

The World 1021

Chapter 1021: Mating Season (5)

Latifa, like she always did, slid forward without hesitation and pressed her tongue right to my crack. She licked in a long, deliberate trail, slow and teasing, and the tiny flicks made my toes curl and my spine shiver. That wet, warm contact at the base of me sent little shockwaves up through my hips. It was an intimate, electric kind of pleasure that pooled low and hot. Latifa worked with practiced rhythm, her mouth exploring, tasting, and every pass warmed me more.

Above her, I kept driving into Ayane in a mating-press—my weight pinned over her, my hips driving down in a hard, steady cadence so my cock slammed her cervix repeatedly. Every downward thrust hit that raw, bruising place and left a delicious sting that buzzed through my bones.

"Hannggh, ahh... ahh, ah, ahhh...! Ahh, ah, ah...!" Ayane's voice broke into ragged gasps with each strike. Her beautiful face melted under the onslaught and the stern, composed look she sometimes wore had slipped away, replaced by something soft and wrecked with her lips parted, cheeks flushed, and her eyes fluttering like someone on the edge of losing herself. She looked like she was experiencing the most exquisite punishment.

Her expression went slack with the pleasure, and down below she felt alive, like a living thing with its own mind. I mean, her pussy curling and coiling around my cock, squeezing with blind insistence as if trying to drain me dry. Each deep hit made her clamp harder, the muscles rolling against me in a way that stole my breath.

"Nghh, ahhh, ahhhnggh~ Ah, ah, ah, ahhh...!" she gasped, breath ragged and little sounds spilling out between the words.

While I was mating-pressing Ayane like that, Trill crept up behind me and grabbed my lips. She yanked me into a sloppy, wet kiss. Her tongue shoved into my mouth, hot and possessive. I blinked, a little surprised, but I let her. The kiss was thick and sweet and felt like velvet against the raw edge of everything else. With my mouth taken, my cock pounding Ayane below, and Latifa worshiping my backside, the pleasure was coming at me from three directions at once. It was dizzying, and the only honest response was to surrender to it.

My senses overloaded—mouth, dick, ass all being toyed with—and moving past that felt impossible. It was too much. It was so, so good. I honestly thought I might cum right there on the spot.

Still, I kept my rhythm, kept my cock buried in Ayane, watching her face as it slid from fierce to slack and hazy. My balls tightened with every stroke. I could feel the pressure building like steam. Tilde had crawled under Latifa and joined in with her mouth moving up to take my balls, licking and sucking with hungry, quick laps that made my knees want to give. Latifa kept working the crack, Tilde worked my balls, and the attention was obscene and unfair.

No surprise then that I blew. I slammed one last heavy thrust into Ayane, let myself go, and my ejaculation detonated—hot and thick—filling her womb until she was brimming with my cum.

"Fuaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhh~!!!" Ayane screamed, eyes blown wide at the heat pooling inside her. Her mouth opened in a perfect, shocked O as she felt the warmth spread. After a few ragged breaths I pulled out and watched her tremble from the orgasm, limbs shuddering, whole body pulsing with aftershocks.

Panting from the nonstop fucking with these beast women, I turned and saw the sight Trill had described. "Leon, I think there's still a lot of room in our room that needs to be filled up. Come here and fill us up," she said, voice lazy and expectant. Tilde was curled on top of her, and on top of Tilde was Maya—three bodies layered like a decadent, obscene cake.

That was a top-tier layered cake. Their asses stuck out toward me, each crack slick with whitish cream. The cum I'd sent into them earlier was leaking, streaks of white crawling down the layers and catching the light. It glittered like something shameful and delicious.

Even though I was a little spent from my multiple ejaculations, I didn't hesitate. I moved down the line and fucked them one hole at a time, letting each pussy welcome me. Their vaginas were so slick—so practically frictionless—that sliding into them felt like gliding through warm silk. Switching between holes took a rhythm all its own. I mean, it was tricky, but I found my footing and worked through each layer until I'd finished inside every single one.

Next were Latifa and Ayane again. Both of them got on all fours—natural and animal for them, with Latifa's doglike body and Ayane's nine-tailed fox shape. If you were going to pick a position that fit, it was this one.

Even after cumming three times on the others, I still had enough energy to give both of these girls what they wanted. I grabbed their hips, pulled them close together so I could switch between them without breaking pace, and fucked them—one thrust into Latifa, one into Ayane—until their howls and moans

filled the room. That sound persisted all day, a wet, lewd chorus that didn't stop until nightfall. The sex hung in the air like a scent. It was thick, heady, and impossible to ignore.

With more beast women joining my harem, I found myself weirdly looking forward to next year's mating season—anticipation like a low heat under the skin.

The next morning, after I'd fucked the five of them until they were satisfied and content, I rolled out of bed and stretched. The day was cold. The winter had crept into the Great Forest earlier than usual. Snow lay crisp and white, and even through gloves the flakes stung my hands a little and it was sharp and biting.

They were saying this would be a long winter. Judging by how early the cold had arrived, I believed them. The air tasted metallic, clean, and it bit at the inside of my nose in that bracing way winter does. It was oddly refreshing, waking me up in spite of last night's excess.

Then something sliced through that stillness—an arrow, fast as a thought, whisked by me with a whisper of air. I froze. Where the hell did that come from?

My eyes scanned the treeline and I spotted movement—figures at the edge of the clearing, large shapes barely visible among the trees. At first their presence was subtle, almost nothing. And then I made out curved bows and the glint of metal. They were mounted—no, not on ordinary horses. The riders were fused to their mounts, bodies and beasts conjoined into a single, formidable shape.

The silhouette settled in my mind like a single, simple word.

Centaurs.

Chapter 1022: Centaurs' Assassination Attempt (1)

Another arrow screamed past me, slicing through the frigid air before burying itself into the snow just inches from my foot. The sound it made was sharp. It was like a whisper that turned into a threat.

Whoever was shooting at me... damn, they kind of sucked.

Or at least, that's what I thought at first.

But no. No, they didn't suck at all. That wasn't it. They were toying with me.

That realization hit me hard, almost like the air itself got colder. They weren't missing because they couldn't aim—they were missing on purpose. Every shot was precise and intentional. Each arrow that barely grazed me was meant to keep me on edge, to make me feel like prey.

Like a predator watching from the shadows, enjoying the sight of its victim dancing between panic and survival.

If they'd wanted me dead, I'd already have an arrow sticking out of my skull. The first shot could've ended it before I even blinked. But no—they wanted me to squirm.

They should've aimed to kill. But even if they did, it wouldn't have mattered. I had Guardian with me. I'd sensed the arrow coming from the moment it left the bow, but I hadn't bothered to react. Why? Because it wasn't aimed to kill. There was no bloodlust behind it. There was no intent to end me.

But that changed.

Now, I could feel it. The air itself seemed to thrum with killing intent, the pressure closing in from all sides like invisible hands gripping my throat.

They were done playing around.

I let out a low breath, steam curling from my lips, and called for my cursed blade. "Ayuru," I muttered, and in the next second, the black steel materialized in my hand. The blade shimmered faintly, hungry, and alive.

"I know it's cold," I said, my voice steady but with a faint grin tugging at my lips, "but forgive me for calling you out."

Her response came immediately—she started sucking my mana, greedily, like it was second nature to her. The faint pulse of energy between us sent a familiar chill crawling up my arm. Yeah, she was definitely in the mood.

It was perfect timing, honestly. I was planning to visit the Centaur King next anyway, to talk about uniting all the kingdoms in the Great Forest. The fact that they came here first? Well, I couldn't have asked for a better setup.

Now, I had a reason to pay them a little visit.

This had to be an assassination attempt.

Thinking about it, it made sense. The Centaurs must've seen me as a thorn in their side—someone who was shaking up their comfortable world. My plan to unite the kingdoms probably made them want to puke. The thought of joining hands with the Beast Kingdom alone must've been unbearable to them.

The Centaurs and the Beasts hated each other. Always had. The kind of hatred that didn't die with time—it just grew deeper and uglier.

So yeah, they wanted me gone. I was a nuisance, a pest trying to stitch peace where blood had always flowed.

And maybe, just maybe... they couldn't stand that I

, an outsider—not even born in the Great Forest—had managed to win over the people here. That probably stung their pride more than anything else.

Well, tough luck.

For now, I just needed to make sure none of their arrows hit me. Sure, I could've used Guardian from the start, but where's the fun in that? I didn't want to rely on it too much—it made me feel like I'd forgotten how to fight. Like I was going soft.

So instead, I waited. I let them think they had me cornered.

Then came another wave.

The sound of bowstrings snapping echoed through the trees. They were fast, sharp, relentless. Arrows flew in a deadly rain from every direction.

But I was faster.

Ayuru moved in my hands like a shadow with teeth, cutting through every arrow that dared to approach me. The snow around me churned and burst from the force of my movements, glittering in the faint light.

Not even a drop of sweat.

Ayuru drank my mana eagerly, humming as if enjoying every moment of it.

"Come on," I taunted, smirking, "if you're gonna assassinate someone, at least try to hit me. Otherwise, you're just doing a shitty job."

That seemed to piss them off. A sharp whistle cut through the air—and then another barrage came, even faster. A storm of arrows, a rain of death.

But again, I cut them all down, each one shattering midair before it could touch me.

They must've been losing their minds watching it. To them, this had to look impossible. I was standing there, barely moving, cutting through an entire hail of arrows like it was nothing.

But it wasn't impossible. Not for me.

They just couldn't accept it. Denial was easier than reality. But the truth? The truth has a way of breaking through—just like my blade through their arrows.

Judging by the number of shots, I guessed there were at least fifty of them hidden in the trees. Maybe more. I even noticed one shooter—east side—who could release three arrows in under a second. Impressive, I'll give him or her that.

Then it happened again. That sound.

The draw of bowstrings.

This time, it was synchronized—coordinated. A wave of pressure filled the air, heavy enough that even the trees seemed to go silent.

Sixty arrows came flying all at once.

I sighed, feeling the shift of mana beneath my skin. "Alright," I muttered, "enough playing."

In an instant, I unleashed Guardian. A faint light flared around me, forming a translucent barrier. The arrows struck it and rebounded violently, scattering like rain against glass. The shockwave blew the snow outward, leaving a circular mark where I stood untouched.

That must've made their eyes widen. They hadn't expected me to deflect everything with just a single barrier.

For a few seconds, the forest went dead silent. Only the sound of the wind remained.

Then—thud.

The heavy sound of hooves hit the frozen ground, one after another. The assassins finally stepped out from the shadows.

Half-human, half-horse—Centaur warriors. Seeing them up close, I had to admit, they were majestic. Their bodies gleamed under the pale light, strong and proud. Even I couldn't deny that they looked almost regal.

"Elf fucker..." one of them spat, glaring at me with venom in his eyes.

That nickname again. Guess word spread faster than I thought. Great—now I was famous there too.

I sighed, letting my blade rest on my shoulder, and smirked. "So, I'm guessing this is the part where you all rush me at once?"

Chapter 1023: Centaurs' Assassination Attempt (2)

"Sorry for the rough introduction," one of them said, his voice low but carrying that quiet command that made people instinctively straighten. He looked every bit the part. I mean he's taller, broader-shouldered, with a presence that made the temperature of the clearing feel a degree colder.

He wore his authority like armor. "I am the Prince of the Centaur Kingdom, and the leader of the warriors within our realm," he announced, each word measured and polite, but threaded with steel. The way he stood, the set of his jaw, the slow sweep of his gaze—everything screamed royalty. No wonder I'd felt that strange, formal pressure the second he stepped forward. It clicked that moment that this wasn't just some random tough—this was a crowned muscle with a throne behind him.

"We've heard rumors that a human's been pushing for the unification of the Great Forest," he continued, voice carrying over the assembled warriors. "We came to see this man for ourselves. We have concerns about your presence here, and we felt it was only right to meet you—frankly, with force if necessary. I suppose you have an idea why we crossed so far and greeted you with... blunt manners."

"Yeah, I get it," I said, shrugging like it was a mundane morning quarrel. "Guess I've been a bit of a nuisance."

He didn't smile. "Glad you understand. I hope there are no hard feelings—we do what we feel is necessary for our people." His eyes pinned me with something like curiosity and something like accusation. "Why would a man like you meddle in our affairs? What right do you have to involve yourself in what happens here?"

I let a small smirk slip. "Well, I figured that's exactly why the Prince of the Centaur Kingdom showed up himself. This isn't a casual visit, is it?"

He folded his arms, the leather of his vambrace creaking faintly. "You seem to catch on quickly. Good. Then you understand the situation you're in."

"I don't know—what situation am I actually in?" I asked, tilting my head. "Am I supposed to feel trapped? Because, honestly, I don't."

Whatever patience he'd been holding vanished in the blink of an eye. With a motion that was half ritual, half threat, he drew a sword that looked like it had been carved from a mountain. The blade was massive—long enough that, when he swung it, the air itself seemed to flinch. Centaurs were built for power. The heft of that weapon made it obvious they weren't joking about strength. The sight tightened the knot in my gut for just a second.

"You'll be cut down here," he roared. "I will stop the rot you try to spread through the Great Forest!" Then he charged.

He moved fast—shockingly so for something that size. There was a raw, untamed quality to his technique. Like Tilde, it was not refined lessoned form, but instinct honed by years of real fights or training. If he ever learned formal swordwork, he'd become a nightmare. His blade arced in wide, thunderous swings that chewed through the morning air.

I dashed back, just out of the cut's reach. The steel whistled by, leaving a ghost of wind that brushed my hair. Then the rest of them rushed. Hooves hammered the dirt in waves. The ground hummed under my boots. Their armor caught the sun, spears and swords glittering like angry teeth. The thump of centaur hooves made my chest vibrate—battle didn't just sound concerned here, it announced itself.

They swung hard, brutal strokes meant to end things quickly. But I slipped between them, light and bored, threading through gaps like I was moving through smoke. It looked effortless because I made it look effortless. Really, it was just timing and a steady beat of adrenaline.

One of them spat, voice sharp as gravel. "Stop scurrying like the cockroach you are, you elf fucker!"

"Why am I only being called the elf fucker?" I shot back, laughter soft and cutting. "I fucked beast girls too, you know?!" Before he could reply, I drove my heel into his face—hard. He folded like a broken puppet, nose splitting crimson, teeth clacking. He hit the ground with a grunt and a heap of dirt.

Another attacker came in from behind. I met him blade-for-blade—Ayuru's slender edge flashing to catch his heavy iron strike. She didn't tremble a moment, even though his sword could have cleaved a tree. Ayuru drank my mana like a thirsty thing. The glow in her steel was a steady, hungry light.

I shot upward on a gust of wind—Wind Magic. The world blurred at the edges as I levitated, then settled into a controlled descent. The prince barked from below, irritated. "All tricks and evasions—come down!"

"Give me a sec," I replied, then dove. He swung at me midair, a desperate upward slash that begged to connect. I dropped faster, hit the dirt, and rolled behind his flanks before he could correct his balance.

In a heartbeat I was on his back. I'd grabbed the reins of the fight—literally and figuratively—and there was no elegant yank, just the cold bite of Ayuru's blade tipping the soft curve of his neck. The metal pressed just right. The prince froze, every muscle in his massive form locking.

"Ugh... W-What are you doing? Why are you riding me?" he stammered, breath hot and shocked close to my ear.

"You centaurs are just horses with human torsos," I said, casual, like we were discussing the weather. "So yeah—I can do this." I tightened my grip, feeling his pulse beat under my thigh.

He spluttered. "D-Don't you know it's forbidden to ride a centaur's back? You could be killed for that!"

"Not in my book," I said, pressing the blade a fraction harder. "You came here to kill me. I'm doing what I need to survive. And right now, you should be more worried about your head than the taboos of your culture—my blade is exactly where it needs to be."

He made a strangled noise. "Ugh..."

Then I looked out over the field, meeting eyes with every centaur who'd circled us. "If you want your prince to live," I said, voice sharp enough to cut, "drop your weapons. Now."

Chapter 1024: Centaurs' Assassination Attempt (3)

They hesitated—steel trembled in gloved hands, breath fogged in the chill of the morning. The wariness on their faces was obvious. I mean, even the prince's order wouldn't instantly erase the chance I might twist and strike. They were right to be careful. Trust is a weapon of its own.

"W-What are you all doing? Put them down!"

The prince barked a command, and slowly, one by one, they lowered their swords. The metal made an uneasy clink as it slid into scabbards or was planted point-first in the soil. Their stances softened a fraction, not from relief but from calculation. They'd obeyed, but caution clung to them like armor.

For a moment, the clearing was still—breathing in and holding itself. I eased the pressure on Ayuru's blade but didn't pull it away. The prince's face was flushed, lips trembling between rage and the realization that this fight hadn't gone how he'd planned.

I swung a casual grin at him. "See? Nobody had to die today."

He ground his teeth, rage reining in his composure. Around us, the centaurs watched, uneasy, their hands hovering on hilts as if the next heartbeat might change everything. I'd walked into an ambush and walked out of it with a man's back under me and his sword at his throat—barely a scratch for me, and a loud lesson for them.

"You really outdid yourself this time, Leon," Lionel said, voice low but laced with dry amusement as he surveyed the scene. Around us the centaurs were bound—thick ropes biting into fur and muscle—huddled together in a tight, disgruntled knot while a semicircle of beast-people kept them penned, weapons at the ready, eyes hard and watchful.

"You managed to avoid getting assassinated. That was honestly impressive." Lionel gave a short, almost incredulous laugh. "Centaurs are notorious for that kind of thing, whether you want to believe it or not. You'd assume—because of how big they are—that silent kills aren't their thing, but they're shockingly good at it. They strike from angles you don't expect, in numbers. By the time you figure out what's happening, it's already too late. If they put the mark on you, you're as good as dead. You can't outrun them. I mean, those legs are built for speed, and you can't beat them in a straight-up surprise because they always come in groups."

"I just got lucky, that's all," I said, shrugging.

"And what are you planning to do with them?" Lionel asked, folding his arms. His face was calm, but there was an edge beneath it.

"We can't just kill them," I answered. "Even if the Centaur Kingdom's been stubborn and unhelpful, I think negotiation is our best shot. If I can talk to their king, if we approach this right, we might avoid worse bloodshed. Pressure and threats will only harden them."

"Maybe," Lionel said slowly, but his tone carried warning. "That old bastard is stubborn as a rock. You need leverage. Make sure you've got a hold on his son—bring him in line before any talks. Take us with you. If they go reckless, we'll respond in kind. We won't hesitate. If they pull something stupid, we'll crush them."

There was something almost grimly confident in Lionel's voice—like a general speaking of contingencies. It wasn't unfounded. I mean, beastkin numbers were not something to scoff at. They held the largest populations across many of the kingdoms, and with numbers came power and pride.

Then the prince's voice cut through. It was sharp, high, and furious. "You scum! You will never get away with this! You're poisoning our land with your idiotic ways. And you, King of the Beast! How dare you allow this in our territories? Have you no shame, no gratitude for the land you live in that you'd permit such idiocy?"

He screamed at us, chest heaving, veins standing at his neck. Rage and humiliation painted his features. He looked every bit the offended noble, furious that Lionel—of all people—would back my ideas. The prince's words were spit like daggers.

Lionel didn't raise his voice. He met the prince's fury with a cool stare. "I trust Leon's vision," he said. "If I didn't, I wouldn't trust him with my daughter. This isn't a reckless gamble—I believe it benefits our kingdom and yours in the long run." His tone was steady, measured, like someone laying out the facts to a stubborn child. "Your pride blinds you. The world beyond these borders is changing and growing stronger. Humans are becoming a force. If you refuse to adapt, you will be consumed by those changes. Pride won't protect you when everything starts collapsing—what will your pride do then?"

The prince's nostrils flared. "How dare you? You think humans will destroy our kingdom?" His face twisted with a mix of scorn and wounded pride. Lionel's words had hit a sore spot—exactly where they were meant to land. The prince looked at us like we were traitors to heritage, as if simply speaking about the outside world was sacrilege.

"We've defended our kingdom for generations," the prince barked, standing taller as if to summon ancestral weight. "We'll defend it for generations more. We are strong. We have no need for foreign help—we can do this ourselves!" His voice wavered a touch, but he tried to make it sound absolute.

"Oh really?" Lionel replied, amusement thin under the steel. He took a step forward, not aggressive but precise. "But you can't act on any of that, can you? You're not the king. You're not even in the line of succession. I doubt your father will hand you the reins."

The prince's face flushed crimson. "What did you say?" he snapped, the heat in his voice breaking into a personal sting. "I'll have you know. I willingly gave succession to my younger brother because I prefer to be a warrior. I don't want the throne!"

"If you say so," Lionel answered coolly, the words smooth as glass. That little exchange was a knife-work of social leverage and it landed exactly where it needed to.

There was a small, uncomfortable hush after that. Lionel's bait had worked. Around us, the bound centaurs glowered, weighing the mood, and some of the beast-people tightened their grips on their weapons, ready for any sign of trouble.

So, the choice was made. It felt less like a declaration and more like an inevitability now. Naturally, the next thing to do was to go to our next destination. We were going to the Centaur Kingdom.

Chapter 1025: The Centaur Kingdom (1)

We led the march toward the Centaur Kingdom, the once-proud assassins trailing behind us with ropes tied snugly around their torsos. The cords were tight enough to sting but not so much that they couldn't walk—though every step they took reminded them that they were no longer free warriors of the plains, but captives of those they once looked down upon. Each clop of their hooves against the dirt sounded heavy, almost resentful, like they were swallowing chunks of their pride with every stride.

Still, there was a certain tension hanging in the air, that thick, awkward kind of silence where everyone knew that one wrong move could turn into a mess. The ropes connected them together, so if one of them stumbled or tried to run, the rest would follow right after—like a herd collapsing over itself. And for a centaur, falling while bound, while seen by their enemies? That was worse than death. No warrior of their kingdom would allow themselves to be seen as that weak and that vulnerable.

"I never thought I'd live long enough to experience this," Lionel said, a mischievous grin spreading across his face as he gave the rope a playful tug. "Leading a centaur around by a rope like a damn dog. Honestly, this might just be the best thing that's happened to me so far."

The centaur prince beside him growled, his muscles tensing as his pride flared up. He couldn't even look at Lionel without his jaw twitching in rage.

"You should be thankful my father hasn't invaded your filthy lands yet!" the prince barked, trying to puff himself up even while tied. "If he did, you'd understand just how powerless your kind truly is before our might! You'd crumble!"

Lionel chuckled, tilting his head to the side. "Oh really? Then remind me again—who's the one I'm dragging by a rope right now? You're really talking big for someone who's literally lost."

"T-That was a fluke!" the prince stammered, his tail flicking nervously. "If we fought seriously, I could've killed him in an instant!"

Lionel's smirk widened, and he let out a small, mocking laugh. "But you didn't. In fact, you had your men with you, and you still

lost. I don't know what's worse—the defeat or the embarrassment that came with it."

The prince's nostrils flared. He clenched his teeth so hard it looked like they might crack. Everything Lionel said was true, and he knew it.

"You're going to pay for this," the prince hissed, his eyes burning with fury.

Lionel and I shared a glance, then shrugged almost in unison. We'd heard enough empty threats for a lifetime.

After a while, the trees started thinning out, and before long, the land opened up into wide plains that stretched beneath a bright sky. And there it was—the Centaur Kingdom.

For two kingdoms that had been locked in bitter conflict for decades, it was shocking how close they were. Barely three days separated the Centaur lands from the Feliann Tribe's borders. Close enough to make the tension feel like a ticking bomb.

The moment we got near the massive gates, a few guards noticed us. Their expressions shifted fast—from calm, to confused, to pure shock when they saw who we were escorting.

"W-What's going on here?" one of them blurted, eyes darting between us and the prince. "Why are the beastkin here—and with the prince of all people!?"

"Did... did they get caught?" another muttered, disbelief written all over his face.

We kept walking, but before we could even reach the gates, a centaur soldier stepped forward, his spear digging into the dirt before us. His voice came out sharp and demanding.

"Where do you think you're going? And why are you with our prince? Explain yourselves—now."

Lionel smirked slightly, resting his hand on his hip. "You already know, don't you? Your prince showed up at dawn trying to slaughter one of our people. You expected us to just sit back and let it happen? We're here to talk to your king."

The guard's eyes narrowed, his tone dripping with disdain. "That's not possible. No beasts are allowed within these walls. You creatures may act like men, but you're still wild things. Uncivilized. You have no place here."

Lionel's grin faded. His tone grew heavier, almost dangerous. "You people really think we're beneath you, huh? Do you want me to show you who's actually uncivilized?"

The guard scoffed, though his voice wavered slightly. "See? Just as I said. Wild. Savage. Itching for a fight." His hand twitched toward his sword, trembling even as he tried to act composed.

Before anything could escalate, a deep, commanding voice rang out from behind him.

"What's going on here?"

The guards immediately stiffened and stepped aside. From behind them emerged a tall figure—towering even among centaurs. His steps were slow but deliberate, and despite leaning on a cane, his presence was impossible to ignore. His beard flowed almost to his chest, thick and gray, swaying as he walked. His eyes, though old, burned with the sharpness of a warrior who'd seen far too many battles.

By his side stood a woman—beautiful and regal, her features refined but carrying the same half-horse body as the rest of her kin. She carried herself like someone used to command.

"It's been a while, Reilhahand," Lionel said, his tone casual but his gaze steady as the older centaur approached.

"A decade, exactly," Reilhahand replied, his voice calm but deep enough to make even the guards straighten unconsciously. Yeah—no doubt about it. This was the Centaur King himself.

"You've gotten old," Lionel teased with a grin. "Still got that swordsmanship of yours?"

Reilhahand chuckled softly, the sound low and rumbling. "It's still sharp as ever. Would you like to find out?" he said, then turned his attention to the prince. "I see you've taken care of my son. I heard he caused trouble in your village. I'm thankful you brought him back safely."

Lionel scoffed. "You think I came all the way here just to drop off your son after he tried to kill someone from my tribe? Don't play dumb—you sent him to assassinate Leon."

Chapter 1026: The Centaur Kingdom (2)

Reilhahand's expression didn't change much. He just stroked his beard, almost amused. "Oh? To kill the man who's trying to unite the entire Great Forest? I wouldn't know anything about that," he said smoothly, though the lie was practically dripping off his words. His gaze slid toward me, his eyes narrowing slightly. "So this is the human I've heard about, huh?"

Lionel smirked, crossing his arms. "Unfortunately for you, your plan failed. He didn't even need help—he crushed your son and his men all by himself."

Reilhahand raised an eyebrow, clearly intrigued, a faint smile curling at the edge of his lips. "By himself?" he repeated, chuckling under his breath. "Interesting...~"

After a brief interlude filled with uneasy silence, we were finally allowed to step past the gates and enter the Kingdom.

The heavy creak of the wooden doors echoed through the air as they opened, revealing the vast settlement within. The scent of dirt, wood, and faint incense mixed together, creating an oddly nostalgic atmosphere. But even then, I could still feel it—the eyes of the people watching us from every corner. Some were peeking from windows, others stood at the edges of the street, their gazes sharp, cautious, and full of uncertainty.

Yeah... that kind of tension was hard to miss.

"This must be the first time beast people were ever allowed past the borders of the kingdom," Lionel muttered, his sharp eyes scanning the crowd as if reading their thoughts. "Naturally, they're going to be a little cautious with us walking around like this."

I let out a quiet breath. "Yeah... can't really blame them. Would've been weirder if they greeted us with flowers and smiles."

Then Reilhahand's deep, commanding voice broke the silence. "Lionel, that man—" his gaze landed directly on me "—he must've been really capable to defeat my son so easily. At first, I thought it was just an easy assassination. He looked frail—weak, even. Nothing about him matches the physical strength of a centaur. But I suppose appearances can lie. He was that capable, huh?"

Lionel smirked faintly, crossing his arms. "So, you actually knew he was going to assassinate Leon, huh?"

Reilhahand chuckled under his breath, the sound carrying a strange mix of pride and bitterness. "There's no point in lying now, is there? Yes, I gave the order. I ordered the assassination to eliminate the one who dared to unify the tribes and kingdoms of the Great Forest. The one who somehow seduced the Elven Queen and her people. That alone was shocking. Not even the most noble or powerful suitors ever made her yield... but he did. You see now why I'm wary of him? He's a problem. A real one."

Lionel laughed lightly, shaking his head. "Yeah, I get where you're coming from. Still, it's possible he's in a relationship with my daughter because he wants to rule the world. But honestly? I wouldn't mind that. If my daughter's the woman of someone who actually achieves world domination, I'd be proud as hell."

I couldn't tell if they were just throwing guesses around or if they'd actually caught on to my real intentions. Either way, it didn't matter. I wasn't about to correct them.

"So," Reilhahand asked, his tone calm but curious now, "what's his true intention behind all of this?"

He wasn't speaking to me directly, so I stayed quiet. Lionel, on the other hand, glanced at me briefly before answering on my behalf.

"I think this kid's got a point," he said. "The world outside the forest is changing—fast. Faster than we can even imagine. Our claws, muscles, and legs aren't going to be enough forever. Out there, there are beings... made of metal. Things we can't fight with just strength."

Reilhahand's expression stiffened slightly. "People made of metal?"

"Not exactly people," Lionel explained, his tone steady. "They're constructs—created to fight wars for humans. Built for destruction. Humans are getting smarter, using every ounce of intelligence to make tools and beings that give them an advantage."

Reilhahand's voice lowered, skeptical. "And how can I be sure that what you're saying is true?"

"Leon showed me one of them," Lionel said, glancing in my direction. "A real one. A being made entirely of metal. After that, it wasn't hard to believe. The outside world is evolving faster than we can keep up. Everything's changing—and if we don't adapt, we'll get left behind. Or worse, swallowed whole."

Reilhahand fell silent for a moment, his tail flicking slightly. Then, he exhaled and looked straight at me again. "You're quite an interesting one. Now I can see why this old fool trusts you as much as he does."

The tension in the air softened after that, just a little.

Our steps echoed through the stony path as we finally reached the castle. It stood tall and proud, a magnificent structure made of smooth wood and sturdy stone. I couldn't help but admire it—it was both rugged and refined, a perfect balance of nature and craftsmanship. The sunlight hit its surface, giving it a faint golden hue. For something built without human engineering, it was damn impressive.

"Keh, I can't believe you people actually built something like this," Lionel said, scanning the architecture with reluctant admiration.

Reilhahand smirked. "Well, we're not as uncivilized as you people think."

The two of them kept exchanging words like blades—sharp and waiting to clash any second.

After a bit more walking, we arrived at a large hall where a raised podium stood at the far end. I'd been wondering earlier how centaurs managed their thrones since they couldn't exactly sit like humans—but now it made sense. Instead of thrones, they had podiums to stand beside when addressing their people. It gave off a commanding, regal presence that suited them perfectly.

"Well then," Reilhahand began, his tone turning serious as his gaze swept across the room. "Let's get to the real reason you all came here—the discussion about this unification matter."

I blinked, a bit surprised he was the one to bring it up first.

"You really don't waste time beating around the bush," Lionel said with a small grin.

Reilhahand returned it with a faint smirk. "No point in delaying, right? Now then," his attention turned toward me, his voice steady and firm, "I want him to speak. Tell me—why do you want all the kingdoms here to come together? Why do you want them all to be unified?"

Chapter 1027: The Centaur Kingdom (3)

Why did I want to unify all the kingdoms in the Great Forest?

It's a question that sounds lofty if you say it loud—grand, even noble—but the truth was simpler and a hell of a lot more practical. I wanted it for myself. That was the core reason beneath all the speeches and strategic posturing. If I could win their cooperation and stitch together the scattered forces of the Great Forest, then taking the whole thing wouldn't be some impossible campaign—it would be tidy, efficient, and, frankly, easy.

Think about it this way. Fighting to conquer a single kingdom at a time meant bleeding effort for marginal gain. You put in a mountain of work for a sliver of land. But get everyone pulling under the same banner and you transform the problem completely. Alliances, networks, pooled manpower—those things change the scale of what's possible. Yes, building those connections would be a grind, and yes, the diplomacy alone would chew time, but once the web was woven correctly, the rest would follow with far less sweat than you'd expect. Saying that out loud, though, felt stupid and dangerous in the moment—so I kept that part in my head and spoke the only thing that actually fit the room.

"Empire seems to be gaining a lot of momentum these past few years," I said, voice steady but clear, letting the weight of the observation hang between us. "It won't be long before they push farther. The Emperor is hellbent on taking the world by sheer domination. They've swallowed smaller realms already—kingdoms and duchies that didn't stand a chance—and now their appetite is growing. Soon enough, the Milham Kingdom, the Bethlan Kingdom, and others are going to fall in relatively short order. Terrain and cost slow them down, so they're taking incremental steps. They are slowly trying to secure the nearby lands, consolidate, then push outward. Because of the terrain and the cost of invading those

lands, they're holding back for now. For now, at the very least. Instead, they'll start expanding from somewhere smaller and more manageable."

"And that means they'll come for the kingdoms and tribes inside the Great Forest," Reilhahand said, low and sharp, like the edge of a blade.

"Exactly," I nodded. "The Great Forest is a resource trove. It isn't just about ore or timber. There are minerals here for weapon-smithing, but the more dangerous thing isn't metal—it's manpower." I let the words sit there. "Human resources. Bodies. Labor. Soldiers."

They'd suspected as much already. I mean, the forest's reputation for being a prime source of captives and slaves wasn't a secret. It's brimming with communities—scattered, varied, sometimes isolated—ripe for exploitation if an outside force had the will and the means.

"Do you really think the Empire could just march in and do that on our doorstep?" Reilhahand asked, incredulous. "Would they have the guts to try? Burn the forest down? Even so, it's impossible to raze the whole thing at once—before they could, we'd have time to respond."

"I'm not guessing," I said, flat. "I know. It's a given."

"A given?" he echoed, brow furrowed.

"Yes." I watched their faces carefully as I spoke. "The Empire will do whatever it takes. They won't balk at razing forests, destroying cities, trampling nature—if it gets them what they want. They treat the world like a chessboard to be cleared."

Reilhahand's expression shifted—skepticism cracking into the first hints of fear.

"You're saying they'd harm mother nature itself?" he pressed. "And with what? Torches? Humans? Even then, burning the entire forest is a colossal task. We'd stop them long before that."

"That's true—if humans were doing it," I said, letting the sentence land like a stone. Then I leaned in a fraction and added in a steadier voice: "But they won't have to."

Their eyes widened as the implication sank in. I reached into my pocket and pulled out my phone, holding the small glowing rectangle up so the light caught on Reilhahand's wary face.

"This is a phone," I said. "One of my people made it."

The device itself was mundane where I came from, but here it read like magic. I could see the wonder bloom on their features—curiosity fighting with distrust.

"With this, I can capture a moment and hold it forever with a single tap. I can record sound, show images, keep memories. All of that—compressed into this little thing. If humans can make something that small hold so much wonder and convenience, then imagine the other things they've made—things not meant for our world."

"What kind of things?" someone murmured.

"Like AI," I said. The word landed in the room and curled the atmosphere colder.

"AI?" the king repeated, uncertain.

"Artificial Intelligence," I clarified. "Machines built to think and act on command. People create them to shoulder work, to automate the heavy lifting. They can do the jobs humans would rather not do—precisely, tirelessly, and without complaint. The dangerous part isn't that they're clever; it's that they lack soul. They don't hesitate. They don't err on conscience. They obey orders without question."

I watched the color leave faces as the image formed. Thinking about machines marching, metal beasts turning forests to ash on a schedule, no human hesitation to slow them down.

"If the Empire deploys machines like that—metallic, efficient, relentless—they won't need to send men to burn the forest," I said softly. "They'll command those things, and in a day or two, the Great Forest could be reduced to ash and smoke."

Reilhahand's composure cracked a little and even the prince's face flickered with something close to terror. My words were doing their job—shifting the threat from abstract rumor to a very real, very close possibility.

That's when you see minds start to race—the practical questions crowding in behind fear. For all the flak the Empire had weathered, their reach and methods were growing in terrifying ways. Making them the monster in the story might make people fight harder to stop it—exactly the kind of urgency I wanted to plant.

Chapter 1028: The Centaur Kingdom (4)

"F-Father, you can't seriously believe the bullshit this man's spewing! Everything he's saying is a goddamn lie! There's no way something like that even exists!"

The Prince's voice cracked slightly, frustration boiling beneath his words. His face was flushed, veins bulging faintly along his neck. He was visibly furious, like a fire had just been thrown into a pile of dry straw.

"But they do, son," Lionel said calmly, his voice steady, almost disarming in its quiet confidence. His lips curved into a knowing smile, the kind that carried weight—like a man who had seen things beyond comprehension. "I think I already told you this, Reilhahand... I've seen it myself—a woman made entirely of metal. That's not a tale or a hallucination. That's the truth. And you know damn well I wouldn't lie to you."

The room fell silent for a moment. The tension thickened like heavy smoke clinging to the air. Reilhahand's brows furrowed, his tail twitching behind him as he processed the statement.

"I believe you, Lionel," he finally muttered, though there was still clear reluctance in his tone. "You've proven many times that you're not a liar... even though I still hate your guts." He crossed his arms tightly, his voice heavy with both suspicion and resignation. "Still, humans made of metal? That's not exactly something you can just swallow easily. I can't just nod and say, 'Oh sure, that sounds believable.' No, not at all. But fine—I'll take it seriously, even if I have to choke it down with a grain of salt."

At least he was willing to consider it. That was already more progress than I expected.

"More than that," Reilhahand continued, his tone sharpening again as he turned his gaze back to me, "I can't just believe you're doing all this out of kindness. There's always a reason. So tell me—what's your real motive? What are you gaining out of this?"

I sighed inwardly. Of course, he'd ask that. It was a fair question, honestly. No one just goes around uniting kingdoms and picking fights with empires for fun. I could've told him my real reason right away, but there were layers to it—things I wasn't ready to reveal yet.

"I want my women to be happy," I said simply.

Reilhahand froze for a second, his expression blank—then suddenly, he broke into laughter.

"Hahahahaha! What?! That's your reason?!" he roared, slapping one of his horse thighs hard enough that the sound echoed through the hall. His laughter came from deep in his chest, full and unrestrained. "You're seriously doing all this—for that? You're really something else!"

Even Lionel cracked a faint grin, shaking his head slightly.

Reilhahand's laughter eventually died down, though he still had that amused smirk plastered on his face. "I've heard about that incident. The elven slaves—you managed to help them free themselves from slavery, right? Never thought anyone could actually pull that off. Guess they'd been planning it for years. Still... I suppose it makes sense. And since you're their man, that explains a lot." His tone grew more thoughtful, though there was still a hint of disbelief in his eyes. "You've made an enemy out of the Empire—the biggest damn country in the world. To stand against that kind of power, yeah, you'd need numbers and land. So, you're trying to unite the kingdoms. Fair enough. Makes sense strategically."

"It's not just that," I said, my tone more serious now. "The elven women aren't just my women—my women also includes Sir Lionel's daughter, and others who still have families here. I can't let the Empire harm the forest, not when they have ties and blood here."

Reilhahand leaned back slightly, studying me with quiet amusement. "Oh, you're a determined one, huh?" he said, his lips curling into a teasing grin. He then glanced toward the centaur woman standing beside him.

And for a moment, I couldn't help but stare.

The centaur woman was stunning. Her presence alone could make the air feel heavier. She carried herself with this quiet grace, her every movement deliberate and composed. Her hair, as white as moonlight, flowed down her back like silk—same color as the King's and the Prince's. That pretty much confirmed she was royalty—his daughter, most likely. Her lower body, that of a horse, gleamed with short, smooth brown fur that looked meticulously groomed. The white tail flicking behind her glimmered under the light. There was something elegant, yet untamed about her. Every centaur I'd met so far had that same regal aura, and she was no exception—if anything, she embodied it.

"Well then," Reilhahand said suddenly, pulling my attention back to him. "I have a proposition for you." His tone turned serious, but there was still that glint of mischief in his eyes. "I'm not exactly thrilled about getting tied up with the other kingdoms—especially not the Beast Kingdom. I don't know if I buy your motivation yet, and I still don't trust that whole metal machine story. But..." he smirked, lowering his voice slightly, "I am interested in you as a man."

...Why the hell was he smirking like that? The way he said it made my skin crawl a little. I wasn't sure if he was messing with me or if this conversation was about to take a weird turn. I mean, sure, I've got a massive schlong that could probably compete with a horse's dick, but I was not planning on testing that theory with an actual centaur man.

"I guess it's only natural," Reilhahand continued, chuckling to himself. "You've made the Queen of the Elves bend the knee to you, you've got a whole damn harem of women, and even Lionel trusts his daughter with you. That's saying something." He turned to gesture at the centaur woman beside him.

"Kali here is my daughter—my one and only," he said proudly. "I haven't appointed her to anyone yet, which means she's still single. I was planning to marry her off to my strongest warrior, but none have met my standards so far. Now, a union between a centaur and another race might sound strange, but it's not unheard of. There were people back then who've had sex with centaurs, so I think you could make it work. So, how about it? If you manage to give me a grandchild, I'll promise my cooperation right away."

...A proposal? He wanted me to get his daughter pregnant?

It sounded weird as hell, but honestly, I could understand the appeal. Kali was beautiful—graceful, elegant, and radiating a wild charm that was hard to ignore. And, well... I'd never fucked a centaur before. To be fair, I was kind of curious.

"Say less," I said with a small smirk tugging at my lips.

After all, as long as there's a hole, there's a goal.

Chapter 1029: The Centaur Kingdom (5)

Reilhahand couldn't help but burst into laughter the very moment those words left my mouth. It wasn't just a chuckle, either—it was a deep, hearty cackle that rumbled through his chest and echoed across the hall. He threw his head back like someone who'd just heard the punchline to the greatest joke in the world.

Saying something that bold and confident, so out of nowhere, must've really blindsided him. His reaction alone was enough to tell me I'd caught him completely off guard.

"You sure don't beat around the bush, huh?!" he said between laughs, wiping a tear from the corner of his eye. "As expected of the one they call the Elven Fucker! You don't waste any time, do you? Even a centaur—someone completely different from you—doesn't escape your eyes, huh? Hahaha! But damn, I like that enthusiasm! I think I'm gonna have a good time working with you. And honestly, I'm certain my daughter, Kali, and you would make one hell of a powerful child!"

He said that last part with such energy that for a moment, it almost sounded like he was the one getting excited about the whole idea. I couldn't even begin to understand guys like him—people who were just so eager to hand their daughters off for the sake of breeding "strong offspring." Like, seriously, who does that? But well, that wasn't really something I should be complaining about.

"F-Father, what do you mean by that?!" the prince suddenly yelled, stepping forward with fire in his eyes. "You can't possibly mean that you're giving Kali to someone like him! There's no way! Not to a man like him! He's nothing but scum!"

The guy was furious—his voice cracked from the strain of holding back his anger. You could practically see the veins bulging at his neck, ready to pop any second. His fists were clenched so tightly it looked like his knuckles might burst through his skin.

Reilhahand turned his gaze toward him, the amusement in his face fading just a bit. "So," he said slowly, his tone carrying weight now, "you're trying to overturn my decision? And since when did you have the right to do that?"

The prince trembled slightly, his voice still defiant but shaky. "I-I mean, I'm sorry, father, but I can't just stay quiet about this. I can't allow someone who has... who has so many illicit relationships with women to be part of this unification. It's disgusting! I can't stand the idea! And I know Kali wouldn't be able to stomach it either!"

Reilhahand arched a brow, folding his arms. "Oh? Kali wouldn't be able to stomach it, huh? Well then—let's ask her directly, shall we?"

His gaze turned toward the woman standing quietly beside him all this time. Kali hadn't said a single word until now. She stood poised and elegant, her presence calm but undeniably sharp, like a blade wrapped in silk.

"Well," she said softly, her voice smooth yet firm. "I don't really know what to think of him yet, Father." Her lips curled into a faint smile. "But... I do find him interesting."

Reilhahand's grin returned instantly. "You hear that? That's what she said."

The prince's jaw tightened. He gritted his teeth so hard I thought he might crack them. "Y-You said you wanted someone strong for Kali!" he barked. "But he hasn't proven anything! Not yet!"

"I think defeating you and your entire squad counts as proof enough," Reilhahand replied coolly. "But fine. Since you're still so stubborn, let's settle it properly." He turned to me again, his eyes gleaming like molten gold. "Why don't you have a duel with Kali? Don't be mistaken though—out of all my children, Kali is the strongest."

Now that was something I didn't expect. To be honest, looking at her, she didn't seem all that intimidating for a centaur. If anything, she looked... delicate. Graceful even. But judging by the way Reilhahand spoke, it sounded like I was underestimating her big time.

"Would you mind that, Leon?" he asked, his tone carrying both challenge and curiosity.

I smirked. "If that's what it takes to earn your approval, then sure. I'm game."

And just like that, it was decided—a duel between me and Kali.

The field they led us to was huge—open grassland as far as the eye could see. The air was heavy with tension and anticipation.

Kali stood about fifty meters ahead, her hooves digging lightly into the dirt as she took her position. The distance between us felt vast, but her sharp gaze made it feel like she was right in front of me.

It made sense that duels here happened on such a large scale—after all, centaurs weren't exactly built for small, confined spaces.

In her hands, Kali held a halberd that looked absolutely massive, even compared to her tall frame. The blade gleamed under the sunlight, sharp enough that I could practically feel its edge from where I stood. One swing from that thing and I'd be turned into a fine slice of sashimi.

"Kali's a master of swordsmanship," Reilhahand's voice rang out from the sidelines. "But with her strength and reach, she learned to use a halberd just as skillfully. She's even stronger than me now. She defeated me once—can you believe that? Maybe it's age catching up to me... or maybe she's just that damn good. Hard to tell these days."

"Then I guess this'll be a pretty fair fight," I said, cracking my neck and tightening my grip on Ayuru.

Reilhahand raised his arm high. "Then let the duel begin! Both of you—fight!"

The instant his hand came down, Kali charged.

And holy hell—she was fast.

Her body moved like a blur, her hooves pounding against the ground in rhythmic thunderclaps. The earth shook beneath her as dust scattered in her wake.

If I hadn't raised Ayuru in time, her halberd would've split my head in two. The metallic clang of our weapons colliding echoed through the field, sharp and powerful.

"Damn... that was close," I muttered under my breath, feeling the sting of her power through my arms.

Kali backed off smoothly, her hooves clicking lightly as she smiled. "Not bad at all," she said, her voice calm and teasing. "I didn't hold back on that swing, but you blocked it effortlessly. You're even better than I expected."

She stood there, completely composed. There was no heavy breathing and there was no sign of exhaustion as well in her face. Just that calm, confident expression that made her look like she was toying with me.

Yeah, she was definitely something else. And for some reason, that made me even more intrigued.

"Fufufu..." she chuckled softly, eyes locked onto mine. "I think I'm starting to get interested in you, Sir Leon. At this point, I wouldn't mind if we really did become lovers."

Even after saying that, she still had her halberd raised, ready for another strike—eyes blazing with the thrill of combat.

I steadied my stance, grinning back at her. "That's fantastic," I said, voice low and charged with excitement. "Because I was just thinking the same thing."

Chapter 1030: The Centaur Kingdom (6)

The ground trembled beneath Kali's hooves as she lunged forward again, a streak of raw power and speed. Her halberd cut through the air with a sharp whoosh, slicing the wind so cleanly it made the air crackle. I met her halfway, raising Ayuru to intercept. The impact resounded like thunder, a metallic clang that sent sparks scattering around us like fireflies in the morning light.

She smiled. That kind of smile that said, "Finally, someone worth fighting." Her eyes gleamed with excitement, her muscles flexing beneath her smooth skin and sleek centaur form. Her halberd twisted in a graceful arc, a blur of polished steel that came down with lethal precision.

I pivoted sideways, the blade narrowly missing my shoulder by a breath. The air pressure from the swing was enough to ruffle my hair and sting my cheek. I countered with a low sweep, my blade humming as I aimed for her lower torso, but Kali jumped back, hooves kicking up dirt in a graceful leap.

The rhythm between us was sharp and relentless. It wasn't just a fight. It was like a dance where every movement flowed naturally into the next. There was no hesitation, no fear, only focus.

She spun her halberd in a full circle, the blade slicing through the air so fast it left streaks of silver light. I ducked beneath it, thrusting upward. Our weapons met again, clang!, sparks flew, and the reverberation tingled in my arm.

"Not bad, Sir Leon," she said between movements, her breathing steady, not a hint of fatigue in her voice. "I thought you'd crumble by now."

"You underestimate how stubborn I can be," I shot back with a grin, parrying her next strike effortlessly.

Her laugh was short but genuine. "I like that."

She lunged again, this time with more speed with her halberd tracing a deadly crescent aimed at my chest. I twisted my wrist, meeting the strike in a flash. The sheer force behind her weapon made the air around us ripple like waves, but my stance didn't falter.

Kali was good. Incredibly good. Her movements were sharp, calculated, and strong, yet elegant with her every swing of her halberd looked like a performance, beautiful but deadly. Her hooves barely made a sound against the earth now. She was moving like a whisper and her attacks were more unpredictable the longer the duel went on.

But I wasn't exactly struggling either. My blade followed her rhythm instinctively, as if it knew where she'd move before she did. I wasn't fighting with raw strength. I was reading her flow, countering at just the right moment.

For minutes, neither of us seemed to gain the upper hand. Every hit, every block, every dodge felt balanced. We are perfectly matched. The clash of metal and the heavy exhalations from both of us echoed through the field.

Around us, the onlookers from Reilhahand's tribe watched in utter silence. Even Reilhahand himself had stopped grinning, his eyes fixed on the fight, clearly intrigued.

Kali twirled her halberd once more, the sunlight reflecting off the blade in a blinding flash before she swung it down hard. The shockwave it produced rippled through the ground, sending a gust of wind that made the grass flatten and dust swirl.

I braced myself, blocking it just in time, though the force pushed me a few steps back.

She smirked. "You're holding back, aren't you?"

I smiled faintly. "Maybe I am. What about you?"

She let out a small laugh, her eyes burning brighter. "Maybe I am too."

We both charged again.

The sound of our weapons colliding grew louder and more intense. Clang!Clang!

Clang! Each impact sent small shockwaves through the air, bits of grass and dirt flaring up beneath our feet. My blade danced in perfect synchrony with her halberd with neither one of us missing a beat.

I slashed low and she deflected it with the bottom of her halberd's shaft. She swung wide and I sidestepped and answered with a clean horizontal cut. She ducked, her hair whipping through the air as she twisted her body to avoid it, then spun her weapon behind her back to counter.

The fight had turned into something almost mesmerizing. And yet, even after what felt like hours, neither of us looked winded.

Sweat glistened faintly across Kali's skin, catching the sunlight as she moved. The determination in her eyes never faded, her lips curved in that same confident grin.

"You're really something else, Sir Leon," she said during one of the short pauses between our flurries. "Most men wouldn't last half this long against me."

"I could say the same for you," I said, shifting my stance, blade poised. "You make it sound like I'm supposed to get tired already."

Her smirk widened. "Cocky. I like that."

Then, with a sudden burst of power, she dashed forward again with her movements faster than before. The ground cracked under her hooves, dust rising in her wake. The tip of her halberd darted toward me like a spear, so fast it nearly blurred.

I parried, twisting my wrist and forcing her blade to the side before countering with a rising slash. She leapt back, the blade grazing her arm just enough to leave a faint mark and a thin red line that contrasted beautifully against her pale skin.

She looked at it, then chuckled. "You drew first blood. Not bad."

"Guess that's one point for me," I said, raising an eyebrow.

She lunged again before I could finish my sentence. Her halberd came down hard, aiming for my shoulder, but I deflected it upward, then kicked off the ground, closing the distance between us. Our faces were inches apart when my sword stopped just shy of her neck, the blade humming faintly against her pulse.

She froze, her eyes widening slightly but not out of fear, but out of surprise. Then, slowly, that same amused smile spread across her lips.

"Well," she breathed, her voice low and soft. "Looks like you win."

For a moment, the world seemed to still. The dust from our fight hung in the air like mist, the wind carrying the faint metallic scent of steel and sweat. Both of us stood there, unmoving, our gazes locked.

Then I lowered my blade, stepping back just slightly.

Kali exhaled, brushing a strand of hair away from her face. Despite losing, she didn't look disappointed. If anything, she looked thrilled with her cheeks flushed and her eyes gleaming with excitement.