

D. of Pride 941

Chapter 941- The Shadow Lurks (4)

It could be said that he had invested quite a lot of resources into the black ogre clan to win this battle. Their failure had caused him a big loss that would be difficult for even a being like him to recover from.

"And besides, have you forgotten the entity that lives in the forest? As long as that ancient tree stands, it is nigh impossible to completely capture the forest"

In fact, the real reason why the forest hasn't been occupied by any demons from the Demon continent so far other than the delicate truce was the existence of the protector of the forest.

An Ancient Titan Treant who had reached a very high level and had stopped the advances of the demon time and time again. It was for his existence coupled with a few others that the Ghastly Winding Forest was still standing.

"This..." As someone who fiercely competed with Gekford for the claim over the forest, how could Arctaurus not know it?

He knew very well how ridiculous that old monstrous tree was who had lived for a very long time. The Ancient Titan Treant was the main reason he was so afraid to invade the forest.

That said... "If nothing is done, we will become a laughing stock to the whole world".

In the last Hexennacht, It wasn't just his pride that had been wounded—it was his authority, his reputation. For a Demon Duke to lose in such a public fashion, and to a Demon Earl no less, was an unforgivable slight.

He had been made a fool in front of the entire Hexennacht, and the other demons had witnessed his downfall with a mixture of surprise and amusement. The insult lingered, festering like an open wound.

Every time he thought back to that night, the memory burned brighter, the shame deeper. It was not just a loss; it was a disgrace, a mark on his reputation that could not be erased.

Gelford silently agreed, he also felt the same. Though in his case, it was more of a personal Vendetta and revenge than any other.

Initially, Gelford hadn't given the Demon Earl much thought. From his perspective, the latter was just another ambitious upstart trying to rise through the ranks by latching onto more powerful allies.

When he saw the Demon Earl standing with Oswell, the prodigy, he had written him off as a leech—someone with no real strength of his own, simply riding the coattails of more established demons to gain recognition.

To Gelford, the Demon Earl was just another fool trying to make a name for himself in the Demon World pretending to be someone worthy of notice. The Demon Earl's audacity at Hexennacht had only solidified Sargel's poor opinion of him.

To challenge the Demon Lord's authority and try to claim the coveted Ghastly Winding Forest was the move of a desperate opportunist, and in Gelford's mind, the Demon Earl was bound to fail spectacularly.

He had watched, expecting them to be crushed under the pressure of the high-ranking demons present and the sheer difficulty of his bid. However, surprising everyone, the latter managed to claim the territory which he had coveted for many centuries.

Although extremely discontent and unresigned by this verdict he had no choice but to accept it. That's right, although he abhorred the demon who hid behind powerful allies to get his way, his impression of the Demon Earl hadn't reached the point where it became incorrigible.

No, in the beginning, despite his disdain, Gelford had even harbored the idea of recruiting the Demon Earl into his faction—the Blood Moon faction. After all, having them under his control would, in essence, would allow him to indirectly claim the Ghastly Winding Forest for himself.

The young Demon Earl would be nothing more than a puppet, and Gelford could pull the strings from behind the scenes. It would have been a tactical victory, and the other party could have been a useful pawn.

He didn't see the Demon Earl as a real threat—more of a minor nuisance who could be brought to heel.

So what changed his stance from recruiting the demon to directly destroying him?

It was the news that Sargel received after the Hexennacht that solidified his stance not only against the Demon Earl but also against the idea of ever allowing him to live.

The latter had killed his son.

Gelford seethed with barely contained fury as he remembered the news he got from his daughter Delphyne who went to visit the dungeon of one of his sons recently.

That's right, other than the two sitting beside him, he has one more son or rather had. Gelgar, his son... a failure of a son, a disgrace to his bloodline, and a constant reminder of weakness in his lineage.

Gelgar had never lived up to his expectations—too reckless, too weak, and too brash to consider one of his won.

In truth, Gelford had long considered him unworthy of inheriting the family legacy, and had even stripped him of his titles and resources. He was a shame to be called his own.

That said, despite all of Gelgar's shortcomings, despite the embarrassment he brought to the family, Gelgar was still his blood.

In this cutthroat world of demons, power was everything, and to allow his bloodline to be insulted in such a way was a humiliation that he could not ignore.

It wasn't even that Gelford grieved for Gelgar—no, far from it. Gelgar's death in many ways was just the natural conclusion to a life filled with blunders. He had long accepted that Gelgar was too weak to survive in the harsh world of demonkind after all, the latter was just a Demon Viscount without any potential to ascend higher.

If the latter had just died in some corner quietly Gelford might not have even cared. But this? This was different. This was public. This was an insult.

A Demon Earl, no less—someone so far beneath him in status—had dared to kill his flesh and blood, no matter how weak and insignificant that flesh may have been. It wasn't just a personal vendetta anymore; it was a matter of reputation.

Chapter 942- The Shadow Lurks (5)

Although Gelford managed to keep the news under wraps for now, how long until the news blows out?

A Demon Duke's information network cannot be underestimated. In fact, Gelford believed that some of the few ancient ones were already aware of it.

Since this was the case, he couldn't afford to let this go, not when his position as a Demon Duke depended on the strength of his image.

The Blood Moon faction, his faction, would be mocked if the murder of Gelgar went unpunished. It would make him look weak and vulnerable—a target for other ambitious demons looking to make a name for themselves.

One of the Great Demon Duke Gelford's sons got killed by a mere Demon Earl. What kind of news would that make?

He can't have that now, can he? No, Gelford couldn't allow that narrative to take hold. The Demon Earl needed to be destroyed if only to preserve his own name and reputation.

This was about power, and power was everything in the demon world. He had built his dungeon, his influence and on the perception of strength over a vast period of time.

To let an insignificant ant like that Demon Earl trample all that and walk away after killing one of his own was an unforgivable affront. No, this cannot stand, Gelford thought, his crimson eyes narrowing.

"Hehe, I'm on the two duke's side on this matter," Avrox said, his voice oozing with twisted delight. Grin widened and his eyes gleamed with malice.

He could sense the hatred and rage simmering within both Arctaurus and Gelford, and that emotion, that fire of vengeance, brought a wicked satisfaction to him. He chose this moment to strike when the iron was hot.

"That Demon Earl cannot be allowed to live. If he really has gotten his hands on the treasure of the Ghastly Winding Forest, then I assure you, he will become a threat far beyond what any of us can handle in the future."

Arctaurus' fingers twitched slightly, his face stone-cold. He had listened to this Demon Earl in the last Hexehnnacht and look what it brought him.

Gelford on the other hand, remained silent, still processing Avrox's words. The latter had spoken the very thing that they were already thinking but had yet to vocalize.

That said, why did Avrox care about that Demon Earl so much to the point of antagonising the other party in every opportunity that presented itself?

Gelford calculatied in his mind his eyes narrowed slightly as he observed Avrox. He and that other demon were both of the same rank—both Demon Earls. What did Avrox stand to gain?

"I know what you're thinking, Duke Gelford. Why should I, a fellow Demon Earl, be so intent on eliminating him?" Avrox's eyes gleamed with malice as he spoke.

"It's because I've dealt with him before. Time and time again, I've tried to snuff out that flame of his before it could grow into an inferno. And each time, I've failed."

The demon world was a brutal hierarchy, a place where survival depended on one's ability to climb over others, often using their corpses as stepping stones. Rank was everything.

The title of "Demon Earl" meant power, authority, and the recognition of one's lineage and strength. Just because the other party was also a fellow Demon Earl, it didn't mean that the both of them had to be allies.

In fact, the very nature of the demon world was defined by treachery and ambition. Self-interest always came first, and Avrox embodied that reality.

And as for Avrox, he seemed to believe that the Demon Earl who was only a low level Demon Viscount when he first met him was a much bigger foe than what everybody thought of him.

From the first time they crossed paths, Simon had been a mere Demon Viscount, barely worthy of mention in the vast tapestry of the demon hierarchy. Yet there was something off about him, something that set him apart from the others.

He still remembered how he got out of the trap he laid in the capital of the Ellesmere kingdom. Yet, at the last moment, a powerful entity—one far beyond the Demon Earl's standing—had appeared to save him.

That pattern had repeated itself at the Hexennacht. Whenever the Demon Earl found himself on the brink of defeat, someone or something powerful stepped in to shield him.

The intervention of such ancient beings was something that Avrox, despite his many years of experience, found impossible to explain.

Time and time again he seemed to get bailed by these powerful entities who would otherwise never take sides. It was almost as if the demon possessed some kind of strange ability that made others into his ally.

In the demon world, where alliances were fickle and trust was non-existent, the Demon Earl's ability to forge bonds with such beings made him dangerous.

It was not only that, even the rate at which the demon was growing was absurd. Hardly if there was any precedence of Demon Viscount climbing up to the ranks of Demon Earl.

No, Rising from the rank of Viscount to Earl in such a short span of time was virtually unheard of. In the demon world, power and rank were intrinsically tied to one's bloodline, a factor that was nearly impossible to overcome.

Bloodline limitations acted as barriers, defining a demon's ceiling of potential. Only the rarest of demons, those with pure and ancient bloodlines, could hope to ascend through the ranks of power.

Most demons are born with a certain amount of power, dictated by their lineage, and that's as far as they go. You would never think a common Demon Viscount can just ascend to an Earl.

The very fact that Demon Viscount could ascend to a Demon Earl and in such a short period of time, made him a much bigger threat than what the two Dukes were taking him for.

"Here's what I suggest," Avrox said, his tone lowering "We launch an attack against the Demon Earl, but not as individuals. No, that would be too risky and play into his hands. Instead, we orchestrate a Fate Game."

Chapter 943- The Shadow Lurks (6)

The moment Avrox spoke the last words, the hall turned silent. Arctaurus and Gelford were one thing but even Vargel and the others wore an expression full of shock.

Why would they not after all, there was not a single demon who did not know about the Fate Game.

"A Fate Game?" Arctaurus arched an eyebrow. "You mean to suggest a joint effort between our factions, to crush him together?"

"Exactly," Avrox nodded "The rules of the Fateful Game are more efficient than fighting individually. With the two of you, the Blood Moon faction and the Iron Crown, we could crush the demon earl with ease".

Gelford furrowed his brow, weighing Avrox's suggestion carefully. The Fate Game, an ancient tool too catastrophic and devastating to be invoked lightly. There was a reason why it remained dormant, inactive and rarely enacted even in the brutal world of demon nobles.

"The Fate Game... Avrox, do you understand the weight of what you're proposing?" Vargel asked with a voice full of incredulity.

In response, Avrox's twisted smile remained the same "Of course. I understand it perfectly."

The two Demon Dukes narrowed their eyes. The Fate Game, though devastatingly efficient, was wrapped in a mountain of intricate rules that must be followed before one could initiate it.

Not only must it go through the Council of Archdukes—the highest authority under the Demon Lords, but it also requires a long time of preparation and planning. Depending on the scale of conflict, the whole process could take months, if not years until the battle is settled.

What's more, similar to the dungeon war Once the Fate Game was invoked, it could not be stopped until one side was utterly destroyed. No peace agreements. No compromises.

It was total annihilation, and the ripples from such a war could be felt across the entire demon continent.

As it could adversely affect the very balance of the demon world and all the Demon Nobles in general, it is considered more of a last resort kind of thing.

There was an unwritten rule in demon society: those who dared to invoke the Fate Game risked invoking the ire of neutral factions, or even worse, the Demon Lords themselves.

The game was designed as a last resort—only used when all other options had been exhausted.

The Demon continent might be chaotic but it was not without order. High-ranking demons respected a code of conduct, unspoken yet enforced by sheer necessity. To break this balance by invoking the Fate Game was akin to wielding a double-edged sword.

While it might help crush a rising threat, it could also spell disaster for the invokers.

Gelford tapped his fingers on the armrest of his throne, his crimson eyes deep in thought. "Avrox, you know as well as I do how much of a hassle initiating a Fate Game is. Let's not even talk about the preparation period, just getting the approval from the council would be difficult".

Arctaurus nodded in agreement "And let's not forget if we invoke the Fate Game recklessly, we could be seen as a threat to the other neutral factions. No one wants to be on the opposite end of that culling blade. If the Demon Lords believe this will destabilize the continent, they will crush us before the game even begins"...

"Right, do we really need to go through such lengths just to crush a Demon Earl?"

To use means like the fate game to crush the growing ambitions of a Demon Earl was like using a sword to butcher a chicken. There was no need to go to such extremes do deal with an opponent who was two ranks lower than them.

"Do we need to go to such lengths?" Avrox scoffed, for the first time he broke away from the façade of his smile.

"You're underestimating him again, lord Gelford. The same way you did at Hexennacht. The same way the Ogre King did."

"Was the Ogre King weak?" the demon pressed "No. He was one of the strongest beings in the Ghastly Winding Forest, a true force of nature. Someone who could even threaten the Deonn Dukes and their rule"

"But how did he fare against the Demon Earl? He couldn't even conquer the dungeon, let alone return alive. Not using the Fate Game means you're still looking down on this enemy, treating him like an ordinary upstart. He's anything but"

"This is no longer about a petty Demon Earl trying to claim a sliver of land. The Ogre King's defeat is just the beginning. If you allow him to continue gaining strength, mark my words, Gelford—this whole thing will spiral into something beyond your control."

At that comment, Gelford's face darkened. An ominous silence filled the room Then, without warning, his aura exploded with fury.

The sheer force of it sent shockwaves through the hall, making the ground tremble violently beneath their feet. The air became thick with crushing pressure, suffocating those nearby.

Even Demon Marquess like Vargel found it hard to breathe.

"You dare... to lecture me...?" Gelford thundered.

The might of a Demon Duke unleashed for all to witness. CRACK... debris fell from the ceiling and the hall seemed like it would cave in any moment.

"Father, please calm yourself!" fearing his wrath, his sons and daughter stepped forward to pacify him.

"Father, This isn't the time to lose your temper." For a long moment, it seemed like Gelford might strike down Avrox where he stood. His killing intent was that palpable. But then, with a deep breath the demon duke composed himself and retracted his outstretched hand.

Seeing this, Vargel and the other sighed. The trembling of the hall ceased, and the pressure in the air began to lift, though the tension remained thick.

Avrox stood there, unfazed by the terrifying display of power, his grin never faltering. His confidence was infuriating, but Gelford knew he couldn't give in to his impulse.

Despite the other party's arrogance, despite their disrespect, Avrox wasn't someone he could afford to kill.

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Avrox wasn't someone he could afford to kill—not because of Avrox himself, but because of the one standing behind him. That said, he still had to maintain his dignity.

Huff... with an irritated voice, Gelford spat out "The only reason you're still standing here still in one piece is because of your master. Were it not for that lord, the one you serve, you would've been ash long ago. That said, I still warn you to watch your words, you are speaking to a demon Duke, I will not let this slide the next time".

At that threat, a mocking smile appeared on Avrox's face for a second. He answered, his tone dripping with false humility.

"Of course, my lord. I wouldn't dream of insulting your authority."

"Anyways, whether or not you choose to act," Avrox continued smoothly, "the Demon Earl won't stop. You've already seen it with your own eyes. This is just the beginning"

"Refuse my suggestion, and mark my words, you'll be swept up in something far greater than what the Ogre King lost. This is a fire that could consume more than just your faction."

The two dukes furrowed their brows. Even if they were to ignore Avrox's words, the fact still remained that they had to do something about the Demon Earl in the Ghastly Winding Forest.

Whether or not he claimed the mysterious treasure of the forest, it was true that he was a hindrance in their path and his means were unfathomable to them.

After a long silence, Gelford spoke "We'll consider your proposal Avrox. However, initiating a Fate Game still remains to be impossible at large"...

"Hoh? Why is it so? I see no reason to hesitate to crush this pest once and for all"...

The Demon Duke paused for a second before answering "Even considering that the council of Archdukes won't interfere, do you think the ones above them will leave us be after initiating the fate game?"

"The world has forgotten, it has grown complacent from the absence of Demon Archdukes, believing that we Demon Dukes are the top powerhouses of the Demon Continent when in fact it is those ancient existences surviving since who knows when who are the actual rulers. What would they think if we suddenly initiate such a dangerous tool?"

The mention of those monstrous existences sent a ripple of tension through the room. A tool as dangerous and destabilising as the Fate Game has dire consequences.

The Demon Continent is currently home to two Demon Lords, and neither of them would look favorably upon anyone who initiates such a tool.

Even if one discards Procell, the Demon Lord of Greed who has been unusually quiet and inactive for centuries now, holed up in his dungeon, it still leaves one more.

Demon Lord of Envy, Belial who has newly ascended to his rank. There is no doubt that he would be eager to assert his dominance and use any opportunity to stabilize his influence over the continent to compete with Procell.

A Fate Game would be exactly the kind of pretext Belial needs to interfere, especially if it means showing his power on the world stage.

"We cannot afford the attention of a Demon Lord, Avrox. Their forces are unlike anything we could withstand, as we all witnessed during the last Hexennacht. Even the slightest show of power from a Demon Lord could obliterate our factions. The Blood Moon and Iron Crown might be strong, but not strong enough to fight a Demon Lord."

The weight of Gelford's words hung heavily in the air. It was a fact that none could dispute—the power of a Demon Lord was something no faction, not even the most powerful on the continent, could oppose directly.

"Hahaha!" A sudden burst of laughter echoed through the grand hall, slicing through the tense atmosphere like a blade.

All eyes turned toward the source of the laughter—Avrox.

"So this is why... Sir Gelford is worried about Lord Belial" There was a faint chuckle in his voice as if the Demon Duke's concern was laughable.

"It seems you're both overthinking this. The two dukes do not need to fret about him. In fact, you may find that Lord Belial will turn a blind eye to our actions—or better yet, stay out of it entirely"...

"Hoh, and what makes you so sure of it?" Arctaurus raised an eyebrow, crossing his massive arms over his chest.

Hehe... With a sly grin, Avrox stepped forward, making his way to the centre of the hall. The spotlight of attention shifted fully onto him.

"Hehe... Have you all forgotten what happened at the last Hexennacht?". At those words, the room fell quiet. All eyes flickered for a second as memories from an event not too long ago flooded into their minds.

"You mean the... incident?" Gelford's gaze sharpened quickly getting the hint.

"Yes. That 'incident.' Where our dear Demon Earl overextended his authority... and interrupted Lord Belial himself".

The mere mention of a demon—an Earl, no less—challenging a Demon Lord's authority in such a public arena was almost unthinkable. And yet, it had happened.

"You see, Lord Belial, in all his ancient might, had to reconsider his own ruling, because of that Demon Earl. For a Demon Lord of his stature? Well, let's just say... that was surely a sore point. Imagine the insult—a Demon Lord, forced to adjust his decisions for someone far below his rank"

He added after a pause "There's no way, not a chance, that Lord Belial would defend that upstart now"

"Indeed... Lord Belial did seem... displeased by the Demon Earl's interference" Arctaurus agreed, his expression dark.

The memory of that day was not pleasant. Although he had been focused on the implications of losing the Ghastly Winding Forest and losing his precious subordinate, he had not missed the personal affront that the Demon Earl had caused Lord Belial.

Everybody, from the lowest of demons to humans knows that a Demon Lord's ego and dignity was legendary, and to have it challenged was unforgivable.

Chapter 945- The Shadow Lurks (8)

What's more, by someone so far beneath him.

"I ask you, Dukes—do you truly believe Lord Belial will come to defend that Demon Earl?"

There was no need to even answer as it was clear.

"He may even be hoping for someone to remove that thorn from his side. Not only is Belial unlikely to defend the Demon Earl, but if the two of you—strong, established Demon Dukes—were to challenge him in a Fate Game, the Demon Lord might welcome it"

"What's more Lord Belial is currently focused on securing his territory. His enemies are closer to home. There is no way he'll abandon his priorities just to crush a Demon Earl. As for Lord Procell, he won't act. The Demon Lord of Greed hasn't lifted a finger in centuries. He won't interfere. He never does".

Avrox's words did have some backing, Gelford and Arctaurus were forced to give his suggestion another thought. But what he was asking was for was still dangerous.

Initiating the fate game was itself a risk that they could not bear. Seeing the two dukes still hesitating, Avrox clicked his tongue stealthily.

He added "Of course I am not telling you to initiate the Fate game. the truth is, we don't have to invoke it directly. We could apply pressure, and create a situation where the Earl is forced to act recklessly"

"We make him the aggressor, make him overreach. Then, it will be him who violates the laws of demonkind, and the Fate Game can be called upon as a justified response."

Gelford and Arctaurus leaned forward. A justification... that's right, If the other party is the aggressor, then it will make complete sense to invoke the fate game and no one would blame them.

Better what, they would have a very good excuse, the pretext that they need to paint themselves as the victim. That said, something like this was too good to be true there was no way it could be achieved.

"What makes you so sure the Demon Lords won't see through this ploy? They're not fools, Avrox. They will know what we're trying to do."

Avrox chuckled darkly.

"Ah, you overestimate how much they care, Duke Gelford. The Demon Lords are far too busy with their own schemes and intrigues. They have wars, territories, and rivalries with other Demon Lords that span millennia"

"Do you really think they'd waste their time on the disappearance of a single Earl? In the grander scheme of things, an Earl's disappearance is nothing but a flicker in the abyss."

Gelford crossed his arms, considering the risks and rewards. True, the Demon Lords rarely involved themselves in the affairs of lower-ranked demons unless something threatened the stability of the entire continent.

The current political landscape of the Demon Continent was anything but stable. with the new Demon Lord of Envy looking to consolidate his power and challenge the long-standing authority of Lord Procell, the Demon Lord of Greed.

Both Lords had much bigger concerns than a minor conflict between remote demon nobles. But still, even if the Demon Lords ignored their plot, there was the issue of getting the Demon Earl to act as the aggressor.

How were they going to achieve that?

Arctaurus spoke, "Even if the Demon Lords ignore our actions, we still need to provoke the Demon Earl into attacking us first. We need a solid pretext for war—something that will make it seem like he's the one pulling the trigger."

At that mention, Avrox's grin widened, bordering sinister "How do we get the Demon Earl to strike first? To create the spark that will ignite the fire...?"

His eyes trailed off towards Gelford as he slowly added "Don't we already have the perfect excuse?"

For a moment, there was silence as Gelford processed Avrox's ambiguous words. His brow furrowed, confusion swirling in his mind.

The perfect excuse? His gaze flickered to Arctaurus, but his fellow Duke looked just as uncertain.

At this, Avrox's smile widened, his eyes gleaming with amusement.

"Ah, it's been so long since I've seen the next generation of the Blood Moon," he said casually, turning his gaze toward Gelford's children seated beside him in the hall.

"I trust your children are in good health, Sir Gelford? They've grown into fine demons"

Vargel and the others caught off guard by the sudden shift in conversation, exchanged puzzled glances. They didn't know why Avrox suddenly directed the topic of conversation towards them.

"Hmph, we are well, there is no need for you to be concerned about us" Delphyne answered on behalf of everyone.

"Good, good. It's important to keep track of one's bloodlines, isn't it? After all, family is such a precious thing, losing one would be such a shame wouldn't it" Gelford's eyes narrowed.

What is he getting at? He studied Avrox, sensing something deeper lurking behind those words. The tone of his voice was far too suggestive, as if Avrox knew something personal.

Slowly, the pieces began to fall into place. Without missing a beat, the latter added "I wonder though... How are you all coping? It must have been difficult after... certain losses. Sometimes it can be hard to keep the family together when one member is missing."

Delphyne blinked in confusion "Losses...?"

"Ah, yes. I seem to recall a certain absence. It's hard to move forward when a brother doesn't return, isn't it? You must miss him dearly."

At those words, The room grew cold. Gelford's crimson eyes sharpened, and the realization finally dawned on him. He knows... he definitely!!!

Avrox's gaze flicked back to Gelford "Ah, but of course, I'm sure it's nothing too troubling. Just something that might... spark a fire."

"What are you implying, Avrox?"...

"Sir Gelford you know as well as I do, the Demon Earl has already crossed a line, hasn't he? The death of a certain individual... a young, ambitious demon who belonged to your bloodline. Gelgar, was it?".

The Demn Duke froze, a pit began to form in his stomach.

Chapter 947- The Man Named Itherion

"However, he has no interest in a domain so far away from his territory. That said, he also told me not to press the two dukes to agree with his condition. If you think you can do this without me, feel free to go ahead"

Avrox shrugged and stopped persuading the two dukes otherwise. After saying his piece, he gave a slight bow and turned to leave the hall.

Just then the subordinate blocked his path and Gelford's voice came from behind.

"Wait, we are done yet".

Avrox turned around to ask "Is there still something?".

"Don't be in a hurry to leave, the discussion is not over yet" Gelford stopped him "You said that Lord Boboshka will help us ease things with the council in the case that we invoke the Fate Game yes?"...

"That's right"...

"Are these the words of Lord Boboshka himself or is it something that you are saying?"...

Avrox put a hand on his chest and performed the signature salute of the demon he was serving. His action revealed that he was saying the absolute truth without any falsity.

In the world of demons where every words and actions are loaded with hidden schemes and interests, the salute is the only constant whose authenticity cannot be questioned.

Since the other party went as far as to perform the salute of the master he served, Gelford felt no need to judge the authenticity of his words further.

"Hmmm, what do you think?" Turning towards the other Demon Duke, he asked the question.

Arctaurus shut his eyes and silently contemplated for a while. It was true that together his Iron Crown and Blood Montion faction were very strong but it was not the point where they could influence the council.

If they wanted to invoke the fate game, they needed Archduke Boboshka's help.

"How about this? We decide about the matter of the treasure after we get rid of that Demon earl and claim the forest. If there is a treasure we can then hand it over to lord Boboshka. If there is more than one treasure, we share them?"

Arctaurus's suggestion although thinly veiled, was nothing more than a polite way of saying they would keep whatever they could, as long as they could justify it later.

In the world of demons, there were countless ways to go back on a promise without ever technically breaking it. Ways to burn the bridge after crossing it.

Gelford thought that Avrox would not accept such an unconscionable offer. However, to his surprise, Avrox did not hesitate for a second and quickly accepted the offer.

"Agreed. If there is more than one treasure, we shall share them. And if none exist, I will withdraw my master's interest, leaving you both with the Ghastly Winding Forest for yourselves."

His response was swift, almost too swift that the Demon Duke felt a sense of unease. He was prepared to counter Avrox's refusal and negotiate further. However, the speed of Avrox's acceptance caught him off guard.

For a moment, suspicion clouded his thoughts.

Why did Avrox accept so quickly? He had no guarantee that the treasure would be handed over after the Demon Earl was dead. Was he so confident in his master's influence that he believed no one would dare to cross him?

"It's settled then. I will talk with my master, and we will iron out the finer details. In any case, the Demon Earl doesn't have long to live."

Avrox spoke, his voice dripped with certainty, as though the end of the Demon Earl was inevitable, a foregone conclusion.

"Too bad we can't destroy him right now. It would be far more satisfying to crush him before he even knows what's coming".

Arctaurus let out a low chuckle "It can't be helped. We need time to prepare for the Tea Party".

Gelford added calmly "It's only a couple more months. Let's allow that Demon Earl to live just a bit longer."

The mention of the Tea Party—the great political gathering of all high-ranking demon nobles—immediately shifted the mood.

For this upcoming event, every demon who has been invited would try and do his best to prepare and hope to make an impression on one of the Demon lords. It is also where they could meet Boboshka, Avox's master and cement everything.

The three demons spoke a little more before parting.

A dark undercurrent was swirling and the person who would take the centre stage in the epic stage, was currently unaware of it.

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Central Continent, Solarain Empire. In one of the renowned academies located in the capital, a woman in her late thirties could be seen taking a class.

The room was marginally big with 40-50 students attending the class. Warm sunlight bathed the room the open window sills and screeching noise from chalk running against black board came intermittently.

CLAP.. CLAP... After finishing her notes on the blackboard, the woman wiped the chalk dust from her hands, then turned to face her students, her voice commanding their attention.

Her dark hair was neatly tied back in a loose bun with a spectacle sitting on her nose giving her a no nonsense aura.

Her attire was simple yet elegant—a long, modest dress of deep green, embroidered with golden threads at the cuffs and collar, symbolizing her stature as a respected teacher at one of the empire's most prestigious academies.

"Today, we'll discuss the history of our beloved Solarian Empire, a topic of utmost importance for every citizen. This empire, built on the ideals of peace and strength, stands as a beacon to all other nations across the Central Continent"

The room filled with the quiet rustling of papers as the students prepared to take notes. Sunlight streamed through the open windows, bathing the classroom in a golden glow, almost as if the sun itself had come to listen to the lesson about the land it watched over.

"Who can tell me," she continued, glancing around the room, "who was the founder of our great empire, and what was the key to his success?"

Chapter 948- The Man Named Itherion (2)

Several hands shot up, but the woman gestured toward a young boy who seemed like he wasn't paying attention.

"You there, tell me".

"Me?" The boy who didn't expect to be called out pointed at himself before scratching his hair.

"Ummm... Solarion the first?" he looked towards his teacher unsure.

"Correct, but you should pay more attention in the class" Syaing that she turned towards the other students and questioned "Now who can elaborate more?"...

A young girl raised her hand "Me, Teacher Verdia. Solarion the first, he united the land during the chaotic times by defeating the warlords and bringing peace. His strength as a warrior and his wisdom as a ruler are still admired today"...

"Very good" the woman named Verdia nodded with approval "Indeed, Solarion I, the Lion King, was the heart and soul of this empire. But what set him apart from the countless warlords of his time wasn't just his might—no. It was his ability to inspire and unite"

"In a land divided by chaos and strife, he didn't just conquer; he created a lasting peace that allowed our empire to flourish. And that, my dear students, is the true foundation of Solaria."

Seeing that her words had ensnared every mind, she continued "His descendants have carried on his legacy. Our empire has grown in both size and wisdom, fostering peace among nations and becoming a centre for trade, culture, and learning"

"But the empire's greatness doesn't rest on its military prowess or wealth alone. It rests on the values that Solarion instilled—courage, justice, and unity".

Verdia turned back to the blackboard, writing in large, bold letters: Strength, Wisdom, Peace.

"There," she said, pointing to the words, "These are virtues and pillars of our empire. And as the future leaders, thinkers, and defenders of this land, it is your responsibility to uphold these values"

"Let me tell you a story," Verdia began...

Long long ago when the Mainland was yet to stabilise itself, there was chaos everywhere. Warlords fought over scraps of land, kingdoms rose and fell in the blink of an eye, and no one knew peace.

It was then from the ashes of these endless wars emerged a single man. Solarion I, who was also popularly known as the Lion King. A warrior unmatched in strength and valor, he not only united the lands, but also brought peace to a land torn asunder.

The students listened, enraptured by a story they never learned from books. Like a wave crashing on the shore, the expression of the children constantly rose and fell as Verdia told Solarion's legendary journey.

"It is said that, on his quest to unite the land, Solarion came face to face with a great Evil. This creature, a terror of the darkest corners and overflowing malevolence had terrorized the Mainland for centuries.

Entire armies had fallen before it. Yet, Solarion, armed with nothing but a golden sword and the courage burning within him, challenged the great evil to a battle.

"Not much is recorded of the fateful battle but what I can tell you is that the battle was fierce, shaking the heavens and the earth. It went on for days, weeks even... Solarion fought with all his strength, but even he found himself at his wit's end facing the never ending evil army and magic of the creature.

Just when it seemed the evil creature's magic would engulf him and the entire land, a band of noble warriors came to aid him. With their aid, he cleaved the Great Evil in two, banishing its malevolent powers forever"....

"Miss Verdia, what kind of people were these noble warriors?" a student raised his hand to ask.

In response, Verdia smiled. Her eyes inadvertently looked up as if gazing at the sky "Have you ever heard about the Seraphims?"...

"Seraphims?"

A murmur rippled through the class as they wondered who Miss Verdia was talking about. A couple of children who were rather knowledgeable or perhaps came from renowned noble houses or clans, raised their hands to answer.

"Is Miss Verdia talking about the mighty warriors of god? The most powerful beings in the world who can do anything?"...

"I heard from my father that they have white wings behind their back and every single one of them are the agent of the gods"...

"Right" Verdia did not deny the kids "It is said that only the most noble of humans who have achieved great prestige and possess a pure heart, have the chance to become one. That said, even though they are the agent of the gods, the mightiest noble warriors, they are not omnipotent"

"Anyways, getting back to the topic. Seraphims are the beings who stand above even those agents of the gods. These mighty warriors aided Solarion I to get rid of the evil creature".

The class fell into silence as they imagined the epic battle, their minds painting vivid pictures of Solarion's victory.

"And so, with the great evil slain, Solarion returned to the people not as a conqueror, but as a protector. He united the warring lands under one banner, creating the great Solarion Empire—a bastion of peace in a world of chaos. His name became legend, and his empire... well, you all know what that became."

Verdia smiled warmly at her students.

"Heroes are born in the Solarion Empire every year, just like Solarion I. It is why we pride ourselves as the protectors of mankind. Our empire doesn't just fight wars; we defend the light of peace, of hope. And you, dear students, should aim to become heroes like that one day."

"Now for the values that I wrote on the board—strength, wisdom, and peace—those were the founding virtues of the empire, chosen by Solarion himself".

Strength to protect, wisdom to guide, peace to unify... thus strength, wisdom and peace. The students nodded, some writing the words in their notebooks.

Verdia's eyes gleamed as she looked at her students burying themselves in books. She moved towards the board before wiring another set of words.

Chapter 949- The Man Named Itherion (3)

"Now you know the history of the Solarion Empire and about its founder. Can anyone tell me what are the grandest sights and the most important places in the Solarion Empire? Where do you think heroes are born?"...

"The capital and the Royal Palace?" A girl spoke tentatively.

"The Knight Headquarters!" a boy followed after, confident in his reply. "And what about the heroes?"...

"Umm... aren't they chosen by destiny? My father said that all heroes carry great fates with them" another student answered.

"You all are not wrong, the capital of our empire, Solaria, is a sight to behold. And at its heart, the grand Royal Palace stands, a symbol of our power and our peace. The Knight Headquarters, the

very heart of our military might. It's where the bravest and strongest knights of the empire train and rise to defend our borders"

"But, there is one place more iconic, more grand than all. The most revered sight in all of Solarion or perhaps the entire mainland, where the heroes are born. Do any of you know what that is?"

At teacher Verdia's question, the students exchanged curious glances until one finally raised their hand.

"Is it the tall tower whose summit cannot be seen?"...

"Exactly! The Tower of Babel, also known as the Adventurer's Headquarters. A colossal structure, a beacon that can be seen from miles away. It stands as the true symbol of the Solarion Empire's strength and courage. For it is within those walls that the greatest adventurers are born"

"Heroes, mercenaries, explorers—all are tested and tempered there. It is a place where dreams of glory become reality. One day, perhaps some of you will stand atop that great tower, gazing out over the empire, knowing that you, too, are a hero of the Solarion Empire".

The students gasped in awe, their eyes shining brightly. All of them dreamed about becoming a hero, accomplishing a feat like the great Solarion and having their names written in history.

"Now this is the most important. Let us study about the Tower of Babel and how it came to be"

Verdia was just about to start a new topic for the class when the bell signalling the end of the class rang.

HUBUB... the class erupted into the usual chatter.

"We'll save the story of the Tower of Babel for another day," she said with a smile, watching as her students eagerly packed up their things, their earlier dreams of heroism forgotten in favor of the excitement of free time.

With that, the class was dismissed. In the hallway, other teachers greeted her as she walked past, discussing their own lessons or the latest academy events.

After a few brief exchanges, she made her way to the grand staircase. Her destination was a place everyone in the academy knew—the principal's chamber. Located at the centre of the fourth floor of the academy.

Knock Knock... Verdia knocked on the oak door, the brass nameplate above it gleamed in the soft light: Headmaster Itherion.

"Enter" A deep voice spoke out from within the room.

"Please excuse me" Saying so, Verdia opened the door and entered.

The principal's chamber was as grand as one might expect for the leader of the most prestigious academy in the Solarion Empire. Large windows bathed the room in golden light, casting a warm glow on the heavy wooden furniture and the towering shelves of ancient tomes that lined the walls.

A faint scent of old parchment and polished leather lingered in the air, giving the room a faint atmosphere of knowledge and wisdom as if one had arrived in front of a library.

There seated Behind the imposing mahogany desk was a man in his forties, his presence as commanding as any seasoned general on the battlefield. His hair, once raven black, was now streaked with white—a testament to the many years he lived.

He had sharp features, a well trimmed beard and a handsome face. However, if one had to point out the most distinctive feature of this man, it would be no doubt his piercing blue eyes.

Those aquamarine eyes that seemed so sharp and yet was clouded by the vicissitude of time. The contrasting features of the eyes of the man gave him a unique and enigmatic aura.

Dressed in formal yet practical attire, he exuded the aura of a man who could effortlessly transition from leading soldiers on a battlefield to commanding the respect of students and scholars alike.

His broad shoulders and muscular frame still carried the strength of his youth, though the wisdom and experience in his gaze revealed his many years of leadership. This was Principal Itherion— a powerful ranker, a hero of the Solarion Empire, now a guiding force in molding its future leaders.

"Ah, Your Holiness," Itherion said, rising slightly from his chair, his tone filled with deep respect. "Please, come in."

He gestured to the chair in front of his desk, his blue eyes softening as he spoke to Verdia.

"You don't need to address me as such Itherion. In terms of seniority, you are much older than me. And besides, a True Hero like you who has performed great merits for this entire world, need not bow his head so easily"

Verdia spoke smiling helplessly at Itherion's humble attitude.

"Haha, your holiness praises me too much" From their conversation it was clear that it was not the first time they were having a talk like that.

That said, even though Itherion blew away Verdia's words lightly, the latter had no intentions of backing out after all, the man in front of her truly deserved her respect.

The current identity of Itherion, was a powerful ranker, a hero of the Solarion Empire and the headmaster of the prestigious Solarion Academy. However, that was only an alias to deceive the public. The real identity of Itherion that only a few people in this entire world knew was Vincent Solarion.

The first emperor of the Solarion empire, the very same hero of the legends that the children of Solarion Empire grew up dreaming of.

Chapter 950- The Man Named Itherion (4)

The very same brave warrior who defeated the evil creature who threatened the world in the ancient times and the master of the Tower of Babel.

Her saying those words to him was by no means an underestimation.

"I don't want to argue with Her Holiness. But those days are long behind me. Now, I am only the Headmaster of the Solarion Academy, Itharion... not the hero of the past. I am only the headmaster of the Solarion Academy, Itherion" Vincent; no Itherion spoke.

"So be it. But in return, you should also address me as Verdia, a normal teacher of the academy. You should know that right now I am on a mission and must keep my identity hidden. So I would be glad if you just considered me a normal staff here".

"That..." Vincent scratched his ears looking a little hesitant. Verdia's identity was too special for him to simply call her by her name even if it was just a fake name.

After a moment of indecisiveness, Itherion sighed and finally gave in.

"I can't win against you but at least let me address you as her holiness while we are alone" That was the only thing he wasn't willing to relent on.

"Very well, suit yourself"

Seeing Verdia nod her head, Itherion felt as if a heavy boulder was lifted off his shoulder. Carefully serving some tea and snacks for her, he opened with some small talk.

"So how goes the classes? Has her holiness already gotten used to teaching the students?"...

Verdia's eyes lit up the moment the conversation shifted to her students. The weariness in her posture seemed to vanish, replaced by an unmistakable spark of joy.

"Oh, the students... they're wonderful!" she exclaimed, a smile blooming across her face. "Their potential is incredible! Some of them remind me of the heroes from the stories we tell—pure-hearted, brave, and full of promise. If they are guided well, I truly believe that their light will shine bright enough to secure the future of our kingdom."

Watching her expression, Itherion couldn't help but chuckle softly "It seems teaching has truly grown on your holiness".

She nodded enthusiastically "In a way, you can say that. Their eyes are still so clear, so untainted by the weight of this world. When I look at them, I see the righteousness we once fought for. I see future knights, scholars, and yes, even heroes"

"There are a few that show exceptional promise—perhaps one day they'll become even greater than us."

Itherion leaned back in his chair, savoring the warmth in her words.

"That's reassuring to hear. It's easy to forget the bright future amidst the darkness we deal with every day."

The children, their hope and their strength, it reminded him what he was trying to protect...

"It might be my wishful thinking, but I want them to smile and be merry like this" Itherion murmured, his voice tinged with quiet melancholy. The once-proud hero who had weathered countless battles now carried the weight of the past like a shadow he couldn't shake.

Dark circles had formed under his eyes, a reminder of sleepless nights and the burden of memories too heavy to cast aside. He gazed out of the window, watching the students laugh and chat in the academy's courtyard, unaware of the darkness that had once consumed their world.

The current era—the most peaceful time this world had ever known—trade flourished, borders were secure, and famine and disease were at an all-time low.

Knowledge thrived in the academies, magic and skills were being studied without the constant fear of battle, and people could live long, fulfilling lives without ever hearing the roar of war drums.

Of course, there are still wars and blood being spilled every day. However, the Solarion Empire with its proud history and powerful global presence was a bastion of civilization and peace.

Yet, even amidst these golden years, there was a growing feeling of unease. The peace has given them so much—prosperity, unity, a world where children can laugh without fear, where they can grow without the weight of a sword in their hand.

But it has also made them... weaker.

"Those who don't know war," Itherion said softly, "and those who are constantly fighting for their survival... there is no comparison. Those who are tempered by fire and blood are always stronger, always sharper than those who live in peace. It's not their fault, and I don't blame them. But it's the truth."

He sighed, leaning back in his chair, his eyes filled with a strange mix of sorrow and relief.

"In the ancient times, when I fought those wars... when we had to defend our very existence... we were always prepared for the worst. There was no other choice. You either fought or you died"

"And that... that made us strong. Stronger than any generation that has come after us. People call us heroes now but at that time we were just ordinary warriors desperate to protect those dear to us. Now that times are starting to change and there are very few heroes alive, I cannot help but worry about the future of our world".

Verdia's expression turned grim, she knew full well the weight of the war and struggles the heroes of the past had to go through. The time of great upheaval. If possible, she didn't want the history to repeat once again.

However, all the signs and evidence were pointing towards an inevitable doom. What's more, the people of the world are still oblivious to it.

With no heroes to protect them this time, there was no way to fight it. That said, unlike Vincent, she didn't lose her hope.

"if I were given the choice, I would never want the children of this era to go through what we had to. No amount of strength is worth the price of those nightmares. No child should be forced to pick up a sword before they've even learned to dream."