

## Village Head 1141

### Chapter 1141: A Meeting That Changes Everything

At the edge of the farm stood a colossal tree, towering over a hundred meters tall, its roots firmly embedded in the soil. A short distance away, a small wooden house rested in its shade.

Inside the small wooden house's main room, a round table was surrounded by four chairs. Anara sat at one of them, while Seraphina and Thoren-leaders of the Healers Association and prominent figures in the Research Centre-sat opposite her. The former was also her sister, one of the Supreme Leader's main wives.

The Research Centre had established itself as one of the most valuable organisations within Paradise, holding authority just below the Key Leaders. Due to the importance of their work, they answered directly to the Supreme Leader. This made the meeting not just a professional discussion but also one between close colleagues and friends, piquing Anara's curiosity about the purpose of their visit.

"We came to discuss a suitable training method for Grace," Seraphina began, her tone steady as she met Anara's gaze. "Although we can wait until the awakening ceremony to see if she can awaken a gift, with her unique constitution-one of the rarest in Paradise-it would be a waste not to properly nurture her beforehand. Especially since she hasn't been able to cultivate her own tree, which suggests the tree nymphs' training methods aren't working for her."

Seraphina gestured to Thoren and continued, "This is Thoren Crystalforge, one of the Healers Association Leaders and a prominent figure at the Research Centre. He's here to examine Grace's constitution so we can start making further preparations."

Thoren nodded slightly toward Anara. Even though they had met on various occasions before, it felt appropriate, given the importance of this conversation.

Anara's frown at Seraphina's words, then shook her head and replied, "I'm sorry, but I have to refuse your offer, Seraphina. I've already been too hard on Grace, pushing her into training before realising that the tree nymphs' methods didn't suit her. I've let her socialise with the other children on the farm as she wishes. Forcing her into another program could do more harm than good." She sighed deeply after speaking.

"Did you inform Orion about this?" Anara asked, her eyes fixed on Seraphina.

"Not fully, no. If he finds out too soon, he'll likely object and halt all plans," Seraphina said, shaking her head fiercely. "I promise I won't do anything that would harm Grace. I just want to offer my help. I can't sit back and watch her situation unfold idly."

Seraphina felt genuinely concerned for Grace. As her stepmother and one of the few highly knowledgeable about Vylkr energy, she was eager and felt obliged to assist.

"Or, I could teach you the theorised training methods for Grace, and you can oversee her training here on the farm. If there's no progress, you can stop it immediately, and we'll wait for her awakening ceremony. But if it works, we won't have to worry about Grace's future."

Seraphina knew Orion would likely never agree to her plan, no matter how safe it seemed. But if Anara decided to do it and oversee it herself, Orion might be more willing to approve.

Seraphina remained silent as a pondering expression appeared on Anara's face. However, after a brief moment, Anara shook her head.

"I understand that you're doing your best, but I want to put this matter to rest until Grace's awakening ceremony," Anara responded, her firm tone indicating she had no intention of changing her mind before the predetermined time.

Seraphina's shoulders slumped in defeat, and Thoren sighed as well. They had expected things to work out, but they seemed to have to wait much longer.

Seraphina knew waiting for Grace's awakening ceremony was a reasonable approach, but she wasn't sure if it was the best option for 'Grace.'

While it was common knowledge that young adults going through the ceremony hadn't yet awakened their gifts or accessed Vylkr energy, Grace was different. She possessed both Vylkr energy and Nature energy, with the former suppressing the latter.

If she took the spiritual fruit from the sundial and obtained the Primordial energy, the reaction of all three energies within her was unpredictable.

There was a chance that everything would turn out fine, and she might qualify to become a warrior, potentially becoming one of the strongest Tree Nymphs. However, there was also a smaller chance that she might suffer a severe setback due to the conflicting energies.

This was why Seraphina wanted to act swiftly rather than leaving things to chance. However, with Anara-Grace's mother-having decided, Seraphina had no choice but to wait.

'I'll wait until Orion returns and explain everything to him, along with the data I've gathered on Grace. If he disagrees, I'll give up entirely and wait for the ceremony,' Seraphina thought, sighing inwardly.

"How about I escort you out?" Anara offered.

Seraphina sighed, nodded, and stood to her feet.

Thoren grabbed the handle of a medium-sized wooden box beside his chair and followed suit.

Anara also rose and led them to the door.

"We'll be taking our leave, Anara. I'll see you another time," Seraphina said with a nod.

"Goodbye, Overseer," Thoren said with a respectful bow.

As Seraphina was about to activate her One-winged Sky Art technique, Thoren's surprised voice suddenly rang out beside them.

"Who's that? Isn't that the Supreme Leader?!" Thoren exclaimed.

As one of the few with access to information about the pocket dimension, he knew that the Supreme Leader, Goddess Aurora, and a few capable warriors had journeyed there to uncover its true nature. So he was astounded to see Orion's unexpected arrival.

'Did they complete their exploration and quickly uncover the secrets hidden within the pocket dimension? Or was it cut short because something unexpected happened?' These thoughts raced through his mind.

Seraphina and Anara also gazed at Orion as he approached from the sky before shifting their focus to the woman beside him. Both of them narrowed their eyes, their expressions morphing into confusion and frowns, each lost in their thoughts.

Within moments, Orion landed before them with Nadia.

"Good day, Supreme Leader," Thoren greeted respectfully with a bow, his curious gaze briefly wandering to the unfamiliar woman beside Orion.

Orion returned the gesture with a slight nod.

"I will take my leave now. Mrs Seraphina, I'll be heading back to work at the Research Centre," Thoren quickly said, bowing respectfully once more before activating a flying technique and swiftly soaring into the sky.

Orion shifted his attention to Anara and Seraphina. From the moment he landed, their gazes had been fixed on Nadia-especially Anara.

Nadia, however, didn't spare a glance at Thoren as he left. Her wide, shock-filled eyes were locked onto Anara, who mirrored her gaze, though hers was confused.

'Could it be?' Nadia thought, feeling her heart race as the tension in the air thickened. 'What should I say? How do I approach her?'

Countless thoughts ran through her mind, and her breathing became laboured, her hearts pounding even harder, causing her expression to twist in pain.

Before Nadia could dwell on her thoughts further, Orion placed his hand on her shoulder.

"Take it easy. Breathe slowly," he advised.

Nadia gulped, took a deep breath, and exhaled, nodding at Orion.

Orion had been concerned about Nadia's pained expression and rapid breathing as he

prepared to introduce her, but seeing her regain her composure, he sighed in relief. After all,

it would have been bad if she had suddenly fainted.

Gesturing toward Nadia, Orion addressed Seraphina and Anara. "Let me introduce you to Nadia, the Sovereigness of the Bastion of the Wailing Gnarled and an Ice Nymph. She leads one of the three remaining forces within the pocket dimension we explored." Hearing his words, Seraphina and Anara's eyes widened in shock and astonishment.

"She's an Ice Nymph? And she came from there?" Seraphina asked, her burning gaze shifting

to Orion as she waited for his response.

"Yes, and she's not the only one," Orion confirmed with a nod. His gaze then moved to Anara, who, unlike Seraphina, was frozen in place.

Anara remained silent, her wide eyes filled with shock and disbelief fixed on Nadia. Meanwhile, Seraphina shivered with excitement, her wide eyes scrutinising Nadia from head

to toe.

Orion then gestured toward Seraphina and Anara. "This is Seraphina, the Leader of the Healers Association and Head of the Research Centre, one of the most esteemed organisations within Paradise," he introduced. "And this is Anara, the Tree Nymphs Overseer

and one of the Key Leaders of Paradise."

Orion's words were like thunderclaps to Nadia's ears. Her body trembled, and her eyes grew cloudy, but she bit her lip, trying to hold back her emotions.

She had pondered what to say if Orion's words were true-how she would approach the Tree Nymphs of Paradise, address them, and even speak to them. But now, standing before one, she realised she couldn't utter a single word.

No, she was afraid to speak. After all these years of separation, would they even want to meet those afflicted by the Death Plague?

Would they welcome her and her people after discovering they had become entirely different individuals despite sharing the same race?

#### Chapter 1142: A Meeting That Changes Everything (2)

As these thoughts raced through Nadia's mind, she unconsciously froze.

But unlike her, Anara stepped forward.

Nadia's eyes widened at her movement, and she instinctively stepped back. However, that didn't stop Anara's advance - she swiftly reached Nadia and gently held her left hand, cupping it with both hands, preventing her from retreating further.

Feeling the warmth of Anara's hands, Nadia trembled violently. "Sis-" She tried to speak, her fearful expression deepening, but quickly sealed her lips, unsure of what kind of response she would receive.

"Sister, how are you? It's been so long. I apologize for almost forgetting about you. If only I had known where you were, I would have done everything to—" Anara began, but before she could finish, Nadia lunged forward, wrapping her arms around her tightly.

Anara felt a cold warmth pressing against her skin.

Nadia's hazy, tear-filled eyes, holding back emotion, finally overflowed as she responded, "You don't need to apologize... because you're not at fault. Sniff... Sister, you have no idea how many stories I've heard about you and how much I longed to meet you! Even if I'm finally losing my mind and this is just a dream... Sister, I can't express how happy I am to finally meet you!"

Anara hesitated briefly before asking, her voice tinged with emotion, "From how you look and speak, has life been hard for you out there?"

Nadia nodded. "Yes... it's been..." She trailed off, unable to finish her sentence as the painful pang in her chest forced her lips to close and her face to twist in pain.

Sensing Nadia's discomfort, Anara quickly released her from the embrace and looked at her worriedly.

"Are you okay?" Anara asked.

Nadia steadied her breathing and nodded silently. Her cheeks were still streaked with tears, but she didn't bother to wipe them away; she focused on imprinting the image of the tree nymph before her into her memory.

Anara narrowed her eyes at Nadia, placing a hand on her chest. Nadia flinched backwards, fear creeping back into her expression once more.

Seeing this, Anara frowned, then sighed softly. "It's alright. I know you have much to say, so we'll talk about this later," she said, pulling Nadia into another embrace and walking forward.

"Follow me. I'm going to introduce you to the rest of our sisters."

"Wait!" Nadia hurriedly called out.

Anara stopped. "What is it?" she asked, curiosity apparent in her expression.

Instead of replying, Nadia closed her eyes, shutting out the scene around her. At first, Anara was confused by Nadia's actions, but then her eyes widened in surprise as she noticed Nadia's transformation. Nadia's icy, deep purple skin and hair began to shift, creating a fluid, watery appearance.

"How should I address you now?" Anara asked.

"You can do so however you like. It doesn't matter. Both forms are still part of who I am," Nadia responded.

Anara's gaze lingered curiously on the subtle scar still visible on Nadia's now fluid, purple skin, then nodded at her words and turned her focus ahead. She stepped forward, arriving at the centre of the vast grassy plains.

Anara turned her head toward the sky, her heart pounding. She closed her eyes briefly, letting the tumultuous emotions swelling inside her settle before finally speaking.

"SISTERS!!" Her voice rang out, carried like a serenade by the evening breeze. It rippled through the leaves, weaved into the branches, and flowed through the roots that spread throughout the farm.

All of nature seemed to pause as if listening.

Suddenly, tree nymphs began to emerge from their trees from every corner of the farm. Some travelled together, sitting atop the branches as the roots beneath them moved, while others leapt from branch to branch toward Anara and Nadia.

Within fifteen minutes, every tree nymph on the farm had gathered before them.

Nadia observed the scene with wide eyes, not wanting to miss a moment.

All the tree nymphs focused on Anara and curiously on Nadia, who was in her embrace. The surroundings were silent, each nymph waiting in anticipation of why their Overseer had summoned them.

"LOOK! OUR LONG-LOST SISTER HAS RETURNED HOME!" Anara shouted, gesturing toward Nadia.

A wave of chatter spread through the tree nymphs, their expressions ranging from confusion to curiosity and wonder. Their gazes on Nadia intensified. Although they didn't fully understand what was happening, they could sense the seriousness in Anara's words.

The murmurs quickly died down as Anara continued.

"They have survived outside for too long, sisters. They have endured. Though they have suffered, finally, Nadia..." Anara's voice cracked, her expression mirroring the tears streaming down Nadia's face. "...is the first to return."



Nadia scanned the faces of the tree nymphs around her, searching for any signs of rejection at her sudden appearance, but what she saw overwhelmed her. They were crying!

Even though the tree nymphs didn't completely grasp the situation, they could sense Anara's emotions and swiftly grasp the meaning of her words. Realizing that the nymph beside Anara was one of their own, they quickly comprehended the magnitude of the moment.

Tears flowed freely from every corner of the forest. Anara was crying. Seraphina stood in the distance behind them, her hand covering her mouth, tears streaming down her cheeks.

A single tear slid down Orion's face, but he quickly wiped it away, controlling his emotions. Overwhelmed, Nadia collapsed in Anara's embrace, sobbing harder.

"Sister!"

The word started softly from a single voice in the crowd.

Nadia's ears perked up at the sound.

"Sister!!"

Another voice joined.

"Sister!!"

And then another.

"Sister!!"

Like a crashing wave against the shore, like lightning striking a tree thrice, the word erupted from every corner of the farm.

"SISTER!! SISTER!! SISTER!!"

The farm came alive.

Nadia felt her hearts pound heavily in her chest, and for the first time in many years, it wasn't pain she felt but joy.

"This is Paradise," Nadia whispered, her voice growing weak as she slumped unconscious in

Anara's embrace.

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Tidal Depths Kingdom

Within a dome separating the water from the outside world, numerous trees and other vegetation sprawled across the area, each enclosed within metallic fences. Scattered throughout the orchard were various large wooden buildings, each in its own section, while countless individuals hurried from place to place, carrying baskets filled with multiple Kanir

fruits.

In one section of the orchard, a man with a humanoid upper body and a lower body resembling a crab-with ten pointing legs and protruding shell-plucked several Kalnir fruits from a tree that leaned toward him.

He carefully placed them into his basket. The basket was only half full when he finished,

barely reaching the top.

"That's all," said a tree nymph, her body covered in numerous scars, as she stepped down

from one of the tree branches beside him.

The tree straightened back to its original position.

The man nodded silently and turned to leave, walking out of the metallic fence.

The tree nymph followed him closely.

They reached a smooth stone road and continued walking, passing other trees that were being harvested. Other tree nymphs observed their movements from the side.

After ten minutes, they arrived at one of the large wooden buildings resembling a warehouse.

A long queue stretched out before it, filled with individuals of different and similar races, each holding baskets filled with Kalnir fruits and accompanied by a tree nymph.

At the warehouse entrance stood a fully armoured Prismerion man, inspecting the baskets and weighing them on a medium-sized stone with a bright gemstone at the base. The gemstone shone in distinct colours, each indicating a different weight limit. It currently

glowed green.

"Pass," the armoured man said, removing the basket and handing it over to a woman with a humanoid upper body and a fish-like tail dress in a plain brown shirt and a piece of attire covering her tail. Water flowed beneath her, pushing her forward since she couldn't walk.

The woman accepted the basket and entered the warehouse. The tree nymph beside her bowed respectfully toward the armoured man before exiting the queue.

"Next!" called the Prismerion as another individual stepped forward with a basket and a tree

nymph beside them.

"Next!"

It was finally their turn after the eleventh person.

The armoured man took the basket from the crab-bodied man and frowned. Without even placing it on the scale, he looked at them both.

"Is this all?" he asked, his tone filled with anger.

The crab-bodied man quickly nodded.

"That's all I can produce for today. I'm tired and need to rest for tomorrow," the tree nymph said, her voice hoarse and weak. She bowed respectfully towards the armoured man.

"I don't care what you say! It's not enough! Go back and harvest more fruits until the basket is full!" the armoured man shouted, his voice booming across the surroundings.

Many queue members glanced at the scene only to fearfully lower their heads. They shook their heads, exhaling inwardly as if already knowing what would transpire next.

#### Chapter 1143: Just In The Nick Of Time

"Please... I might suffer a severe backlash if I continue working. Besides, wasn't there an announcement that we wouldn't have to work-" the tree nymph anxiously pleaded. However, before she could finish, the armoured man pulled a whip from the hung on the of his waist and lashed it across her body with a resounding 'PAH!'

"WHO TOLD YOU TO SPEAK? I NEVER ASKED FOR YOUR OPINION! YOU WOULD HAVE HAD YOUR REST IF THE BASTION OF ASHEN HOPE AND THE WAILING GNARLED HADN'T BEEN FOOLISH ENOUGH TO AMBUSH AND POISON THE KING!! THE KING HAS ORDERED YOU ALL TO WORK!! THERE IS NO REST!!" the armoured man shouted as he continued lashing the battered tree nymph, the whip cracking through the air repeatedly.

The tree nymph collapsed to the ground, her body writhing in pain as her skin bruised under the relentless lashes of the whip.

The crab-bodied man standing beside her stepped back in fear, lowering his head.

Just as the whip was about to strike the tree nymph again, her shadow rippled, and a headless winged spawn emerged from it, catching the swung whip in its grasp.

All of this happened in an instant.

Witnessing the creature's appearance and swift action, the man froze in shock before his expression turned to horror. He screamed, "TAINTED! A TAINTED HAS APPEARED IN THE ORCHARD!!" Without a second thought, the armoured man turned and fled, disregarding the queue and his surroundings.

The headless, winged spawn vanished and reappeared before the fleeing man, its arms morphing into a curved, inky-black blade. In an instant, before the armoured man could react, the blade slashed through him, severing his legs and crippling his escape.

The man fell to the ground, blood pouring from his severed legs, and he screamed in agony, "AHH!! MY LEGS!!"

"TAINTED!!!"

The queue members who had witnessed the scene panicked and ran in a frenzy. Chaos erupted in the surroundings as everyone became aware of the danger.

Even the crab-bodied man turned and fled in terror.

The bruised tree nymph's face was filled with fear. She tried to stand and run, but her body was too weak. Pain surged through her with every attempt, causing her to collapse back to the ground after each slight movement.

"Please, spare me!" she cried, her fear deepening as the tainted took hold of the crippled man and approached her. "Kyaa~~SOMEONE HELP ME!" She screamed, hoping someone would come to her rescue. However, contrary to her expectations, the tainted stopped when it arrived beside her.

The tree nymph's eyes widened in disbelief, and she flinched when a voice sounded beside her.

"Are you okay, child?"

The tree nymph snapped her head toward the voice, and her eyes landed on a tall, slender woman with flawless fair skin dressed in a green gown adorned with many beautiful flower patterns.

Her hair was a mix of gold and green, pouring smoothly down to her waist. Her breathtaking beauty left the tree nymph momentarily stunned, making her question whether this woman before her was a goddess.

The tree nymph was so captivated by the woman's beauty that she momentarily forgot her pain until the aching sensation in her body swiftly reminded her.

As the tree nymph shifted to the side, she noticed another woman clad in shimmering bronze armour and wearing a black mask with strange tendril designs. Unlike the first woman, her appearance was hidden, but the oppressive aura around her was far more powerful than that of the armoured man who had just been crippled by the tainted.

The tree nymph froze, realizing that these two women had somehow caused the tainted to halt, indicating they were far more dangerous than the armoured man. Unsure if they were sent by the castle to handle the situation, she closed her eyes and sealed her lips, lowering her head in surrender to whatever might happen next.

The nymph remained silent, offering no response.

Aurora frowned deeply as she looked at the battered tree nymph before her.

"I'll take care of your injuries," Aurora said, waving her hand over the frozen tree nymph. Strands of Vylkr energy, mingled with wisps of divine energy, flowed from her hands in a mixed milky and inky-black brilliance.

The energy enveloped the tree nymph, healing the bruises from the whip and restoring her battered skin.

Iris glanced at the crippled armoured Prismerion man, whose movements and mouth were bound by the headless winged spawn. His broad, horrified eyes stared at them.

Iris shook her head in disappointment. Even if Aurora hadn't acted, she would have handled it without hesitation. She refocused her attention on the tree nymph slumped beside them. Within moments, the tree nymph was fully healed, and all discomfort had vanished.

The tree nymph opened her eyes wide in astonishment as she sensed the changes within her body. She snapped her gaze toward the two women, quickly standing to her feet and bowing. "Thank you," she said, her voice hoarse with emotion.

"Do you feel better now?" Aurora asked softly, gently touching the tree nymph's shoulder.

The tree nymph almost flinched in fear but decided to stand her ground and nodded fiercely. "Yes, thanks to you, I no longer feel any pain. I'm completely healed. Thank you for your care," she said, tears slowly rolling down her cheeks and falling to the ground. Her emotions overwhelmed her under Aurora's comforting touch.

Suddenly, clanging metal, hurried footsteps, and flowing water echoed in the distance. "Alright, stay close to us. We'll handle everything from here," Aurora said.

The tree nymph nodded and quickly moved behind Aurora. She cast brief glances at the tainted holding the conscious man, standing idly beside them, her wild emotions concealed, then turned to look at the two mysterious women before her with curiosity and astonishment. The noises in the distance grew louder, indicating that several figures were approaching.

Soon, they arrived. Before them stood numerous fully armoured figures with protruding breastplates. Some were fully humanoid with distinct characteristics, while others had lower aquatic bodies resembling crabs, sea turtles, or octopus-like tendrils. Some walked on land, while others moved with streams of water flowing beneath them.

Each wielded different weapons-bows and arrows, crudely made swords, spears-and numbered about thirty.

For such a force to be mobilized instantly after the headless winged spawn's emergence meant that the Tidal Depths Kingdom was fully prepared to handle and suppress the appearance of any tainted in their orchards. Unfortunately, this was nothing but a false alarm. However, the thirty-man squad didn't see it that way. Upon sighting the decapitated leg on the ground, the strange scene of the

armoured Prismerion man bound by an unmoving tainted, and the two mysterious figures standing near it with a tree nymph hiding behind them, they clenched their weapons.

They immediately formed an attack formation, surrounding Aurora, Iris, and the others. "WHO ARE YOU? WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE? WERE YOU SENT BY THE BASTION OF THE WAILING GNARLED OR PERHAPS THE ASHEN HOPE TO LAUNCH AMBUSH IN OUR TERRITORY?!" bellowed the fish-tailed man standing on a floating stream of water at the forefront of the attack formation, his voice resonating across the surroundings.

He grasped his spear tightly, awaiting their response.

"Allow me to handle this, Goddess Aurora," Iris said.

Aurora nodded. "Alright, I'll leave this to you to handle," she responded. Her tone was cold and almost emotionless, unlike her previous soft, soothing voice, sending a chill through Iris's spine and through the others around them who heard her words.

Truthfully, Aurora was angry about the scene she had just witnessed, but she refrained from acting to avoid making the situation worse. After all, death would be too swift and merciful an end for their crimes.

Iris nodded and stepped forward, halting before the enemy's attack formation.

The thirty armoured men, who had overheard their conversation and made no effort to conceal it, frowned deeply and clenched their teeth in anger, their furious gazes fixed on Iris

and Aurora.

"I MAY NOT KNOW HOW YOU GOT PAST THE BARRIER, BUT YOU ARE TOO ARROGANT IF YOU THINK THE TWO OF YOU ALONE CAN ACCOMPLISH ANYTHING!" the leader shouted before giving a resounding order, "March forward!"

However, just as the thirty-man squad was about to obey his command, a voice rang out from behind them.



"STAND DOWN! WITHDRAW YOUR WEAPONS IMMEDIATELY!" a man shouted, pushing through the tight attack formation until he arrived at the front and turned to face them.

Iris looked at the man and recognized him as the Prismerion commander, one of the two leaders who had accompanied the Tidal Depths Kingdom's forces to meet the Bastion of the Wailing Gnarl and Ashen Hope. He now wore simpler attire— a shirt and black trousers. "ARE YOU DEAF? OR DO YOU DARE DEFY THE ORDERS OF A COMMANDER? WITHDRAW YOUR WEAPONS!" the man shouted again.

Upon hearing the man's words and recognizing him, the thirty-man squad hesitated, then reluctantly lowered their weapons and withdrew from their attack formation, returning to a

normal stance.

The leader stepped forward with a frown. "Commander-" he began to say, but before he could finish, a hand collided with his face with a loud 'BANG,' fracturing his nose and sending him tumbling from the floating stream of water onto the ground.

#### Chapter 1144: A Goddess's Rage Consumes All

The entire squad was stunned into silence by the commander's actions.

The commander stared at the barely conscious squad leader on the ground with clenched fists, then turned to address the group behind him with a bright smile on his face.

"I am Zale, Division Commander of the First Sword Division," Zale introduced himself. "I haven't yet thanked you properly for saving my life. If you have any issues, I'd be happy to help; you do not need to take action by yourself."

Zale was relieved that he had taken the initiative to intervene after hearing about the appearance of a tainted in the orchard. Thanks to the mysterious woman healing their injuries on the battlefield, he didn't need to visit a healer for a check-up.

Unfortunately, it wasn't just any ordinary taint that had appeared; it was one that easily eliminated the taint that nearly led their forces to their deaths.

Even though Zale didn't understand how they had arrived here from the castle, he didn't overthink it. This seemed almost tame compared to the other feats he had witnessed from them.

Zale maintained his smile, awaiting their response.

"Alright, since you've offered to help, I think it's best to leave this to a Division commander of the Tidal Depths Kingdom to handle," Aurora nodded.

Zale exhaled inwardly, relieved that the woman was someone reasonable.

But Aurora's following words left him dumbfounded.

"Sever their legs and bring me a whip for each of them," Aurora added.

Zale stood rooted in place, his eyes widening in shock, unsure how to respond. Finally, he opened his mouth and spoke with a trembling voice, "Kind travel-" but before he could finish, Aurora narrowed her eyes at him and said, "If you're unwilling to comply and help me take action, then step aside."

Zale tried to shake his head and speak, but to his surprise, he could not move or utter a word. It felt as though an invisible force had sealed his body and mouth.

'Why can't I move? What's going on?!' he thought, his eyes widening in shock and confusion. Then, something unbelievable happened.

Zale's body moved on its own toward the sizeable wooden warehouse. He arrived and turned around, his back just inches from the wall. Beads of sweat gathered on his forehead as he realized he was entirely under the woman's control.

Meanwhile, the thirty-man squad observing the scene was stunned and dumbfounded.

"What's going on? Why did the commander listen to the woman's words and move out of the way?!" asked a crab-bodied armoured man wielding a spear, his voice filled with astonishment.

"If he's not going to intervene, does that mean we're going to fight?" asked an armoured octopus-bodied man, his tendrils submerged in a floating stream of water beneath him. His expression shifted to one of hesitation and fear.

"Captain..."

They all voiced their thoughts to one another, unable to comprehend what had just unfolded before them. From Zale's actions, they were sure that the two individuals before them were powerful and not to be trifled with.

However, looking at the tainted, they remained unsure of how to react and sought guidance from their squad leader.

The squad leader, who had been punched to the ground by Zale, slowly regained his bearings and got to his feet, guiding the floating water beneath him to stabilize his stance.

He glanced at the frozen Zale, clenching his teeth in anger, and then turned to look at the two women with a glint in his eyes.

A sudden thought crossed his mind-the rewards he might receive for stopping them. No matter who these people were, they would surely be punished for their actions. If he were the one to bring them in, he would undoubtedly be heavily rewarded, along with a promotion, pushing him closer to achieving his dream of becoming a Knight.

"EVERYONE, BLOCK YOUR EARS AND GET INTO ATTACK FORMATION! WAIT FOR MY SIGNAL!" the squad leader commanded loudly.

The thirty-man squad pulled pieces of cloth from their pockets and stuffed them into their ears, quickly forming an attack formation, once again surrounding Aurora and the others.

Suddenly, a voice sounded from behind him.

"Help me! I can't move my body!" one of the armoured men screamed as he walked out of formation toward Aurora, unable to control or stop his steps. His eyes widened in horror, filled with disbelief.

He stopped before her, his lips sealed, his words buried in his throat.

Aurora's expression remained expressionless as she stretched her hand forward and tapped his forehead, delving into his memories.

After a few minutes, the armoured man squirmed in pain, his eyes unfocused, darting from side to side, before collapsing onto the ground.

Aurora withdrew her hand, a frown crossing her face as she sifted through the memories she had just assimilated.

All of this transpired within seconds.

Zale's heart shivered at the unfolding scene.

The squad leader swallowed hard, his body trembling with fear. He took several steps back, followed by the entire squad. They couldn't understand how one of their own had been controlled despite blocking their ears.

Iris observed the scene, slightly trembling at Aurora's indifferent look as the events unfolded. She recognized this side of Aurora-the Princess of the Garden-the woman who had lived long enough to witness countless generations of kings and queens in the former Prismerion kingdom.

Despite seeing her softer side after the Supreme Leader mysteriously stole her heart, Iris had never questioned Aurora's orders or gone against her wishes. Doing so felt like stepping on a

live landmine.

"Iris..." Aurora called softly, "...sever their limbs and ensure no one escapes."

Iris's body stiffened upon hearing her words, but she nodded firmly. She drew a blade from her waist and walked toward the thirty-man squad.

[Energy Level - 323 BEM]

[Energy Level - 295 BEM]

[Energy Level - 231 BEM]

[Energy Level - 155 BEM]

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They all possessed energy levels at 323 BEM and below, indicating they were all two-star warriors. Such a number was impressive, but it was nothing noteworthy compared to the gods' chosens, with their formidable equipment, and warriors with their gifts.

The squad leader ground his teeth and raised his right hand, signalling his men before dropping it. "ATTACK!!" he screamed at the top of his lungs, charging forward.

Surprisingly, as the group advanced, fifteen of them broke away from the thirty-man squad

and charged toward Aurora, the tainted, and the tree nymph.

Seeing this, Iris frowned, swung her sword, and vanished from her position.

"AHH!!"

"AHH!!"

"AHH!!"

Each time Iris reappeared, tails and legs were severed, and the armoured men fell to the ground, screaming in agony. Sometimes, two limbs dropped at once. Within seconds, the thirty-man squad was reduced to nine.

It was hardly a battle, more of an absolute massacre.

Realizing they were facing a monster and stood no chance, the remaining soldiers dropped

their weapons and tried to flee. But they couldn't outrun Iris's blade. She intercepted them, and within moments, the entire thirty-man squad had been defeated with a single swing

each.

The ground was covered in pools of crimson blood.

Iris swung the blood from her blade and returned to her previous position.

Aurora nodded approvingly at the scene before facing the tree nymph behind her. "Take this

whip and punish him as you see fit," Aurora said, producing a black whip out of thin air, startling the tree nymph, whose eyes widened in shock.

After hearing Aurora's words, the tree nymph was stunned and in disbelief, unsure if she had

heard correctly.

"If you don't want it, then I-" Aurora began, but before she could finish, the tree nymph immediately took the whip and bowed gratefully, "Thank you."

Aurora nodded in response.

The tree nymph straightened her posture and turned to face the armoured man who had previously whipped her continuously. She swung the whip against the ground, creating a sharp crackle that echoed in the air.

The armoured man, held by the headless winged spawn, wore a pleading expression. Having witnessed everything that had transpired, he knew there was no escape. His only hope now was to beg the tree nymph for mercy.

"Please, spare me! I was only following orders from the higher-ups!..." he pleaded, his voice breaking as a scream tore from his lips when the whip lashed down on his body, easily tearing through his armour and opening a gash on his flesh.

The tree nymph paused, glancing at the injury she had inflicted with just one swing and then at the whip in her hand in surprise. Tightening her grip, she lashed the man again.

"AHHH!!"

Aurora turned her gaze away from the scene and focused on the crippled squad. She activated her divine skill, 'Eternal Chaos Legion.' Instantly, headless, winged spawns began to emerge

from thin air, one by one, until a hundred filled the area.

Zale and the others watched in horror at the sight.

So many tainted! The Tidal Depths Kingdom was under attack!

They wanted to scream and report it to their superiors, but none had the courage to speak.

#### Chapter 1145: By Decree Of Strength

Aurora gave an order to the headless winged spawn, and in an instant, they vanished. Aurora turned to Zale and released him from his restraints.

Zale collapsed to the ground, unable to stand on his quivering legs, and took several deep breaths to calm his racing emotions.

....

Zale was born from the affair of a common maid who once served under the master of one of the Tidal Depths Kingdom's influential noble houses. The man was powerful and deeply respected, but he recklessly sowed his seed among many of his servants.

Their affair was a secret she kept hidden, clutching it to her heart even when she was cast out of the household after he learned of her pregnancy. Zale grew up with his mother alone, and she spun stories of his father's honour, influence, and strength.

She called him noble, but he was anything but.

Zale was young and naive, so he clung to these stories. As they filled his heart, so did his desire to become a son his father could be proud of. If asked whether it was worth sacrificing everything—childhood, joy, and companionship—just to gain strength, to become better than the man his mother swore his father was, his answer would always be:

Yes!

When he came of age and acquired his first voidheart, he swiftly joined the Tidal Depths Kingdom's forces, seeking to climb the ranks and earn the qualifications to meet his father and showcase his achievements.

Years passed, and he finally petitioned for an audience with his father. Upon his arrival at the noble household, he was met with indifferent faces and sceptical stares. His father was nothing like the man his mother had described. He was cruel, showing no recognition of him. "One day, he will see you, and he will be proud," his mother had said.

Zale held on to his mother's words and continued seeking his father's recognition. Only one of his father's wives greeted him with the motherly warmth and kindness he had longed for, and he swiftly fell under her care.

However, things spiralled out of control. One night, his father was found dead, and the blame was cast quickly on him. His kind stepmother wept and accused him of ambushing the man he once wished to honour. That's when he saw her true face.

The rest of the family clamoured for his blood, but he managed to escape. Unfortunately, the news quickly spread, and a bounty was placed on his head, forcing him to flee back home to hide.

When he returned, his mother, heartbroken upon hearing the events, revealed her obsession with loving a man who had never loved her. She had moulded Zale to grasp something she could never attain.



In her grief, she cursed him in a fit of rage and took her own life.

Zale was left broken. Soon after, news arose that his stepmother had taken control of the noble household and brought in a lover. But her plans were quickly thwarted by one of his father's brothers, who was a far more powerful man who swiftly uncovered the truth, avenged his brother's death, and cancelled the bounty on Zale's head.

He offered Zale a place in his household and promised to support his growth within the Tidal Depths Kingdom's ranks. Despite losing everything and becoming a hollow shell of himself, he accepted the offer, choosing to prove that he could be more than his father, a better man than the one his mother had lied about.

He wanted to show that he was far more capable, to the point where there would be no comparison.

If Zale was asked whether it was worth sacrificing everything—joy, peace, and companionship—to become better than the man his mother had sworn his father was, his answer would always be undoubtedly:

Yes!

....

Zale shivered, sensing the mysterious woman's piercing gaze on him. Even when facing knights and the powers far beyond his reach, which he could only dream of attaining, he had never encountered such an overwhelming defeat, where his opponent barely lifted a hand and was already subdued before he could even draw his weapon.

"What realm of strength is this?" Zale thought.

"I need you to deliver a message to King Izak. I would have done it myself, but it wouldn't be proper etiquette," Aurora said calmly.

Zale raised his head, briefly turning to look at Aurora. He swallowed hard, then nodded. "...I will... help you deliver the message," he replied.

Though he wasn't sure why she wanted to meet with the King here, her actions showed her intentions. She sought to take over the Tidal Depths Kingdom. Zale didn't doubt her capability. In fact, he doubted whether even the hidden figures within the Kingdom, those with power surpassing the knights, could stop her.

Aurora nodded and turned her gaze away from Zale. However, noticing he still hadn't moved from his position, she halted and narrowed her eyes at him.

"You are free from your restraints. You may leave immediately," Aurora said.

Zale regained his composure and placed both hands on the ground. Then, astonishingly, he pressed his head firmly against the earth and spoke loudly, "...Great Warrior, how do I become as strong as you?!"

His words stunned Aurora. Even Iris looked at him in disbelief, glancing at him once more.

Aurora stared at him, remaining silent. She sensed his sincerity and knew he had no hidden motives. Yet, she wasn't sure what had driven him to ask such a question. She was tempted to read his memories.

After a brief pause with no response, Zale added, "Please, I'll do anything you want if you share this knowledge with me." He tightened his fists and gritted his teeth, awaiting their

reply.

Finally, Aurora responded, "You can't become as strong as I am. A mortal's body cannot fathom the kind of strength I possess." She paused, observing him curiously, waiting for his

reaction.

'A strength beyond what a mortal's body can hold,' Zale muttered under his breath. His eyes remained fixed on Aurora before shifting to Iris. "What about her? How can I become as strong as she is?" His fists clenched tightly, blood seeping from them.

"You can't," Aurora said, shaking her head again. "She has surpassed the limits of mortal constraints. But if you're truly intent on your desire, I'll tell you how to achieve your goal. The only way to become as powerful as she is to receive the blessing of a divine being."

Her words echoed in Zale's ears like crashing waves collapsing upon one another.

Aurora's words bewildered Zale. Soon, his expression morphed into realization and shock as he shifted his gaze between her and Iris.

Who would have thought the two individuals they brought into the Tidal Depths Kingdom were divine beings?

Zale swiftly pressed his head against the ground again, hurriedly saying, "Goddess, please bless me!" His voice was tinged with excitement and nervousness.

Aurora furrowed her brows, frowning as she realized that her words had helped Zale recognize her identity. Though she wasn't concerned about revealing herself, having made no effort to hide it, as it would be helpful when confronting the Tidal Depths Kingdom, she acknowledged it would be bothersome if revealed too early.

"I can't because you are not worthy of my blessing," Aurora responded, shaking her head.

She was still training with her mother and hadn't fully learned the complex process of creating a Divine Apostle crest, so she couldn't make anyone her divine apostle yet. Even if she could, she would never choose someone with such low strength who hadn't pledged

allegiance to Paradise.

"But," Aurora continued, "if the entirety of the Tidal Depths Kingdom chooses to pledge their loyalty to Paradise, then you can grow just as powerful."

Zale's face paled, only to brighten again as Aurora finished speaking.

"Thank you, goddess! Thank you... thank you..." Zale said, repeatedly raising and pressing his

head to the ground in reverence toward Aurora. He wasn't sure what this 'Paradise' was, but he didn't care. All that mattered to him was getting stronger.

Zale stood up and bowed. "I will deliver the message to the King immediately and ensure I gather as many as I can pledge their allegiance to Paradise!" he declared.

As a division commander, he was confident he could convince many. Without hesitation, Zale turned around and ran as fast as he could, a crazed smile spreading across his face. Aurora watched as he disappeared from view, deep in thought. She had only said those words to make him willingly pledge his allegiance to Paradise and to see if, due to his position, he could convince others to do the same. Having someone work for her from within the enemy's ranks was a clever strategy to hasten their assimilation to Paradise.

Iris, however, looked bewildered, unsure how to react to the scene that had just unfolded before her.

Aurora turned her focus to the side.

At that moment, a tree nymph knelt on the ground, weeping profusely, while an armoured

man stared blankly into the air, his injuries mysteriously healed despite the countless lashes he had endured.

#### Chapter 1146: Veiled Intentions

Aurora walked forward and stopped beside her. "Are you okay, child?"

The tree nymph immediately stood up, wiped away her tears, and bowed toward Aurora. "Thank you, goddess," she said, her voice filled with appreciation.

It was clear she had overheard the conversation between Aurora and Zale.

"Gather everyone in the orchard. I want to speak with them," Aurora instructed.

The tree nymph glanced at the numerous armoured figures lying on the ground in the distance, a look of understanding flashing in her eyes. She nodded quickly and ran excitedly into the forest to call the rest of her sisters. She sensed that today was the day they would finally gain their freedom.

Aurora watched her go, her lips curving into a smile.

....

Within a vast hall of smooth stone supported by four large, thick pillars, the walls were lined with crimson-glowing volcanic tendrils that warmed the atmosphere. Yet, cool air still permeated the environment.

Every corner of the room was adorned with broken weapons from war-swords, shattered shields, spears, and more-some still stained with the blood of their enemies.

Lanterns hanging at various corners illuminated the hall. A wide rectangular table surrounded by eight high-backed wooden chairs stood in the centre.

The Emperor of the Bastion of the Ashen Hope Territory was seated at the table with two women - the Queens beside him and the High Advisors.

At the far end of the table were two simple wooden chairs occupied by Brane and Zara.

"What are the benefits if we pledge our allegiance to this 'Paradise'?" asked a tall, hulking man, around 8ft (2.4m) tall, with grey shoulder-length hair and piercing blue eyes. He wore a dark tunic, but the faint brilliance of Vylkr-alloy-forged armour gleamed beneath it.

His name was Gaverick, the Emperor of the Bastion of the Ashen Hope Territory.

Brane nodded in acknowledgement and quickly launched into his explanation. "...Simply put, as long as you pledge your allegiance to Paradise, you won't have to worry about safety or food, and we might even be able to uncover a potential cure for the Death Plague," he explained before falling silent.

However, the hall erupted into a cacophony of noise when Brane finished speaking.

"Even though I don't doubt the existence of this Paradise, you seem confident about its ability to find a cure for the Death Plague despite only hearing about it several minutes ago," said a muscular man with tanned skin and black hair. He wore a sleeveless grey tunic that exposed his muscular physique, with Vylkr alloy-forged armour beneath it.

His name was Robbick, and he was the first-seat High Advisor.

"How did you suddenly discover us? And how are we supposed to believe you when you say our world is a small, enclosed space?" he added, his piercing gaze fixed on Brane.

Brane expertly answered all their questions, no matter how difficult, in a way everyone could understand. His manner of addressing each person made it seem as though he already knew their personalities, which made the group uneasy.

They found it hard to believe he hadn't gathered information about them beforehand, as that would explain his flawless responses.

However, that wasn't the case-it was merely a personal skill Brane had cultivated.

"I don't think your world is small, but when compared to the outside world, there's no comparison. As for the rest of your questions, you won't be able to understand them no matter what I say. The only way is for you to witness everything yourself," Brane responded, shaking his head.

He chose not to reveal everything, subtly implying that they didn't possess the qualifications to know more. Also, showing too much too soon could cause more harm than good.

Robbick frowned at Brane's words, sensing his intentions. He withdrew his gaze, his face a mix of contemplation and scepticism.

"If we pledge our allegiance to Paradise, would we still be in charge of our forces, or would we be replaced?" Gaverick, the Emperor of the Bastion of the Ashen Hope Territory, asked, his contemplative gaze fixed on Brane.

"Naturally, you'll still be in charge of your forces, but your authority will only be second to the Supreme Leader and the Key Leaders, who will be the primary decision-makers," Brane

replied.

A sudden silence permeated the room.

Hearing Brane's response, Gaverick, the women beside him and the High Advisors frowned deeply.

Finally, Gaverick replied, "If that's the case, I'll have to refuse your offer, Great Warrior Brane. We have lived in this ocean for so long. And we will continue to do so and survive. Now that we know there's a world out there, we will stop at nothing until we uncover it."

As he finished speaking, the women and the High Advisors nodded in agreement. It was clear they were unwilling to bow their heads to Paradise. Though Paradise seemed like a place too good to be true-where anyone in a dire situation might be tempted to submit-the thought of losing their authority and becoming just another statistic in Paradise's population made the idea far less appealing.

"Also, nothing good comes for free, and Paradise would not extend its hand to any force, especially one as weak as ours, without reason. Right?" Gaverick added, a glint of suspicion in his eyes as he awaited Brane's response.

Brane sighed wearily and nodded. "Yes. All the Bastion of the Ashen Hope residents would be required to follow commands and cooperate with other forces under Paradise. You would never be given a task too great for you to handle," he replied, his tone filled with pride.

"The Supreme Leader dreams of creating a sanctuary for every race in need in this desolate world, so I guarantee this alliance would benefit your people and the Bastion of the Ashen Hope far more than it benefits Paradise. My companions have already extended this offer to the Tidal Depths Kingdom and the Bastion of the Wailling Gnarled Territory, so I advise you to reconsider your decision."

While many saw Orion only for his potential to become the strongest warrior in the village, Brane was the first to recognize Orion's brilliance and personally pushed for him to become the next Village Chief.

Brane felt incredibly proud of him. If only Orion's father had been alive, he would have rewarded him handsomely for adhering to the village's traditions and raising such a fine

successor.

Nonetheless, Brane had always been generous in rewarding Orion's family from the start. Upon hearing Brane's words, Gaverick snorted inwardly.

He could hardly believe that a man with such power under his command would harbour no

hidden motives. It would have been more believable if this supreme leader had been a power-hungry tyrant offering a slave contract. That would give them room to bargain and find a way

to stand on equal footing.

Instead, he seemed to be handing them water in a desert, promising to quench their thirst without any hidden agenda.

However, after hearing that the same offer had been extended to the Bastion of the Gnarled Territory and the Tidal Depths Kingdom, Gaverick reconsidered his stance.

The room fell silent, all eyes on Gaverick as they awaited his response.

After a moment, Gaverick refocused his gaze on Brane. Just as he was about to speak, his eyes fell on the jar of wine and the bowl of Kalnir fruits sitting before Brane and Zara. Since the meeting had started, they had neither eaten any of the Kalnir fruits nor touched the wine, causing Gaverick to furrow his brows suspiciously.

"Aren't you going to taste our offerings? Especially since you've travelled from such a distant region-it would reflect poorly on us if we couldn't satisfy your tastes," Gaverick said,

masking his concern behind a smile.

Brane frowned. According to Zara, who had used her gift to inform him of potential dangers,

the fruits and wine were poisoned.



Although his robust constitution could withstand it, he preferred not to take any chances. He understood their caution and had planned to address the matter once he had successfully brought the Bastion of the Ashen Hope under Paradise's influence.

After all, he would have consumed the poison if not for Zara's timely warning.

He knew he was powerful, but attacking the Bastion of the Ashen Hope without fully

understanding its depth would be reckless.

Besides, this was the first human force they had encountered, so he hesitated to act too hastily. Yet, after receiving Orion's message regarding the nymphs and learning that the meal had been poisoned, Brane couldn't overlook the offence.

Under Gaverick's watchful gaze, Brane grabbed the wine jar with his right hand, tilted it to the

side, and poured its contents onto the ground.

Gaverick's expression turned to one of shock.

'Did he discover the poison hidden within? How is that possible?' His mind raced, trying to figure out how Brane had uncovered the poison they had meticulously concealed in it. The two women and the High Advisors were equally stunned, their thoughts racing.

#### Chapter 1147: A Fatal Meal

Suddenly, Gaverick's expression turned stunned before twisting into rage.

"What is the meaning of this? If the meal wasn't to your satisfaction, was there any need to waste it by throwing it away?!" Gaverick demanded, his voice tinged with immense anger.

The expressions of those around them also twist in anger and disapproval at Brane's actions. Brane snorted at their reactions.

"Are you going to pretend you didn't know the meal was poisoned?" Brane asked, his tone deadly serious.

Hearing Brane's accusation, Gaverick's expression turned to shock.

"Poison?!" Gaverick exclaimed, his voice steady as he shook his head. "The fruits were picked from one of our finest orchards as a feast for your arrival. There's no way it's poisoned. Are you certain you haven't mistaken, great warrior?" His eyes locked onto Brane, but he couldn't see through his composed mask.

On the inside, Gaverick's heart raced with fear. 'He uncovered the poison... but how?' His thoughts raced wildly.

Brane clicked his tongue in thought. They were even more thick-skinned than he had anticipated. Nonetheless, he wasn't new to this game and decided to play along.

"If you don't believe me, verify it yourself," Brane said, lifting the basket into the air with Celestial energy. The basket vanished instantly and reappeared on the opposite side of the table, right before Gaverick and the others.

The scene left everyone in the room stunned. They had seen the bowl lift from the table but couldn't keep up with its movement as it traversed the distance and reappeared before them.

A shiver ran down their spines.

Gaverick quickly composed himself, his expression darkening into a frown. He picked a fruit from the basket, scrutinized it briefly, and then signalled to one of the guards.

The guard standing beside one of the four stony, thick pillars in the hall swiftly approached the large rectangular table and stopped before them.

Gaverick handed him the fruit. "Eat it," he ordered.

The guard hesitated for a moment before bringing the fruit to his mouth. He bit into it, chewed, and swallowed.

Brane, Zara, Gaverick, the two Queens, the high advisors-everyone in the room-watched closely, waiting to see what would happen.

After five minutes, the guard's body trembled violently, and he collapsed onto the ground. His eyes rolled back, turning white, and his body continued to convulse before falling unconscious.

Two guards immediately rushed forward and knelt beside him to check his condition. "He's unconscious, nearly in a death-like state," one of the guards reported, his voice trembling as he looked at Gaverick and the others' solemn expressions.

"Take him to one of the Stronghold's healers for treatment," Gaverick commanded.

The guard nodded, lifted the unconscious man with the help of his companion, and quickly exited the room.

A sudden silence blanketed the hall.

Suddenly...

BANG!

A loud fist slamming against the wooden table resonated across the hall. "It's those ungrateful nymphs! After all we've done for them, how do they choose to repay us? Poisoning our esteemed guest?!" exclaimed a tall, fair-skinned woman with long, silky black hair in an ankle-length blue gown. Beneath her dress, she wore an armour forged from Vylkr alloy.

Her name was Cora, the second-seat high advisor.

Her face twisted with rage, her teeth clenched tightly.

"We need to make them regret this treachery," Cora continued, her fierce gaze on Gaverick.

"I agree! We can't let this slide or allow them to trample on our name!" said a tall, grim-faced man with a shaved head and thick beard. "If our guest hadn't detected the poison, the consequences would've been disastrous."

His name was Raydon, the fourth-seat high advisor.

He wore a light brown shirt paired with black trousers, and, like the others, a Vylkr alloy armour was concealed beneath.

Gaverick stayed silent momentarily, his face contemplating, before finally nodding. "You're all right. We need to punish them appropriately and ensure they regret their actions," he said.

Then, he turned his gaze toward a long blonde-haired woman seated to his right-one of the two Queens beside him.

"Will you be able to handle this task, Leri?" Gaverick asked.

"I will do my best not to disappoint you, Emperor," Leri responded with a firm nod, her tone and expression grave.

Gaverick nodded in return, then shifted his gaze toward Brane and Zara.

"Once we have apprehended the criminals responsible, we will hand them over to you so you may decide their fate," Gaverick said. Then, with a curious expression, he added, "May I ask how you detected that your meal was poisoned? I'm simply curious. If you choose not to answer, that's fine." He shook his head slightly, hoping their performance had been

convincing.

Watching the drama unfold, Brane shook his head in disappointment, wondering how they had sunk to such a disgraceful level.

'How despicable,' Zara thought, her expression solemn.

"Husband, I don't think there's any need to bring them to Paradise. We shouldn't risk infecting it with their corruption. This place suits them well. We should gather only the nymphs and take them to Anara, where she can provide them with proper care," Zara said, her emotions drastically rising as she mentioned them.

"We don't have to judge them all the same way. I believe many deserve to be freed from this pocket dimension," Brane responded. Then, his gaze sharpened. "Regardless, I agree that we should focus on the nymphs while we filter through the others."

Their conversation was concealed behind the masks they wore.

Upon hearing Gaverick's question, Brane nodded. "My wife was the one who sensed the poison hidden in the meal. I can confidently say that nothing escapes her senses," he said,

gesturing toward Zara.

Gaverick's gaze flickered toward Zara, the woman wearing a half-pink and fiery red mask coloured horizontally with numerous tendril-like designs engraved on its surface, similar to

Brane's.

'It seems this 'Paradise' has far deeper and more terrifying roots than I imagined,' Gaverick thought, his mind racing.

Despite not underestimating Paradise after what he had heard from Knight Darian-Brane's and Zara's terrifying display of skill-it still felt he had significantly underestimated them. "That's a truly fascinating ability. I wonder if you could lend us a hand while interrogating the criminals responsible for this to help us identify the one responsible more quickly," Gaverick suggested.

## Chapter 1148: Unmasking The Perpetrators

If they accused any of the nymphs or refused to assist, it would confirm that they were bluffing. The only plausible explanation is that they had become cautious after learning what had happened with King Izak from the Tidal Depths Kingdom. If so, they were both more intelligent and luckier than he had anticipated.

"No, I don't think there's any need for that," Zara responded, shaking her head gently. Gaverick smiled slightly at her words, but his smile faltered when she added, "...because the criminals are already in this room. I can point them out now so we can begin their punishment immediately."

'You want to play this game? Fine, I'll play along too,' Zara thought.

"...Are you certain?" Gaverick asked, his voice trembling, swallowing hard as he stared at Zara in shock.

"Yes, I am," Zara replied with a calm nod.

Gaverick glanced around at the individuals seated beside him. Their expressions ranged from shock to nervousness and fear.

Refocusing on Zara, he nodded. "Alright. I also want to know who the traitor among us is so we can properly deal with them," he said.

If things spiralled out of control, Gaverick was prepared to show them that the Bastion of Ashen Hope were more formidable than they believed. Fortunately, he had made arrangements for such contingencies.

Zara nodded silently and shifted her focus toward Cora and Raydon, the two high advisors who had spoken earlier. She extended her hand and pointed at them.

"They are the ones responsible for poisoning our meal. Let's begin," she stated.

Cora and Raydon's eyes widened, nearly bulging out of their sockets as they sat frozen in their seats.

Even Gaverick, the two Queens, and the remaining advisors continued to stare at Zara in shock.

"THIS IS RIDICULOUS, EMPEROR! SHE'S LYING! HOW CAN I, A HIGH ADVISOR, DO SOMETHING SO FOOLISH?! THERE'S NO WAY I'M RESPONSIBLE FOR THIS!" Cora was

the first to snap out of her shock, shouting in protest, her expression a mix of fear and feigned outrage.

"I AM NOT RESPONSIBLE EITHER! I THINK THIS SO-CALLED UNIQUE ABILITY OF HERS IS FAKE, AND SHE'S SIMPLY TRYING TO INTIMIDATE US! WHO'S TO SAY THEY DIDN'T POISON THE MEAL THEMSELVES WHILE WE WEREN'T LOOKING!" Raydon quickly followed, his voice brimming with anger.

Despite their bold claims, their hearts pounded in fear, as they both knew the truth-Zara's accusations were spot on.

Before the meeting, Gaverick had instructed Cora to ensure the poison was carefully placed in the meal to trap the guests, hoping to extract vital information about how they arrived, and possibly use them as leverage against the others who had gone to the Tidal Depths Kingdom and the Bastion of the Wailing Gnarled territory.

Cora was guilty, but they couldn't understand why she implicated Raydon.

Unbeknownst to them, Zara had done so purely for her own amusement. She would have chosen one more individual if it wouldn't have spoiled the fun that was about to unfold.

'This will teach you not to play silly games with your elders,' she thought.

"Silence!" Gaverick commanded, causing both Cora and Raydon to fall silent instantly. He cast a brief glance at them before turning back to Zara.

"Great warrior, I can assure you that none of my high advisors can commit such a crime. Perhaps you could use your unique ability again to..." Gaverick began, clearing his throat, but before he could finish, a powerful pressure descended on his shoulders, silencing and drenching him in sweat.

The pressure swept through the hall, suffocating the atmosphere and weighing heavily on everyone present. The guards stationed near the four thick, stony pillars and large entrance metallic door collapsed to their knees. They tried to stand, but their efforts were in vain.

"You invited us into your territory and poisoned the meal you served. Fortunately, we detected it in time. Yet you dare accuse us of lying when we point out the culprits responsible for this crime.

Shouldn't the fact that we detected the poison be enough proof of my wife's abilities?" Brane said coldly, his gaze fixed on Gaverick and the others.

"Or are you trying to insinuate that we poisoned our meal after offering to help bring you out of this miserable area? I have been truthful throughout this meeting, yet this is how you treat us."

Bane's voice reverberated across the hall as he spoke, each word striking deep into their ears.

[ Energy Level - 1598 BEM ]

[ Energy Level - 1,200 BEM]

[ Energy Level - 1,120 BEM ]

[ Energy Level - 1,129 BEM]

...

Brane glanced at Gaverick's energy level, reading it at 1598 BEM, before shifting his gaze to the Queens and advisors beside him and then to the guards.

[ Energy Level - 1,123 BEM]

[ Energy Level - 1,000 BEM ]

[ Energy Level - 1,026 BEM]

Each was a three-star warrior, relatively strong. But to Brane, it was a disappointment. He had expected them to be much stronger, especially considering they didn't seem to use the same procedure as the Village in harnessing Vylkr energy.

Nonetheless, Brane's curiosity deepened.



What convinced them that poisoning him and his wife was a good idea? They didn't strike him as fools who would act so recklessly without thought.

Brane desired to corner them until they revealed all their cards. That way, they'd have no grounds to claim fault when he acted ruthlessly.

Unable to move, Gaverick clenched his teeth and said, "Please, great travellers, calm down..." But before he could finish, the pressure on him intensified, pressing his body deeper into the table, causing cracks to spread across its surface.

Gaverick gritted his teeth in frustration, realizing he had no choice but to act. He had to suppress Brane or risk incurring more of his wrath.

Suddenly, the entire hall began to shake.

BOOM!! BOOM!!

Sensing the vibrations, Gaverick smiled inwardly. He would show them that the foundation of the Bastion of the Wailing Gnarled wasn't so shallow that they could be suppressed in their

own territory.

BANG!!

The metallic door burst open, crashing to the other side of the room. Dust swirled as the sudden commotion grabbed Brane's and Zara's attention.

Chapter 1149: Arch-Knights, Who Is Her Mommy?

The sound of the wind whistling echoed in the hall as various figures shot through the swirling debris. While others could barely perceive their movements, Brane and Zara could see them clearly.

In an instant, eight figures tightly surrounded Brane and Zara.

Brane and Zara glanced at them, frowning.

The eight individuals were tall, and their bodies were engulfed in blazing black, inky flames similar to those they had seen Knight Darian use in battle.

They also possessed enlarged limbs-arms, legs, or torsos-disfigured in a way resembling the tainted beings they had encountered. Dressed in fully plated bulky Vylkr-forged armour, their appearances were concealed, making it difficult to discern who they were.

However, it was clear that these were not ordinary humans. They each wielded finely crafted weapons.

[ Energy Level - 4,300 BEM ]

[ Energy Level - 4,700 BEM]

[ Energy Level - 4,212 BEM]

[ Energy Level - 4,596 BEM ]

...

The highest energy level was 4,800 BEM, and the lowest was 4,200 BEM. All eight were four- star warriors, the strongest individuals Brane and Zara had encountered since entering the pocket dimension.

"Something's not right," Brane muttered, scrutinizing them. He could sense an

overwhelming amount of Vylkr energy emanating from their bodies. They weren't trying to hide it, making it easy to detect.

"Can you sense it too, husband?" Zara asked, her expression solemn.

"Yes, there's something weird about them," Brane responded.

It was remarkable to reach such strength without the aid of a Vylkr Fusion Armlet or the Devourer's Bracelet. But Brane was more puzzled by how they could effortlessly control such an enormous amount of Vylkr energy without a Vylkr container.

He even suspected that this might be the reason for their disfigured bodies.

Unfortunately, the group had decided to share the information they gathered only after collecting everything from the various forces to compare and verify it. The exception had been the nymphs, so Brane and Zara were unaware of the information that Orion and Fifi had discovered about the Void Heart and the residents' ability to produce Vylkr energy naturally.

With Brane's attention diverted, Gaverick and the others stood up, one by one, and distanced themselves from the unfolding situation.

Brane turned his gaze toward them. "Who are they?" he asked, his voice tinged with curiosity.

"They are the commanders of the Arch-Knights corps," Gaverick responded with a smile. "Warriors who have entered the Mirror Realm and returned successfully, escaping the fate of becoming tainted. They are the foundation of strength in the Bastion of Ashen Hope Territory."

Brane and Zara frowned at his words. They understood that these individuals were the commanders of the strongest forces within the Bastion, but they couldn't grasp the whole meaning of what Gaverick had said.

"I heard you were powerful individuals who had just arrived in this ocean, so I decided to take precautions before the meeting in case something unexpected happened. Fortunately, I was a step ahead. I don't know how strong you are, but before the power of the void flame, your strength is meaningless," Gaverick said confidently, his gaze sweeping over them.

He then turned to the Arch-Knight Commanders and commanded, "Restrain them! If they prove too difficult, you have permission to eliminate them!"

"Understood, Emperor," came a hoarse voice from the Arch-Knight Commander with the highest BEM level.

In an instant, all eight vanished from their positions, reappearing beside Brane and Zara with their weapons raised, ready to incapacitate them.

Their shadows rippled, and two headless, winged Vylkr spawns emerged from within, halting the knights' attacks-four for each-and binding them with their tendrils.

"What is this?" one of the heavily armoured Arch-Knights asked in a hoarse voice tinged with surprise. The remaining seven shared the same astonishment.

Surprisingly, their attacks were effortlessly blocked by the strange creatures.

Without hesitation, the intensity of the inky black flames on the Arch-Knights' bodies surged, spreading toward the headless, winged spawns and their tendrils.

However, before the fire could spread further, they were instantly quenched.

Witnessing this, the Arch-Knights' gazes trembled, their hearts turning cold. They tried to break free from the restraints but found themselves unable to do so. In the next moment, something unexpected happened.

The black flames extinguished on the bodies of the headless, winged spawns reignited with an intensity far surpassing the Arch-Knights' own. Before they could comprehend what was happening, the tendrils that had restrained them transformed into sharp blades, slicing through their armour and attacking various parts of their bodies, incapacitating them.

"ARGHH!!"

"ARGHH!!"

The Arch-Knights fell one by one, bleeding profusely, their crimson-black blood staining the shattered tiled floor. Within minutes of their arrival, the entire commanders of the Arch-

Knights' corps had been incapacitated.

Observing the stunning scene from across the hall, Gaverick and the others were at a loss for words. The Bastion of Ashen Hope's strongest forces had been unable to retaliate from the moment the attack began until they were incapacitated by the headless, winged spawns that had emerged from the shadows.

Based on what they had heard from Knight Darian, they had thought the headless, winged creatures weren't that powerful and had only repelled the hordes of tainted with their numbers. But that clearly wasn't the case. Even the void flames had been absorbed and used against them.

Everyone present knew the Arch-Knights' capabilities, especially their commanders, so seeing them defeated so quickly was something they still hadn't fully processed.

Suddenly, Brane and Zara's shadows rippled like water again, and more headless Vylkr spawns emerged, subduing Gaverick and the rest before spreading across the hall to block the

entrance.

The captives were then brought back to their seats and restrained while the guards were placed back at the four pillars and before the entrance door. Before they could comprehend what was happening, they realized they were sealed inside the meeting hall and at Brane and

Zara's mercy.

Gaverick and the others began to sweat profusely.

"Can you explain what they are and about this Mirror Realm?" Brane asked, gesturing toward the fallen Arch-Knight commanders.

Instead of responding, Gaverick asked, "Who are you? What are they? This isn't the kind of power a mortal should be capable of possessing!"

CRACK!

Gaverick's right shoulder was crushed instantly. He bit his lip, suppressing the scream that threatened to escape, his body trembling with pain.

"I have already introduced our identities truthfully to you. And you're right," Brane nodded, "this kind of power isn't something a mortal should possess."

Gaverick's trembling gaze widened in astoundment, not expecting Brane to confirm his words.

"There are many things I want to learn about this ocean and the Bastion of Ashen Hope, so let's continue with the meeting," Brane said.

Gaverick attempted to ask another question, but feeling a tremendous force emerging on his leg and hand, he held back his words and nodded, "Let's continue. I will tell you everything you want to know."

"That's good. Let's restart from the beginning," Brane responded.

...

Paradise

"Ahh!" Nadia clutched her head in pain as she rose from her slumber. She sat upright, looking around the unfamiliar bed and wooden walls in confusion before a flood of memories crashed into her mind, forcing her to remember what had transpired earlier that day.

She had found her sisters, the ones she had only heard about from the elders at the Bastion of Walling Gnarled. They welcomed her warmly even though she was an unfamiliar figure. Even though it seemed like it was only her three nymph sisters, it didn't matter-they were still her sisters.

Nadia realized that everything Orion had said was true. The tree nymphs weren't being used as slaves to run orchards but were doing so out of their free will to provide Paradise with their

fruits.

Nadia's lips curved into a smile. She couldn't wait to return to the Bastion of Wailing Gnarled and inform the others about everything that had transpired.

"I'll need to take care of a few things first and inform him about some important details,"

Nadia muttered.

After all, she didn't want to cause problems for the tree nymphs in Paradise.

Suddenly, the entrance door opened, and a small golden figure dressed in a casual flowering

dress entered the room. However, she halted, her eyes widening in shock and surprise as they locked gazes. Soon, her shocked expression turned to curiosity.

At first, Nadia was stunned as she looked at the golden little figure. But the longer she scrutinized her, her eyes widened in shock and astonishment.

Before she could speak, the little figure rushed out of the room.

"Mommy, the strange woman is awake!" a loud voice pierced through the building.

"Mommy...," Nadia muttered to herself in confusion. She was frozen in place, unable to understand what had just happened.

Nadia could sense a faint aura of Anara from the little girl and would have mistaken her for Anara if she hadn't looked closely. Most of all, the girl's skin tone was bizarre for a nymph,

making her question her racial identity.

Suddenly, Anara walked through the door, holding the little girl in her arms.

Anara smiled as her eyes fell on Nadia.

"It's good that you're finally awake. If you had slept for another hour, I would have called for the healers to check on your health," Anara said as she arrived beside the bed. Then she asked, "So, how are you feeling? You scared us when you fainted so abruptly."

Instead of answering, Nadia looked at Anara and the girl, her gaze shifting between the two

before focusing on Anara and asking, "Who is her mommy?"

Chapter 1150: You Have A Husband?, Returning To The Bastion Of Wailing Gnarled

Anara sat on a chair with Grace settled on her thighs.

Nadia sat on a chair across the table opposite them.

As Nadia stared at Anara and Grace with a mixed expression of astonishment, shock, and confusion, she asked, "You are her mother?... Her biological mother?" Her voice cracked with disbelief as she pointed a trembling finger at them. "And she's your daughter? Your biological daughter?"

Anara nodded, a smile emerging on her lips. She understood Nadia's reaction, as motherhood for a nymph was somewhat unnatural. So, she waited patiently for Nadia to process the information.

Nadia realized she couldn't fully grasp what she had just heard.

Was it possible for a nymph to become pregnant? No, it wasn't! However, such an assumption seemed entirely wrong now because she had just encountered a nymph who had given birth to a child!

According to what she knew, tree nymphs raised their young by selecting the best Kalna fruit and concentrating their life force on it for several months before dropping the fruit to the ground.

The overseer would then help nourish the fruit with the help of the Divine Essence Lake, using a method passed down from the oldest living tree nymphs to the next generation. This process was



not easy for the tree nymph, as it consumed a portion of their lifespan, though they could slowly regain it over time.

The process could also be done without the Divine Essence Lake, but the duration until complete germination would be a bit longer.

Despite this, when a tree nymph emerged, she was not seen as a child but as a sister nurtured by the entire grove. Of course, a certain reverence was given to the tree nymph who used her life essence to birth her existence.

The ice nymphs, also called water nymphs, used their life essence to create a pearl seed from a drop of water, which they would nourish either by themselves or with the help of several other nymphs, regardless of their traits. With the aid of a Divine Essence Lake, a new water nymph would be born when the pearl finally opens up.

The rock nymphs followed a similar process, creating a soul stone they nurtured until a new rock nymph was born. Each process required the assistance of several others to lighten the burden on the initial nymph, allowing the grove to work together and fostering a sense of

oneness.

This also helped them prevent others from capturing and enslaving them. Due to their inability to reproduce naturally, they compensated for it with their unique birth methods and a strong sense of community.

Nonetheless, the medium used in birthing a new nymph, whether a Kalna fruit, a pearl seed, or a soul stone, was a highly coveted resource in alchemical formulas and other fields. Many were willing to risk attacking entire communities to obtain these precious items.

Now, in a world like this, their lives were even more threatened, and it was simply a miracle that the tree nymphs had lived in Paradise, surviving in comfort until this very moment.

Nadia had also heard stories about one of their sister kin, the fire nymphs. However, she wasn't sure if they were real or just myths, as she had never met one. After meeting Anara, though, Nadia held a small hope that the fire nymphs did exist and that some were still out there, waiting for their reunion.

After taking several deep breaths to calm her emotions and thoughts, Nadia focused on Anara and asked, "Who's her father?" Her tone was laced with curiosity.

Nadia suspected that a man must be responsible if Anara had gotten pregnant. Nadia couldn't help but wonder what kind of man he was, considering he was possibly responsible for the irregularity she had just witnessed.

Before Anara could respond, Grace said, "My father is Orion, the Supreme Leader of Paradise and one of the youngest and strongest warriors in Paradise."

Nadia's mind immediately short-circuited, her body frozen in place.

"What did you say?" Nadia asked, her eyes now locked on Grace.

Feeling her intense gaze, Grace shrunk back and clutched Anara's dress tightly.

Realizing she was frightening the little girl, Nadia softened her expression and apologized. "I'm sorry."

"You don't need to apologize. Your reaction was natural. From your expression, I can tell you've been through a lot," Anara said, shaking her head. "Grace will snap out of it after a while and find the courage to approach you again, so don't worry."

She wrapped her arms around Grace and gently combed her golden hair with her fingers. "As for what she said, it's true. Orion is Grace's father and my husband," Anara confirmed. "You're married?" Nadia asked again, her expression and voice tinged with indescribable shock.

Anara nodded in response, holding back a chuckle as she took in Nadia's shocked expression. She was enjoying the conversation; it wasn't every day that she could share such incredible news with a new sister.

Nadia wasn't just shocked to learn that Orion was Anara's husband and Grace's father, but also because she had unknowingly met the Supreme Leader of Paradise. She recalled the foolish plans she had initially considered and couldn't help but shiver in fear.

If she had acted on those plans, she would have not only incurred the wrath of Paradise but also lost the chance to reunite with her long-lost sisters. It would have been a disastrous encounter with tragic consequences. She realized just how lucky she was.

Suddenly, a knock echoed through the house, followed by the door opening.

"He's here," Anara said. She had instructed one of the nymphs to inform Orion of Nadia's awakening.

Nadia nodded in understanding and quickly tried to regain her composure.

Soon, Orion stepped into the dining area, and Seth followed close behind him.

"Daddy!" Grace exclaimed, jumping down from Anara's arms and running into Orion's embrace.

Orion caught her effortlessly and gently rubbed her back as he approached the table, his gaze fixed on Nadia.

Seth followed behind, eyeing Nadia with a curious expression. Just from observing the nymph the Supreme Leader had spoken about, he became intrigued by the other nymphs and the remaining Bastions within the pocket dimension.

"How are you feeling now, Miss Nadia?" Orion asked, taking a seat.

"I'm fine," Nadia nodded. "Great warrior Orion, are you really the Supreme Leader of Paradise?" she asked, seeking confirmation.

While she believed Anara's words, she wanted to hear them from Orion.

"Yes, I am," Orion replied. "I couldn't reveal this earlier because I knew it would have made our meeting tense. Besides, I doubt you would have come if I had told you beforehand."

Nadia sighed, realizing he was right.

"Allow me to officially introduce you," Orion said, gesturing towards Seth, who sat beside him. "This is Stronghold Leader Seth, one of the key leaders commanding most of Paradise's military forces and one of its strongest warriors."

They shook hands and nodded at each other.

Nadia studied Seth curiously, wondering if his strength was greater or lesser than Orion's.

"I don't mean to interrupt your conversation," Orion continued, his tone serious, "but it's time for us to leave and return to the Bastion of the Wailing Gnarled. The longer you are away, the more problematic it might become. Also, you must inform your sisters about what you have learned here and see if they can come here."

Nadia nodded in understanding. She had wanted to stay for another hour, but considering how she had left the Bastion of the Wailing Gnarled for a while, it wouldn't be good if someone discovered her disappearance and found only Fifi in her place, which might lead to

reckless actions.

"Let's go. I can't wait to inform my sisters about all the new information I've learned regarding Paradise," Nadia said firmly.

She then turned to Anara. "I'll be leaving now, sister, but I promise I'll return as soon as

possible."

Anara nodded with a warm smile and responded. "I understand. Do everything you can to bring our remaining sisters to Paradise so the others and I can care for them. That way, they

won't feel troubled anymore."

"I will," Nadia replied with an equally bright smile.

They stood up and headed for the door. Orion returned Grace to Anara and prepared to take off into the sky with Nadia.

"Goodbye, Aunt Nadia!" Grace called out, waving with a small smile as she finally had the courage to face Nadia again.

Nadia's expression softened, and her eyes were filled with tears as she waved back with an emotional smile.

If anyone from the pocket dimension had seen Nadia's expression at that moment, they would have mistaken her for a completely different person. In just a few hours, her demeanour had shifted so dramatically that even Nadia would have trouble recognizing herself if she looked into a mirror.

Nadia realized that this was what she had been missing all her life. After so many years of suffering in that dreaded ocean, her hardships were finally nearing an end.