

64. A Sinister Plot

The main event has begun.

A beautiful woman of average height wandered into the arena from the eastern gate with a dazed expression. Her reddish-brown hair hung freely over her face. She observed the spectators, squinting her earthy brown eyes at the various nobles one by one until her sights landed on a lone noble.

The noble had strikingly similar hair to her own and earthy brown eyes that judged her through a white mask-like the rest of them.

"Uncle?" She tilted her head slightly in confusion and murmured to herself as if unsure and wishing to avoid an embarrassing situation. Within the cavern, the lighting was dim, and although their hair colour was rare, it wasn't unique.

Marquess Cunningdal met her gaze briefly before dismissing her. She was the Daughter of his Brother, Victor, conceived between his Father and a mundane whore.

A noble bloodline isn't fictitious nor something to disregard. Nobles wield magic and pass on that right through their blood; to provide this gift to the child of a mundane was simply ridiculous. Power, control, wealth. All should remain within the aristocratic circle and members of high society as it has done for thousands of years.

The mundanes believe they have a one in a thousand chance to awaken magical abilities, but realistically when two mundanes with distant noble ancestors have a child, their child will have a high probability of awakening.

Victor was a bastard, an outcast that was unwanted and thrown away. Yet he dared to dilute the bloodline even further by having a child.

Evelyn.

Dressed in a tattered maid outfit, Evelyn warily observed her opponent waltzing out from the western gate. Her foe was a fellow maid, Kayla.

She was a flat-chested short girl with blonde pigtails and unusual pink eyes. There was a high chance she was a half breed, between what? Marquess Cunningdal didn't have a clue, nor did he care. She was an obstacle, a *mundane maid* that dared to duel his distant relative.

With her small stature and natural looks, many nobles chose to favour the taller and more well defined Evelyn in this duel; Marquess

Cunningdal agreed with their judgment. Although faint, Evelyn did possess noble blood and should therefore triumph over a commoner.

Evelyn straightened her back as Prince August made his appearance at the balcony's edge in his blinding white suit. He gave a quick glance at Marquess Cunningdal before giving his speech.

Marquess Cunningdal didn't miss the Prince's gaze as sudden unease filled his bones. He found it suspicious that Prince August would involve a distant relative of his in the main event, but suddenly gaining the Prince's attention that hadn't been on him this entire time made him uneasy.

Something wasn't right.

"With a clap of my hands, may the duel begin!" Unlike the other duels where Prince August utilised his Necromancy to force the fights, this one started with a bang as Kayla sprinted towards Evelyn, sand flying in her wake.

Evelyn stayed calm and waited until Kayla was before her; Marquess Cunningdal watched with interest as he detected Evelyn's mana circuit warming up.

The most significant advantage between those with mana and those without is *Magic Sight*. The ability to see spells before they manifest themselves.

Marquess Cunningdal could see Earth affinity mana surging through Evelyn's underdeveloped mana circuit as the ground a few meters in front of her became a murky swamp of sand and mud.

Being mundane, Kayla couldn't see it coming until Evelyn said the activation word in the runic language. Kayla panicked when Evelyn began speaking the *arcane tongue* and scouted her surroundings.

She looked down at the swamp around Evelyn's feet and sneered while looking back at Evelyn, "You think this can stop-" a ball of sand and clay brutally struck her chin, sending her head spinning.

As Kayla stumbled back, trying to remove the dizziness threatening to steal her consciousness away, her foot slipped as the ground distorted slightly; there was no chant as Evelyn used *Geokinesis*.

She tumbled, taking by surprise, earning herself a face full of mud; she yelped as it enveloped her hands and feet like quicksand as she slowly began to sink.

Without rest, Evelyn began her next spell. Rock walls formed a coffin around the commoner, sealing her fate to the dark depths below.

Evelyn was sweating profusely and collapsed to one knee, her reddish-brown hair cascading down her face, hiding her pained expression from the spectators above.

"Tsk." Marquess Cunningdal was somewhat disappointed; Evelyn's C grade spells were poorly practised, and she clearly lacked a sufficient mana pool. If she fought another mage, she would lose tragically and stain the reputation of House Cunningdal, the unbreakable wall of the North.

As a family specialising in the Earth affinity, Marquess Cunningdal could erect a stone fortress in seconds with a mere thought, form mile wide fissures in the earth, command an army of golems. Such was the power of a B grade Earth mage hardened by War.

'In contrast to my own power, Evelyn turned a small area around her into a glorified puddle, threw a rock at Kayla's face and then slightly shifted the ground, so Kayla lost her footing. It works perfectly against mundanes; they are fragile, after all. But against a mage from another House? It would be an embarrassment. Would she throw mud at nobles? Make them slip? That simply will not do.' Marquess Cunningdal crossed his fingers and rested his chin on his hands while leaning forward. The bidding war had begun.

Various sums of gold echoed through the dim cavern, slowly climbing.

"105 Gold? Are you poor? I bid 1500!"

"1500? Who are you to flaunt money in front of me? 2000 gold!"

Marquess Cunningdal quietly listened to the bidding war, something tugging on his mind, *'This somehow feels rehearsed... the bids are far too low for a pretty girl that displayed some magical prowess; a few thousand gold is nothing to these tycoons.'*

The bidding slowed down at around 5000 gold, still far too low in Marquess Cunningdal's opinion. But, while glancing around, he mysteriously felt everyone's gaze on him.

He was being watched.

But why? He stood out a little as he sat alone, but other than that, he was just another noble in attendance that had yet to place a bid. *'Let's test the waters then...'*

Sanding up, Marquess Cunningdal announced his bid in a calm voice.

"5010 gold."

Silence.

The bidding abruptly ceased, and seconds later, Prince August clapped his hands with a mysterious smile, "Congratulations on your prize; please wait there to accept it!"

'He is far too cheerful; it's almost creepy.'

The stone coffin cracked as dark tendrils burrowed inside and retrieved Kayla's corpse. Like before, Prince August used his Necromancy to convert the corpse into black viscous sludge and deposited it into a crystal jar.

The jar then casually floated across the arena and into his outstretched hands.

It reeked of death and decay, moving around the jar as if alive. Marquess Cunningdal quickly glanced at the ring on his finger. The little white gemstone had turned pitch black.

'If this sludge truly extended life, this artefact would radiate a Green affinity such as Life or Regeneration, maybe even red for Blood affinity. Yet black can only mean one thing. Death.' Before the Prince became impatient, he inspected the other nobles more carefully.

They all patiently observed him, waiting. No chatter or movement, no sneers or judgment. Just cold empty gazes.

'They are copying the Prince's movements. Puppets? Reanimated corpses? Mind control? I cannot be certain, but this entire after-party was indeed a trap as I feared. Either I become his loyalist through death, or I die trying to escape.'

Marquess Cunningdal made a decisive decision, years on the battlefield had honed his instincts for danger, and they screamed as the Prince's expression turned to a frown.

"Marquess Cunningdal... please accept my gift."

Marquess Cunningdal took one last look at the sludge before ripping off his white mask, throwing it onto the stone steps below and dumping the sludge upon it.

The mask greedily absorbed the sludge as spikes emerged from its surface where Marquess Cunningdal's face had been moments ago.

'I would have died instantly with that many spikes impaling my brain... so all these nobles are corpses then? The Prince's faction is far more

sinister than I first thought. Marquess Cunningdal witnessed Prince August's face decay away, revealing a ghoulish skull with glowing green eyes.

The ominous green orbs nestled within his eyes sockets pulsed with power as dark tendrils shot out in all directions, latching onto the many nobles around the room.

The noble's faces melted similarly to the Prince's, revealing their pristine white skulls below.

Evelyn screamed in horror, drawing Marquess Cunningdal's attention. He needed to leave, and quickly. "Prince August, did nobody ever inform you of the worst place to fight an Earth mage? I believe it's best for everyone if you remain down here. Where skeletons belong." Raising his arms to the cavern's ceiling with a mere thought, his *Geokneisis* surged forth with intense vigour, causing large cracks to form.

Evelyn stumbled and fell as rocks rained from above and the ground trembled; intense rumbling echoed through the cavern as the earth cracked and warped to the Earth mage's will.

Prince August didn't wait to be buried alive; with a howl, the ground exploded as an enormous skeletal arm, potentially belonging to a Dragon from centuries ago, emerged and rushed towards the unstable cave ceiling. The lone skeletal claw held up the sky like a titan defying the Gods.

The many noble puppets opened their mouths, and with shrieks and howls, they unleashed spells from their maws while chanting the arcane tongue at inhuman speeds. Their mana pools seemed endless as a wall of elemental spells rushed through the cavern and converged on Marquess Cunningdal position.

The Marquess was a famous mage; although lacking compared to the Archmages and true superpowers of the continent, he was a well-respected B grade mage.

Yet the stone wall he reinforced with his mana crumbled to dust under the persistent artillery fire.

'A *grade...*' Marquess Cunningdal cursed in his head as he realised the scope of his opponent's power; victory was not an option. Escape the only possibility.

He clutched a purple stone in his hand while cowering behind his hastily constructed fortress; he stared at it with a pained face. But just before he activated it, he caught the sight of Evelyn out of the corner of his eye.

Blood streamed from her forehead as she limped around the arena below, desperately trying to dodge the onslaught of rocks and misguided spells. Her fiery red hair had a striking resemblance to his Mother's.

'Protect your own life first. A true noble should stand up for themselves, accept help from nobody, only command chess pieces from afar.'

Marquess Cunningdal's Father's words echoed in his mind, but his Mother's gentle voice cut in, *'Don't be so cold and calculating, dear; the only thing that truly matters is family. Stick together through thick and thin, look out for one another. Only then can the House succeed.*

Enough of this infighting. Take that strength and rage and use it on others, not our own.'

Marquess Cunningdal gritted his teeth; for the first time in his life, he would do something for another person, something selfless. He raised his arm; sweat poured down his forehead as the arena's entire floor began to rise; within seconds, it aligned with the spectator's seats.

"Evelyn." He held out his hand towards the bloodied and frightened girl. She barely managed to grab the outstretched hand as the fortress walls behind the Marquess exploded. He grabbed Evelyn in an awkward hug as the purple stone in his hand rapidly expanded, eventually swallowing the two through a rift in space.

A half-elf briefly raised his head from a mountain of paperwork as a purple rift in space appeared in the middle of his office.

"Marquess Cunningdal." The half-elf commented in a monotone voice as a man with fiery red hair stumbled out of the rift while clutching a young woman.

"My apologies Jannalor for the abrupt arrival; it's worse than you feared."

The half-elf stood up from his seat, wearing his black gown covered in swirling purple patterns and donning the Guild Masters crest.

With his hands behind his back, Jannalor towered over the Marquess, and his eyes turned pitch black as if gazing into his very soul, "Oh? Please do explain."

"The Prince is a Necromancer of at least A grade."

Jannalor's brows furrowed.

"This is going to be a problem..." the lanky half-elf wandered around the room while tapping his chin, "We need to consolidate our power

somewhere, a war is coming, and it's dangerous to prepare our forces, so near the enemy."

Marquess Cunningdal frowned, "What about my territory?"

Jannalor shook his head, "Far too close to the border with Oshal; they will see the increase in troops as a threat and speed up their war efforts. If we fight a civil war while being attacked by Oshal from behind, Kassinki will fall within days."

The Marquess nodded in agreement, "Then where can we possibly go?"

Jannalor stopped pacing and looked towards the North with his pitch-black eyes, "How about Blackthorn?"