

D. of Pride 931

Chapter 931- Invitation for the Tea Party

"A great item" Simon was in awe.

The [Giant Crystal] was one of the key items that his dungeon needed and was something that would make it even stronger.

His mind raced, if he could harvest more of this crystal and incorporate that into the Breeding Pen that Coleus created, he would be able to create giant mutated beasts that were not only able to use elemental powers but were twice the size of normal.

Thus making them more fiercer and stronger.

With the recent invasion, Simon was made aware that no matter how many or what kind of beasts he spawned to guard his floors, they were all tantamount to ants in front of pure might.

They weren't able to create any waves against the three kings. In the future, there would be more opponents or even stronger knocking on his door, at that time, he would need stronger monsters and guardians to defend his dungeon.

And the [Giant Crystal] was one of the ways. There was one thing though, when he observed the crystal with [Appraisal], he was able to find a big drawback about this item.

The power of becoming a giant is so steep that it burns through the user's life force at an alarming rate.

While they gain immense power, their lifespan is drastically shortened, living years or even decades less than they otherwise would. The stronger the individual becomes, the more life force the stone consumes, shortening their life with each transformation.

Simon frowned, this was a big negative point. The Giant Crystal was no doubt a powerful item but the cost was high too.

He pondered for a moment, before shrugging it off. There was no gain without risk, the greater the drawback the greater the potential.

Even the mutation crystal had its own drawbacks, compared to it, the giant crystal was nothing.

Simon was sure that if he gave this item to Colues, he would find a way to increase the strength of the spawned monsters.

Storing the stone in his space ring, Simon looked around the pond. He had already discovered several treasures in this place, but he had a feeling that there was more to be found.

Just as he was about to die in, from the corner of his eyes he saw a blue figure and the beautiful scent that she brought along with her.

"You've awoken?" he lifted his head and saw Irene standing nearby.

A pair of azure blue eyes was quietly looking at him. She was wearing a noble blue dress with phoenix embroidery. While it covered her body, the slits and curves of the dress revealed a lovely and well proportioned body that was seemingly perfect.

Her long and lustrous hair was currently scattered and wet. They landed behind her bottom like a waterfall, giving off endless allure.

At this moment, she seemed to be releasing a languid aura that was very much unlike her, making it seemingly irresistible not to stare. This caused Simon's heart to pound for various reasons.

"You look different" Simon spoke out his thoughts.

"How so?" Irene simply smiled, folded her dress and nonchalantly sat next to him. She was so close that their shoulders were practically touching.

Simon was absentminded by her action for a second before replying "You have become more beautiful".

It was not a lie, usually an ice queen like her refrained from coming too close to anyone or initiating skin contact like this. And even if she did, it was during special occasions or events.

You would seldom find this icy fairy emitting such a languid and defenceless aura. The contrast was so much that even Simon who knew her well by now, had to take a good look at her to see if it really was her.

Her current change was not simply a matter of external beauty but something that arose from within.

More precisely, it was her aura, her demeanour. If previously she acted like a noble icy fairy who disdained the mundane world, then right now she looked like an earthly fairy who grew to love the world, amiable and so soul stirringly beautiful.

Irene simply smiled in response to his flattery and said "Stop looking, there is still a mountain of work waiting for you"...

"What do you mean?"...

"A Letter arrived at the White Palace by tearing through space while you were away" Irene handed him the letter.

"This is..." Simon put on his serious face, the reason was because the sender as written in a big dark red letter read... Lilith.

The Demon Lord of Lust and master of three Great Dungeons that still exist today. Someone he thought he would not come in contact with until later in the future when he grew plenty strong, had sent him a letter.

Even if it was not directly her, the fact that it had her name, meant that it came from the side of the Demon Lord of Lust.

Why would she send him a letter?

Simon hesitated for a moment as he stared down at the letter in his hand. The parchment felt strange. It wasn't made from any ordinary material and faintly shimmered with an unknown energy.

Even though the letter was stationary, it emanated a faint pulse as though alive. Simon ran his fingers across the dark red wax seal, which bore the intricate crest of Lilith, the Demon Lord of Lust.

With a sharp tug, he broke the seal and opened the letter. As soon as he unfolded the parchment, a faint, exotic scent wafted into the air.

It was bewitching, seductive, just like the Demon Lord herself. Simon's expression grew even more serious as he began to read.

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Dear Simon, Demon Marquess of the Ghastly Winding Forest. So, it seems you've been making quite the name for yourself lately, hmm? I've been hearing your name whispered in places you might not even know exist. A rising star, they say! Hmmm, you must be quite something.

Chapter 932- Invitation for the Tea Party (2)

I thought it was about time we met, you and I. It's not every day a Demon Marquess with your... unique potential pops up. You've caught my attention, Simon. Consider yourself invited to one of my little 'get-togethers.' Don't worry, it's not just any gathering. Oh no, this is the Grand Tea—an event I host every... well let's say whenever I feel like it. Think of it as... a who's who of the Demon world. All the Demon Archdukes and anyone else who's anyone will be there. You'll fit right in—well, that depends on whether you can handle the heat.

Hehehe, three months from now, my darling. Mark your calendar. The Eternal Desire Palace awaits. I'm sure you've heard of it. If not, well... I suppose you'll find out soon enough. It's a place full of... temptation. It's located deep in the Demi-Human continent, far beyond the Dead Tide and the Burning Expanse. Oh yes, I'm well aware that it's a bit... out of the way for many. But don't worry, I'm nothing if not accommodating. There will be airships ready to carry my esteemed guests. They'll be departing from a few select locations on the Demon Continent. You'll need to make your way to one of these stations. Let's see, the closest to you would probably be Wailing Spire, nestled in the Forgotten Valley. It's not too far from your lovely forest, just a quick jaunt through the Sphinx Desert. If that's too much trouble, you could always head toward Abaddon's Maw, though I hear the locals can be a bit... unfriendly to newcomers. There's also Gehenna's Gate, over in the Black Sun Wastelands, but it's a bit of a trek from your side of the continent. Whichever you choose, the airship will take you directly to the Eternal Desire Palace. Just be sure not to miss your ride. After all, the Dungeon of Temptation doesn't host just anyone, you know. Not everyone who attends these... little gatherings leaves unscathed. Or at all. You could say the place has a way of... changing

people. But someone like you should be fine, right? You're not the type to fall for a bit of temptation, are you? Hehehe, of course, I'll leave the choice up to you. Oh, and one more thing—are you sure you'll make it to the airship? I heard you've made quite a few enemies at the last Hexennacht. There are rumours that certain parties might not be too pleased to see you alive, let alone prospering. I wonder... will they let you board so easily? Or perhaps... we'll be seeing each other far sooner than expected if you fail to make it? Hehehe, wouldn't that be fun? Well then, deary, don't keep me waiting too long. After all, I'm ever so curious to see what makes you so... special.

See you soon, Lilith, Demon Lord of Lust, Mistress of Temptation... and a few other fun things."**

As he finished reading the content, Simon's face was mix of amusement and shock. His lips curled into a smirk as he read the final lines, this was no letter but a missive to temptation.

There was no denying Lilith's skill with words, every sentence dripped with teasing allure and mockery, but also, beneath that, was a challenge—a dare to step into her domain and see if he could survive the temptations of the Eternal Desire Palace. The seductive fragrance still lingered in the air as Simon's eyes moved back to the wax seal, the signature crest of Lilith, stamped in blood-red wax. It had been made to tease, to provoke curiosity, while her words held a faint sense of bewitchment, as if they sought to lure him closer to her world.

Simon knew well enough that Lilith was not one to be taken lightly, but he had to admire her boldness.

She clearly wasn't just testing his strength but his ability to keep his mind sharp and will intact. Lilith, the Demon Lord of Lust... Although this would be his first time seeing her in person, he'd heard many things about her—most notably for her charm.

She wasn't merely a being of overwhelming power like some of the more brutish Demon Lords, but she was far more dangerous because of her cunning.

Lilith was known not just for her strength but for the subtle and insidious ways she manipulated others, bending even the most willful to her desires without lifting a finger. Just a few whispered word or a passing glance, and the strongest of warriors would be at her feet, yearning for her approval.

She was someone who not only uses strength, but also wits to fight her battles. Most importantly, it wasn't just her seductive prowess that made her a formidable force.

Lilith was said to be one of the oldest beings in existence, a primordial demon, a being who had existed since the beginning of the world.

She was one of the few who held the "Complete Memory of the World," meaning she possessed the knowledge of its deepest secrets—truths that even other Demon Lords might not know. She held wisdom that went beyond mere power.

Such a being was someone who could not be underestimated or trifled with.

"What a cunning woman," Simon muttered under his breath, folding the letter and keeping it in his space ring.

The fact that Lilith had addressed him by name, a Demon Marquess, sent chills down his spine.

How much does she know about me? He had to wonder. He had been careful, meticulous even, about keeping his profile low while he grew his power and influence, yet it seemed the Demon Lord of Lust had taken notice of him.

For her to know his name... that in itself raised more questions than it answered.

How did she learn of me? And more importantly, how much does she know??

It was no secret that beings as ancient and powerful as Lilith had vast information networks, reaching into the farthest corners of the world. A being of her caliber could gather information about anyone or anything without breaking a sweat.

Chapter 933- Sphinx Dungeon

If she wished to investigate someone, it would be child's play. Simon had been working hard to develop his own network, trying to use the kingdom to spread his influence through the regions.

But he was painfully aware that his efforts were still in their infancy compared to a Demon Lord of her stature.

If she wanted to, she could probably know everything about him. But the real concern wasn't the fact that Lilith knew of him—many beings might eventually come to learn of him as he grew stronger.

Simon's greatest fear was whether or not she had discovered his most closely guarded secret: the Fragments of Pride. He had made sure that no one, aside from his closest subordinates, knew of its existence.

If Lilith, or anyone else of her calibre, were to find out... the consequences could be catastrophic.

Simon shook his head. No, it's unlikely. There's no way she could know about the Fragments. Not yet.

Other than that, there was also the thing she mentioned. The last Hexennacht had indeed been... eventful, to say the least. He had made powerful allies, but even more powerful enemies.

It wouldn't be surprising if some of those enemies tried to stop him before he could even set foot on the airship. His mind raced as he considered his options.

Wailing Spire seemed like the most logical choice—closer to his territory and somewhat less treacherous than the other locations. However, even the Forgotten Valley and Sphinx Desert had their dangers, especially for someone who had made as many enemies as he had.

The idea of ambushes along the way was not out of the question. As for the other names, Abaddon's Maw and the Gehenna's Gate in the Black Sun Wasteland were something he had never heard before.

It was only natural since he had yet to fully explore the Demon continent and his Memory of the world was incomplete.

"What's wrong?"

Irene's soft voice cut through his thoughts. She noticed the sudden change in his expression after he finished reading the letter.

Simon handed her the letter without a word. As her eyes skimmed over the content, her face reflected the same shock and worry he had felt.

"What are you going to do about it?" she asked.

What was he going to do? The answer was obvious. There was no real choice in the matter.

"I have to attend," Simon sighed. The letter hadn't been sent by just anyone—it came directly from Lilith, one of the Demon Lords who stood at the pinnacle of the demonic hierarchy.

A being as high as her didn't send casual invitations. It was a command in the guise of a letter, and while the tone of the message was playful and teasing, the power behind it was absolute.

Refusal was not an option.

The hierarchy of demons was rigid, and those ranked lower were expected to obey the commands of those ranked higher. As a Demon Marquess, Simon was still several levels beneath a being like Lilith.

Even other Demon Lords or Archdukes had to show deference when standing before a primordial Demon Lord like her. No amount of pride could override that fact.

And while this was just a 'Tea Party', the mere fact that all invitees were Archdukes and Dukes only made Simon's inclusion more baffling.

Why me? he wondered, trying to piece together her motives. There had to be a reason, but no matter how hard he thought, the reasoning behind her invitation never came to him.

He couldn't figure out the intentions of this woman.

"Forget about it," he muttered to himself, rubbing his temples. "Thinking about it without more information will only give me a headache."

He had three months until the party, which was more than enough time to prepare. Whatever Lilith's intention was, Simon would need to prepare with the best of his ability. He couldn't afford to go in blind.

Sighing, he decided to push the matter aside for now. There was work to be done. He had been immersing himself in the Pond of Serenity not only to uncover rare treasures but also to advance his training.

Recently, Simon had hit a bottleneck in his growth, one that couldn't be overcome by brute force alone.

That's where the mystical pond came in—it had a unique ability to soothe the mind and body, allowing those who entered it to loosen their bottlenecks and gain new enlightenment. But that wasn't its only gift.

The Pond of Serenity was said to improve the latent talent of those who submerged themselves in its waters, nurturing their potential in ways that were otherwise impossible.

It wasn't a miracle cure—its effects were subtle and required regular immersion to see any real progress. Simon dived inside the tranquil waters of the pool day after day and only through that was he able to improve his talent.

It was a slow and almost imperceptible process, but he knew that without the pond, his talent as a demon would have long since hit its peak.

The talent of a Demon Baron was inherently limited. Their potential for growth, particularly in the areas of higher-tier magic and complex skills like Amalgamation Magic, was stunted compared to higher-ranking demons.

Most Barons would struggle to even cast mid-tier spells, let alone the powerful, devastating magics of the higher ranks. But Simon had been different from the very beginning.

He not only learned advanced and high-ranking magic, but his proficiency with them surpassed beings that should have far outclassed him in power and rank.

This was the real advantage of the Pond of Serenity. Nurturing and cultivating one's talent. Every time he submerged in the pool, his mind felt clearer, and his connection to the magic around him grew more attuned.

The pond didn't work miracles overnight, but its long-term effects were undeniable. His strength, both physically and magically, had grown leaps and bounds beyond what should have been possible for someone of his rank.

And now that he had reached a wall, only the pond of serenity could help him surmount it.

Chapter 934- Sphinx Dungeon (2)

That said, even the pond of Serenity cannot help him fully surpass this wall, he needed to find a different way.

Simon knew that if he didn't find a way to break through, his growth would stagnate, leaving him vulnerable in this ever-dangerous world.

Three months. That was all the time he had left before the Demon Lord of Lust's tea party. The moment the invitation arrived, it became clear that his current power would not be enough.

He could not afford to go into the presence of the Demon Lords—especially someone like Lilith—without being at his absolute best.

A way to break past his limits... it's not like there was no way. Simon's mind immediately went towards the transit stone sitting in his space ring.

Forbidden Grounds, a place filled with unlimited opportunities and risks, where every path was fraught with danger.

A domain of chaos, filled with ancient, untamed magic and powerful creatures long forgotten by the world. Where the environment itself was hostile to the living.

It was not without reason that the forbidden grounds were said to be a burial place for those foolish enough to seek it out. However, precisely because it was so dangerous that it was the only place that could allow him to break past his limits and grow even further.

As the saying—'Opportunities and dangers go hand in hand'— if he wanted to surmount the wall, he had to take the danger.

He had already experienced the treacherousness of the domain and knew how the place was filled with magical artifacts from eras long past, remnants of battles fought by powerful ancient entities that still lay hidden within its deadly confines.

There were rumours of ancient knowledge, long-lost spells, and even supreme powers locked away in the deepest parts of the Grounds. It was said that those who clear the forbidden grounds would instantly rise to the pinnacle of this world.

He had already cleared the forbidden ground till the sixth trial and got his hands on all kinds of treasures. Since normal training won't suffice anymore, this was the catalyst he needed.

That said, he could not take the go getter attitude with this one since what happened the last time was still clear in his mind. He had almost died in the last trial.

Godwin who he didn't expect to meet in the sixth trial, turned out to be a much bigger opponent than he thought and they almost pushed him to his brink.

If it was not because of the fragments of pride and the other him warning him about the dangers of the River of Destiny, he would never have been able to come out of it.

Perhaps, his fate would have been similar to Godwin's, disintegrating into nothing.

It was not only the sixth trial, the previous trials were also the same where a slight mistake could have cost him his life. The entities inside the forbidden grounds were powerful enough to shatter space and split the sea with a single move.

No matter how many lives he has, it won't be enough. The reason why he managed to survive this long other than sticking to the historia was because of luck.

If even a single factor was missing, he would have been swallowed whole by the forbidden ground just like the many challengers that came before him.

"Are you thinking of going back to that place?" Seeing him fall deep in contemplation, Irene instantly realised what he was thinking about.

Her eyebrows lowered and her gaze softened "Do what you need to do. Leave everything here to me. I know what you are planning to do. The dungeon city isn't the true extent of your plans right?"

Simon looked at Irene, his expression conflicted. She had always been perceptive, often knowing his thoughts before he voiced them.

The dungeon city wasn't just a place to increase his income or a mere seat of power; it was only one part of his grander scheme. And she knew that. She always did.

"You're right but if I leave the dungeon now..."

There were many things to do and many changes that needed to be made to the dungeon. It has only been around a month since the dungeon was attacked, he cannot just go away at such a crucial time.

Seeing his conundrum, Irene's gaze softened further. She had stood by his side long enough to understand the complexities of his ambition. This wasn't just about ruling, nor was it about gaining strength to reshape the very balance of the world.

It was about survival and the safety of the ones he considers his family. He pursued power because only through this way would he be able to control his fate. This remained the same ever since he summoned her and even now.

"You won't stop until you've achieved your goal, will you?"

Irene's voice carried a hint of resignation but also admiration. She knew that his drive, though dangerous, was what set him apart. It was what made him different from others—he was always pushing, always striving for more.

Simon nodded, he didn't need to say anymore as the sentiments were conveyed with just his gesture.

"Since that is the case, then go. Have more faith in your subordinates, they are the people you gathered yourself. I'm sure they will be able to execute your plans as per your wish" Irene gestured.

Simon nodded his head and sent a message to each and all of his close subordinates to gather in the main hall.

About an hour later, all of his subordinates stood in front of him in the Main Hall. Simon glanced at all of their faces before declaring his intentions.

"What Master you will be going away? Can I come with you?" Alice pleaded, star could be seen flashing in her eyes.

This little girl, she wasn't content even after going on an expedition to the kingdom of Ellesmere and wanted to adventure even more.

Chapter 935- Sphinx Dungeon (3)

Had it been any other place, Simon wouldn't mind to take her with him. However, the place he was going was one of the most dangerous places in the world and it took everything he had just to protect himself.

If he brought Alice with him, he wasn't sure he would be able to protect her. And besides, the difficulty of the trials increases based on the challengers.

The more the challengers are on the trial, the more difficult it is to clear.

Take the Abomination in the Sixth Trial for example. Had it not been for the fourth finger's intervention and the subsequent event, who knew how the events would have transpired?

If he brought Alice with him to the next trial, based on her level the difficulty of the trial would definitely increase to a whole new realm.

SPANK... "Ouch!!!" Alice screamed as Annette spanked her little butt.

"Little girl, don't be too impulsive. Master is going away on an important mission and not to play. If you go there, I will be more worried"

After teaching a lesson to her little sister, Annette fixed her glasses and stared at Simon "Master, how long will you be away for this time?"

At that question, the latter became silent. The last time, he was away for more than three months causing others to be worried about him. Although this time there would be no River of Destiny, he couldn't be sure.

The trial could take him anywhere and it could take any amount of time. That said, he had a solid reason to complete the trial within three months this time.

The Demon of Lust's Tea Party. When Simon explained the reasoning to them and his growth wall, the Valkyries and the others nodded in understanding.

"Then we will wait for your return. Don't worry master, you can leave the dungeon and the plans for the dungeon city to us"...

"Yeah, I leave it to you guys then"

He had already explained to them the plan to build the dungeon city down to the finest details as such he did not have to worry about anything. He could leave it in their hands and be ready when the time came to reap the results.

On that note, he had also explained his reasoning to Cynthia who could now be considered one of his subordinates being a [Custodian] of floor zero and all.

Additionally, he left the matters of the dungeon to Irene who would act as a proxy dungeon master in his absence with Annette aiding her. All the other subordinates including Prime and the Forest Spring Sprits are to assist them in every way possible.

"Now then, I am heading off. I will be back in three months"

Throwing those words as farewell, Simon crushed the transit stone in his hands.

The world in his vision spun and quickly turned dark. Just like the last time, he felt a sense of weightlessness before plunging downwards face first.

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While Simon embarked on his perilous journey to the Forbidden Grounds, in a far-off corner of the world, deep within the Vast Sphinx Desert, stood a grand construct that defied both nature and reason.

Rising from the golden dunes like a colossal monument to power, the structure resembled a titanic Sphinx, lying with its paws extended and its maw wide open as if waiting to devour any intruder foolish enough to approach.

Its features were sharp, regal, and terrifyingly lifelike. Like a living entity just waiting to pounce.

The eyes of the stone beast seemed to gaze into the very souls of those who dared glance upon it. The Sphinx's presence was so commanding that even the enormous pyramids surrounding it—each of them towering structures on their own—looked like mere toys in comparison, as though they had been placed there as an afterthought.

Around the Grand Sphinx structure, the air crackled with an oppressive energy. The billowing sandstorms that constantly swirled all around the desert and were fierce enough to strip flesh from bone.

Yet, in front of the Sphinx, these violent forces seemed to bend as if obeying some unseen will.

It was not only the sandstorms, Even the ferocious monsters that roamed the desert—creatures of nightmarish power and aggression—kept their distance from the construct.

Their primal instincts warning them to stay far from this place after all, they knew, with an unshakable certainty, that whatever lay within the Sphinx was far more dangerous than even they were.

And they were right, the Grand Sphinx structure was no ordinary ruin; it was a dungeon—a living entity that twisted and morphed within. It stretched down into the earth for miles, its labyrinthine depths housing all manner of treasures, traps, and deadly creatures.

The maw of the Sphinx was a massive gateway large enough for an entire battalion to march through side by side and served as the entrance to this ancient and forbidding dungeon.

Near the entrance, a large teleportation gate could be seen shimmering with ethereal light. This was the teleportation gate that was placed by the humans.

Teams of adventurers, mercenaries, and dungeon explorers—many hailing from powerful kingdoms—arrived through the gate, diving into the dungeon's depths in search of riches, glory, and power.

None of them could deny the allure of the Dungeon of the Sphinx, and many sought to conquer its depths, though few ever made it past the lower floors as it was a high ranking [A] tier dungeon.

Far underneath on the last and final floor of the dungeon, sat its ruler—a man whose mere presence radiated dominance and power.

His skin was the deep, rich brown of the desert sands, and he was clad in flowing, loose garments that shimmered like molten gold in the dim light of the chamber.

With his elegant and fine robes that were made with ease of movement and battle in mind, he unmistakably exuded an aura of nobility. Around his neck, heavy golden chains adorned with rubies and sapphires gleamed, and on his head rested a headgear made of the finest silk that glowed with a subtle but potent magical aura.

Chapter 936- Two Dukes

From this one could tell that the demon liked gold and adorning himself with extravagant things. He was the lord of the Sphinx dungeon and one of the most feared demons in the world, Gelford—the Demon Duke of Sphinx.

He had a big frame with explosive muscles brimming with untamed power and although his posture was relaxed, his sharp crimson eyes said anything but that. His sun kissed skin and sharp features gave him an almost predatory look.

Had it not been for his aura of nobility and his regal clothes, one might even confuse him for a barbarian. That was how undeniably savage he looked.

Gelford sat on his throne, each of his fingers were adorned with golden rings etched with intricate runes of protection and power and rested calmly on the armrest.

Seated beside him on either side were three figures—two male and one female. All of them shared the same ferocious aura as him in their own unique way. The three figures were none other than his sons and daughter.

His eldest son, Vargel, was a towering figure, muscular and broad-shouldered like his father but with a more refined air about him. His skin gleamed in the dim light, and his strikingly sharp features were shadowed by his well-groomed hair.

Beside Vargel sat his younger brother, Kaelor, smaller in frame but no less fearsome.

To Gelford's right sat his daughter, Delphyne, the most enigmatic of the three. Her presence was subtler but no less powerful.

Unlike her brothers, Delphyne's skin was a pale golden, and her amber eyes held a keen, almost mystical light. She wore elegant, flowing robes of deep purple, embroidered with runes of magic.

Her sharp, predatory features mirrored her father's, though softened slightly by her feminine grace.

"So it's like that huh, I see that is good news"

Gelford spoke. Usually, the air in the room would be much less reserved and more informal with just his sons and daughter in the room.

However, at this moment they were not alone. Gelford was entertaining a guest, a being no less intimidating in stature than him.

Across the chamber, on a throne crafted from bones and stone, sat another Demon Duke, a figure so immense and commanding that even the mighty Gelford had to acknowledge his equal.

His appearance was a mixture of noble demon and primal beast, a fusion of grace and savagery. He was none other than Arctaurus, the Father of Minotaurs.

Arctaurus' stature was colossal. His body was a blend of a demon noble's regal bearing and the raw, bestial power of a minotaur. His skin was a dark, deep brown, covered in patches of coarse black hair that ran down his arms and legs.

His head was crowned with massive, curved horns that spiralled outward like those of a great beast. His powerful body, rippling with muscles, was covered in ceremonial armor adorned with spikes and runes, each piece crafted with the best of materials and polished to a shine.

That said, what drew the most attention was not his armor or his big curved horns but the huge battle axe that was resting beside him.

Black as night and etched with ancient runes that pulsed with dark magic. Whether it be Gelford, his sons or Gelford, if Simon was here he would be able to instantly recognise them as they were there, present in the Hexennacht.

Especially Gelford, he was one of the Demon Duke he had a conflict with. It was in the Ritual of the Blades where he stole the former's subordinate as a trophy of the winner.

To this day, that Giga Minotaur was still following Maybell like a little lamb.

Arctaurus turned his gaze toward Gelford, a deep rumbling laugh escaped from his throat.

"So, Sargel, it's that time of the year again"...

"Indeed it is"...

"RARARA... This time, even I got an invitation from the Dungeon of Temptation. It looks like the world has finally started to realise the potential I have"

There was a sense of satisfaction in Arctaurus' voice, one that was hard to miss. The invitation from the Dungeon of Temptation was not something given lightly, nor was it something anyone could simply request or earn.

Only those who had garnered recognition from the Demon Lord of Lust, were invited to the Tea Party.

To be summoned meant that you had made an impact, that your existence had shifted the balance of power in the world of demons.

For a being like Arctaurus, whose power was already immense, this invitation was a validation of his growing influence.

"An invitation from the Dungeon of Temptation is no small thing," Gelford agreed, his tone thoughtful "Especially from the likes of Her Highness Lilith, the Demon Lord of lust. For her to take notice of anyone, let alone a Duke means something significant."

The Tea Party hosted by the Demon Lords wasn't just a casual gathering of powerful beings. It was an event shrouded in mystery, one that only the most elite among the Demon Nobility were privy to.

Many sought to attend, but few were deemed worthy. Those fortunate enough to receive an invitation were marked as important figures in the ever-changing dynamics of the demon world.

Invitations from the Dungeon of Temptation, in particular, were rare—Lilith, the Demon Lord of lust, cared little for the politics and internal dynamics of the demon realm, preferring her own interest and indulgences over engaging in the power struggles of the ones beneath her.

In fact, although he didn't know it, but Simon was the only person who received the grace of being personally invited by Lilith in all these years.

Arctaurus grunted, his massive hand running over the handle of the immense axe strapped to his back.

"Aye. The Tea Party isn't just a casual affair. Not anyone can simply attend even if they wanted to. But I wonder, do you think it's just another one of her indulgences?"

This was the first time he was invited to the tea party organised by one of three great dungeons over all these years. As such, he didn't know much about it.

Chapter 937- Two Dukes (2)

"Unlikely. Knowing her, there's always something more. A woman like her never plays a simple game. I'm sure she is up to something again. In the last Tea Party too she came up with something ridiculous. There is no doubt this time too she is planning something"

Gelfor answered. As one of the oldest Demon Dukes who had lived for more than 2000 years, he knew all too well how cunning the Demon Lords were.

They were not just the epitome of strength but they were the peak of their kind. The demon lord of Lust, in particular, had been there since before the time he could remember.

Having lived such a long long life, she was not only extremely shrewd but an expert manipulator. There was no limit to what a being like that can do.

A master manipulator, someone who could weave her desires into the minds of others without them even realizing it.

Her Tea Parties were known for more than just frivolity—there were always deeper machinations at play, and those who attended could find themselves caught in a web of plots before they knew it.

He could tell because he had attended her party before.

"In the last Tea Party," Gelford continued, his voice lowering as if recalling a dangerous memory "she came up with something utterly ridiculous. She enjoys toying with the ambitions of others, using the smallest of indulgences to ignite greater flames. I have no doubt she is scheming something again."

Arctaurus furrowed his brows "Then this time too she is scheming something. That said, there is no refusing the invitation. I do not want to incur the wrath of one of the three primordial demon lords".

If Hexenact and Walpurgis were the assembly of the demons to do whatever they wanted, then the Tea Party was the event for 'her' to weave her desires.

"Father, do we need to fear her that much? Isn't the Demon Lord of Lust situated in the far off distant continent of Demihumans?"

Vargel, Gelford's eldest son spoke, breaking the tense atmosphere. His voice filled with youthful confidence. He leaned forward in his seat, his arms crossed over his chest, the arrogance of his strength and youth seeping into his tone.

From his point of view, the threat of someone so distant—across entire seas and continents—seemed like nothing to be concerned about. After all, how could someone like Lilith, who dwelled far beyond their lands, ever hope to influence the Demon Continent?

"Hmm?"

Arctaurus, the imposing Demon Duke, arched a brow at the young demon's words but said nothing. It was not his place to chastise Vargel, though his silence carried a weight that spoke volumes.

He'd seen too many brash, overconfident young demons fall because they underestimated their enemies.

Gelford's crimson eyes flicked to his son, and the room fell quiet. said, his deep voice filled with a calm authority.

"Distance means little when it comes to beings like the Demon Lords. Their reach is far greater than you can imagine. In fact, it's not about how far they are—it's about their power. You cannot underestimate these beings who sit at the top of the demon hierarchy. They reign above even the Demon Archdukes, and not without reason."

Unlike his son, he wasn't going to make the mistake of underestimating the Demon Lords. The beings who have transcended the limits of ordinary demons. The power they hold is tied to the Fragments of Sin—the ancient force which was still a mystery to the world.

There was no way of knowing what kind of unimaginable powers those fragments give them.

Gelford's gaze drifted for a moment as he recalled the scenes from not too long ago. In the Walpurgis and the Hexennacht where he met the one chosen by the Fragments of Envy, the Demon lord of Envy, Belial.

His power was beyond comprehension. His forces—his control over the minds of others—is something one cannot even begin to fathom.

Gelford who stood in his presence felt the weight of his aura alone nearly drive him to my knees. The power of a Demon Lord wasn't simply strength—it was an unshakable, oppressive force.

It wasn't just the Demon Lord of Envy, Sargel recalled a memory from a long time ago. At one point in time, he was fortunate enough to be present in an event where he was personally able to witness the famous Demon Lord that the world was talking about at one point in time.

"Procell..." Gelford whispered in a voice that only he could hear.

The name which was spoken in awe and fear throughout the Demon Continent. The Demon Lord of Greed, A demon who rose to power like a comet.

Gelford was fortunate enough—or perhaps, unfortunate—to have met him once. To be in his presence was to feel the vast gulf that exists between a Demon Lord and the rest of the demonkind to the point where it would immediately dishearten anyone.

His aura... it wasn't just power, it was consumption. He could feel the hunger in the air, the greed that sought to devour everything.

Procell's mere presence felt like standing in the shadow of something far beyond—a force of nature, something primal.

Gelford paused, his eyes flickering with the memory of that encounter. Even now, so many years later, the memory sent a cold shiver down his spine.

The terror and awe he had felt standing before Procell were unlike anything he had ever experienced. It was the moment he realized just how insignificant even a Demon Duke could feel before a true being of power.

"You must remember one thing Vargel, never underestimate a Demon ranking above you. Especially the ones who call themselves the Demon Lords" He spoke in a voice as serious as it could be.

Vargel swallowed, the weight of his father's words finally sinking in. For all his bravado, he had never experienced such power firsthand.

Other than the time where he saw the newly risen Demon Lord of Envy in which case he was very far back in the hall, he had never stood in the presence of a Demon Lord or felt the crushing weight of their aura.

Chapter 938- The Shadow Lurks

Now, Vargel realized, perhaps for the first time, that his father's caution was well-founded. That said, there was still a hint of skepticism in his gaze.

His father's caution seemed unnecessary to him. How could someone whose influence lay on the far side of the world reach all the way to them? That being said, he knew better than to overstep his bounds.

After Gelford was done with his explanation, the room fell silent for a while. But just when it seemed like this silence would stretch on, the sudden clamour of footsteps echoed from the far end of the hall.

A figure rushed into the grand chamber. Sharp-eyed, beak-like nose, and wiry frame, he was one of the most trusted subordinates of Gelford, the demon duke of Sphinx.

The latter's presence in such a setting was unexpected and rude, and the tension in the room thickened immediately.

"Gavis... it is disrespectful to barge into the hall like this" Gelford's voice was a low growl, his crimson eyes narrowing dangerously at the interruption.

"Didn't I tell you that I am entertaining guests and will be occupied?"

Gavis visibly trembled under his lord's glare, his face pale as he quickly lowered himself in apology "My lord, please forgive my intrusion, but I thought it necessary for you to hear this urgently".

"What is it?"

At his subordinate's insistence, Gelford realised that the situation was not simple. And he was right, the next words that came out of the other party's mouth solidified his suspicions.

"Avrox is here"...

"Avrox?! What is he doing here? Has he already completed the mission I gave him?" ...

"My lord... about that," Gavis hesitated, his eyes flicking again toward Arctaurus, knowing that the implications of what he was about to say were not to be shared lightly in front of someone of his stature.

"He has something urgent to report."

"Avrox?! Isn't that the Demon Earl who serves lord Pasha? What is he doing here?"

Arctaurus questioned, his eyes narrowed. Instantly, the atmosphere in the room changed, the once casual conversation over wine was now replaced with a palpable, suffocating tension.

The subtle clashing of auras between Gelford and Arctaurus was undeniable, a silent battle of dominance that only demons of their calibre could engage in.

Just moments ago, they had been relaxed and drinking, exchanging barbs and stories. Now, they were poised for conflict, a hairsbreadth from bloodshed.

"What are you hiding from me Gelford?" ...

Vargel, Sargel's eldest son, exchanged a glance with his father. His expression asked for guidance, silently inquiring if he should prepare for battle.

Though only a Demon Marquess, Vargel was not afraid to face a powerful opponent. Yet, even he knew that a fight here, in the heart of their dungeon, could have disastrous consequences.

Gelford on the other hand weighed his options. Avrox timing couldn't be said to be absolutely worse... at least the being in front of him was someone he understood very well.

"Alright, bring him in. I want to hear what report he has for me" And so he made his decision.

The subordinate bowed and left to carry out his orders. It wasn't long before he returned bringing along with him a grinning demon.

The figure that entered was unsettling, even to those accustomed to the company of monsters and demons. His sharp, serpentine smile was the first thing anyone noticed—too wide and too menacing.

His aura was equally eerie, radiating malice despite his nonchalant appearance. Though not particularly handsome, his chiselled, demonic features and the constant smirk gave him a dangerous charm.

He was someone who stood out even among other demons.

If Simon were here, he would have instantly recognized this demon—the very same Demon Earl who had tried to interfere with him during his battles in Walpurgis, Hexennacht, and even the kingdom of Ellesmere.

This was none other than Avrox, a cunning manipulator who had caused more trouble than his rank would suggest.

"Lord Gelford,"

Avrox bowed slightly, his manner as well as his voice was as flimsy as ever and dripping with insincerity. Yet despite all that, Gelford did not mind it too much.

"Talk Avrox, why are you here?" ...

"Hehe, I'm afraid I'm here to deliver a bad news my lord. The plan we hatched has failed".

At those words, the audience in the hall reacted in surprise. Their eyes wide and their bodies arching forward as if in disbelief.

"Plan?" Arctaurus looked at Gelford whose eyes despite burning with intensity, remained calm.

It was instead his children who displayed their surprise. Delphyne was the first to react.

"What do you mean, 'failed'?" she snapped, her voice carrying the sharpness of a blade "The Ogre King was sent to crush that demon and his dungeon. How could he fail?"...

Vargel, too, was incredulous "I have personally assessed that demon's potential. Even though he holds the rank of a Demon Earl, there was nothing about him that suggested he could take on the Ogre King! It's impossible."

"Is it as brother says," Delphyne added, her tone layered with skepticism.

"We investigated Gelgar's destroyed dungeon thoroughly. That Demon Earl while resourceful, wasn't anything to be worried about. He gathered a few powerful subordinates by sheer luck, but none of them should've been able to stand against the Ogre King."

Facing their questions, Avrox simply grinned. His attitude seemed to be that of a third party simply observing a farce from the distance.

"You two stop!!"

It was at this moment, that Gelford spoke up. He got up from his seat and addressed Avrox.

"Avrox tell me what exactly happened".

"I understand your doubts, my lords and lady," he said smoothly "But allow me to assure you... this isn't a matter of underestimating him. The Ogre King, in all his might, attacked that dungeon and fought valiantly. But something... unexpected occurred. Something we didn't account for. The Ogre King was not just defeated—his fate is now unknown. He has simply vanished."

"Vanished? You're telling me that an Ogre King, one of the most fearsome beings in the Ghastly Winding Forest, simply vanished in a fight against a Demon Earl?"

Chapter 939- The Shadow Lurks (2)

"Do you expect us to believe that?".

Avros shrugged his shoulders and chuckled softly "Believe it or don't—it matters not. But the truth remains the same. The Ogre King is gone, and that Demon Earl's dungeon still stands. Whatever lies within that forest... it is not as simple as we first believed. The demon and his subordinates are stronger than we anticipated. Much stronger".

At this point, Gelford had no choice but to believe the other party. There was no reason for the latter to lie to him.

The silence stretched as the Demon Duke weighed his next move. The plan to eliminate that Demon Earl had been a calculated one, with the Ogre King chosen for his sheer destructive power.

The fact that it had failed—worse, that the Ogre King had vanished—spoke of something.

"Could it be that Demon Earl used some tricks?"...

"He could have, I tried to get him in trouble twice but both the times he defied all logic and got out of it unscathed" Avrox agreed.

"Oi... Oi.. Oi... Don't tell me you have already started your plans to capture the Ghastly Winding Forest? You bastard are you ignoring the truce?"

At this moment, Arctaurus couldn't help but speak up. The dialogues back and forth allowed him to guess what Gelford was up to.

This made him furious, the reason for that was because the Ghastly Winding Forest was domain coveted by many. The only reason they hadn't been able to lay their hands and claim it was because of the truce they made.

If every demon tried to get their hands on this domain, it would spark a cataclysmic war, one that could potentially shake the entire continent to its core.

To avoid this devastating outcome, the higher echelons of demon society, including the Archdukes and Demon Lords, had long ago reached an uneasy truce regarding the forest.

During every Hexennacht, when the domains were selected, the Ghastly Winding Forest was either vetoed or marked as a "green belt," a territory that could not be contested or claimed, to prevent a dungeon war of catastrophic proportions.

What made the Ghastly Winding Forest so lucrative to the eyes of the demon? If you consider the environment and living conditions of the Demon continent, then it becomes crystal clear why it was so.

However, more than that, the main reason why the Ghastly Winding Forest is so sought after is because of the legend that was passed on.

The ancient legend spoke of an unimaginable treasure hidden deep within the Ghastly Winding Forest, a relic from the primordial era, long before the rise of the current Demon Lords.

This treasure, shrouded in myth and secrecy, was said to possess powers so vast that it could elevate those who could wield it to the pinnacle of this world in a single stroke.

Some stories also say that whatever is hidden in the forest, held the key to unlocking forgotten magics, perhaps even the secrets of invincibility, or artifacts crafted by beings that existed in the primordial era itself.

It was a legend that transcended realms—not just passed on in ancient texts to the human world but also fiercely believed on the demon continent.

That said, in the course of history many came to the forest to claim the treasure. However, to this date, none were able to find it and the legend became one of the greatest mysteries in the world.

"Don't be brain dead, Truce? Anyone with half a brain knows that if all of us tried to claim it at once, it would lead to mutual destruction. That's why the truce exists. However, now that the Demon Earl has claimed that territory for himself, does the truce still exist?"

"And more importantly... how long before someone tries to take it from him? Are you telling me to stand back and watch while all that happens? Don't make me laugh. The truce only applies when the opponent is a Demon Duke. Since our enemy is only a Demon Earl, there is no need for us to give him that honour"

Gelford spoke shooting an annoyed glance at Arctaurus.

The latter was also surprised by the other party's words "Are you telling me that Demon Earl could be in possession of the treasure?"...

"It's not entirely impossible. Rather, if he has the treasure all the abnormalities about him and his subordinates can be explained. Well, even if it's not the case, the fact remains that he is sitting on one of the most coveted territories"

The one to answer him was Avrox still flashing that sheepish grin.

Arctaurus' face at this moment was a sight to see. Just like all the other Demons, he too coveted the Ghastly Winding Forest and fought for it tooth and nail in every Hexennacht.

However, due to the truce and the other high ranking demons presiding over the event, his ploys had always failed. He thought that no one could claim the forest for themselves only to be proved wrong in the last Hexennacht.

Betraying his belief, a demon claimed the forest for himself in the last Hexennacht. If it was a very high ranking demon, he wouldn't have any qualms. However, the one who claimed the Ghastly Winding Forest was just a Demon Earl. An ant he wouldn't even glance at otherwise.

Of course, there was a lot of discontent but more than that, all of them were shocked. The reason being that a demon earl dared to stand up to them and claim the coveted forest for himself.

Naturally, they laughed at the fool who didn't know his place. In any other event that Demon Earl would have been thrown out or perhaps killed in some corner.

However, it was the Hexennacht, a sacred event for all the Demon Kind. What's more, presiding over the event this time was the Demon Lord of Envy.

It could be said that he had the most authority there at that time and the one with the final say.

Chapter 940- The Shadow Lurks (3)

Everybody including him thought that the Demon Earl was out of his place to negotiate with the Demon Lord on equal grounds. However, something happened, something that defied all logic and persuaded the Demon lord of Envy to give a verdict that he otherwise wouldn't.

Arctaurus was there, he saw it happen with his own eyes. The suffocating pressure he had felt when the Demon Earl, had walked into the centre of the grand hall.

The atmosphere had shifted then, not just because of the Demon Earl's audacity in claiming the Ghastly Winding Forest, but because of the strange and overwhelming power he carried with him.

The entire gathering had fallen into a deathly silence as the Demon Earl stood before the assembly. Only he spoke during that time. And it wasn't just his presence that unsettled everyone—it was the allies that the Demon Earl had unexpectedly rallied to his side.

Oswell, the young Demon Duke, whose meteoric rise had shaken the foundations of demon society. Less than three hundred years old and already with a [S] tier dungeon to his name, Oswell was a prodigy the likes of which the Demon Continent hadn't seen in a long long years.

The fact that such a figure would align himself with the Demon Earl was shocking enough, but it wasn't just Oswell.

Marchosias, an ancient and fearsome warrior of the past whose powers could only be described as legendary, had emerged out of nowhere to stand with the Demon Earl.

For someone of her stature to take a side in such a political affair was practically unheard of. Her presence alone had been enough to silence any dissent from the lower-ranked demons. Her siding with the Demon Earl had sealed his bid for the Ghastly Winding Forest.

Another abnormality that no one could have predicted.

Is it because of these reasons that he was furious? Why he feels so much discontent to the point of spouting blood right now after hearing the name Ghastly Winding Forest come out?

No, what truly boiled his blood was what had happened next in the Hexennacht—his own personal humiliation.

In the heat of the fateful Hexennacht, Avrox came to him with a suggestion. Finding it excellent, he immediately rode on that idea and challenged the Demon Earl.

He had been confident—why wouldn't he be? Avrox had fed him information that made Simon seem like a novice, and despite the allies standing beside the Demon Earl, Arctaurus believed his power and status would be enough to tilt the scales.

He had proposed a Ritual of the Blades, a sacred combat that allowed for no outside interference. It was a centuries-old tradition, its rules absolute.

In such a duel, two demons would pit their chosen champions against each other, with no aid from allies or they themselves. The winner would claim victory not just over their foe, but over the matter at hand—in this case, the ownership of the Ghastly Winding Forest.

Arctaurus at that time believed this to be the perfect solution. In this one-on-one contest, the Demon Earl would have to stand on his own without Oswell, Marchosias, or any other ally.

He had expected to crush the Demon Earl easily, showing the entire assembly his superiority and the power he amassed. After all, how could someone like that ant, a mere Demon Earl, hope to stand against the might of a seasoned Demon Duke?

But what had followed... it was an utter disaster.

He sent out his trump card, his most powerful summon, the [A] rank Giga Minotaurus, Minos. The latter had served him loyally for years, a combatant whose strength was unmatched in his domain.

Confident, he had watched from the sidelines, expecting an easy victory. But Simon's champion had been unlike anything Ragnarok had expected.

The Demon Earl sent forth a little girl as his champion. Further assured of his victory he laughed only to stand rooted in the events that followed next.

The duel had been swift—brutal, even. In a matter of moments, his champion was overwhelmed, beaten, and then, in an act of sheer humiliation, stolen away from him.

Not only had his warrior been defeated, but he had been claimed by the Demon Earl's side, as per the rules of the sacred duel. To lose a duel was one thing, but to have his own champion taken from him in front of the entire assembly—it was a face-slapping insult that cut deep into Arctaurus' pride.

"That bastard, don't tell me he used some kind of trick in the Ritual of the Blades"

He muttered in a low voice. However, it was loud enough for everyone in the hall to hear.

They were all present in the last Hexennacht or had heard it from rumours how the Demon Duke of Wildlands was defeated and his champion stolen by an upstart Demon Earl. If there was anyone who held a massive grudge against the latter, it would be him.

"Gelford you bastard, so you were trying to claim the forest behind my back" Arctaurus turned to face Gelford with a grim look in his eyes.

Now that the cat was out of the bag, Gelford felt no need to hide this fact. He nodded his head and openly accepted that he was trying to claim the territory for himself. On that fact, he made many plans to defeat the many obstacles standing in his way.

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"So how goes your plan?" Arctaurus questioned.

"It is as you heard, it was a complete failure"...

The room fell into silence as everyone had a pondering look on their face.

"We need to do something about that Demon Earl, don't tell me that you will take this defeat lying down?"...

"Do you think manipulating the black ogre clan was easy? You don't know how much length I had to go so that Orge King wouldn't notice me. I tried and employed all my resources to make the black ogre clan stronger. However, they still failed me in the end"

Gelford clicked his tongue.