

62. Council of the White Masks

The evening sunlight gradually sank below the horizon, with its warm embrace gone; many orbs of fire floated aimlessly through the night sky like fireflies, providing heat to the numerous guests. A genre of music similar to jazz complimented the light chatter that filled the air as men and women in stylish and lavish clothing linking arms mingled around the beautiful palace garden. A fleet of waiters skillfully weaved through the group of aristocrats to deliver delicious wines and exotic late-night nibbles.

Many hovered in groups around a handsome and lofty Prince; his dazzling blonde hair cascaded down to his shoulder blades like a lion's mane. His emerald eyes and soft smile calmed the hearts of many, and his white silk suit with golden embroidery gave him almost a holy feel.

Prince August was the centre of attention as always, with many nobles patiently waiting for an opportunity to discuss potential benefits in the future through collaborations.

He was currently engaged in a joyful conversation with Marquess Cunningdal over a friendly game of chess. The two seemed best of friends, but Marquess Cunningdal was desperately trying to let Prince August win without making it obvious.

Prince August is a jealous and spiteful man; winning in any aspect against him was seen as an act of war. Prince August liked competent subordinates, but overly competent ones are threats to his rule and therefore eliminated silently.

Marquess Cunningdal dabbed the sweat accumulating on his forehead with a paisley floral handkerchief as he nervously decided on his next move.

Prince August crossed one leg over the other and slightly leaned back, "In recent weeks, tensions at the border have been rising. Is this true, Marquess?"

Marquess Cunningdal gulped as he hovered his Queen piece over Prince August's Knight, "First Prince is well informed, tensions have indeed been rising, but my soldiers are maintaining the border as expected of us. Although those Oshal dogs are growing impatient as time wears on, famine is rampant on their side of the great river."

After making his slightly questionable move that will cause him to lose his Queen piece within three turns, he continued after taking a sip of wine, "Luckily weather is on our side for once, a great storm has brewed

across the barren lands and flooded the great river with a raging tide once more. How long will it last? I can't say but a week or two at most."

A murmur spread through the various tightly huddled groups of nobles surrounding the chess table.

Prince August moved his hand above the chessboard while eyeing for the greatest angle of attack, "So war is inevitable? My war council believes a full-scale conflict may breakout next spring; I shall send the necessary supplies to bolster your defences."

Marquess Cunnindal shifted nervously in his seat; he was one of the few nobles that claimed to be neutral but secretly plotted against the Prince. The Princess faction was small, but recent rumours of a Vampire Prince joining the faction has sparked the group's enthusiasm.

Prince August showed a slight smirk at the sight of Marquess Cunnindal squirming in his chair; he made a slow and calculated move with his Rook, putting Marquess Cunnindal in check. Then, although the game had yet to conclude, he stood up and patted down his clothes to remove invisible dust, "Be careful where you put your troops, Marquess Cunnindal... or you might just find yourself defenceless."

Marquess Cunnindal awkwardly stood up and lightly shook Prince August's hand, "I understand, my Prince; I thank you for the humbling lesson."

Just as the Prince turned to leave, a waiter wearing more fancy clothes than the other servants approached the Prince and whispered something into his ear.

Prince August's entire demeanour shifted for a split second, but he promptly recovered and eyed his guest with a slightly mysterious smile, "Ladies and Gentlemen, I appreciate all those that have attended this little get-together. The garden party is now over; those with a pass, please follow me to the after-party."

The groups of nobles lightly clapped at his speech. Then, various nobles began to walk towards the entrance, including Marquess Cunnindal. Before leaving, he glanced over his shoulder and saw nobles belonging to the Prince faction retrieving white masks from their inner suit pockets or from between their bosoms. A shiver ran down his spine, and he quickly looked forward. Whatever the after-party entailed, he wanted no part of it. Yet a hand gripped his shoulder and passed him a mask.

Prince August grinned at Marquess Cunnindal's expression, "Come along, Marquess, it will be a delightful night to remember."

Prince August stood on the balcony of the garden and looked down at the sprawling city of Kassinki below. His twisted expression was a stark comparison to his usual soft smile.

"They failed?"

His voice filled with spite disturbed the peaceful night and made the butler standing behind him shiver, "We believe so, my Lord. It has been a day, and they are yet to return. Sir Beldroth returned and reported that the soldiers stayed with Duke Nightshade and requested food supplies."

August clenched his fist and gnashed his teeth, "Those soldiers should have died; how can they be still alive? Somethings not right."

The butler nodded thoughtfully, "That is indeed the case; should I send some soldiers to investigate?"

August lightly shook his head, "Father is keeping a close eye on my activities, and those were the last of my double agents... I can't afford to send any forces externally without justification to my Father. Not to mention the Mage Tower is backing Duke Nightshade, and since my surprise attack failed, any further action is far too risky. Beldroth likely knew that those soldiers belonged to me but chose not to reveal it; I can see the hidden meaning behind his actions."

August tapped his fingers on the balcony marble railing, "Don't mess with us, and we won't mess with you." Then, turning on his heel, he faced the butler, "Forget this matter for now. Is the main event ready?"

The butler nodded, "The knight's family members have been branded as traitors to the crown and secured in the basement."

Prince August swirled the red wine in his crystal glass, "Let the main event begin." He proclaimed, downing the remaining mouthful.

Marquess Cunnindal sat stiffly on the stone steps; the white mask helped hide his anxious expression and wandering eyes. A butler had led the group of nobles to an underground dungeon that doubled up as an arena within a massive cavern.

The arena was small, with high walls allowing the noble guests an excellent birds-eye view of the sand-filled battlegrounds. The mossy stone walls had the occasional dried bloodstain showing signs of past bloodshed.

Marquess Cunnindal glanced around but couldn't distinguish anyone's features due to the white masks obscuring the face's top half and dim lighting. The masked nobles huddled together and discussed various topics in hushed murmurs while sipping on wine; Marquess Cunnindal felt isolated as he sat alone.

Marquess Cunnindal had a perfect view of the balcony opposite him; the murmurs of the various nobles died down as the door creaked open. Marquess Cunnindal knew it was the Prince as he still wore his radiant white suit that looked especially ominous combined with the white mask.

"Greetings, my loyalists." Prince August took centre stage and tilted his head as he looked around, "Shall we watch as *traitorous* subjects that dared to defy my orders fight to the death for our pleasure and continued longevity?"

The elite crowd roared in excitement as two gates on either side of the arena slowly rose.

A middle-aged man came stumbling out the west gate with a blindfold around his eyes, a man wearing a butler uniform and a white mask pushed the middle-aged man into the arena and slammed the gate shut.

The middle-aged man misstepped and fell to the ground earning himself a mouth full of sand and a round of haunting chuckles from the spectators; he stood up with a grunt and pulled off the blindfold, revealing his surroundings. He looked around in confusion as the east side gate opened and a woman stumbled in.

"Cindy?"

The woman pulled off her blindfold and returned the greeting, "Danny?"

They ran into each other's embrace, and Cindy sobbed on Danny's shoulder and whispered, "Where are we?"

"I don't know..."

A loud clapping drew their attention to a man in a white suit and mask standing way above them on a balcony, "A touching reunion between husband and wife."

He then spread his arms wide and gestured to the many other well-dressed men and women, "Council of the white masks, I present a duel to the death between a loving couple. The winner shall be sold to the highest bidder, and the loser drained for your nourishment. May the games commence."