

## D. of Pride 911

### Chapter 911- Simon's Call and the Unknown Enemy

Simon wanted to find out if he was worthy of becoming the figure that everyone in the dungeon respected and revered so much. It was his way of not making anyone worried.

Irene did not speak any further and silently observed the figure of the demon slowly dive into the pond.

A proud man who would silently endure all the rain and storms in the world rather than make his close ones worried.

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At the same time as the battle in the dungeon was reaching its conclusion, the situation in the capital, where Annette and the other maids were stationed, had also settled into an uneasy calm.

The air above the capital was thick with tension, not from the remnants of Blackthorn's invasion, but from the iron-fisted authority that had swiftly taken hold of the kingdom under the new queen, Cynthia.

The flames of war had barely been extinguished before Cynthia, like a force of nature, moved with unprecedented speed and decisiveness, reshaping the kingdom in her image.

Before the embers of the conflict with Blackthorn had even cooled, she seized control of the kingdom like a tsunami. Her approach was starkly different from her father, the previous king, whose rule had been marked by a more lenient, almost benevolent hand.

Under his reign, the nobles had grown complacent, their power unchecked, and their loyalty wavering. This led to the disaster that could be seen and felt in the kingdom ravaged by war today.

However, Cynthia was not her father. The war had changed her in ways that no one could have anticipated—turning her into a ruler who understood that mercy was often mistaken for weakness, and that to secure her throne, she needed to act with unyielding authority.

"Long live the queen"...

"Long live the queen"

Inside the palace which was still left intact after the war, a large gathering of crowd could be seen assembled inside the throne room.

Dressed in noble and exquisite clothing, they were the nobles of the kingdom of Ellesmere. Usually, when in attendance in the throne room they would always form factions, try to advance their political schemes or drag somebody down.

It had always been like this, the nobles were always divided and only cared about their own interest. However, with Cynthia's rise in power, everything changed.

The fragmented nobility which had long been a thorn in the kingdom's side were exposed of their treachery. Some houses which had openly or secretly collaborated were all executed at the stake.

Even the ones whose loyalty wavered towards the throne, Cynthia didn't spare them. With a cold, calculating mind, she moved against them with precision.

Nobles who had once held sway over the court found themselves stripped of their titles and lands. Those who had conspired against her father or shown even a hint of disloyalty were swiftly dealt with—imprisoned or executed, their fates serving as an example of the cost of treachery.

Her rule was absolute and no one questioned her power after the war.

Cynthia glanced at the nobles bowing their heads in fear and awe in the throne room. Her posture was straight and her dignity majestic.

The war had changed her in ways that even she couldn't have anticipated—turning her into a ruler who ruled with a n iron fist. She was no longer that weak princess who could only be pushed

around and used as a political pawn by her siblings. She summoned the nobles to the capital, ostensibly to discuss the kingdom's recovery in the wake of the war.

Even today many new nobles or their descendants from various parts of the kingdom, have gathered here. However, what awaited them was not a council, but a tribunal.

In the grand hall where her father had once held court, Cynthia presided over the proceedings with a steely gaze. There was no room for negotiation, no room for debate.

"Baron Lucius Martin, you have been suspected of arms dealing, leaking intelligence, and drug trafficking to the nearby kingdom of Golf. The witnesses who presented the information were none other than your own butlers and partners in these dealings."

"These crimes laid before you are severe—treasonous, even. They are betrayals not just against the crown, but against the very people you swore to protect and serve. It has also directly endangered the kingdom"

"Baron Lucius Martin, do you have anything to say in your defence? The benevolent queen is willing to hear you and give you a last chance"

The chancellor standing a step below by the queen's side read out the charges against one of the nobles gathered in this audience today.

Baron Lucius Martin a middle aged man in his early thirties stood before her, his face pale, his hands trembling slightly.

"Your Majesty," he began, his voice wavering "I... I assure you, these accusations are unfounded. I have always been loyal to the crown. These witnesses... they must be mistaken or have been coerced into lying. My dealings have always been in the best interest of the kingdom."

"Is that so, Baron Lucius?" Cynthia's gaze remained steady, her expression unreadable.

"You say that yet these witnesses—your own butlers and partners—have provided detailed accounts of your actions. They have described in great detail the shipments of arms, the secret meetings with agents from Golf, and the exchange of illicit goods. Do you deny that these events took place?"...

"I do, Your Majesty, these are fabrications, lies spread to frame me. I would never betray my kingdom. My loyalty has always been with the crown."...

"Loyalty?" hearing that, Cynthia's lips curved into a small, humourless smile.

"Baron? Do you speak of the same loyalty that drives a man to sell weapons to our enemies? To trade in substances that poison our people? Where was your loyalty when my father was in the danger of being poisoned by the same substances you trafficked in the kingdom?"

With a tone laced with icy detachment, she turned towards the Chancellor. It was now not a state secret that the previous king, the queen's father was killed by some poison.

Chapter 912- Simon's Call and the Unknown Enemy (2)

"Sir Chancellor, what are the punishments for such crimes against the crown in the old law?"...

The chancellor read out the charges for each crime.

"For smuggling weapons out of the kingdom, those found guilty are to be stripped of their wealth and sent to the mine to serve for at least twenty years. For trafficking substances in and out of the country, the minimum punishment is at least fifty years in the mine as well as the seizure of all wealth and land"

"As for colluding with enemy nations and leaking classified state intel the punishment is... removal of all titles, land and authority. The guilty is to be sent to the prison for life".

At the end, the chancellor added, his eyes darting towards the queen "Of course these are the old rules".

The kingdom was different now. It had welcomed its first ever queen as the monarch. She wasn't like her father the former king whose authority had completely dwindled.

The time when the noble's factions whose strength had surpassed the crown and whose mechanisation decided the ruling here. Her father would have been forced to show mercy perhaps even offer some leniency against the worse of crimes.

But now, things have changed. In here, her ruling was absolute. Nobles, knights, politics, nothing towered over her influence.

"The old rules cannot be followed anymore. The times have changed and so should the rules, lest something like this occurs again"

Saying that, Cynthia passed her ruling "Baron Lucius Martin, for your crimes against the crown and the kingdom, I hereby strip you of your titles, lands, and authority. Your lands and wealth will be redistributed to those who have remained loyal to the crown, to those who have fought for this kingdom's survival"

"Those who are related to you will also be ceased of half of their wealth. As for you and your accomplices, you all will be sent to the dungeon".

Cold and ruthless, her voice was unwavering.

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The audience gasped but none dared to raise their voice. From their subdued attitude, one could tell that this wasn't the first time such a ruling was given.

Send to the dungeon, knowing what kind of place it was, it was no different than a death sentence for nobles like them who rarely possessed any fighting experience despite being higher level than the commoners.

Cynthia's eyes calmly swept over the crowd, her methods were authoritarian, but they were effective. She consolidated power with a ruthlessness that left no room for dissent. Her rulings were swift and decisive, designed to centralize authority under the crown.

Just like this, one by one the noble houses, with their own armies and allegiances, were forcibly brought to heel. The private armies and their soldiers were absorbed into the royal military or dispersed.

"Your Majesty, I swear to you—" The baron opened his mouth to protest in a last bit of desperation, but the queen's steely gaze silenced him.

He knew that any further attempts to argue his case would be futile. His power, his influence—everything he had amassed over the years—was being torn away in an instant.

Appealing to the crowd was no use either since all of them were in the same boat as him. The queen appointed her own loyalists to key positions within the government, ensuring that the kingdom's administration was firmly under her control.

The chancellor, the ministers, for example were all people on her side. The nobles murmured among themselves in fear as Lucius was led away by the guards.

Cynthia had made it clear that betrayal would not be tolerated, that the old ways of leniency and forgiveness were over. The kingdom was entering a new era, one where loyalty was paramount.

The ruling passed but the hall hadn't settled down yet. The reason for that was because today was different than your usual tribunal.

The queen had promised reward as well as punishment, and she intended to keep that promise. Today she had announced that she would be rewarding some of the people of the realm who had gained merits in the war.

"Ahem," The chancellor gave a dry cough before announcing "Now we shall begin the noble ceremony. Those who I call out step forward".

"Sir Talbryn"...

"Sir Fitzwilliam"...

"Sir Declan"

And so, one by one those who were called out, stepped forward. The queen rewarded them for their bravery and loyalty, assigning key positions in the new kingdom to them.

The ceremony continued and before long it was his turn. Cynthia's attention to the side where she saw one of her most trusted warriors, a man who had fought bravely at her side during the war, who had proven his loyalty time and time again.

"Step forward, Sir Blake" Cynthia commanded, her voice carrying across the hall. A warrior, clad in full armor, stepped forward and knelt before her, his head bowed in respect.

He had frizzy crimson hair, a build of a warrior and exuded a pressure that overwhelmed all the others in the hall. The man was none other than Blake Gunvald.

"For your bravery on the battlefield and for your service to the kingdom in its darkest hour, I hereby knight you," Cynthia declared, her voice strong and resolute.

"From this day forward, you shall bear the title of Knight-Commander of the Royal Guard, and you shall hold lands and authority befitting your new station."

She placed a ceremonial sword on Marcus's shoulders, officially bestowing upon him his new title. The hall erupted into applause, a stark contrast to the silence that had followed Lucius's sentencing.

Blake, now newly knighted as Knight-Commander of the Royal Guard, rose from his kneeling position, his heart heavy with a mix of pride and sorrow.

The cheers of the nobles and the weight of the ceremonial sword on his shoulder filled him with a sense of purpose he had long been searching for.

"From this day forth, I swear on my life and my blade that I will protect this kingdom with all my strength. I will uphold the values of loyalty, justice, and honor that you have set forth, and I will not falter in my duty."

Chapter 913- Simon's Call and the Unknown Enemy (3)

Blake spoke with a firm and resolute voice.

"Un, I have much expectation for you" Cynthia nodded, her expression softening slightly at his words.

"I have no doubt, Sir Blake, that you will serve this kingdom well. You have earned your place, and I look forward to seeing how you will shape the future of the Royal Guard."

As the ceremony concluded and the banquet started, Blake found himself standing alone in the grand chamber. As he looked at his glass of wine and how the people around him sent him glances, he couldn't help but sigh in his heart.

The crowd's attention to the noble's fantasism was much too foreign and new for him to bear.

"What am I doing?" He couldn't help but think back to the events that had led him to this moment.

Just a few months ago, he had been a man without direction, a warrior adrift in a sea of uncertainty. His guild, once renowned and envied, had been annihilated inside the dungeon—a brutal massacre that had left him and a few others as the sole survivors.

The guilt of that loss, the haunting memories of his fallen comrades, had driven him to wander aimlessly through the kingdom, seeking solace that never came.

He had been like a log drifting in a river, carried wherever the currents of fate took him. But in that time when he was in his lowest of the low, his remaining teammates—those few who had survived outside the dungeon—never abandoned him.

They stood by his side, supporting him in ways he had never imagined, urging him to find a new purpose.

The war with the kingdom of Blackthorn reminded him of the debts he owed to those who had fallen, particularly to his mentor, the previous Knight-Commander Cylus.

Cylus had been more than just a mentor; he had been like a brother to Blake, teaching him the ways of the sword, the principles of knighthood, and the importance of protecting those who could not protect themselves.

Cylus had been a stalwart defender of the kingdom, a man of unwavering honor. His death in battle had left a void not just in Blake's life, but in the entire kingdom.

And now, as Blake stood in the very position Cylus once held, he couldn't help but ponder. Was it alright for him to assume the position of the Knight Commander? He was no noble nor did he know the etiquette or how to act like one.



Would he be able to perform as per his position?

"I owe you so much, Cylus," Blake murmured to himself, his hand resting on the hilt of his sword.

"This kingdom you wanted to protect, I will protect it in your stead. That is the only way I can think of repaying you..."

"I knew you would be here" While Blake was lost in his thoughts, his teammates approached him.

"What are you doing here all alone? You are the star of this ceremony, everybody wants to know and make connections with you. Can't you feel their gazes?" Frida questioned locking hands with him.

"I don't know. Although I agreed to assume the position of the knight commander at the insistence of everyone, I am having doubts that I would be able to perform my duties like Cylus did. I wanted to have one last battle with him before he died"

This was one of his regrets. Cylus was very dedicated and serious about his duties. He looked after everyone, whether they be the royal family or everyone around him.

He would help the ones who needed his aid and put his duties foremost of everything. He was the sword and shield of the kingdom, a man who commanded respect from everyone. The hole that his absence left, wasn't something that could be filled up easily.

"I'm sure you will do an excellent job. It's Her Majesty who chose you for this position, so have more confidence about it"

The one to speak was Alvara the guard commander and the biological sister of Cylus. If anyone who had the right to criticize him it was her after all, this was the position her brother used to hold not very long ago.

The wounds from the war were still fresh as such, it wouldn't be strange if Alvara didn't see him in good light now that he had snatched his position.

However, contrary to his expectations, Alvara held no such grudge. What came out of her mouth were words of encouragement and the responsibilities that his duties held.

"My brother Cylus Skyler was a man of chivalry and honor. To him, his duties and the kingdom came first. If it was for his duties, he would be even willing to lay down his life"

"No one can become like my brother. However, if anyone can fill that position he left, it's you Blake. You are not Cylus Skyler but you are you. Act like the way you feel, no one is telling you to imitate my brother"...

"Alvara, I..."

"Of course, it's impossible for anyone in the first place to imitate my brother. He is still 1000-0 against everyone"

Alvara's last comment made everyone laugh. That's right, most of the people here were all trained by Cylus, he was like a mentor/ big brother to them. And even until the end, they never managed to score one against him. It was their complete loss.

"So, if you want to fill the position of the Knight Commander, do it the way you, Blake Gunvald want to do it. I'm sure Her Majesty also wanted that which is why she appointed you".

Hearing her words, Blake sighed feeling relieved. That's right, there was no point in thinking if he would be able to fill in his position, he simply needed to do it.

There was no point in thinking too much, he just had to do it in the way he does. As everyone said, there was no one more qualified than him for this position. If he couldn't do it, then no one could.

Chapter 914- Simon's Call and the Unknown Enemy (4)

"Look at you Blake.. Ah no, should I call you Sir Blake by now" Wyot who chose to stick with Blake even after the calamity in the Tower Town, cracked a joke to diffuse the atmosphere.

"Haha, I was wondering now that you have assumed the position of the knight commander, will you give up on adventuring?"

Everything aside, Blake was an adventurer, he had always been. In fact, the reason why they met, was because Blake was adventuring in the Tower Town. If he stopped adventuring, it would be like discarding a part of him.

"Don't worry about that, her highness offered me this position after thinking things through. She is planning to make this kingdom completely different from before. As such, I won't be quitting adventuring".

The title of Knight-Commander was a great honor, but it did not mean he had given up on adventuring. The thrill of exploration, the call of the unknown, still burned within him.

What's more, there was still the last words that the Bloodthorn Demonic Warhorse left him. A creature with immense strength and character. He had met that being once again during the raid on the criminal organisation in the tower town.

Inside the basement, he had singlehandedly annihilated the top officers of the criminal organisation and stood on their corpses.

The Bloodthorn Demonic Warhorse was so powerful that in their second encounter even while injured he managed to blast him out of the earth and sent him flying into the dungeon.

"Our match is still pending, let's consider this one a draw. If you still have the courage to fight me, come find me on the lower floors of the dungeon. I will be waiting for our rematch"

Those were the words he left him before they parted ways and he lost consciousness. Those words echoed in Blake's mind, a taunt that fueled his desire to return to the dungeon where so much had been lost.

The thought of that unfinished duel, of proving himself once and for all, gnawed at him. It wasn't just about pride or rivalry—it was about closure, about confronting the demons of his past and emerging stronger.

'Mars' Blake muttered inside his heart.

"I haven't forgotten, Mars," Blake whispered, his eyes narrowing with determination. "I will enter that dungeon, and we will finish what we started."

Their journey was far from over. Wyot and a few others who started following Blake after witnessing his leadership and heroism were relieved.

"That said, I still have to perform my duties as the knight commander for the time being".

There were going to be massive reforms and changes to the kingdom, battles to be fought on many fronts—political, military, and personal.

The nobles needed to be kept in line, the people needed to feel safe, and the shadow of war still loomed over the land and as the Knight commander, he could not be absent.

Blake would fulfil his duties as Knight-Commander, but he would not let the fires of adventure die within him.

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Outside the audience hall, in another room, Annette and the other subordinates loyal to Simon gathered. Among them were the vampire twins, the demihuman servants they commanded and others who had been recently or during the war, admitted into their ranks.

"It has been so long? Is there still no news from master?"

Theodore asked impatiently. He had been pacing around the room the whole time. His subordinates tried to calm him down to no avail.

It was not only him, the others around the room were also affected as they wore expressions of concern and impatience as they waited for a reply. Just that they were not as expressive as Theodore.

"Dammit, I cannot take this any longer. I am going back to the dungeon" He smacked his hands on the table before turning around to storm out.

It has been more than a week since they last heard from their master. And from what they heard the last time, it appeared that the dungeon was being attacked.

At that time, Theodore and a few others requested to discontinue their mission and return back to the dungeon. However, they weren't given the permission and ordered to continue their mission.

Ever since then, they have been dutifully doing their tasks, protecting the princess and supporting her to ascend the throne while waiting for their master's message.

Given the fact that the dungeon was being attacked, it was only natural for them to be concerned and impatient. The kingdom was secondary, their first and foremost priority was to defend their master and dungeon.

"I'm out of here"...

"You won't take a step out of that door"

Just when Theodore was about to storm out, Annette spoke out.

A heavy pressure settled onto the place. The clash of two powerful auras both surpassing superhuman strength, created a tense atmosphere that was almost palpable.

The room shook and cracks appeared on the floor.

"What did you say? Are you implying that you will stop me, Annette?" Theodore glanced back, his crimson vampire like eyes glaring.

"It's big sister Annette for you and yes, you won't take a step out here. We have orders from the Master to continue with our mission and until he says otherwise, no one is to leave their stations. Bianca, Emma, Alice, block the place."

On her orders, the three valkyries each took a spot, blocking off all the exit inside the room.

"Ugh, big sister why are you doing this now of all times?" Theodore sighed but did not back down. Seeing this, Annette's eyes became cold.

"Master made me the leader of this team. Going against me means defying Master's orders. And besides, there is no reason for anyone to be concerned. There is no way anything is going to happen to master. There might be a reason why he isn't able to contact us"

She added: "The soul connection will immediately tell us if there is anything wrong. Carry your missions, master will surely call us eventually".

Chapter 915- Location of the Heart

"Fine..." Like a little brother defeated by the arguments of his big sister, Theodore dropped his shoulders and backed down.

Now that a consensus was reached, everyone followed their orders and waited for their master to contact them.

It wasn't very long before Simon got in contact with them.

"Everyone, are you well? Report me your situation".

When the voice rang out, everyone around hurriedly left whatever they were doing and rushed towards the transmission conch.

"Master, we are so relieved to hear your voice. We are all well here and are still in the capital, well what remains of the capital"...

"I see, I understand. Did anything troublesome happen during the mission?"...

"No, we successfully completed our mission. Everything is going according to the plan... Actually, there is something, we want to report to you" Annette recalled.

"The enemy was using some kind of mysterious energy that felt similar to one of master's items".

"Hoh?! Similar to one of my items you say?" a curious voice came from the other side of the transmission conch.

"Yes master, in the last battle it became completely obvious that the enemy was using this strange power to expand themselves around this region. It was not only the top brass of the Blackthorn Kingdom, but even the footsoldier was using this energy"

"It was coming from the armor and weapons they used. This is what was giving them strength, an external strength that isn't theirs and coming from a different source"

"In the last battle when Cynthia fought against the general of the kingdom, he used a peculiar skill that raised his strength drastically. At that moment, I realised that he was receiving external strength through that skill. The source was a strange energy"...

A grim silence pervaded the room when Annette mentioned the last part. All of them here were aware of what that meant.

A skill that allows one to grant a portion of one's strength to their subordinates. A skill like that would be above Lost Legendary in just tier.

Such a skill... the enemy possessing that meant that the master mind or whoever in charge of the kingdom Blackthorn was at a very high level. A powerful enemy that cannot be underestimated.

"Relax, whoever they are, they are far away and haven't noticed us yet. For them, it would simply look like your normal war between two kingdoms. They wouldn't be able to guess anything else other than that" Simon assured.

The Valkyries, the vampire twins and the vampires under them. All of them were acting covertly and under the flag of the princess of Ellesmere kingdom. There was no trace of them that would lead it to the dungeon.

And by the time that powerful being realises their involvement, the dungeon will grow to a point where they will no longer have to worry about the enemy's retaliation.

"Master is right" Annette smiled.

The grim atmosphere from before disappeared in an instant. The dungeon might not be powerful now but at the rate at which it is growing, there was no need to fear anyone.

Simon raised their morals just from a few words of his.

"Send someone to bring those weapons and some other evidence to me. I am very curious as to who our enemy is"...

"Yes master" Everyone nodded their head in understanding.

"Ah, there is one more thing" Just as Simon was about to hang up, Annette cried out. "The princess asked to meet you. She says it is important".

"Alright, after you are done with your mission in the capital, return back with her"

CLACK... With that, the transmission was over. Everyone rejoiced, the previous air of gloom that surrounded them had disappeared as if it was never there.

Hearing their master's voice gave them renewed strength and scattered all their fear. Although they did not ask, from his voice it was very much clear they had also defeated their enemy, the one that invaded the dungeon.

Two victories in a row and all of this was possible because of their master's meticulous plan.

"Alright everyone, back to your stations. Let's finish tidying up all the nobles and complete our mission here to go back" Annette clapped her hands to make everyone increase their speed.

The dawn of a new era was breaking over the Kingdom of Ellesmere, and with it, the winds of change began to move. It was a transformation that few could have predicted, a resurgence that would ripple through the entire Central Continent in ways no one could have foreseen.

All of this was brought about by a single individual's rise to the throne and a demon grinning inside his lair. .

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A space filled with cold air and unyielding authority, a high ceiling loomed overhead. The walls and floor were constructed from dark, unpolished onyx stone giving the room an almost cavernous look.



Torches flickered in sconces along the walls, casting eerie shadows that danced across the floor. The place was the throne room of the Kingdom of Blackthorn, intimidating and dark with no warmth of light.

Seated upon the imposing throne was Gladius Onyx Blackthorn, the ruler of this domain. He was an authoritarian, a dictator who rose to power after shedding a vast amount of blood.

To become the king he killed his rivals, his family, brothers, sisters everyone who stood in his way. He believed that the only way he could have everything under his control was by conquering them.

A conqueror with a lust for power.

In his usual days, he would order a sentencing for an ordinary innocent man without batting an eye. However, today was different than usual. His mood was upset, rage in his eyes and he was giving off a murderous aura.

Kneeling a few meters away from him was a subordinate wearing the uniform of the Blackthorn army.

"Are you saying that the mission to capture the kingdom of Ellesmere failed?"

Gladius growled. The reason why he was so angry was because the report he heard from the subordinate was different from what he wanted to hear.

Chapter 916- Location of the Heart (2)

Galdion wanted the Kingdom of Ellesmere to surrender not win against his third army.

The kingdom of Ellesmere had fought a hopeless battle, a futile fight that would have no impact on the fate of the kingdom.

Yet as if destroying that notion, the princess and the army she gathered emerged victorious against Blackthorn's third army. An event that no matter how much you think about it, any factors you consider would never make it come to pass.

So how did they do it? How did his third army lose?

Gladion was well aware of the third general's strength and the army he commanded. There was no way any kingdom around this region was capable of taking on such an army. The difference in quality and quantity was that big.

A kingdom that was on the brink of surrender shouldn't have the strength to emerge victorious. There had to be something.

"Your Majesty, the deserters who ran away from the war said that the princess of the kingdom was powerful enough to match the general of the third army in a duel and emerge victorious"

"Not only that, but she also possessed numerous powerful allies and tactics that defied common sense. The princess's army rushed in like a wave, thwarted all their plans and obstructed them from executing their tactics. It was as if the enemy knew all about their plans and actions beforehand".

The subordinate reported, sweat trickled down his body from the intimidating pressure.

Gladion narrowed his eyes, the more he heard the worse his mood became. It was a defeat, a complete defeat.

The enemy had managed to capture their capital back and his third army was gone. No matter how you put it, there was no way to sugarcoat things. It was their defeat.

"Dammit, those batards they have completely ruined my plans"

BANG... a fist landed and a portion of the wall behind the throne was smashed into pieces. Gladion was so pissed that he did not care about maintaining his kingly dignity. He was angry, bloodthirsty and wanted to kill.

"This is the first time something like this happened, the first time where a whole army was annihilated. You are telling me that it was because we wrongly judged the enemy's strength?"

"In this region who else is stronger than us? What's more, our opponent was only a third grade country without a single ranker. The Third Army should have been more than enough to handle and capture that kingdom".

The report did not make sense, they were overlooking something, something big, something that was the key to Ellesmere's victory but they had no idea what it was.

How could Gladion not be angry?

"That son of bitch, he set me up. He knew that something was going on with Ellesmere and used my hand to probe the enemy" He complained seemingly to no one.

In his mind was the crown prince of the kingdom of Golf, the one who lured him into attacking Ellesmere.

Why would he do that? What did he find? How were they able to notice the unsuality of Ellesmere?

There were many questions and no answers. However, that was not important right now. What was important was he wasted the strength of 'that person'.

The one who was key to his success, the one who allowed him to beat his competitors and ascend the throne. The one who was going to make his dream come true.

No matter what happens, he cannot lose the interest of 'that person'. He has to make things right.

The silence in the room was unbearable. Gladion after venting his anger, sat motionless on his throne. His expression now calm and unreadable.

"What happened to Ellesmere after it won the war?".

At that question, the subordinate answered "Your majesty, our scouts are in the capital and according to the reports they sent, the kingdom is beginning to make strange movements. It has summoned all of its regional lords and nobles to the capital and no news or traces of them could be found after they entered the royal palace"

"Not only that, we have also received reports that the structure of the royal court has changed completely. Our accomplices who had dealings with those nobles have stopped responding to our calls".

Gladion was silent, he was no amateur when it came to politics. He only needed to know a few tidbits to grasp the whole situation in Ellesmere.

"Striking when the iron is hot, she is taking over the kingdom in one fell swoop. Suppressing riots, keeping ones who are loyal and executing the ones who are of no use to you"

A tactic that he had used all his time. It was just that this time it was the enemy who managed to outwit him by executing his own technique.

"Mark out all the secret agents we sent to Ellesmere who are not responding. They are either discovered and caught or executed. Those who respond to our calls, use them to lay a trap for the enemy. We cannot let them bite more than they can chew"

Gladion gave one cruel order after another, unbothered about the lives of those agents and soldiers.

"Also send word to the other two generals. We will fortify our borders and prepare for the possibility of an incursion. We will also increase our military exercises all over our kingdom. We have to let them think that we are going to prepare for another attack".

"Understood" The subordinate bowed and asked a question "What should we do about the deserters of the Third Army who fled from the battlefield".

"Throw them to the underground chamber with our next group of people who will be going through the baptism"...

"As you command, your majesty. I will see to it immediately."

As the subordinate hurriedly left the throne room, Gladius leaned back on his throne, his mind already formulating a plan.

The situation was dire, but not beyond his control. He would not allow the Kingdom of Ellesmere, or any other power, to challenge his supremacy.

Chapter 917- Ominous Dream

After a while~ inside the now empty throne room. The darkness seemed to grow even darker. The king was absent and the room now had a new hidden chamber.

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"Why... are... you... here?..." A voice called out from a deep muddy miasma.

Gladion got on his knees and clasped his hands. He looked at the vague figure inside the muddy miasma and spoke.

"The plan to capture Ellesmere and expand towards the north had met with some obstructions. I'm afraid it will slow down your supreme's plan"...

The figure in the miasma was silent for a while...

"Hmm? How can that be... I have given you those weapons and soldiers. Using their strength to conquer all of north of the Central Continent wouldn't pose a problem" the figure questioned.

Gladion grit his teeth and replied "We are still investigating the reason but from what I know so far, it appears that we underestimated the enemy. They had many powerful backers and someone who could defeat the Third General"...

At those words, The figure in the miasma started murmuring in a voice that only he could hear.

"Strange?! This shouldn't have happened. Although he was just a disposable pawn in the end, his synchronisation was at least 30 percent and he had reached the late stages of level 600."

"There shouldn't be any beings in the north... could it be a Ranker joined them? If so then pushing them even further would cause that Ranker to make a move. This would make the Adventurer's association suspicious. Taking a fight with them at this stage is too dangerous. But I need to head north, the resonance I felt way back was definitely from the north. Fifth has to be there".

"We have to investigate the reason and conquer north no matter what. However, before that we have far more important tasks. We need to head towards the west, I found the location of the heart. Once I get that item, I'll be back at my full strength. At that time, conquering north won't be a problem"

The figure in the miasma commanded.

Shedding all of his royal arrogance, Gladion nodded like a subordinate.

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One month later— Dungeon Laplace, White Palace.

Today It was the time of year when the Forest Spring Spirits celebrated the Spiritus Fortuna Festival, an ancient tradition where they offered thanks to the nature spirits for the bounty of the land and prayed for the continued prosperity of their clan.

The entire village had been transformed into a dazzling display of nature's beauty intertwined with the Spirits' magical touch. The trees, which were naturally verdant, now shimmered with soft hues of gold and silver, their leaves gently rustling as if in sync with the joyous atmosphere.

Vines of luminescent flowers curled around the pillars and archways, and the cobblestones beneath their feet glowed faintly, guiding the way through the winding streets.

Under the protection of Simon, they were no longer the small emigrants they were before and instead have become a large village that was the part of the dungeon.

The streets of the Forest Spring Village were alive with a vibrant, festive energy that could be felt in every corner.

In the heart of the village, the main plaza was a sight to behold. Colourful banners made from woven leaves and petals hung between the buildings, fluttering in the breeze.

Stalls had been set up in neat rows, each one offering a variety of goods—from freshly baked bread infused with forest herbs to intricately carved wooden trinkets that captured the essence of the wild.

The smell of roasting meats and sweet pastries filled the air, mingling with the sound of laughter and the cheerful melodies played by the local musicians.

Families wandered from stall to stall, children running ahead with eyes wide in wonder. Adults pacing leisurely, neighbours greeting each other, and shopkeepers exchanging pleasantries.

Here and there, groups of friends gathered around tables, sharing stories and raising glasses filled with the finest spirits the village had to offer. A scene that could never be imagined by the adventurers was taking place inside the dungeon on the Forest Spring Spirit Floor.

In the centre of what could be said to be the main table in the plaza, sat Simon as he quietly took in all of the views and events around him. It was not every time that the inhabitants of the dungeon could relax like this.

"I'm starting to like this festival" Irene commented sitting next to him.

Simon smiled at her comment as he glanced over at her. "You look good in that sea green dress".

The sea-green dress she wore was a masterpiece that seemed to be made just for her. The fabric shimmered gently under the soft lantern light, reflecting the colours of the forest around them.

The dress was elegantly simple yet crafted with such precision that it accentuated Irene's graceful figure without being too extravagant. It highlighted her neckline and collarbones.

The craftsmanship was evident in every detail—the fabric was of the finest quality, soft to the touch yet sturdy, clearly made to withstand both elegance and practicality.

Blushing slightly at Simon's compliment, Irene glanced away for a moment, her cheeks dusted with a light pink.

"This dress... it was made by Daphne, she's truly talented. I can see why everyone in the village speaks so highly of her. She even made sure the embroidery matched the essence of the Forest Spring Spirit's heritage."

She brushed her fingers lightly over the delicate patterns, feeling the smoothness of the stitching under her fingertips.

"And you," Irene added, turning her gaze back to Simon with a small, appreciative smile, "look quite handsome yourself."

Simon's attire, though different from his usual crimson clothes, was equally impressive too. His dark tunic was made from a rare material that seemed to blend with the shadows and glinted faintly with hidden emerald threads when caught in the light.

The Forest Spring Spirits had crafted it with both form and function in mind—it was lightweight, allowing for freedom of movement, and reinforced to be durable enough for battle.

Chapter 918- Ominous Dream (2)

Everything from his trousers to boot was fashioned from supple leather that had been treated to withstand even the harshest conditions and crafted with care, tailored to fit him perfectly by the skilled hands of the Forest Spring Spirits.

The clothes not only enhanced his looks but also gave him a formidable presence.

"I suppose I should thank Daphne as well," Simon replied, glancing down at his own outfit with a rare smile.

"She certainly knows how to dress someone for a festival."

Irene chuckled softly "Yes, she does. It's nice to see you in something other than your usual battle gear."

As they sat together, enjoying the peaceful atmosphere of the festival, the tension of the past battles seemed to fade into the background, replaced by a sense of calm and belonging.

The laughter of children, the distant music, the sight of couples dancing under the lanterns—everything seemed to slow down, allowing them a moment of reprieve.



For a brief moment, all tension and fatigue washed away from them and they became two people enjoying the beauty and simplicity of a place they fought so hard to protect. They felt a sense of peace they hadn't felt in a while.

In the distance, the festival was going in full swing. The plaza continued to fill with more villagers, dryads and other visitors of the floor.

Time passed by... the plaza was bathed in the soft light of the setting sun, casting a golden glow over everything.

The music slowed to a more intimate pace, and the couples dancing in the centre of the plaza all turned to look at him. Before Simon could realise something he felt a tug on his right hand.

"Will you dance with me?" Irene spoke holding his right hand. Her azure blue eyes which were usually cold, held slight expectation, slight embarrassment in them.

This was the first time she asked Simon for a dance. Every year whenever it was the occasion, it would be him asking her for a dance.

This time though, she stole the initiative. An action the previous her would never even thought about was possible. Simon glanced up and saw the slight hue on her cheeks. A smile leaked from him and he stood up.

"Let's go" He grabbed her hand and led her to the plaza. Moments like this was when a man needs to show his resolve.

The music swelled, the soft notes of flutes and the rhythmic beat of drums set the perfect backdrop for their dance.

The moment Simon took Irene's hand in his, the world faded and seemed to be existing solely for them.

Confidence and sway, he led her with a gentle and firm grip. Their feet glided across the stone floor, moving with the music.

Fluid and graceful, there was something more to their dance that enamoured everyone in the plaza. The festive chatter quieted, and the people watched in awe as Simon and Irene moved together.

"Why is it that every time I dance with him I feel like this scene is much too familiar to me? A scene as if I have lived this before" She silently muttered to himself.

To onlookers who were enamoured by them, their dance was not just a display of skill but of something deeper—an unspoken bond between them that radiated outwards, touching everyone who witnessed it.

It was as if every turn, every dip, every step they took together seemed to tell a story—a story of battles fought side by side, of victories and of shared moments both quiet and grand.

Simon spun Irene around once more, and as she came back to him, they paused for a brief second, their eyes locking.

"About earlier... I wanted to thank you for covering up for me. If they knew I was injured during the battle, it would have made them worried. I much prefer they be happy rather than sad" Simon spoke.

"Un" Irene nodded.

CLAP... CLAP... CLAP... the music ended and a thunderous clatter came from the onlookers.

All eyes were stuck to the couple who in their view seemed to look perfect around each other.

"Thanks for the dance, you were wonderful"...

"I had a good partner"...

As Simon turned around to lead Irene back to their seats, a shadow appeared in front of him. It was Bea, she stood before him, confused and embarrassed.

"M-Master, w-will you dance with me?" Her voice came out wavery.

A Valkyrie and a Night Amazoness known for their fierceness was this timid when it came to dancing. If an enemy who faced Bea saw this scene they would never be able to believe this scene.

Irene looked at Bea's nervous and indecisive self and smiled.

"I am going to sit down, so why don't you fulfil this lady's wish"

She grabbed Bea's shoulder, pushing her forward "Hehe, it seems you are going to be busy".

Simon didn't understand her at first but when he saw the long queue of people lining behind Bea to dance with him, he understood why she was laughing at him.

"Haha" Simon gave a dry laugh and danced with all of them one by one. By the time he was done, the festival was almost coming to an end.

"Haah..." Having retired to his room in the forest spirit village, he gave a deep sigh. Usually, for a Demon Marquess like him who possessed many restorative skills, sleep wasn't something they required.

However, when Simon fell on the bed, he felt all the tiredness his skill couldn't remove, come overwhelming him all at once. Within a few seconds, he was already asleep.

Inside the house in another room, Irene's body twitched as she slept, beads of sweat rolling down her forehead. Her face was creased with distress, and her breath came in shallow gasps.

It was clear that whatever dream she was having, it was far from peaceful.

Inside her dreams, Irene stood in the midst of a desolate landscape—a vast land of ice and snow, frozen in a perpetual winter.

Chapter 919- Ominous Dream (3)

The air was cold and biting, and the ground beneath her feet cracked with every step she took. But that wasn't what unsettled her. It was the blood.

Her hands were covered in it, staining the white snow red.

What was going on? This was clearly a bad dream; however, for some reason, this dream felt different from the usual.

She looked down, trembling, trying to understand what had happened, but her body moved on its own, ignoring her confusion.

In front of her stood a lone figure, a shadowy silhouette against the bleak horizon. His appearance was obscured by the storm raging around them, but his presence was undeniable.

He was strong, calm, and unyielding—a stark contrast to the chaos swirling within her.

Without warning, Irene's body lunged forward, attacking the figure with relentless ferocity. Her hands, now wielding blades of ice, struck again and again, each blow powerful enough to shatter space and destroy mountains.

Yet, despite her fierce assault, the figure never retaliated. He defended himself, dodging and blocking her attacks, but never once striking back.

There were others around them watching the battle unfold. They seemed familiar, like distant memories or forgotten friends, but none of them intervened. They were held back by the mysterious figure.

It was as if he commanded the space around him, ensuring that this fight was only between the two of them. Irene's mind screamed, begging her body to stop, to understand why she was attacking this person.

But it was as if she had no control of her body or a passenger in her own body.

The dream was too vivid, too real. Every breath, every movement, every sound—it all felt as though it were happening right before her eyes.

It was clearly a dream... and yet, there was something about the figure. Something that tugged at her heart, even as she tried to tear him apart.

A sense of familiarity that she couldn't place, a connection that she couldn't understand. Why did he feel so... important?

BOOOM...

As the battle raged on, the world around them began to change. The ice spread further and further, freezing everything in its path. Trees, mountains, and even the sky itself seemed to crack and shatter under the force of the cold.

The land became a wasteland of ice and snow, devoid of life, devoid of warmth.

Huff... Huff... Finally, after what felt like an eternity, Irene's relentless assault slowed. Her body, though still not under her control, seemed to weaken, and her movements became sluggish.

In that moment, the mysterious figure stepped forward, closing the distance between them. He gently held her, stopping her from attacking.

Something was spoken; however, thanks to not being in control of her body she could not hear. It all sounded like a mumbled jumble to her. Nevertheless, thanks to that touch, she was finally able to control her body.

The icy rage that had consumed her moments ago melted away, replaced by a deep, aching sadness. Tears welled up in her eyes, and a sob caught in her throat.

She didn't understand why, but she felt as though she had lost something precious—something irreplaceable.

The figure held her tenderly and slowly lowered her to the ground. Through her blurry vision, she watched as the figure turned away from her. He faced the sky, his form slowly becoming indistinct, as if the very world around him was swallowing him up.

And then, just like that, he was gone.

The dream shattered like glass, and Irene jolted awake.

Huff... Huff... She sat up in bed, her heart pounding in her chest and her breathing ragged.

"What was that dream?" muttering to herself, she looked around. The room around her was quiet, dimly lit by the moonlight filtering through the window.

That said, the events of the dream still lingered in her mind—the ice, the blood, the mysterious figure...

"?" At this moment, Irene realised that tears were blocking her vision. Trembling, she quickly wiped away her tears, trying to shake the lingering sadness that clung to her heart.

This was a dream... but then what was that feeling? Unable to calm down, Irene slipped out of her room.

The cool night breeze was soothing enough to calm the turmoil in her heart. She didn't know where she should go but before she realized it, her feet were carrying her towards the most conspicuous place in the entire Forest Spring Spirit Village—the hill where the Tree of Spirit stood.

The Tree of Spirit which had grown at an astonishing rate, was unlike anything else in the village. Its long, graceful branches cascaded downward, much like those of a willow tree, yet it bore no leaves.

Instead, its branches glowed with a soft, white light, making the tree appear both ancient and ethereal. Its bark was a pale silver hue and seemed to shimmer faintly with the moonlight.

The entire tree exuded a sense of calm and serenity. What made the tree even more mesmerizing were the countless speckles of light that danced around it. They moved in gentle, rhythmic patterns, orbiting the tree.

These speckles, like tiny, wandering spirits, were drawn to the tree's otherworldly glow. They drifted through the air and around the tree, creating an almost ethereal halo that surrounded the entire area.

It was as if the tree was a beacon for souls who had lost their mortal bodies. That was the Tree of Spirits.

Irene stood there, marvelling at the scene before her. No matter how many times she saw the tree, it never fails to amaze her. Thanks to the Tree of Spirits, she was able to forget the disturbing dream she had just experienced.

Just as she was lost in thought by the soft glow of the tree of spirits, from the corner of her eyes she noticed something or rather someone.

She was not the only one here who thought of seeking the solace of the Tree of Spirits in the middle of the night.

#### Chapter 920- Intimate Night

Standing beneath the tree, with his back turned to her, was Simon. He stood there silently, his eyes fixed on the tree's glowing branches, more precisely, it was focused on something more profound—something nestled among the branches of the glowing tree.

Cradled gently in the intricate weave of the tree's branches was an egg. Not just any egg, but one that radiated a faint glow of its own, almost as if the tree's light had infused it with life.

The egg looked mysterious and ancient and gave off a unique ripple. The branches of the Tree of Spirit held the egg carefully, tenderly, like a mother cradling her child. It was as if the Tree of Spirit itself was nurturing the egg, providing it with warmth and protection.

Simon's eyes were locked on the egg, his expression one of deep contemplation which was why he failed to notice someone else's presence so near him.

Irene did not alert Simon, instead she observed him as he stood there. It was rare to see him so focused, so absorbed in something beyond the immediate concerns of the dungeon or the battles that lay ahead.

There was a certain tranquillity, a certain charm about him in that moment that drew others to him.

"Hm?" at this moment, Simon turned slightly at the sound of a footstep catching sight of Irene standing just a few feet away. She looked a little lost, as if her body was here but her mind was not.

"What are you doing here at this hour? Are you unable to sleep?" Simon asked.

Irene who was pulled out of her thoughts, blinked and put on a faint smile.

"I couldn't sleep," She admitted. But she didn't mention the dream—not because she didn't want to share it, but because it was something that even she herself didn't fully understand.

The emotions the dream had stirred within her were still swirling around in her mind, unresolved and confusing.

"What about you? Why are you here?" At that question, Simon pointed his finger at the egg nestled in the branches of the Tree of Spirit.

"The egg... It called to you?" If it wasn't Simon who was telling her that, she would wonder if the other party was right in the head.

And besides, the egg nestled in the embrace of the Tree of Spirits was no ordinary egg either. It held a tremendous amount of power and released a powerful oppressive aura even before hatching.

With a voice lost in thoughts, he spoke "I was asleep, but then..." He paused, searching for the right words "I felt something. A transmission of sorts. It was like a voice calling out to me, but not exactly. More like... a presence. It came from the egg."

He glanced at Irene, "I can't say for sure what it was, but it woke me up. And so, I came here."

The latter's gaze also drifted towards the egg, momentarily forgetting about her strange dream.

"The egg... It called to you?" If it wasn't Simon who was telling her that, she would wonder if the other party was right in the head.

And besides, the egg nestled in the embrace of the Tree of Spirits was no ordinary egg either. It held a tremendous amount of power and released a powerful oppressive aura even before hatching.

There were also several ancient markings on the egg's shell and it looked quite and mysterious. The being incubated inside was no doubt extraordinary after all, the egg was something that was pulled out of that Mysterious Abyss.



Irene wouldn't be shocked if another exquisite being like the Null Elemental popped up from it.

"Yes. Though I can't tell if it was truly a voice or something else. All I know is that it wanted to tell me something."

The stillness of the night wrapped around them like a blanket and the soft glow of the Tree of Spirit cast a gentle, ethereal light.

At this moment, the entire floor was sleeping after a day of heartfelt festivity. Perhaps the only one awake right now was the two of them. A man and woman alone in the night... the atmosphere quickly became amorous.

"I wonder what's inside?" Realising the mood, Irene quickly changed the topic "It must be something important if it's calling out to you like that".

Simon's smile deepened as he observed Irene's attempt to steer the conversation elsewhere. There was a certain charm in seeing her flustered—a rare sight considering her usual composed demeanour.

He felt like teasing this cold beauty a little.

"You seemed to be staring at me earlier. Are you sure it's the egg you're curious about?"

He leaned in slightly, closing the small distance between them, his eyes twinkling with mischief. There was only a few centimetres of distance between their bodies and lips.

Caught off guard, Irene froze momentarily at his sudden boldness. The gentle breeze of the night seemed to carry a hint of electricity now, or maybe that was just her imagination, but she was feeling quite jittery.

Clearing her throat, Irene quickly tried to regain her composure, though the faint blush on her cheeks betrayed her efforts.

"I... of course it's the egg that I came to see. I can feel that it won't be long before the bing inside comes out" she replied, though her voice faltered slightly.

"Really?" Simon drew closer. At this point, their bodies were practically touching each other.

Finding her reaction endearing, he reached out and gently tucked a stray lock of hair behind her ears. It was a simple gesture, but this gesture sent a shiver down her spine, making it impossible to ignore the increasing intimacy between them.

"I suppose you are here for a different reason. But it cannot be a coincidence that both you and I arrived here in the middle of the night. Perhaps tonight is not about the festival, the tree or the egg"

"Perhaps it is trying to tell us something. Do you understand what I am getting at? A man and a woman in the middle of the night, surrounded by the moonlight and the warm glow of the tree of spirits..."

Simon whispered into her ears, his voice low and smooth.

Feeling his breath touch her skin, Irene's body flinched. As she met his gaze, she felt there was something more in his eyes—a warmth, an affection that she hadn't allowed herself to fully acknowledge before.