

D. of Pride 961

Chapter 961- Fighting a Demon Duke

Looking at their pathetic state, Simon didn't berate them. Besides, this was not the time and place for that.

STEP... he took a step forward planting himself between the mercenaries and the Duke. His crimson eyes narrowed, his voice cutting through the camp like a blade and forcing their attention back to him.

"Whatever happens, do not engage him directly. Stay behind the barricades. Shoot from a distance. If the latter gets close—run. No heroics."

The soldiers looked at him in disbelief, one of them couldn't help but ask "You're going to fight it alone?"

Simon gave a grim smile, his eyes never leaving the Duke.

"I'll handle it. Your job is to survive and keep the illusion of the main camp being here intact. If the enemy figures out we're stalling them, everyone here—and the entire southern alliance—is finished".

"If you all understand then get up and do your job. We hold the line here. Don't think—just follow orders. Every second you stay alive is another second we give Rothgard's army to reach the fortress."

After saying everything he needed to, he no longer bothered with the soldiers and prepared to face the Demon Duke. With the next step, he was already closing in on the enemy.

Behind him, the mercenaries exchanged uneasy glances, still not completely out of the grasp of the fear. Nevertheless, they still reluctantly played their role.

As the Demon Duke moved towards the camp, his steps were slow, deliberate, and entirely unconcerned with the feeble opposition waiting for him. To a being of his station, this was hardly a battle; it was an errand, a task given by his master, the Demon Lord of Envy.

Under any other circumstances, he would have never sullied his hands by marching personally to a human camp. But orders were orders, and he intended to follow them—as effortlessly and as quickly as possible.

Just as he neared the camp, out of nowhere a flicker of movement caught his attention. A figure was rushing toward him from the shadows, sword drawn, eyes blazing with a reckless determination that, frankly, amused him.

The Demon Duke stopped, observing the human who dared stand in his path with thinly veiled disdain. This mortal—this human— whose head had become too big for his britches was in his opinion a moth drawn to a flame.

An ignorant being who didn't know the difference between their strengths.

For a moment, he simply stood there, allowing the man to draw closer, giving him the honor of facing a Demon Duke's undivided attention.

When the other party was close enough, he put his hands behind his back and spoke in a deep voice that carried an edge of command, as if expecting obedience from all who heard it.

"You there human, before you proceed any further into an unwinnable fight, allow me to introduce myself. Thought I don't think someone of your level would be able to recognise my majesty".

"Rejoice, the one you face is the Infernal Duke, Keeper of Ruin, Lord of Shadowed Flames, and vanguard of the Demon Lord of Envy's host, Vordanaz. One of the highest of demonkind and a power far beyond anything you could ever imagine."

The Demon Duke who introduced himself as Vordanaz, spoke in a tone brimming with with mockery and satisfaction.

"Now then, before I kill you, surely you possess a name human? Speak so I might remember the fool who dared cross a path not meant for his kind."

A highly conceited and arrogant foe, since that was the case, Simon believed that he had a chance. He introduced himself.

"Simon, is it? Fitting for a human of no rank, no bloodline, and no hope. A name that will soon be nothing more than dust in the annals of my victories."

A look of condescension appeared on Vordanaz's face. The next second, he released his aura spreading it like black smoke on the wind.

The ground cracked, caving in from the pressure and even the air itself grew heavier. The shadows intensified, creeping like ink along the ground and pressing down on the camp with an invisible weight that made it hard to breathe.

Vordanaz watched with satisfaction as Simon's shoulder tensed. Though the next second he was a little surprised finding that the human refused to bow down even against his pressure.

"Interesting" In truth, the Duke had no intention of engaging with the other party fully, he believed that such effort was beneath his standing. His mere aura alone should be enough to cow lesser beings, to make them falter and reveal their weaknesses.

He thought that would be enough to extract whatever information he desired from this 'Simon'.

"Consider yourself fortunate," Vordanaz continued, his voice sinister. "Normally, I would not waste words on someone like you. But tonight, I've been given a task by my master. A small errand, you can say. He sent me here to gauge your numbers, your capabilities, and your weaknesses"

"Usually such a task would be handled by a low ranking demon but the Demon Lord is a cautious one. He sent me here because he believed the humans are up to something. That said, even if this is an order from a Demon Lord, I have no plans of lowering myself to fight a weak human".

"So save us both the trouble, and tell me: what forces do you humans possess? Reveal your numbers, your strength, your hidden plans and the names of your leaders."

His attitude was completely looking down on the other party.

Simon raised an eyebrow, his expression part surprised part confused "The great Vordanaz, the mighty Infernal Duke, here to count soldiers and scribble down notes? I would have thought a demon of your rank had more... important duties. But perhaps I was wrong."

For a split second there, Vordanaz was taken aback. This human knew of his rank? Intrigued, the Duke lowered his hand, letting his aura withdraw slightly as he regarded Simon with renewed interest.

A mortal who could see through his rank, and still dare mock him to his face.

Chapter 962- Fighting a Demon Duke (2)

He hadn't expected that, a small part of him was amused by the human's boldness.

"Interesting, Not many humans would recognize a Demon Duke on sight. Much less stand before one and mock him outright. You have spirit, I'll give you that. A foolish spirit, but one I find... amusing. But did you know that foolish bravery can get you killed".

Vordanaz's voice was yet to fade when powerful winds engulfed the place. Winds howled, spiralling with such ferocity that they shredded the earth beneath them, uprooting trees and ripping boulders from the ground.

Within moments, the swirling gusts coalesced into a massive tornado, a towering pillar of wind that stretched from the heavens to the earth, casting its shadow over Simon and the trembling mercenaries in the distance.

Vordanaz extended his hand with a lazy, almost dismissive wave, and the tempest surged toward Simon, tearing through the land in its path like a beast unleashed.

Within seconds, it quickly engulfed its target. Earth was torn asunder, pulverised rocks flew everywhere and dust covered the field. The sheer destructiveness of the spell was breathtaking.

In the distance, as he stood in the air, the Duke watched down with a wicked glint in his eyes.

"Still breathing, are we? Then how about this?"

With a flick of his wrist, he conjured another spell, this time calling upon the earth itself. The ground around him rumbled ominously, fissures snaking out from his feet.

With a simple motion, Vordanaz brought his hands down, and the ground split open. Massive spires of rock burst forth, towering jagged pillars that shot up in erratic formations, hurtling toward Simon with the speed and force of battering rams.

The earth itself seemed to obey the Duke's will, attacking Simon in waves, each rock exploding on impact and sending debris into the air.

In the distance, the decoy force looked on, their faces pale as they watched the impossible display of strength. The mercenaries, who had once looked up to Simon as a leader, now felt a chilling helplessness sink into their bones.

This wasn't a battle—it was a massacre. Someone choked back a sob, while another let out a hollow laugh, already resigned to their fate.

"He is... dead," a soldier muttered, his voice empty "There's no way. No one could survive that."

Haha, The laughter grew until a few others joined in, it was the laughter of men who had abandoned all hope, the laughter of helplessness.

"Huh?"

Just when it started to look like a nightmare, someone noticed something. A shadow, indistinct and vague breaking out of the layers of dust.

Bruised, dirt-streaked, and breathing heavily, the figure looked worse for wear but nevertheless, it was alive.

"Still standing...?"

A flicker of surprise crossed Vordanaz's face before it was replaced with a glint of bemusement. The human was more resilient than he thought.

He could sense the latter's energy waning and even dodging took a great toll on them, yet they refused to fall.

'This is getting interesting, Most would have fallen after the first blow. But let's see... how much more you can endure' A chuckle escaped his lips.

The ground trembled once more, and Vordanaz raised his hand, his gaze alight with twisted pleasure.

He wasn't even close to exerting himself yet; it was beneath him to take a human seriously. But this one—he deserved a bit of fun.

With a flick of his fingers, he summoned the winds again, this time in a swirling vortex that surged with both wind and stone, a maelstrom of tempest and destruction.

The storm spun, gathering speed until it became gigantic whirling snakes that rushed towards his opponent with ruthless precision.

On the other hand, Simon darted and dodged, each movement narrowly evading the incoming snakes of destruction. From starting his eyes never left the Duke and they monitored each of his movements to the very last detail.

For Vordanaz, it was all as effortless as flicking a hand. The destruction was instantaneous and profound, and the magic a beguiling sight to behold. To him, these spells required no focus, no incantation. It was as if what he was throwing were simple and beginner magic.

However, make no mistake each and every magic that the Demon Duke threw his way was all high level advanced magic and even amalgamation magic that would usually require one a lengthy amount of concentration time and incantation.

Even with [Chant Shortening], [Shadow Chant] or other rare skills, it was practically difficult to imitate what the duke in front of him was doing.

BOOM... a tremor shook the earth beneath his feet. Cracks split open the ground, and storm snakes erupted from below, all locked in on him.

Vordanaz was relentless, hurling one spell after another as if testing his resilience, each attack more devastating than the last.

As he dodged all of the attacks, he couldn't help but wonder how the other party was doing that. How was he able to cast so many super high level spells so quickly and without any effort?

Simon had fought his way to the Demon Marquess rank and had even faced three of the Seven Kings. He'd thought he understood what a Demon Duke's strength would be, assuming their realms were similar in scope.

However, all of his perception was thrown awry now that he was actually locked in a fight against a Demon Duke.

All of his delusion was swept away when he realised the realm the Demon Duke in front of him stood. Whether it be level, skills, experience, or the usage of his abilities it was on a whole different realm than him.

Even if Simon wanted to, he could not imitate the action of the duke even with his skills that was said by Irene to be beyond his rank.

Vordanaz wasn't just casting spells; he was manipulating the very attributes of the world to his will, seamlessly weaving advanced Tempest and Tremor magic without any pause or incantation.

It was as natural to him as breathing.

Chapter 963- Fighting a Demon Duke (3)

That said, as much as Simon was tempted to throw everything he had into the fight, he held back, carefully hiding his true abilities. Revealing his full power, especially his rare skills and trump cards, would only draw unwanted attention—and could jeopardize his mission.

He wasn't here to win, after all. He just had to survive and hold the line. But a small part of him had to admit, he wanted to see more of what Vordanaz could do.

The Duke's skill, his ability—it was a rare opportunity, and Simon intended to observe it closely. Knowledge was power in itself and it's not every day one gets to see a Demon Duke in action.

"I see, you are quite good at running. Then how about this" Vordanaz snapped his fingers summoning magic of a scale and ferocity leagues beyond anything he'd thrown before.

The ground trembled and air pulsated with a dark energy that clawed at one's senses. This spell wasn't for mere intimidation. The twisted mass of energy formed above Vordanaz's outstretched hands and at first glance, looked like an orb of violent, shifting earth and swirling winds.

Its mere presence seemed to warp the space around it, humming with the raw intent to annihilate anything in its path.

Simon's eyes widened feeling the gravity of the spell. One look and he instinctively knew that he needed to intercept that, if he didn't the entire camp behind him would be leveled in an instant.

The men he was supposed to protect, the entire decoy force—all of them would be wiped out like insects in a storm.

Without another thought, Simon summoned his swords and launched himself forward, making a beeline toward the Duke.

Like an arrow loosed from a bow, he moved with precision and speed. But no matter how fast he was, without going all out, it wouldn't be enough to stop the Duke from casting his magic.

Before Simon could even close half the distance, Vordanaz smirked, his spell finally complete.

As he held what looked like a glob of mud and wind, his attitude seemed to be contemplating whether he should play with his prey a little more or finish it here.

Though the next second, he came to a decision. With a flick of his fingers, he released the spell, launching it directly at Simon.

The energy shot forward, an amalgamation spell of unknown origin, churning with overflowing destructive wind and violent, shifting earth. Simon tightened the grip on his sword as he prepared to face the attack.

Right at the instant of the impact, a vision flashed inside his head—a brief glimpse, an instinct refined through countless battles.

Without a second thought, he shifted his entire stance, pulling his weight low and angling his blade to deflect rather than absorb the impact head-on.

BANG!!!... The force was incomprehensible, as though the weight of an entire mountain range was bearing down on him.

The ground shook beneath his feet, and the sheer pressure made his vision go red as blood spurted from his nose, his ears, his mouth—his very bones felt like they were splintering.

A sickening crunch echoed in his shoulder as he felt the joint dislocate from the impact, pain searing through him. However, what was frightening was that this was just the initial impact, the true force of the spell still coiled within the swirling vortex of mud and wind.

Simon grit his teeth, he was fully aware that if he doesn't use his full strength, he won't be able to survive taking it head on.

Even though every nerve in his body screamed in protest, muscles quaked under the strain, he forced himself to keep steady. With all the precision, mastery and enlightenment he had gained on the sword, Simon angled his blade perfectly, redirecting the force.

The spell's energy shifted and the pressure veered off course. The redirected glob of wind and earth barreled past him, hurtling toward the wasteland behind.

As it made contact with the ground, the spell finally released its true power, exploding with a force that sent a shockwave ripping through the landscape. The ground split open, the earth caving in and collapsing in massive layers.

A canyon carved itself into the barren land, a jagged wound stretching for hundreds of meters, where the solid ground had been shredded and cast aside like paper.

The decoy force in the distance fell to the ground, colours drained from their faces. Their eyes widened in horror as they saw the devastating scale of Vordanaz's power.

The terrain which was once a flat wasteland, was now a canyon torn asunder by the Duke's single spell.

Huff... Huff... Simon gasped, his chest heaving up and down. Blood dripped down from his face, staining his collar.

That attack earlier was too close for comfort, if not for that vision, he could have been seriously injured.

Speaking of vision, what was that? It was far different from the intuition or enhanced six Senses that he had honed. The two skills allowed him to predict incoming attacks and sense their path and direction.

However, this was different. It was not his intuition or Enhanced Six Senses, no, this was like actually seeing the future. Visualising the attack moments before it connected.

Something like that... even for Simon who had cultivated a rich battle history, an experience like that was a first time for him.

That aside... Simon turned his head to look at the camp. Fortunately, he was able to divert the magic from the Demon Duke just enough for the magic to miss the camp.

It was untouched, feeling relieved He turned to face Vordanaz. A chill crept into his heart, from the earlier exchange he knew that he couldn't look down on the demon duke in front of him.

Heck, he might die if he didn't use his full strength. Hiding his true identity? If he lost his life, it wouldn't matter anymore. The Duke's abilities far surpassed the seven kings he had faced.

Chapter 964- Demon Lord's Army

Although there might not be much difference in level, the skill, abilities, power, techniques possessed by Vordanaz were realms higher than the likes of the seven kings. It was something he felt after personally clashing with the Demon Duke.

If this continued, he would have to reveal his true strength just to keep his life intact. While Simon was inwardly deliberating his options, Vordanaz, however, was watching him with newfound interest.

His previous air of mockery had vanished, replaced by a calculating curiosity. His crimson eyes roamed the human from head to toe as if appraising his worth.

"You survived eh" The Duke let out a low chuckle "You're more resilient than I'd thought. Most would have been crushed into dust by now."

Simon remained steadfast, silently observing the enemy.

"It's a shame truly, that a human of your calibre would waste himself on the losing side. Tell me human named Simon, why try to fight for them ?" he pointed at the camp behind Simon.

"Those humans, they're weak, fragile. They'll be nothing but dust beneath the Demon Lord's advance."

What Vordanaz said was not entirely contemptuous. In fact, it was the truth after all, the history suggests that the south wing army which Simon was a part of right now, was completely annihilated by the Demon Lord's army.

It was not an understatement at all when he said that they were weak and destined to lose. He kind of expected the demons to look down on their feeble resistance.

That said, what he didn't expect was for the Demon Duke in front of him to say the next words.

"It's a shame for you to die here. A person of your calibre should be on the winning side". Saying that, Vordanaz extended his hand towards Simon in a gesture.

"Join me, human. Pledge yourself to my banner, and I will grant you power beyond mortal comprehension. Together with the demon lord, we could reshape this pathetic world. Who knows I may even allow you to rule a part of it".

For a second there, Simon couldn't believe his ears. Was the Demon Duke trying to...

"Swear loyalty to me, and I will grant you what the humans never could. Power, immortality, status. You don't belong among these weaklings, join hands with the strong."

An offer out of nowhere; no, should he say it was more like a mandate. Simon's shock slowly morphed into a faint smirk, digesting the words, the absurdity of this offer.

For Vordanaz, it must have been quite a revelation to see someone, a mere human not only standing up to him, but also enduring his spells, and still remaining unbowed.

Though that said, this proposal was almost laughable. Still, the Demon Duke clearly didn't see it that way.

Vordanaz's expression was entirely serious, his face a mask of regal pride. It was as if he believed that there was no way a human could reject his offer after all the promise he was making was much too appealing for anyone.

Power, immortality, status, who didn't seek all these?

Simon arched an eyebrow. For a moment, he almost entertained the idea of laughing outright, but the Duke's intense stare made him think otherwise.

He realized quickly that this wasn't some fleeting jest or a whim of the demon duke, no, Vordanaz was genuinely offering him a place among the demons, a chance to switch sides and serve as his subordinate, perhaps as his closest aide.

"Are you asking me to betray humanity?"

Be it Status, power, or immortality, taking the demon duke's hand meant only one thing and that was to betray the humanity and join the enemy's side.

In other case, he wouldn't even spare a second to mull over this question since he knew who he was and his identity very well. However, this was not your any other case, Simon was currently inside the forbidden grounds, undergoing a trial.

His feelings on the matter were a bit more complicated. Foremost, he wasn't human... his true nature was hidden behind the magical trinket he wore—the Trinket of Grimlock, concealing his true identity and allowing him to pass among mortals without detection.

But even though Simon wasn't truly one of them, he was still aligned with humanity's goals. The seventh trial, the quest, the purpose, required him to play this role.

"Yes," Vordanaz seemed unfazed by the question, nodding as if it were the most natural suggestion in the world.

"Betray humanity, leave behind this fragile, doomed alliance, and stand with us. I'll make far better use of your talents and skills."

Although his tone was light as if discussing a trivial matter, there was a powerful trace of temptation to it. Simon's eyes narrowed slightly, to the duke betraying humanity was just a minor step—a formality, a mere inconvenience but to Simon, it was of utmost importance.

Just as he was getting ready to respond, Vordanaz held up a hand to stop him.

"Don't be in a haste to answer, Consider my proposal well, Simon. If you stay with the humans, you're going to die here. Meaninglessly. They're weak. They'll be crushed. But you... you piqued my interest. I'm giving you a chance. Think hard on it."

After that, he turned around and left just like that. His last words were carried by the winds.

"I'll be waiting for you at our stronghold, when you've made your decision, all you need to do is climb over the mountain range and join the horde. Mention my name, and they'll let you pass. Remember, Simon—the strong choose their own path. Don't waste your strength on those unworthy of it."

As Vordanaz's figure disappeared in the darkness, the heavy, dark pressure that had been suffocating the air seemed to lift.

The storm clouds dissipated, and moonlight poured down again. For the first time since Vordanaz appeared, he could breathe freely again...

After he made his way back to the camp, he was prepared to face wary, exhausted soldiers—but the sight that greeted him was unexpected.

Chapter 965- Demon Lord's Army (2)

The moment he stepped into the clearing, an uproar of cheers erupted, startling him.

"Sir Simon! You're back!"

Soldiers rushed up to him, eyes wide with awe, grins plastered across their faces. Mercenaries crowded around him, slapping him on the back and flooding him with questions.

"Woah, how powerful are you, really? To stand against that demon—how many class changes have you gone through?"

"You must be insanely strong to hold your own against that demon! Did you acquire a rare class or something?"

"Why did he leave? Did he actually fear your strength?"...

"What level are you?"...

Simon who was taken aback by their sudden enthusiasm, was constantly barraged by their questions. To the men surrounding him, that battle was nothing short of legendary.

Most of them were former serfs and peasants who had rarely seen anything beyond skirmishes and minor battles. To see their leader confront a powerful Demon and live to tell the tale was, to them, a feat of impossible heroism.

"Simon! Simon! Simon!" They began to chant his name, as if he were a hero who had descended to save them all.

Simon felt awkward, he was only trying to complete his quest. If not for it, he wouldn't bother with the life and death of these characters who were just a recreation of history. He was far away from an existence like the hero.

Besides, the disaster hasn't subsided yet. The Demon Duke hadn't left out of fear or respect. He'd left because he had a far more dangerous game in mind.

That said, there was no need for him to share that detail with the decoy force. And so, after a while he dispersed the crowd, commanding them to get back to position.

"Everyone, we still have a job to do. This battle isn't over yet."

Having won their hearts and respect, the soldiers and mercenaries willingly obeyed his command. Gradually, they dispersed and got back to their work.

Thanks to the strength shown by Simon their leader, the morale in the camp had transformed. Where there had been fear, there was now a sense of hope, a belief that they could actually survive this.

Once he'd managed to escape the crowd, Simon made his way to his shelter. His nerves still taut from the previous battle.

The Demon Duke had left—but the threat was far from gone. They still needed to buy time for the southern alliance, fend off the demons' scouts, and survive the night. But for now, he had a brief respite...

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As the night progressed further, Simon's thoughts returned to Vordanaz's unexpected proposal.

The Duke's words echoed in his mind. He had been agonizing for weeks over how to accomplish his quest, over how to prevent the Southern alliance's annihilation at the hands of the Demon Lord of Envy's army.

Even with the fortress at Mount Gorgor and the plan to bottleneck the demon horde, the odds were still stacked overwhelmingly against them.

The Quest was nightmarishly difficult. Stopping the Southern Alliance's annihilation felt impossible.

He had been racking his brain, agonising every single day to find a way. Who knew the way would come over to him on its own two feet?

That's right, the way he found was the offer from Duke Vordanaz. Despite knowing that it would mean betraying humanity, he felt the potential of the offer.

Of course, he wasn't interested in the power, status or immortality that Vordanaz offered. No, what he was interested in was to sway the Demon Lord's horde and possibly know all about their plans.

If he joined their side and proved enough worth, he might be able to redirect their main forces away from the alliance. With the influence and rank Vordanaz promised, he could possibly manipulate the demons from within, slowing or even halting their attack.

This was a way he couldn't think of while being on this side of the conflict. He needed to join the other side too, only by being on both sides would he be able to get a proper grasp of the war that was going on.

The trial was not only about saving the southern alliance but to alter the Historia and ultimately preventing the Demon Lord of Envy's death.

Now that he thought about it, the quest was clearly hinting at him to join both sides. That said, joining the demon lord's side sounded easier said than done.

The other party were infamous demons after all and being a demon himself he was not an amateur when it came to understanding them.

Vordanaz might be favouring him right now, but it was only for the moment. There was no telling when the Demon Duke's interest and whim would change.

If they felt like his use was over or their favourability decreased, they would not hesitate to get rid of him. And besides, he was not truly planning on joining one side but rather infiltrate both sides.

If his intentions ever came to surface or his deception was caught, at that time he'd be facing not just Vordanaz but the entire demon horde. Heck, he might even be hounded by the human side for being a traitor.

No matter how you look at it, this was a difficult decision. Then again, this was the chance he needed.

A covert operation from within their ranks. If he played his cards right, he might just be able to complete all the quests.

His mind raced with possibilities, Simon quickly fell into thoughts...

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Over the mountain range, far into the horizon, a black line sprawling endlessly could be seen. a dark mass writhing like a sea of shadows under the pale moonlight.

Thousands upon thousands of demons stretched as far as the eye could see, a legion so vast it seemed to swallow the earth itself. The atmosphere here was thick with a dark, oppressive energy that permeated the very air.

The place was eerily silent broken only by the distant roars and growls of countless monsters.

Chapter 966- Demon Lord's Army (3)

Simon who flew here nonstop over the night, passing over the vast mountain range and enduring the cold biting wind of the night, finally made it to the place where the army of the demon lord was.

The moment he arrived, he was taken aback by the scene in front of him. An endless horde, a precursor to destruction. As far as the eye could see, hideous looking monsters and demons were sprawling everywhere.

It was like watching a black carpet blanketing the world. The scene was so impactful that it made one dizzy.

Even Simon who had already seen the demon horde from the distance, was shocked and taken aback when he came here. Looking at the demon lord's army from the distance was one thing but seeing it up close and with one's own eyes, was another.

It was only after arriving here and witnessing the scene that lay before him, that he realised how much he; no everyone had been underestimating the Demon Lord's army.

To say that it was a horde was an understatement. No, the strength of just this lineup here had already surpassed the combined strength of the Southern Alliance.

What they saw from over the mountain range, was just the tip of the iceberg. The real forces of the demon lord's army, the truly dangerous ones were far behind at the centre of the horde.

The ones in front were just meatshields, the lowest ranking demons and monsters.

"This is stupid, does the creator of the forbidden ground really want me to clear this?" Simon mocked inwardly.

He was still some distance away from the area where the horde was but the land had already changed. cracked and scorched, dark veins of energy pulsing inside the ground like corrupted blood beneath the surface.

The air smelled of sulfur and decay, Even the wind felt heavy like it was carrying the weight of something ancient and dangerous.

Simon's eyes scanned the horde, recognizing various species of monsters and creatures that one would be hard pressed to find other than in a high ranking dungeon.

Ogres, trolls, Cyclops, Gargoyles... then there were also Mordregals, siege beasts. Hulking, bear-like beasts with tusks as thick as a man's arm, and glowing eyes that could see in complete darkness. Even a single one could easily topple a fortress.

Vorivales, sinuous reptilian creatures with scales as hard as Mythril. "Are those Nightmares?!!!"

Floating over the ranks of Mordregals, were ethereal spectre like creatures wrapped in black shrouds, with faces twisted in expressions of permanent agony. They moved with the grace of smoke, and their whispers could drive any being to madness within seconds.

A super rare being that could only be spawned in high and [S] rank dungeons, it was no wonder Simon involuntarily spoke out loud.

Knowing that his dungeon was close to reaching the status of a high ranking dungeon soon, he had previously checked the DP required to spawn more powerful creatures. It was at that time the name of the nightmares came up.

But it was not only the nightmares, Infernal Wraiths, Cerberus and even Wyverns... what the people on the other side of the mountain range saw, was just the tip of the iceberg of the Demon lord of Envy's real force.

Even if they were given a hundred chances there was no way just the south wing army of the southern alliance could stall this horde. It was a mistake to even think that the fortress in Mount Gorgor would be able to provide the army with some ground to fight the horde back.

It was a good thing he came here, now he could at least come up with some other plan. Thankfully, the conversation between him and Vordanaz happened in the distance and wasn't overheard by the mercenaries and soldiers in the camp.

Because of it, he was able to make a swift excuse to slip out of the camp.

The excuse that he gave was... a duel. Apparently, the demon in respect of his powers issued him a challenge to fight him in a duel. If he won, the camp would be protected from getting destroyed and if he lost or didn't show up, the horde would trample them down.

To protect the camp and to keep the deception going he chose to accept the challenge.

Of course, it was all bullshit and there were flaws here and there but these people were no scholars and only used their heads to headbutt. There was no way they would find out about his lie.

As expected the soldiers and mercenaries undoubtedly accepted his lie as the truth. Heck, they even started shedding manly tears.

For him, he was just completing his quest but to these people who knew nothing, he was their savior. His casual words made them realise that the demon hadn't retreated in fear, but was deceived into a duel... all so as to protect them.

Unbeknownst to him it caused the awe and admiration in their eyes to strengthen further. No, perhaps it worked a little too much, they even started saying stuff like wanting to follow him and fight by his side.

Thankfully, he was able to somehow suppress their excitement and rush over here. Anyway, things went smoothly on the other side. Now he had another challenge lying in front of him.

Simon observed the unending horde that lay before him, These creatures; no these monsters, weapons of destruction, siege engines of war, were quite a sight to see. It was not every day one gets to see a massive horde capable of ending the world.

"The previous Demon Lord of Envy... he is nothing like the current Possessor of Envy".

Beyond the legion lay the demons' camp, sprawling and chaotic but highly fortified, an eerie contrast of disorder and structure.

Makeshift barricades constructed from massive, spiked logs and twisted metal surrounded it, while tents made from strange, leathery hide dotted the landscape haphazardly. Massive iron braziers lined the perimeter, the flames an unnatural green gave the camp an unholy luminescence.

Chapter 967- Acquiring Few Henchmen

Demonic sigils and banners bearing the insignia of high ranking demon nobles marked the encampment. Fluttering in the wind above them all, was one flag more ominous and majestic than the others— the Demon Lord of Envy's banner.

Simon narrowed his eyes, he was finally here. The Demon Lord of Envy, the Second Apex War, the Seraphim of Honor... the historia will soon start to move and the events of the past will be reenacted once again.

He needed to prevent that to clear the trial. Taking a steadying breath, he flew down and approached the gates of the horde's fortress.

As the entire valley was covered in a powerful magical array, anything foreign that flew up was quickly shot down making the place an anti flight area. Thanks to that, Simon had to approach the place on foot.

"You there human, halt!!"

When he arrived before the stronghold, he was met with a sight that was both intimidating and grotesque. Two massive trolls stood guard at the entrance, their towering frames appearing intimidating and unshakeable.

But it was not only that, unlike your standard trolls, the ones standing guard near the entrance were Mutants. Beings who deviated from the standard of their race and mutated into much stronger species.

Nightmarish in appearance, their skin a dark obsidian, leathery and covered in jagged scars. Their muscles bulged grotesquely, veins pulsing beneath their skin and their breath heavy and rumbling.

The two trolls carried weapons that seemed as oversized as they were—one wielded a massive club studded with rusted iron spikes, while the other gripped a crude but deadly-looking axe, its blade chipped and crusted with dark stains.

The one who spoke was the one with the club.

"Human, why have you come here? Are you mad, or just eager to die?"

Simon stood his ground and answered "I've come under the orders of Duke Vordanaz. He told me to join the horde and speak his name. He said you would let me pass."

At the mention of Vordanaz's name, the trolls exchanged a glance, they seemed to be fully aware of who the human was talking about.

"Duke Vordanaz..." the troll with the axe grunted "He doesn't send humans our way. But if he gave you his name, then you must be something unusual."

He seemed to be scrutinising Simon. It was said that trolls were a race that had inherently low intelligence and high physical and magical abilities. But judging from the voice and words, they seem to hold quite some intelligence.

"You may pass, human," The second troll gave way.

That said, given how easily they trusted him, it appeared that even after mutating, the inherent troll like trait didn't disappear.

Simon entered the demon horde's encampment, but instead of directly seeking Demon Duke Vordanaz, he roamed the camp at random, taking in the sights and making mental notes of the layout.

He wanted to get a feel for this place, to observe its structure and gauge its strength before meeting with the Duke.

Wherever he went, the reactions were immediate and hostile. Monster of all shapes and sizes turned their heads, their eyes narrowing as they caught sight of him.

Low growls, whispered curses and sneering remarks followed him. A human in the middle of the Demon Lord's camp was like a rabbit wandering through a den of wolves. The demons gave him unpleasant, threatening looks, their malice palpable.

He was an outlier, an intruder. It was only a matter of time before he invited trouble. And trouble found him sooner than expected.

Simon continued his stroll, feigning nonchalance, but his senses were on high alert. It was then he felt a powerful presence, accompanied by several lesser but still formidable energies closing in on him.

A group stood before Simon, led by a tall, imposing figure—a Demon Earl. The others around him, all clearly subordinates, exuded a bloodthirsty aura. Their expressions were a mix of curiosity and contempt as they looked over him.

"Well, well, what do we have here? A human, wandering our camp without chains or collars? Now, this is unexpected" The Demon Earl sneered.

Just like how the group was observing him, Simon was sizing them up too. Demon Viscounts, perhaps a few Demon Barons. Their power levels were clear to him even at a glance.

They were formidable by ordinary standards, but to him, they were no real threat. The Earl was the only one who was somewhat powerful, but even he was one whole rank below him.

In demon hierarchy, ranks were absolute. Unless one was a freak like Simon, no demon could defy that. That said, currently he was in the form of a human and reigning in all of his aura. Hence the confusion.

"Oi, Sir Melkan is speaking to you, why aren't you answering?"

The demon henchmen around the Demon Earl cursed. But even after all that, they got no reply from him. Heck, the human wasn't even facing them when they were talking to him.

Slightly angered, the demon earl named Melkan gestured one of his subordinates "Go on, see what this slave is doing here".

From his tone, it was clear that he was assuming Simon was nothing more than a captured human, perhaps the property of some demon noble.

The henchman ordered, stepped forward brimming with arrogance. "Hey, you" When he was close enough to the human, he put his hands on the other party's shoulder and forced them to turn around.

"Where do you think you're roaming, slave? Where are your collars and chains? Who is your master...?"

The henchman was unable to complete his sentence as the rest of it got stuck in his throat. He arched his head and looked up. He didn't realise it earlier but now that he was face to face with the human, he realised that he had to look up to see the other party's face.

The demon's confidence wavered, as a demon viscount he stood at a height of 1.90 metres which could easily dwarf most of the humans of this world.

However, the one standing in front of him, even at a glance stood a full head taller than him.

Chapter 968- Acquiring Few Henchmen (2)

Their imposing frame was enough to even make him a Demon Viscount appear small in comparison. GULP... Without him knowing, he gulped and involuntarily took a step back.

Simon's eyes narrowed slightly as he observed the henchman who put his hands on his shoulder. It only took him a moment to assess the demon's rank—a low-tier Viscount, clearly used to throwing his weight around against weaker beings.

It was a familiar scene to Simon: demons trying to assert their dominance through intimidation, seeking pleasure in belittling others. Especially now, in the middle of a war, that kind of behavior was more unhinged and rampant.

The chaos of battle had loosened the demons' restraint, making them more brazen and prone to seeking conflict. However, it was one thing to do it with another but with him... they chose the wrong opponent to mess with.

The Viscount's bravado faltered when he met Simon's cold unreadable gaze.

"Um..." It was then a frosty voice sounded beside his ears.

"What are you doing backing down? Are you defying my orders?" It came from none other than Demon Earl Melkan himself.

Immediately coming to his senses, the Demon Viscount tried to cover up his momentary slip. He shouted "Didn't you hear me human? Why are you running around free? Who is your master?"

It was common to use subjugated enemies as slaves of war. It was no wonder that these bunch of demons thought that he was one of those enslaved humans here.

Simon did not answer immediately, he looked around and after seeing that their small commotion was not attracting any attention, he guessed that it was either a common occurrence here or the high ranking demons were too busy to bother with something of this level.

Simon's eyes then brushed past the demon Viscount and landed towards the demon earl in the distance. The leader of this group and the one behind this charade.

Did they say his name was Melkan? For someone like him to fall so low and behave like your alleyway thug, Simon could easily guess that his rank among the demon army was at the bottom and he was one of those countless expendables being bossed around by the other demons.

As for his intent, it was as clear as day. By this show of force, he was expecting the human to cower, to show fear or submission to indulge his superiority.

However, too bad for them, the opponent they chose this time was someone beyond their level. Simon had faced countless creatures like this before, and he knew their tactics well.

"Why am I here you ask? Let's just say I have a very important task I have been given by a high ranking demon".

'Wha...!' Not expecting an answer like that, the demon henchmen was taken aback. A high ranking demon... if what the human said was true, then messing with him would mean messing with their plans.

Something that would warrant them a fate worse than death. The group instinctively started backing down when the Demon Earl shouted.

"Lies!! Don't fall for his trap. This human is clearly lying" He pointed at Simon and scoffed.

"Directive from a high ranking demon you say? Tsk, there is no way a high ranking demon would use a mere human slave".

His words seemed to have convinced others as they also stopped backing down and looked visibly enraged.

"You dare try to trick us human!!!" The Demon Viscount closest to Simon raised his hand to strike but he easily dodged it. When the demon was about to continue pulling his punches, Simon grabbed his fist thus stopping all of his assault.

The Demon Earl narrowed his eyes whereas his entourage looked visibly shaken. They didn't expect a human, a mere slave at that too to easily stop a Demon viscount's attack. This was a humiliation.

"What are you doing? Are you trying to make me lose face? Stop holding back and quickly apprehend that slave. Make it so that he cannot mutter such nonsense again"...

"This..." The Demon Viscount's expression was grim. As the one attacking, he knew full well whether he was holding back or not.

In that attack, he had used most of his physical powers that could easily apprehend any human even if they were warriors. However, when he attacked the human in front of him, all of his strength disappeared in an instant.

It was like throwing a stone in a lake, all of his power and momentum vanished in the water. What's more, the hand holding his fist were like pincers he was unable to break free of.

"You..." the demon viscount tried to say something but his voice was cut short by a punch in his solar plexus.

BANG... there was resounding low rumbling along bones being crushed. The next second, to the group's surprise, the demon viscount bent down and kissed the ground knocked unconscious.

All eyes even the ones in the surrounding went wide as they shifted between the human and the demon viscount on the ground. This was an outcome none of them expected.

Even Melkan was stunned for a long while unable to believe his eyes. Nevertheless, no matter how low his standing was among the demons, he was a demon earl.

"Very good... very good" his body trembled with rage as he pointed at Simon "You have some nerve, human, to act so brazenly in this place. Are you looking to die early?"

Melkan stepped forward, he was looking to close this one himself. Fights in the demon camp were not unusual. As such, even if they fought here with all their strength, it wouldn't alarm the high ranking demon of the demon lord army.

Simon's smirk slowly faded, his eyes narrowed dangerously. This had gone on long enough. He was here on a mission, and he couldn't afford to let these demons interfere any longer.

He took a slow, deliberate step forward, closing the distance between himself and the earl. The other demons flinched, clearly unsettled by the lack of fear in his eyes.

Chapter 969- Acquiring Few Henchmen (3)

"I'd advise you to step back, unless you want to test your luck against someone far beyond your rank."

"What did you say?"

The Demon Earl grit his teeth so hard that one could even hear them cracking. He was about to flip out in anger when Simon said the following words.

"Why do you think I'm not on a mission from a high ranking demon?"...

"Why you ask? That's because..."

He didn't let the Demon earl finish and continued "It's because I'm a human?"

Looking down on humans was practically ingrained in every demon. Especially now during times of war, the hatred was at its peak. But Simon could see something more from Melkan in front of him.

It was insecurity, fear and unwillingness to accept that someone is superior to you. There are always bound to be idiots with overinflated egos but no substance to back it up, the demon Earl in front of him was one of them.

"Since you think I'm just a mere slave, why don't you come with me and verify the fact yourself".

Melkan was silent, his expression shifting between suspicion and hesitation. He seemed to be deliberating whether Simon was really telling the truth. He could see the calm confidence in the latter's gaze—there was no trace of fear, no hint of deception.

Simon did not wait for the other party's answer, he turned around and made his way to Duke Vordanaz's camp.

Melkan and his entourage begrudgingly followed behind.

As he approached Vordanaz's camp, the difference between it and the surrounding encampments became glaringly obvious. Unlike the rough tents and makeshift shelters used by lower-ranking demons and other beings, Vordanaz's quarters were grand and imposing, showcasing his power and status.

The camp couldn't be called a camp anymore; instead, it looked like a fortress, built of solid walls and jagged earth, conjured through powerful magic. The entire structure had a faint magical barrier covering it, repelling weaker entities.

Looking at it, one wouldn't be able to call it a temporary shelter anymore.

Should he say as expected of a high ranking demon? The entire area was swarming with powerful subordinates and monsters patrolling the place.

A show of power indeed, on his way here Simon noted only low-ranking demons and lesser creatures bothered with simple tents. For those of higher status, like Vordanaz and his peers, the standard was a magically constructed fortress or castle, built with their own power.

The grander the structure, the higher the standing of its owner in the Demon Lord's army. Here, status was everything, and the size and complexity of a demon's stronghold were clear indicators of their influence and strength.

In this regard, Vordanaz's fortress was neither the most impressive nor the smallest—it was an intermediate-sized castle, a sign that even among the Demon Lord's ranks, Vordanaz held a respectable position.

Simon observed the castle before becking at the entourage behind him "Let's go".

The entrance to Duke Vordanaz's camp was guarded by a pair of Infernal Knights, clad in crimson armor and burning helmets. The moment they saw a group approaching, they stepped forward, their bodies blocking the path.

"Stop right there!! This is the Dwelling of Lord Vordanaz. Uninvited people are not allowed"

The infernal knights roared. Their powerful aura quickly subdued the Demon Earl's entourage, making them trembling in their boots.

Not mentioning the powerful presence of the Demon Duke which completely covered the area, just the hostility directed by the infernal knights was too much for this group of Demon Viscount and Demon Baron to endure.

Melkan on the other hand, observed the human and camp before him. The fact that the human had willingly led them to this place unsettled him and caused his unease to grow.

"I'm not intruding, I'm someone your master invited. Simon, tell him my name... he will recognise me"

Simon replied but the infernal knights refused to move out of his way. Seconds passed in tense silence, just when it seemed like they would be shoved away, the infernal knights suddenly moved out of the way and pointed with their hands.

"This way, lord Vordanaz is expecting you". One of the knights intoned.

Simon smirked and cast a glance behind him. At this moment, the faces of the demon earl and his henchmen were a sight to see. It was almost comical how the Demon Earl's face was frozen in shock, his eyes wide and mouth slightly agape.

His subordinates were no better, their earlier sneers replaced by expressions of stunned disbelief. Simon could practically read their thoughts:

How could a human, a mere mortal, receive an invitation from a Duke?

But Simon didn't spare them a second thought. He had more important matters to address. He walked confidently into the stronghold.

Inside his camp or rather stronghold, Vordanaz was waiting for them. Seated on his seat, his presence dominated the room.

When Simon entered, a pleased smile appeared on the corner of his lips.

"So you came, Simon, I knew you would. Have you decided to join my side after all?" His voice echoed throughout the chamber, filled with self-assured arrogance.

"Yes, joining me is the right decision. A strong man like you should be on my side. When you deflected my attacks, I realized you were different from those pathetic ones who scurry about, content with their mediocrity. You are meant to soar higher, to rise above the masses."

"You've made the right choice, Simon. Power, immortality, status—whatever you desire, I can grant it. You've seen the might I command, the influence I wield. Swear loyalty to me, and you'll have everything you've ever wanted."

In the back, Melkan and his entourage stood in stunned silence, their eyes wide and jaws slack. They couldn't believe what they were hearing.

A human had fought against a Demon Duke and survived his attacks? If anyone else had told this story, they would have laughed them off as a fool or a liar. But this was Vordanaz himself speaking—there was no way he would lie about such a thing.

It was unfathomable.

Chapter 970- Acquiring Few Henchmen (4)

Believing as if he had sealed the deal, the smile on the Demon Duke widened "Since you have made your decision by coming to me, tell me what is it that you want? As long as it's nothing too ridiculous, I'm willing to grant your wish. Now swear loyalty to..."

Before the duke could continue, Simon held up a hand stopping him from continuing any further.

The sudden gesture made the room fall into a deathly silence. All eyes turned towards Simon who stood there calm and collected even when subjected to so many cold and unfriendly stares.

"Duke Vordanaz" he sighed "You seem to be misunderstanding something. It is correct that I have made my decision but I'm not here to become your subordinate, nor am I interested in the power, immortality, or status you promise"...

"It's as you said earlier, the strong choose their own path. And I've chosen mine."

A bold statement, a daring declaration. Simon's words dropped like a bomb on everyone listening. For a moment, it felt as if all the air was sucked out of the room making it difficult to even breathe.

In the back, Melkan and his entourage stood frozen, their faces pale, bodies trembling visibly and beads of sweat forming on their foreheads. It felt as if though the temperature had plummeted, but there was no cold here—just the icy grip of fear seizing their hearts.

The implications of Simon's words were crystal clear. He had rejected the Duke's offer outright.

Melkan wanted to grab the human by his collar and ask him if he even knew what he was saying. To reject a high-ranking Demon Duke, a being of immense power and influence, was madness.

It was more than just a refusal; it was a blatant act of disrespect. It was the kind of insult that could provoke a wrath so terrifying that even imagining it was enough to send chills down his spine.

"What is this human thinking?!" He had fought quite a few battles before but for the first time in his long life did Melkan feel the shadow of death so close to him.

If he was like this, one could imagine what state his subordinates were in. All of them were drained of their colours and trembling in their boots.

When they arrived here, they entered with the human who had just spat in the face of one of the Demon Lord's most powerful nobles. To the others in the room, it was a small step to mistake them as accomplices of this insolent outsider.

And just as Melkan feared, after the shock of Simon's words settled in, it was as if a dam had burst. A wave of hostility surged through the room, all the hatred and resentment directed squarely at them.

The powerful subordinates of Duke Vordanaz drew their weapons in a flash, mana crackling in the air like a storm about to break. They were all enraged and murderous at the remark that belittled their lord.

"You dare reject the grace that Lord Vordanaz bestowed upon you?!" one of the subordinates of the Demon Duke snarled, "Looks like you've forgotten your place, human! You need to be reminded of it!"...

"You dare reject the grace the Duke himself bestowed on you? You will pay for this insolence with your life, and so will anyone who sides with you!"

Others added, their eyes gleaming in fury. The air crackled with murderous intent, and the room seemed on the brink of erupting into violence.

Melkan could feel his heart hammering against his ribs, his breath came in ragged gasps as the full weight of the situation settled on him. They were moments away from being slaughtered.

Who knew that following this human would cause them to seek their own death? With everything said and done, it looked like they would be sacrificed as a collateral damage in the fallout of this confrontation.

If he was given another chance, he would never choose to follow the human. Heck, he might not even bother with him. That said, regret as he much, there was no medicine for it.

Attacks materialised, but just as the subordinates were about to strike, the room was suddenly filled with an overwhelming pressure. Vordanaz released his aura, a dark, suffocating wave of energy that silenced the room instantly.

The crackling mana dissipated, and the demons took an involuntary step back, their expressions shifting from rage to caution. The murderous intent vanished as quickly as it had appeared, replaced by a fearful silence.

Vordanaz, who had been seated on his throne with a faltering smile, now leaned forward, his eyes locked onto Simon with a mix of confusion and curiosity. He stared at the human for a long moment, as if searching his face for something hidden beneath that calm exterior.

It made no sense. No human would dare come here, into the heart of the demon horde's camp, just to refuse an offer from a Demon Duke. It was suicidal, and yet Simon had done exactly that.

"I don't understand," Vordanaz finally said, his voice a low rumble of genuine confusion.

"My offer should be incredibly alluring, not to mention unreachable for most humans. Power, immortality, status—these are things that people like you could only dream of. No matter how I look at it, you gain nothing by rejecting me"...

"What's more, you walked into my stronghold with your own two feet just to say no. That makes even less sense. If you weren't enticed by my offer, you wouldn't have come here at all."

His eyes narrowed, his suspicion growing.

"So tell me, Simon—why did you come here? Unless I was mistaken about you and you are a madman, you must have some reason".

He was not a fool, he could easily see that the human had a reason for declining his offer. What's more, that confidence when he came in here and even now when all hostility was directed at him, Simon did not even flinch the slightest.

Unless one had some impressive backing or assurance, they wouldn't be this calm.