected, "-Goddess Gophy, Intherna, Miira, and Lilith, please see to it the people are saved."

"Will do," a tsunamic pressure drowned the pretenders. Onlookers from Kreston glued to the floor, looking at the figures felt wrong. Heart raced rapidly, never had they felt so fraught.

"I'll leave the rest in thy hands, éclair. Aid my friends as is necessary."

"Quite cold of you," squinted Lilith, "-I'll take my payment later."

"Only if the town and its people are safe," returned he. "-Draconis, stop flying and get down."

A meteorite landed with a crater, "-hey pops," he leaped in for a hug, "-can I come to fight?"

"No," the head shook, "-you'll fight beside Lilith."

"Alright," no complaints nor tantrums.

"Will you be alright?" inquired Miira, "-going against five-thousand and a potentially god-like entity."

"I wouldn't worry so much. Vanesa's here. Should be a walk in the park."

\*Ancient Magic: Teleportation.\* Anxiety hung, the bravado of being angels faded. Real strength had surrounded their stead.

"éclair," called Intherna, "-who of these two was responsible for killing the guards?"

"The elegantly dressed one," said he stood at a safe distance.

"Good," an adorable expression of bliss gave a moment's rest, "-I'll kill her," her fist flamed.

"Please, have mercy," begged Alta, "-we're not responsible for the demi-humans maltreatment. Our leader said to take the town without casualties."

"Believe us," begged Ulia, "-tis the truth."

"Gophy," said Lilith, "-look at this one here," she held Alta's chin, "-she has a pretty face and a gorgeous body to boot. What say you, shall I inflict the curse of Akina?"

"Perhaps..." shrugged she, "-I wanted to spring into battle as if a hero. Our presence alone has discouraged the invaders."

"I know," facepalmed Intherna, "-I wanted to burnt stuff, let's give these two a taste of what power feels like, they're close to being demi-goddess."

"Hold it," interjected Miira, "-don't leave them."

"I agree with lady Miira," nodded éclair, "-they're strong. However, haven't done anything against the demi-humans. The real enemies are the guards littered around town. If not for the remote portals, we'd have a tough situation."

"They'd have taken hostages," said Miira.

"No matter the reason," said Gophy, "-they dared invade our trusted companion's territory."

"Yes," nodded Lilith, "-I agree," they stood shoulder to shoulder, "-goddess or not, they harmed the people he vowed to protect."

"Pops said to kill them," giggled Draconis, "-mother, let's fight, I'm bored already."

"Wait a moment," said éclair, "-Lady Gophy and Intherna, mind heading to the adventuring guild. A strong being stands like as watch. Should be an entertaining fight."

"Understood," they vanished.

"Leaves you and me, Miira," she licked her lips, "-let's exterminate them."

"War is crude, foolishness is cruder. Let the genocide begin."

Meanwhile, the guarded guild slumped into depression, their situation gave no sliver of hope. A companion of the hero's party watched beside the chief inquisitor. Black lightning of a few minutes ago didn't once bother their psyche.

The sound of crumbling bone rattled the room, "-is this the place?" nonchalantly wondered Gophy.

"I guess so," \*Phoenix's flame,\* columns of fire consumed soldiers. The helmed one's body fell forward.

"CHIEF INQUISITOR!" cried Inesa, blood poured.

"Was he supposed to be the stronger fighter?" she held his heart, "-the stench of his presence annoyed my nose," the grip tightened.

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"HOW DARE YOU," she pulled a gun, '-my friends, they're all dead...' charred corpses fell, \*bang, bang, bang,\*

\*Wall of flames,\* gestured Intherna, the projectiles melted.



"Don't bother fighting," whispered Gophy, "-we've won."

"Screw you," \*spat,\*

\*Snap,\* a kindle vaporized the insolent attack.

"My word," she giggled, "-how dare you?" her laughter grew, \*crack,\* an effortless lock broke the lass's arms. \*AHHHH.\* "-don't scream yet," the eyes watered, "-we still have the legs," foot on her knees, "-watch this." Her index curled as did the girl's leg, it broke from the joint, the screams amplified. "-I'm bored..." \*Snap,\* a gust sent her across the room.

"Adventurers," facing the crowd, "-we've come to help. Anyone remotely able in the healing arts, kindly tend to the vixen's injuries."

"No," refuted a hostage, "-no way I'll help someone like that. Damn bitch killed my comrades," an upward glance showed beheaded cranium on spikes, "-they deserve every ounce of pain," fired another.

"They destroyed my village; I don't care for the Imperial savages. I call bullshit on their cleansing, my wife and children were stripped and molested in front of everyone, I'll be damned if I ever forgive them."

"Everyone," said Ling, "-heal her. Dying like so would be too simple," the cheeks drowned, "-even though I'm new here, you guys accepted me and my party. How can humans be so cruel, they killed the friends we made. Heal her so she can suffer, please, I'm begging you."

"You heard the lass..."

Footsteps echoed around the guild, "-Lady Inesa, Chief Inquisitor, we heard gunfire, is everything ok?"

"Our time to shine," added Intherna, "-Guild Master Haru, a butler will be here soon. Have the fighters evacuate, we from Baron Igna's party shall rectify the injustice."

A ball of fire exploded out the building with Gophy and Intherna in tow. The duo's unmatched combat prowess thinned numbers at a frightening pace. Interrupting would slow their fight.

'When it rains, it pours. Woe carried by the demi-humans materialized into human form. A devil spawned off their anguish and torment, the Baron of Glenda. The world will soon understand how fearsome the Haggard Dynasty truly is,' thought a humble chronicler. '-the age of retribution begins at last.'