

Talk

A Plus Period side story

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1/ Darkwood Kingdom 1

"-----all dead."

She muttered, in front of the dreadful sight.

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It was a dark forest.

Two hours since the nightmarish night had passed. Even though the sun has risen, the forest is still shrouded in darkness. The forest is dark even in daylight, and it sheds blood repeatedly in a shade of dark red as if it were the innards of some animal. Blood is flowing, just like that. The trees of this forest secrete blood instead of sap. It was not made from the inside, but sucked from the outside.

-----speaking frankly,

This forest can be called an alien world.

A black forest that reaches 50 kilometers in diameter. It, with a mind of its own, 'moves', and sucks the blood of every single animal in the area. No man who had set foot upon this forest, which can be called an enormous predating lifeform on its own, has returned alive.

A dense overgrowth of tree branches.

Countless roots reach into the earth.

Blood flows from the end of each, and the forest growls, as if it were one bloodthirsty dark-red beast. Inside it, human ability is powerless. The trees suddenly strike, becoming weapons of free form, and even the air becomes poisonous, leaving nowhere to flee. A man engulfed by the forest has his fate sealed. No, the forest not only attacks humans, but the village itself, and it wasn't rare for it to create a whole new forest in one night. A vampiric land that thinks, and wanders the world with the earth. Forest dwellers call it the Demon of Schwarzwald.

They call it the Disemboweling Forest of Einnashe.

"-----all dead, here as well."

In the darkness, she is the only one alive.

She has no baptismal name. Only the name 'Ciel' refers to her.

Ciel sets foot upon the miserable space. The trees in the vicinity are definitely eliminated. Probably the final struggle of the colleagues. The trees around the square were all slashed, broken, and incinerated.

Scattered around the square are around ten dead bodies. Bodies with familiar faces. The demise of the followers, sent into the forest by the order of the Church.

.....in the end, a combat unit of 40 people wasn't even able to survive one night.

".....ten men could only eliminate such a small section."

Ciel confirms the bodies one by one.

Each one is a first-class fighting monk, and a comrade who had trained together.

"So exorcists can be of no help within this forest... mages are not specialized in exorcism, but even to them, this forest would be a fatal place."

The combat units of the Church are not accompanied by exorcists. The ones that were sent to this forest are specialized in close combat. There were some who used sorcery as well, but their circuits couldn't have operated. Because, in this forest.

"-----the source of magical energy is dominated by Einnashe, yes. Wouldn't that be why Narbareck chose you in the first place?"

Ciel's movement stalled. Fixing her eyes on the tenth body, she spoke to the person who appeared ----- no, he was there from the start, behind her back.

"Merm. Are you the watcher this time?"

"Ahahaha... a watcher, that can't be appropriate."

A lively laugh that doesn't match the scenery.

The one called Merm does not reveal his form.

"Do you know that I really care for my coworkers? Since I'm here to help Ciel for now, why not be friends? Actually, Eins was supposed to come here, but I switched places. He can't possibly protect you, and both of you could be killed. But Narbareck insisted on putting you in charge... so I followed in a hurry."

"You care for your co-workers? That's new... I'm just asking, but what did you do with Eins?"

"Ahaha, I ate him", Merm said in an innocent tone. "It doesn't matter, does it? Just say Einnashe did him in. He was at a good age to retire, anyway. This kind of work gets tough both physically and mentally after 50, doesn't it?"

".....I'm hearing this from someone whose life scales up to four digits, Merm."

"No, look. I'm Peter Pan, so I can't be measured by common standards."

"....."

After confirming all the bodies, Ciel started to walk towards the center of the forest.

"Eh? What, you're going to do it alone? You know you can't use any sorcery in this forest, don't you? The only thing one can trust here is his personal abilities. Supernatural powers that rely on exterior mana cannot be used. After all, everything in this forest is--"

"Dominated by Einnashe, isn't it? I know that. This is a Reality Marble created by the Dead Apostle Einnashe. You can't enjoy the world's benefits when the world around you belongs to your enemy."

"That's it. I mean, even if you are skilled in the martial arts. You didn't train yourself to master level. The two factors that made you a member of the Burial Agency have no meaning here. Without your sorcery and your immortality, you can't survive in this place. Knowing this, and picking you, Narbareck's really got a rotten spirit."

"It's probably just a test. Without my immortality, I am no attractive firepower. The director is indirectly telling me to die."

"See, you're stubborn. That's why Narbareck likes you."

".....useless meddling. If you want to talk, than talk to those trees. They can attack people, maybe they can talk to people as well."

Ciel leaves the square behind. And behind her,

"-----Ciel, you're leaving the Burial Agency, are you?"

A question is thrown, with murderous intent.

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"I've heard that such rumors are spreading."

Ciel replied in an emotionless voice. The one called Merm giggled.

"So it is. Your objective was to regain your humanity by killing Roa. Since that has been accomplished, there is no reason to be with us. Frankly speaking, you were invited by the British Museum, weren't you? Now that your next workplace has been arranged, don't you think this rumor is quite persuasive?"

".....I am no mage. Even if something goes wrong, I won't be joining the Association."

"Ah, that's fortunate. Since it's really dull there. I figured if someone like you, who already knows the taste of blood, went there he'd die of boredom. Of course. Dying of boredom, you wouldn't want to die such a Dead Apostle-like death. Well -- although you are more Dead Apostle-like than that Dead Apostle over there in the first place."

"-----"

"Besides. I know that the rumor is just a rumor. I mean, if you were trying to leave, you would have left a year ago. It's been a year since Roa was exterminated. And you've been continuing the Dead Apostle-hunting. If your objective was in regaining humanity, isn't it strange that you didn't leave a year ago?"

"----- so, what are you trying to say, Merm Solomon?"

"Eh? Well, I'm saying that you don't really care about being human or not. All you're interested in is killing vampires. Like the others, you're no more than a killing machine. Ah, but I'm different. I'm just a kid who likes toys."

"-----are you? Then don't bother with my affairs. Like what you said, I'm just a machine that kills Dead Apostles. So even if you're a co-worker, there's no guarantee that I won't assault you, is there?"

The Dead Apostle called Merm laughs, shrouded in darkness.

"Then, Ciel, why are you still hunting Dead Apostles?"

2/ Opening

There is a Dead Apostle called Einnashe. It is regarded as one of the ancestors, but the vampire had changed its matter of existence dramatically some 800 years ago. The vampire called Einnashe follows a forest. There is a sorcery called Reality Marble, which materializes a person's mental image, altering the world temporarily. The "Living Forest" that Einnashe controls is a form of it. However, while a typical vampire can only maintain a bounded barrier for a few minutes, and even the most powerful ancestors, a few hours, Einnashe maintains it for days.

The forest. The alien world called the Disemboweling Forest is elusive. It sucks the blood of hundreds of people, and then disappears, going into a state of hibernation for a couple of decades. Einnashe shows its form only around once in 50 years. This is why the Church hasn't been able to seal it, even though it repeats mass homicide. No, to speak the truth, they have no way of destroying Einnashe in the first place. Out of the 27 ancestors, ones that rank in the top ten cannot be destroyed by ordinary concepts. For if one is to compete against a being that lives in an illusion, one must use an illusion that surpasses it.

And this time. Einnashe is active again, and two towns have already been exterminated. The Church has sent first-class combat units out of dignity. The result is obvious. The Church has failed again. Also, the Church is not the only one that is interested in Einnashe. There are many organizations that are trying to negotiate, or capture Einnashe, one of the most powerful of the Dead Apostles. They, too, sent their elite into the forest, but the result was the same. Einnashe does not distinguish friend from foe. Everything that sets foot upon his alien world has no more meaning to it than food.

Even so, there are many humans who wish to enter the dark forest.

One of the reasons is related to immortality. In the center of the dark forest, there is a giant tree, and in that throne of Einnashe is a fruit of vivid red. A single fruit holding the condensed blood of hundreds, thousands of animals that had lived in the forest.

One who eats that fruit can gain temporary immortality.

That is similar to a light trap. Countless humans enter the dark forest, lured by the fruit of immortality. This year, it has been four days since Einnashe has appeared again, and the number of hunters that have entered the forest goes over a hundred. Only four remain. Numbers 5 and 7 of the Burial Agency, the prized anti-vampire organization of the Church. A wind magus from the Mage's Association, who has visited the forest as a hunter.

And, one other.

3/ Black Sheep

They walk the forest. Four days after entering the Disemboweling Forest. Ciel still hasn't been able to grasp the true colors of this forest, nor the location of its central area. Although it only reaches around 50 kilometers in size, the Disemboweling Forest is constantly in motion from the start. A forest walks inside a forest. To find the center of a disemboweling forest that never stays in the same area is not something that can be done in three or four days.

"So, we're lost again. Wouldn't it be better to take some appropriate rest here? Anyway, it'll be safe if we make a clearing by knocking the trees down to their roots." The voice of the one called Merm is heard behind Ciel's back. Even if Ciel had looked behind, she wouldn't have seen a shadow of a man.

"-----"

Ciel walked on in silence. Her robe is torn here and there, and her breath is scattered. Four days after entering the forest. It was the result of 46 hours of combat with trees assaulting from all directions.

"Eh, are you listening to me? It's no use just wandering around the Disemboweling Forest. For now, it's best to take a rest, to recover your stamina."

"-----"

Ciel walks on.

"Really. Ciel, why don't you listen to what I say?"

"Because I don't like you."

"Wha, that's so mean~" A merry voice burst out from behind. In this forest, where a moment's lack of tension could get oneself impaled, he was the only cheerful one. And, his presence was lost, just as easily.

"-----Merm?"

Ciel stopped her feet. A loud boom was heard some hundred meters ahead.

"-----Merm!"

She runs toward the source of the sound. In the end, no matter how she tried to deny it, she had a tenderness inside that cared for her colleagues.

And that allowed her to stay as herself.

†

It was a ruined wasteland. There was a large patch of wasteland in the middle of the forest, as if a meteor had fallen on it. The ground was dug deep, so much that even the roots would surely have been blown away.

"-----unbelievable. This is, like."

Like someone just scooped the ground away with a giant spoon, she muttered.

"Okay, now we could rest in peace."

An angel-like boy stands in the middle of the ruin. Merm Solomon. This boy was the 5th of the Burial Agency, and one of the 27 Ancestors, just like Einnashe.

†

The two sat around a bonfire. Looking up, the sky was already dark.... although there wasn't much of a difference, since it was dark inside the forest during the day as well. Well, maybe the stars could make a difference.

"It's okay. Einnashe won't move around anymore. It's about time for it to start making the fruit."

Merm, who was making noises with his rings, spoke out. The boy wears rings in every single finger.

".....a rare thing, for you to use your beasts in front of someone else."

"Hm? Ah, well since I haven't been giving it enough food lately. The soil of Einnashe makes good food. Besides, I wanted to talk to you like this. Since you're talking, I should prepare the stage, shouldn't I?"

"Talk-----what, about what we were saying earlier?"

"Eh-----no, not that, but..... yes, um, you know. You, said you met, a year ago?"

The boy mumbled, avoiding Ciel's eyes, as if he was ashamed of something.

"It's about her, is it?"

The boy flushed furiously. Ciel was amused, rather than surprised.

"This just makes no sense at all. You're already like a traitor of the Dead Apostles, and now you're on her side. Where did the wise and cool Merm Solomon go off to?"

"That's my left hand. I only show my true self to you and Narbareck. You see, our organization values experience. It could get quite tiresome in many ways if I show myself - Anyway, is it true that the princess won't be returning to her castle?"

The boy spoke in an uneasy tone.

†

The Church has a morbid hatred for vampires. It is known that they will do whatever it takes to eliminate vampiric beings that were once human-----that is, Dead Apostle. That's because while they can tolerate demons, they cannot accept beings that their god is not involved with.

However, to hunt down a heretic is to acknowledge its existence. Therefore, an organization keeps a darkness within in order to protect itself. An agency that exists not to solve a contradiction, but to eradicate it, to say it wasn't there. That is the darkness in which she resides. The darkness requires not faith, but just force, to protect the organization. Out of those forces, these two can be called extraordinary. The woman called Ciel was once tainted.

The boy calls himself Merm is the target of elimination itself.

†

And, the two share a common situation.

".....Hm. Then it should be about time for her blood crave to take over."

The boy muttered, expressing regrets.

"Is that so? From what I've seen, she didn't seem to have reached that stage."

"Well, the True Ancestors are different from other vampiric creatures. They suck blood because of psychological reasons, not physical ones. That is, the incentive is emotional. So, their hatred against humans and their love for them may actually be quite similar."

".....Hah. You mean that for a True Ancestor the more emotionless one is, the longer he lives?"

"Yeah, since nature has no emotions. Ones belonging to nature only have a will to stay beautiful. That's why the world is so-----"

and suddenly, the boy broke his speech.

"Merm.....?"

"-----"

The boy does not answer.

His dazed eyes, seemed to be gazing far beyond the darkness.

4/ Red Ram

And, a battle draws to an end.

A dark forest. The mage Forte has been defeated by a nameless opponent.

"-----I ask, for your name."

Forte spoke, hidden in the shadows of the trees, posed to break from this location immediately. The mage was not wounded. Even after a complete and utter defeat, her body didn't have a single scratch.

However, the battle was concluded. Forte understood that it was impossible to compete against this oriental. To be honest, she couldn't believe she was still alive, that she wasn't killed outright. It was as if all this, hiding in the shadows and hearing his name, was just a delusion, as if she was already dead.

The oriental said something, but it was impossible for Forte to understand. Since she never was interested in Japanese, even the pronunciation wasn't caught clearly.

But still-----Forte inscribed that poorly heard sound into her mind. The one that forced her, a swordsman as well as a mage, who could stand her ground even against the dogs of the Burial Agency, into defeat.

The name of the unknown killer.

†

And the mage departed.

She left like the wind, in the same manner in which she appeared.

"-----ha."

A sigh, and he winds the bandages again. In his hand, there is only an antique knife. Other than that, some light clothing that is lacking somewhat in resistance. Even in this unearthly, demonic ground, his attire was as simple as that of the boy called Merm Solomon.

"Indeed, with you as an escort, even Nero would have been exterminated."

"-----"

The voice spoke out without any sign of disturbance, as if it already knew his presence. The voice spoke English, which he couldn't speak at all, so it was somewhat difficult to understand what it said.

"Pleased to meet you, Satsujinki. Though we were to meet in the near future, I never imagined we would meet today. So, what brings you this deep into the mountains? From what I've heard you don't seem to agree with Dead Apostle-hunting."

"-----"

"It just happened, did it. You're quite similar to Ciel. Well, since in your case, all your actions are based on the princess -- indeed, you're after the Fruit of Einnashe as well. That's fine. The fruit would surely suppress her blood crave to a good extent." He responds to the sound of 'Ciel'. Just for an instant, however. He lays his hand on the freshly wrapped bandages.

"Wait. I have no intention of fighting you. Since as of now, there is no way for you to defeat me. Such pointless actions are not advised. For now, your power should act against Einnashe."

The fingers stop, extended over the bandaging.

"Wonderful. You're honest, unlike Ciel. Judging from what I've heard, I had imagined an emotionless killer, but you're a lot better. A purpose that goes out in two extremes, two completely different systems of thought. A contradiction that cannot exist without such methods is quite beautiful. Well, since I happen to like inept humans."

A small laugh.

He finally understood that the voice in the darkness was actually nowhere near him.

"Well, I'll guide you to the lair of Einnashe..... but before that, will you tell me one thing? 800 years ago, the princess definitely exterminated Einnashe.

Why, then, is he still alive?"

5/ Darkwood Kingdom 2

"Merm.....?"

"-----hahah. That's a rather ridiculous coincidence."

Light returned to the boy's eyes. Merm, who had been like an empty shell for some time, exhaled deeply.

"Coincidence? Merm, what coincidence?"

"Eh? Oh, I was just off for a moment to hear the truth. How Einnashe can maintain a Reality Marble for days, and such."

"...? Heard, from whom?"

"Mm-, that's a secret. However I'll tell you the details. That's like, such a pressing story. Ciel, did you ever hear about what type of Dead Apostle Einnashe is?"

".....no, I've heard that the Dead Apostle Einnashe became prominent some 800 years ago, but I do not know of its identity."

"Yeah, Einnashe is like Zelretch. He's a mage who turned himself into a vampire. A powerful hypnotist, so much that his abilities could be called memory remodeling. He was a cautious one, and he rewrote the memory of every single human that got to know him. Even the princess was fooled into thinking 'There is no Dead Apostle called Einnashe'. But that was just once. Einnashe remodels memory by making the target 'understand'. There was a mage who can sink thoughts into the subconscious, making it impossible to recall. The princess eliminated Einnashe with his help. That was 800 years ago."

".....800 years, then that would be when she was still hunting Dead Apostles by the order of the True Ancestors. If she eliminated him then, she would have destroyed the whole lot of them. Then, didn't the entire clan called Einnashe get totally wiped out?"

"Yeah, that's what happened. However, for some reason the princess made a big mistake. She left Einnashe's dead body and returned to the castle, but she left it under some tree."

".....? Some tree, what's that?"

"Well, a carnivorous plant. If you were in Japan, you'd have heard of such things? Like gajumal or jubotko, stories of trees that suck blood. Ah, he also said cherry blossoms drink blood as well. Well, anyway, the corpse was under that tree, and the tree accidentally sucked Einnashe's blood. You know the rest. The tree that sucked the blood of a powerful monster such as Einnashe. It became a transcendental lifeform that moves around, assaulting people, and it grew steadily."

"-----that leaves me speechless. Unbelievable. That idiot, had a screw loose from the first place, did he."

"Ahahaha. Yeah, he showed the same sort of appreciations well."

The boy laughed innocently.

"Eh.....wait a second, Merm. Someone who knows such a truth that only she could know, and talks about it just like that. Um, it's just a maybe, but....."

"Yeah, it's the one Ciel was talking about earlier. He was quite surprised when I mentioned you, as well. Like whoa, Senpai is here as well, or something."

"-----"

Ciel flushed, becoming as red as the boy did earlier, and took a breath.

"Ah, um, Merm, that-----"

"If it's his location, it's simple. He was closer to Einnashe than we are. So I gave him some guidance. Anyway, he says he's here to destroy Einnashe."

"What.....!"

Ciel rises to her feet.

And at that moment.

"Eh-----no way?"

The whole forest shook, and suddenly, one of the boy's legs ruptured.

†

If there was such a thing as a god's beast, then it would refer to something like that. A dark mass. A silhouette like a whale stood up from the middle of the forest. Were there so many birds in this forest of death? A flock of wild birds, big enough to cover the stars, fly up.

The black whale, made a sound like a scream.

Something was clinging at an alarming rate, starting from the legs of the giant beast.

It was a group of trees, literally running over the black skin of the whale. The enormous beast, which had the size of a mountain, was covered entirely by trees in less than a minute, and halted, becoming a new part of the forest. The beast that would stomp and crush the world was, however, defeated by the corrosion of the world it should crush.

No. It was no match in the first place.

†

"Argh-----that thing, doing quite well.....!"

The boy presses down the ruptured right leg. The forest continues to shake. Perhaps it's the excitement of consuming such a giant lifeform, the trees suppress a strong desire to move around.

"Merm, that was-----!?"

"No, this is bad-----of course, it lives purely on instinct. Looks like it noticed that something capable of killing it has come near. That Disemboweling Forest is about to kill every single living thing on it."

"-----!"

From that, she understood the whole turn of events. Holding the few black keys that are left, she stares into the depths of the forest. Inside, would be her target.

Not the target to destroy, but the target to protect.

"Merm, where's the core of Einnashe."

"There, around 3 kilometers in distance."

The boy speaking is missing a hand. Clearly not satisfied with just being attacked, it seems that he has already sent another beast in the direction.

"I'm going. Will you be able to protect yourself alone, Merm?"

"It's okay. I'm not alone."

"Of course, it was a stupid question."

Ciel replied briefly, and ran off. Severing countless assaulting branches, she headed to the core of the dark forest.

†

What happened after that, would be needless to say.

Since it would be what anyone would imagine.

6/ Epilogue

They leave the forest.
The sun, which they haven't seen for a few days, glows a dazzling white.

†

"Ciel, you let him go. The Church had ordered his capture as an important reference."
"But you let her go. The director sent out orders to dispose of her on sight, did she not?"

The two halted at the exit of the forest.
After staring at each other in the eye for a few seconds,
"Well, I'll let it pass this time."

"Yeah, let's forget about it."
And they walk. It seems the boy's leg is still immobile. His movement is awkward, so much that he couldn't walk properly without her assistance.

"-----"

The two walk in silence. Suddenly.
"Ciel, if there's a chance, that would be now."
The boy spoke such words.

"-----"

She stops her steps. The boy's intentions are incomprehensible, but his words speak the truth. There is no watcher on her, and her only companion cannot move properly. If she is to disappear, like a cat without her leash, now is the perfect chance.

"-----"

After taking a deep breath.
"Forget about it. The opportunity has left a year ago."
She says, and starts to walk with the boy in her arms.

"Hm. That's just acting calmness, isn't it."

"Yes. However, since this is the first time, it would be an impudence to stop before I can't bear it anymore.

giving up just because I'm fed up with it, is rather childish."

"Hm, that's like paying the price of your sins? It's funny, since that sounds quite human."

"Eh. Do you envy me, Merm?"

".....yeah- in a way. About as much as you envy me. However, then how long does it last? You're not saying that sin lasts until you die, are you?"

"That would be convenient..... But I don't think so. Since I don't even know what my sin is, in the first place."

Until it is certain, I will confront the darkness within me, she says.

The boy, gazes far.

"What, then it's a damned bond that lasts a lifetime, isn't it? Don't you know the simple truth? That nothing can be cleared before it comes to an end?"

He says, in a rather exhausted tone.

"Indeed... those words carry a weight when you say it, Merm."

She giggles like a boy, but she doesn't stop walking.

-----like that, she returns to her old workplace.

The boy doesn't know. He doesn't know that she had always wanted to escape, that she repeats the same things over and over again in each task.

In the end.

The woman called Ciel goes searching for her sins until her old nest itself is gone.

Afterwards, whether the sin comes in the end or not, will be another story.....