

## Titan King 1021

### Chapter 1021: A serious glow-up

At the same time Rize was pleading for reinforcements, Orion was summoning one of his own key agents to The Stillness.

A figure materialized in the center of the great hall. Dressed in white robes, Gustalon moved with an ethereal grace, as if the wind itself had taken human form.

“My lord,” he said, his voice a low whisper.

“Welcome to Silverwood Realm,” Orion said with a nod. He gestured vaguely towards the world outside the fortress. “We are in a region known as the Forest of Nature. I’ve named this outpost ‘The Stillness.’”

With a flick of his wrist, a blank map, save for the small area Orion had already charted, materialized in the air before Gustalon.

“This territory will become a vital breadbasket for the horde. It’s a new frontier,” Orion explained. “An unknown world, filled with mysterious elves, strange flora, and... the freedom you so desire.”

He met Gustalon’s gaze. “Go. Enjoy that freedom. And while you’re at it, bring me back a detailed map of this land.”

A genuine smile bloomed on Gustalon’s face. To explore the unknown, to be as free as the wind—it was all he had ever wanted. An open-ended assignment like this wasn’t work; it was a gift.

“I will chart the unknown in your name, my lord.”

Orion inclined his head. Gustalon wasn’t one for flattery; his words were sincere.

A moment later, Gustalon dissolved into a gust of wind that swirled out of the hall and into the vast expanse of the Forest of Nature.

Emerald Dream Realm, the city of Lorelia.

A flash of teleportation magic lit up the plaza outside the Dragon Crucible. The hulking form of Dirtclaw, the Hell-Drake Hound, slammed into existence. His four massive paws, wreathed in hellfire, instantly began to scorch the flagstones, sending up plumes of acrid smoke.

With a grunt, Dirtclaw focused his will, wrestling the raw, supernatural power now coursing through him back under control.

"Haha, Dirtclaw! Look at you! That's a serious glow-up!"

He looked up as the familiar, teasing voice reached him. The flames enveloping him receded, vanishing back under his cooling magma hide. Lilith and Lorelia, who had clearly been waiting for him, were approaching.

"Mistress Lilith. Lady Lorelia," Dirtclaw rumbled in greeting.

"Dirtclaw, what happened to you? You're gorgeous!" Lorelia squealed, scrambling onto his broad back and settling in as if he were a prized steed.

It was only then, feeling the light weight on his spine, that Dirtclaw realized he was still in his beast form. The upright, bipedal gnoll was gone.

"What... what am I?" he growled, lifting a massive claw. It wasn't the paw of a gnoll. It was the scaled, obsidian talon of a drake.

"You've ascended to the rank of Legend," Lilith explained, stepping forward. Her smile was one of pure satisfaction. The stoneheart horde had gained a powerful new champion. "Your bloodline's full potential was unlocked. It seems you're locked into this form for now."

“Oh, I get it! Just like Xalathar, who’s always stuck as a dragon,” Lorelia chirped from her perch.

Lilith nodded, confirming Lorelia’s guess. The abyssal dragon Xalathar had spent a long time developing under Orion’s direct tutelage, and his true power had become a thing of legend within the stoneheart horde.

“So... my potential was unlocked,” Dirtclaw mused, twisting his powerful neck to examine himself. Most of his body was now draconic. The sensation was profoundly strange. Standing still, the body felt alien. But the moment he moved, it felt perfectly, instinctually, his own.

“Come on, run!” Lorelia urged, patting his neck excitedly. “Let’s see what this new ride can do!”

The novelty of his Hell-Drake Hound form was an irresistible new toy.

“Hold on tight, Lady Lorelia!” A thrill shot through Dirtclaw. He was just as curious as she was. He threw his head back, and a sound that was half-roar, half-howl tore from his throat before he launched himself forward.

The sensation was electric. The power of a Legendary-tier body, enhanced by supernatural energies, translated into pure, exhilarating speed. Lorelia’s laughter peeled behind him on the wind, and Dirtclaw himself became lost in the intoxicating rush of his newfound strength.

Half an hour later, they returned to Lilith, both still buzzing with excitement. Under Dirtclaw’s careful efforts, his relationship with the playful dragon had always been warm and close.

“Alright, Dirtclaw,” Lilith said, her smile turning sly. “Your vacation is officially over.” She produced a teleportation scroll from her inventory and held it out. “My lord has a mission for you. You are to return to the territory, get the gnoll race’s affairs in order, and use this scroll within three days.”

Sensing the shift to serious business, Lorelia immediately hopped off Dirtclaw’s back, her eyes fixed on the scroll. She knew her master. Orders like this usually meant one thing: war. And having gotten a taste for it, Lorelia was always eager for more.

Dirtclaw was practically built for it. He had clawed his way up from nothing, climbing a mountain of bones from one battlefield to the next. Fresh off his promotion to lord, he was itching to test his new power and see how his combat style had evolved.

"I accept the command," he growled. His playful demeanor vanished, replaced by the grim focus of a soldier. He opened his great jaws and gently took the scroll from Lilith's hand.

"Go," she said. "I'm sure the gnolls will be bursting with pride to see their new lord."

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Titanion Realm, Stoneheart City.

Atop his throne, Orion's eyes were closed, his consciousness fully immersed in the Survivor's Platform. He was in a direct channel with an ally.

"I'm just about set on my end," came the gruff, digitized voice of Arthas. After a period of recovery, he was finally ready to move on the Godforsaken Land. "We go in three days. Any issues on your side?"

"No issues," Orion typed back instantly. "We're ready." This time, he was deploying Soraya, the broodmother. To ensure her safety, he had just recalled the newly ascended Dirtclaw to serve as her dedicated protector. In any real war, the broodmother was always the highest priority target.

"I'm timing this invasion for a three-month campaign," Arthas continued, his tone dead serious. "Three months. Win or lose, we pull out. This enemy is no joke. We have to go all-in from the moment our boots hit the ground."

Orion didn't ask why. He simply absorbed the intel.

Arthas must be fighting on other fronts. In other realms.

Chapter 1022: The Death Spiral Zone

I can handle a two-front war with my current resources. A veteran player like Arthas must be fighting on multiple fronts across the realms.

A trade request pinged. A massive cache of resources appeared in his inventory. "Give these to your broodmother," Arthas's message read. "This is going to be a meat grinder. Tell her not to conserve anything. The timeline is tight. We need to bulldoze them in one clean push."

Orion accepted without hesitation. Churning out endless waves of cannon fodder like small scorpions required a burn rate the stoneheart horde couldn't possibly sustain on its own.

"Understood," Orion sent back. The conversation ended there. Some things had to be discussed on-site, face-to-face.

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Three days later, Orion's Deathly Soul-Reaper avatar, flanked by Soraya and Dirtclaw, teleported into the bleak expanse of the Godforsaken Land.

Godforsaken Land, the Death Spiral Zone.

A ripple of void energy dissipated, leaving the Deathly Soul-Reaper, Soraya, and Dirtclaw standing in the middle of a desolate deadlands. Waiting for them was another party.

"Bro?" Orion called out.

"Here," a hollow voice replied.

Orion's gaze fell upon the figure at the head of the undead host. It was a lich of immense power, easily at the arch lord peak. A crown of jagged obsidian, embedded with a single, pulsing sapphire, rested on its skull. A swirling vortex of crimson energy spun in its hollowed-out chest cavity. Orion had to admit, the whole vibe—the cryptic aura, the overpowered gear—was pure Arthas.

He knew it was him for sure when he saw the figures standing behind the lich: not just the familiar forms of Vexis and Rumbold, but the four powerhouse lords Bone White, Bone Red, Bone Green, and Bone Blue.

“Follow me,” Arthas said, his tone all business. Leaving his subordinates behind, he gestured for Orion to join him as he glided towards a nearby tower of black stone.

The moment they stepped inside, Arthas began the briefing. “This entire region is the domain of the Gnasher Race. They worship a dark demigod.”

He didn’t mince words. “You don’t worry about the demigod. That’s my problem. Your job is to take the undead armies, your cannon fodder, and the skeletal dragons and steamroll the entire Death Spiral Zone.”

Arthas led Orion to a magical sand table that displayed a perfect, miniature representation of the Godforsaken Land. It was an irregularly shaped continent with a massive, bottomless-looking pit at its core. Countless paths radiated outwards from the pit in a spiral pattern.

“These paths are tunnels excavated by the Gnasher Race,” Arthas explained. “We push along these routes until we reach the heart of their lair. The areas between the paths are impassable mountain ridges. We have no choice but to attack them on their own ground.”

He tapped one of the paths near the outer edge, indicating their current position.

“The second we enter one of these tunnels, they’ll know we’re here. From that point on, it’s a fight to the death. The entire network of paths is what I call the Death Spiral Zone.” He paused, letting the grim name sink in. “And one more thing. While fighting within the Spiral, the Gnasher Race receives some kind of environmental buff. Their overall strength increases by ten to thirty percent.”

After a moment of staring at the map, Arthas led Orion into a side chamber. Inside, laid out on stone slabs, were three corpses.

“Our first intel, captured from scouting probes. Gnasher Race specimens, ranked from highest status and power on the left, to lowest on the right.”

They both fell silent, studying the enemy they were about to face.

“Ant-men?” Orion finally asked, the word sounding inadequate.

“Something like that,” Arthas conceded.

The bodies were humanoid, but that’s where the similarities ended. They possessed triangular, insectoid heads dominated by enormous, multi-faceted eyes. Their mouths were a horrifying set of razor-sharp mandibles that gave them their name. In addition to two long, human-like legs, a second pair of powerful arms sprouted from their ribs.

“Their physical strength is off the charts,” Arthas continued. “Even their lowest-tier fodder can shear through bone and steel with ease.” To demonstrate, he tossed a thick femur onto the corpse on the right. The moment it touched the creature’s mandibles, it snapped in two with a sharp crack.

“The other two variants have demonstrated the ability to burrow and spit corrosive venom. My guess is that different castes possess different magic-like abilities.”

Orion’s brow furrowed. No wonder Arthas said the casualties would be immense. Forget Soraya’s small scorpions; even Arthas’s hardened skeleton warriors would be torn to shreds against these things. The sheer brutal efficiency of those mandibles was terrifying.

“Expect other enemy types among their elites. Don’t get complacent,” Arthas warned. His intel was incomplete. Once the fighting started, he wouldn’t be able to bail Orion out.

“As you can see, we have no graveyard or necropolis to draw from here,” Arthas stated. “My avatar will remain in this tower and maintain the summoning formation, providing a constant stream of reinforcements. You can have your broodmother set up her Nest right beside me. I’ll watch over her.”

Orion nodded, agreeing with the plan.

“Take Bones with you,” Arthas said, pulling a ring from his finger and holding it out. “He should help you take some of the pressure off.”

The ring was shaped like a sleeping dragon, its body coiled around itself. As Orion reached for it, a tremendous roar echoed not in the room, but directly inside his mind. He understood instantly. The ring was Arthas’s skeletal dragon mount.

Arthas moved to sit on a throne carved of bone at the center of the room. “Remember,” he said, his voice resonating with chilling authority. “The best way to deal with a deeply entrenched faction like this is to meet force with greater force. We will annihilate them with overwhelming power and numbers.”

He looked at Orion.

“Let’s begin.”

Before Orion could even offer a word of assent, Arthas had already given the order to advance.

“Right,” Orion said, his back straightening. He turned, his face a mask of grim resolve, and strode out of the undead tower.

Silverwood Realm, the Forest of Nature.

Shrieks and battle cries echoed through the trees. A mixed squadron of Plague-thralls, Shield Warriors, and Wood Elves was closing in on a pack of demonic monsters that had been hunting a group of refugees.

In a dense thicket, Caesar and two Alpha-level Shield Warriors had formed a triangle, trapping a massive, Alpha-peak Cyclopes between them. Caesar was the tip of the spear, his sword flashing as he pressed the attack. The two warriors absorbed the beast’s wild swings on their heavy shields, using perfectly timed shield-bashes to keep its attention locked.

High above, perched on the branch of a colossal tree, Xylia held her bow taut, an arrow aimed at the Cyclopes's single, raging eye, ready to provide support at a moment's notice.

This running battle had started when they found the fifty or so Wood Elves, cornered and doomed. Half of them were children. Xylia had no idea how they had survived this long or made it this far, but she knew with absolute certainty that she would die before she let them fall now.

As that conviction hardened in her heart, she heard a roar from below. Caesar, seeing his opening, charged.

"Blade Tyrant's Art: Sonic Cross!"

Chapter 1023: My turn

Before a war begins, there is always the quiet dread. A tense, suffocating silence where the mind races.

Every soldier, living and dead, stared at the narrow slit of the canyon ahead, as if some unimaginable horror was about to burst forth from the shadows.

Is it starting?

Standing guard outside the sand scorpions' Nest, Dirtclaw watched the endless tide of small scorpions and skeleton warriors flow into the mouth of the Death Spiral Zone. A jolt of adrenaline shot through him. With a sudden whoosh, the hellfire dormant within him erupted, cloaking his draconic form in shimmering heat. The battle lust began to simmer, the fire in his blood catching light.

The first wave to enter the spiral passage wasn't the skeletons. It was the scorpions, which vanished underground, their movement kicking up a colossal sandstorm that roared into the tunnel. The grating hiss of sand on stone was the opening salvo of a war that would be decided by brute force, not cunning.

A lone Gnasher Race drone clawed its way out of the earth, its antennae twitching frantically as it tried to process the sudden chaos. The sandstorm hit it a second later. The drone was instantly shredded, its antennae sent spinning into the vortex. In the face of this terrifying invasion, death was a footnote.

But in its final moment, the drone had succeeded. It had broadcast everything it sensed, a complex warning encoded in pheromones. The sandstorm, its executioner, became the perfect vehicle for that message.

Soon, other drones began to surface along the tunnel, one after another. They met the same fate, torn to pieces before they could even register their own demise. But with each death, the intelligence grew more refined, a clearer picture carried on the wind to the heart of the Gnasher Race Nest.

Screeeeeeee!

Deep within the Gnasher lair, a sound like grinding metal echoed through the chambers. It was the highest alert, a signal that the Tribe faced a war for its very survival.

The Mandible Guard, the hulking elites stationed near the Nest's core, immediately converged on the broodchamber, forming a living wall around their matriarch, Jin Ya. In wartime, they would not leave her side.

"Invaders?" The broodmother's voice was calm, melodic, and laced with ancient weariness. "They must be here for the black gold."

The Gnasher Race's broodmother possessed a deceptively humanoid form, her features obscured by a network of intricate, glowing tattoos. She was an ageless being, whose terrible and majestic presence filled the chamber.

She approached a grand statue at the center of her royal hall. It was a monument to their ancestor, the demigod they worshipped. She began a ritual, her movements precise and strange, her voice a low prayer.

As she prayed, a carapace of black, chitinous armor grew from her skin, flowing over her body until she was encased in a formidable suit of living plate.

By the time the ritual was complete, her four primary Mandible Guards had taken their positions around her, each one a giant of muscle and chitin that towered over her.

“Report,” Jin Ya commanded, stretching her newly armored limbs with a series of sharp cracks.

One of the guards, its voice a dry rasp, answered. “Matriarch, we have only fragmented intel. A great storm has entered the outer spiral, followed by an army of countless skeleton warriors. They are prepared, Matriarch. To invade so brazenly... this is a calculated assault.”

“Have the Reavers been dispatched?” she asked. The Reavers were the Gnasher Race’s elite frontline specialists, every one of them a warrior of the arch lord rank.

The guard bowed its head. “Matriarch, the two closest Reavers are already en route to intercept. The others have received the signal and are mobilizing.”

Jin Ya nodded, her expression unreadable. There was no panic here. This Godforsaken Land, a territory their ancestor had torn from another power, was rich in black gold. They had fought off countless invaders seeking to claim it. For the Gnasher Race, who devoured any living thing they could kill, war was not a tragedy. It was a banquet.

“Prepare yourselves,” she told her guards. “If the Reavers fail, you will march with me.”

Unlike the broodmothers of lesser races, Jin Ya was no helpless queen to be protected. She was a master of combat, the single most powerful warrior in the entire Gnasher Race.

Outside the Nest, at the edge of the death spiral.

Orion’s Deathly Soul-Reaper avatar strolled casually through the endless ranks of skeletons, its massive runed scythe resting on its shoulder. The combined might of the undead and scorpion armies was a relentless flood, pouring ever deeper into the spiral’s darkening core. This was merely the opening phase; the main Gnasher army had yet to appear, and the advance was brutally fast.

Behind Orion, Bone White, Bone Red, Vexis, and Rumbold followed. Vexis and Rumbold moved with grim purpose, their staves flashing with baleful light as they reanimated the shredded remains of the Gnasher drones, their unholy necromantic magic causing the invasion force to snowball with every single step it took.

At this rate, Orion's army would soon become an unstoppable avalanche, destined to crush the Gnasher Race under its sheer weight.

Suddenly, Orion paused. He sensed two powerful signatures—arch lords—streaking towards them at an incredible, blurring speed.

"My turn," the Soul-Reaper's raspy voice echoed. "Protect yourselves."

The warning was mostly a formality. He knew Bone White and Bone Red, the hulking skeleton champions, were already flanking Vexis and Rumbold, their sole purpose to serve as their bodyguards.

Aaaaooooowl!

A chilling roar, cold and metallic, tore through the air. A colossal skeletal dragon materialized high above the army, its cavernous eyes burning with ethereal blue light. It beat its tattered, sun-blocking wings, unleashing a palpable wave of frigid air.

The Deathly Soul-Reaper leaped, landing silently atop the dragon's skull. The great beast instantly sensed its master's targets, and with a powerful surge of frost and wind, it shot forward like a missile to meet the rapidly approaching threat.

Chapter 1024: We must stand together

Silverwood Realm, The Stillness.

A crowd had formed in the main plaza, an uneasy mix of Shield Warriors and Wood Elves. The elves, in particular, watched the center of the square with a familiar terror creeping back into their eyes. The source of their fear was a swirling mass of gray-black mist about ten feet across, hovering motionlessly. It was a Mist Wraith.

To the Wood Elves, this demonic monster was an inescapable death sentence. In the entire brutal history of their flight, not a single one of them had ever escaped an encounter with a Mist Wraith.

The commotion was significant enough that Orion himself emerged from the main keep.

"What's going on here?" he asked, striding over to Tangere. His eyes swept over the nervous onlookers, and his brow furrowed in disapproval. The Stillness was on a war footing. Everyone should have been at their posts, contributing. A crowd of gawkers with long faces was the last thing he wanted to see.

"That," Tangere said, nodding toward the roiling cloud, "is a Mist Wraith. The same kind Aerin and Xylia warned us about. Your elemental agent brought it back."

As he spoke, a flicker of awe and shock passed through Tangere's eyes. The fact that Orion had a Legendary-level elemental like Gustalon as an enslaved subordinate had completely shattered his understanding of what the top-tier Survivors were capable of. Tangere had seen arch lords and elementals before, but never one that had been bound to service.

"A Mist Wraith?" Orion repeated.

"Yes. It was in a state of confused shock when it was brought in. I've since asserted control over it with my plague magic." Tangere felt a pang of humiliation admitting it. He'd run into these things himself recently, and every single time, they had slipped through his grasp. Then Gustalon shows up, casually whips up a few gales, and plucks the wraiths from their hiding places like picking fruit. It was a humbling, deeply irritating display of power that threatened his carefully crafted image as a powerful protector among the elves.

"What are its capabilities?" Orion asked, cutting straight to the point.

"They can generate a toxic mist that causes hallucinations if inhaled. Inside the mist, your movement and senses are severely impaired, and you lose all sense of direction. The wraiths themselves, however, move through it freely. They're deadly assassins in their element."

As if on cue, Tangere made the captive Mist Wraith draw a strange, curved scimitar from its belt. It began to execute a series of fluid, lethal strikes within its now-thinning cloud of mist.

Orion was already considering the possibilities. A unit like that would be a deadly asset.

He raised a hand, beckoning a nearby Shield Warrior. "Let me borrow your sword."

"It is my honor!" The warrior, his face shining with reverence, presented his longsword with both hands.

Orion gave a curt nod, drew the blade, and walked directly toward the Mist Wraith.

There was a single, clean sound of tearing steel.

With one diagonal slash from shoulder to hip, Orion cleaved the Mist Wraith in two. It was utterly and completely dead. He bent down, grabbed the creature's horned, skull-like head, and turned to face the crowd.

"This is the demon you fear?" he asked, his voice ringing across the silent plaza. He held the sword in one hand and the severed head in the other, his sharp gaze raking across the faces of the Wood Elves. "It's nothing."

For too long, the demonic monsters had carved an impression of invincibility into the psyche of the elves. Now, Orion would use the simple truth—and a simple steel sword—to shatter that impression. He would kill their fear itself.

"Listen to me! The demonic monsters are not the problem," he declared, his voice rising. "The problem is a lack of will to defend our homes! A lack of courage to fight back! Your old home, the peaceful Forest of Nature, is gone. It was burned to the ground!"

Orion would show them that they were helpless refugees, a race on the brink of extinction, saved only by his intervention.

"Do you want to see this new home, The Stillness—a home built from the ashes of war and flight—destroyed as well?" he roared. "Do you want to see your families, your people, cast out to wander and die in this forest once more?"

Home. Safety. The endless, terrifying flight. He was striking at the very core of their trauma, the most vulnerable strings of their hearts. The raw, painful memories washed over them, Aerin included.

"These demonic monsters are nothing!" Orion proclaimed, lifting the head high. "In time, we will purge every last one of them from the Forest of Nature. We will restore the peace you lost. But to do that, we must stand together! We must fight together! We must believe in ourselves, and in the strength we have when we are united!"

With his speech concluded, he casually tossed the longsword. It spun through the air and landed perfectly in the waiting hands of its owner. Then, still holding the Mist Wraith's remains, Orion turned and walked back toward the keep. The creature was dead, but his sister, Clymene, could surely work her magic on it. Adding a unit like this to the stoneheart horde's undead armies would be a massive boon. He made a mental note. When Gustalon returns, his new primary mission will be to hunt and capture more Mist Wraiths.

"The Godfather is so cool," Aerin whispered, her eyes wide with admiration. "Even the way he walks is powerful."

Unlike the other elves, her mind was already clearing. As a Survivor, she saw the world through a different lens. The image of Orion walking away, resolute and powerful, perfectly matched her idea of a true Big boss.

As Orion disappeared, Aerin stepped forward to address her people. "Alright, everyone, back to work!" she called out, taking a page from Orion's book. "Those wooden walls won't reinforce themselves! There are treehouses to be built and seeds to be planted! My lord and his warriors will clear the forest, but it is our job to make sure we aren't a burden!"

She raised her voice. "This is My lord's Stillness, but it is our new home, too!"

Tangere glanced at her, shaking his head in weary resignation. He couldn't even be surprised anymore.

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Godforsaken Land, the Death Spiral Zone.

A colossal phantom of a scythe materialized in the air. Having teleported, Orion's avatar appeared directly behind one of the incoming arch lords and executed a perfect Sever.

The two enemies that had been racing to the front lines were Gnasher Reavers. Orion didn't know their official title, but he knew a tactical opportunity when he saw one.

He watched the Reaver's head and body tumble through the air, a flicker of satisfaction on his face. The target was a middle arch lord. Weaker than he'd expected.

## Chapter 1025: Gnasher Race

As Orion's peripheral vision caught the skeletal dragon clashing with the second enemy, he saw something impossible. The Gnasher Reaver he had just decapitated, its head and body still tumbling through the air, suddenly snapped back together. The flesh where the cut should have been writhed and sealed in an instant.

A spike of alarm shot through Orion. The Deathly Soul-Reaper's scythe swung down in a vicious arc, just in time to intercept two enormous, tooth-like spears that erupted from the ground.

Orion narrowed his eyes, staring at the fully reformed enemy, which now twisted and swelled into a hulking Gnasher Behemoth.

Of course. A bizarre race is going to have bizarre abilities.

"Bones!" Orion called out—their signal to switch targets.

In the next instant, he teleported behind the other Gnasher Reaver. A flurry of scythe phantoms trailed his movement as he bisected the creature at the waist while it was still latched onto the skeletal dragon's tail.

But it wasn't over. The Reaver's upper half erupted in a shower of blood that splattered across the dragon, the corrosive fluid sizzling against its ancient bones. Orion immediately fell back. The Reaver's

severed torso released the dragon, brandishing its massive blade as it lunged after him, its mandibles clicking and grinding as if charging up some kind of ultimate attack.

Seizing the opening, the skeletal dragon, Bones, finally crashed into the Gnasher Behemoth. The fight escalated into a frenzy of snapping teeth and tearing claws, the air filled with the cacophony of cracking bone and whistling wind.

“Sever!”

On the other side of the melee, Orion unleashed the full arch lord peak power of his Deathly Soul-Reaper avatar. As the bisected Reaver charged, his avatar simply vanished, cloaking itself in its Phantom Veil. A moment later, a massive scythe phantom materialized behind the Gnasher, cleaving its upper body in two from top to bottom. Before that phantom even faded, more appeared, slicing and dicing the creature from every conceivable angle. Within a single breath, the Gnasher Reaver’s life force was utterly extinguished.

Only when its presence was completely gone from his senses did the Deathly Soul-Reaper reappear. It hovered in the air, looking down. Orion found it strange that the arch lord hadn’t manifested a body of faith, but this was a battlefield, and there was no time to ponder it. The skeletal dragon was still locked in combat with the behemoth.

The Soul-Reaper teleported again, reappearing on the back of the Gnasher Behemoth. The jagged scythe plunged down without hesitation, and Orion’s avatar became a blur, running the length of the monster’s spine. A phantom of the scythe trailed behind, neatly slicing the behemoth in half.

Bones seized the opportunity, its great claws sinking into the two halves of the beast and tearing it completely asunder. A moment later, a plume of white bonefire erupted from the dragon’s talons. The still-struggling pieces of the behemoth met the flames and shriveled like deflating balloons. In seconds, all its flesh was incinerated, leaving only a pile of blackened bones. The skeletal dragon then began weaving the larger pieces of the skeleton into its own body, seamlessly replacing the bones that had been damaged in the fight.

The Deathly Soul-Reaper landed lightly on the dragon’s head. Bones let out a cold, triumphant roar and surveyed the war raging across the Death Spiral Zone. The battle between the elites had been brutally fast and decisive, a testament to the perfect, unspoken coordination between Orion and his mount.

From the undead tower, Arthas's lich avatar, still channeling energy into the summoning formation, withdrew its attention from the battle. It was thoroughly satisfied. He had specifically advised Orion to use the Deathly Soul-Reaper avatar because his intel suggested its near-immunity to physical attacks would be a hard counter to the Gnasher Race. From what he had just seen—their terrifying bite, rapid regeneration, corrosive blood, and beast transformations—he had made the right call. And this was only the beginning.

Deep within the Gnasher Race Nest.

Before a strange, humanoid statue, Matriarch Jynara and her Mandible Guard had watched the entire battle unfold through a scrying ritual.

"The skeletal dragon possesses immense physical power," Jynara said, her voice a low, analytical hum. "Its aura and breath carry a negative energy, a corrupting effect. And that final white flame... even I felt a tremor of unease. I suspect it contains a sliver of fundamental power."

This was the Gnasher way. The Reavers were the vanguard, the sacrificial scouts sent to probe the enemy's strengths and expose their ultimate abilities. Only after the Matriarch and her Guard had analyzed the enemy's tactics and formulated a perfect counter-strategy would they themselves take the field to deliver the killing blow.

"The other entity utilized teleportation, spatial severing, and some minor soul-based abilities," one of the guards added, speaking for all four of them. The spatial severing, they had concluded, was an innate property of its scythe.

"Matriarch, the enemy surely has other cards to play. We have two recommendations," the guard continued. "First: we send the remaining two Gnasher Reavers to continue probing. They will likely be killed, and our overall strength will be diminished. The results are not guaranteed."

"Second: we emerge from the Nest now. We join with the Reavers and encircle the enemy. This course of action places you at significant personal risk, Matriarch."

Jynara was silent. She was unsettled. The raw, arch lord peak power of the Soul-Reaper and its brutally efficient combat style made it an unpredictable variable.

“Continue the probing,” she finally commanded after a long pause. “I have begun awakening the ancestor. His arrival will take time.”

Jynara was no fool. An invasion force led by only two arch lords would never be so brazen. There had to be at least one demigod backing this assault.

Based on all her past experience, the true war would only begin when her own demigod ancestor arrived to face theirs. To risk herself now against these two powerful but ultimately disposable champions would be a gamble worthy of a Reaver, not a Queen.

Chapter 1026: Your gift is on its way

Emerald Dream Realm, City of Lorelia.

The moment the great gates of the Dragon Crucible ground open, the trial was officially over.

Rolan strode out, his shoulders set broader than before. The first thing he saw was the waiting crowd: Lilith, Pallas, Elara, and the rest of the elders.

“Mistress Lilith, Elders...” Rolan gave a firm, respectful nod to the assembly. He was the last one to emerge from the Crucible.

“There you are.” Lilith pulled Rolan into a warm embrace, then held him at arm’s length, her hands instinctively straightening the collar of his worn tunic. “Look at you. Taller, stronger.”

It was true. The Crucible had reforged him. The power thrumming in his veins had added a new density to his frame.

“Hah! That’s Orion’s disciple, all right!” Rendall’s booming laugh echoed across the plaza as he clapped a heavy hand on Rolan’s shoulder. “Not even a man grown and already hit Alpha-level. The youngest elder in the history of the Stoneheart Horde.”

“Damn right,” another elder chimed in.

“You’ve already caught up to us old-timers. Keep this up, and you’ll be on your mentor’s heels before you know it.” Rendall’s eyes, usually clouded with age, were sharp with pride.

Rolan’s ascension wasn’t just a personal victory; it was a signal. The new generation of the Stoneheart Horde was here, and he was at the crest of the wave.

“Heh, you’re giving me too much credit,” Rolan said with a sheepish grin, though a thrill of pure joy shot through him. Reaching Alpha-level was a huge milestone. As Orion’s only disciple, the pressure he put on himself was immense. All those brutal training sessions, all the sweat and blood—it had finally paid off. Orion was his goal, but catching up to his mentor? Yeah, right. Not in this lifetime. He knew the chasm that still separated them.

“Don’t be so modest,” Rendall insisted, his mood infectious. “Your mentor has enough humility for the both of you. Don’t be afraid to own your strength. It’s not a bad thing.”

The old warrior was practically glowing. The Crucible’s energies had benefited him as well, pushing him from late-stage Alpha to Alpha-peak and putting the rank of Lord within his grasp. The path was still unclear, but a spark of hope had been rekindled in him, a fire that had long since dwindled to embers. His eyes were brighter now.

Behind him, Onyx, Thundar, and Fergus were all grinning, buzzing with their own newfound power. Onyx, while still at Alpha-peak, now carried himself with a deeper, more condensed energy, like a coiled spring.

“Well, the whole gang’s here,” Rendall declared, turning to Onyx. “It’s been too long. What say we grab a round and celebrate properly?”

Onyx nodded in agreement, then glanced toward Lilith for the final say.

Lilith smiled and gently patted Lorelia’s head. “The city of Lorelia is your fiefdom, isn’t it? Aren’t you going to play host for your people?”

Never one to miss a party, Lorelia's eyes went wide. A huge grin spread across her face.

"Alright, listen up! Elders, everyone, all you younglings!" she yelled, projecting her voice across the plaza. "As long as you're in Lorelia, all the food and drink is on me!" She puffed out her chest, every bit the generous ruler.

A massive cheer erupted from the crowd, a chorus of praise for Lorelia's generosity.

As the noise died down, her mischievous voice piped up again. "But hey, house rules still apply! My Mistress and I just got promoted to Lord and became Wardens. You guys didn't forget our gifts, did you?"

A moment of stunned silence fell over the crowd.

Then, it broke in a wave of roaring, heartfelt laughter.

"Don't you worry, Warden! Your gift is on its way!"

"Yeah, we wouldn't forget your cut!"

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Silverwood Realm, The Stillness.

With Caesar and Xylia having rescued several hundred more of their kin, the once-empty settlement was now bustling, humming with the vibrant energy of the Wood Elves.

It was a welcome sight, but Orion knew it was time for structure. He summoned Aerin and Xylia to the castle's war room.

“Our ultimate goal isn’t just the Forest of Nature,” he began, his voice calm but absolute. “It’s the lands beyond it. In my grand design, the Forest itself will be granted to the Wood Elves. It is, after all, your natural home.”

This had always been the coalition’s plan. Orion knew it, Tangere and Caesar knew it, and Aerin knew it. You don’t call allies to war without promising them a share of the spoils.

But Xylia and the rest of the rescued Wood Elves were not privy to these high-level discussions. Without Orion’s express permission, Aerin couldn’t simply spread that information. Now, he was giving that permission, speaking not just to Xylia, but through her to her entire people.

“However,” he continued, his gaze hardening slightly, “before that happens, I require a complete reintegration of the Wood Elf race. I have no use for a people who have abandoned their strength, who know only of peace and tranquility. That path leads to extinction.”

He looked from Aerin to Xylia, the two de facto leaders of their people—one handling internal affairs, the other external. A decent pairing.

“You are my vassals now. That means you will serve me, and you will fight for me. Periodically, the Wood Elf race will provide a levy of troops to serve and train within my armies.”

His tone was flat, devoid of negotiation. It was an order.

“Aerin. Xylia.” He pinned them with his gaze. “For the future of your people, can you do this?”

“My lord, we will obey your command,” Aerin said, her voice firm.

“We will obey, my lord,” Xylia echoed, her resolve just as strong.

The recent war had been a brutal but necessary lesson. Their old ways might have bought them temporary peace, but they would never guarantee lasting security. If you don’t want to be the one on the receiving end of the whip, you’d better be the one holding it.

"You must understand," Orion added, driving the point home. "There is a world of difference between being defenseless and choosing not to draw your sword."

The Stoneheart Horde didn't need the Wood Elves to be aggressors—in fact, their pacifist nature was a strategic asset. But they could not afford for them to be weak. Their entire culture had to be reforged.

Now, in the ashes of their former lives, was the perfect time to tear down the old traditions and build something new, something stronger. Orion saw it as his duty to guide them.

"Now," he said, leaning over the tactical map on the table, "we need to re-evaluate the classifications of your people."

Chapter 1027: I've already seen the potential

Orion turned, his attention fixed on the newly updated map of the Forest of Nature.

The Stillness was situated in the north, a considerable distance from the Wood Elves' former heartland. He pointed to the dense, central region of the forest.

"According to your intelligence, this was your people's core territory," he stated, his finger tracing the borders. "The ancestral home of the Wood Elf race, and the place where the Tree of Life lies in its self-imposed slumber."

He looked up at them. "Tangere's scouts have already reached the perimeter. It won't be long before this entire area is absorbed into my territory and falls under the administration of The Stillness." His expression became analytical. "Aerin, Xylia, I've spent the last few days studying the histories you provided. Theoretically, your race should not be this weak."

Managing an empire was more than just winning battles. A true leader had to understand every facet of his territory: the people, the geography, the resources, the culture. It was a part of the job Orion took seriously.

"You are correct, my lord," Xylia responded, her voice tight with a mixture of pride and sorrow. As a guardian of her people, she knew their martial history intimately. "Long ago, the Wood Elf race was anything but weak."

"In our golden age, we had legions of Goliath Treants and rode Eagle Knights into battle. Our borders were protected by ancient Treant Guardians." As she spoke, she seemed to drift away, her eyes losing focus, lost in the epic sweep of her people's history. "Legends even speak of Sylvan Spirits and Forest Drakes—some were the ultimate warriors, others were beings of immense and mysterious power."

Her voice trembled slightly. "But all of them are gone. Now, only we Wardancers remain." The title was the formal name for her class of warrior. The fact that even an elder like Aerin had never trained as a Wardancer was infuriatingly telling.

Xylia's focus snapped back to the present, a heavy sigh escaping her lips. The disappearance of those legendary units was undeniable proof of the Wood Elves' decline. Generations of our leaders must have been idealists, preaching a doctrine of peace that led us right to the brink of annihilation.

"The disappearance of those units doesn't surprise me," Orion said, his tone flat. "In fact, it was inevitable."

The blunt statement startled both Aerin and Xylia. They looked up at him, searching for an explanation.

"A society that shuns conflict has no place for warriors," he explained, his voice cold as steel. "When you reject the very concept of war, you leave no home for the warrior spirit. Their bodies and their minds have nowhere to belong, so they fade from reality into legend."

Orion understood war, and he understood warriors. Only a race forged in the crucible of constant conflict could produce the most elite fighters, the kind of heroes that shape history.

But there was a condition: the faction itself had to be strong enough to sustain the endless grind of war without collapsing. It needed the resources and the momentum to survive long enough for its true prodigies to emerge.

He was living proof of that. The Stoneheart Horde of his youth could never have supported his own meteoric rise. It was the Survivor's Platform, his alliance with Arthas and his bros in the Champions Alliance, that gave him the foundation he needed to become who he was.

Rolan was the same. If Orion hadn't shattered the Horde's old limits, Rolan would have been stuck in the Black Forest, his potential capped at the hero level for his entire life. But with the Giant Tribe's newfound power, they now had the resources and, more importantly, the time to nurture a talent like his. That was how he became the youngest Alpha-level elder in their history.

"My plan is to restructure the Wood Elf race into two branches," Orion continued, laying out his vision. "One dedicated to martial pursuits, the other to the prosperity and growth of your people. Those with a talent for combat will be trained from youth. They will be the seed from which the strength of the Wood Elves will grow again." He wasn't going to let his new vassals become a race of passive homebodies like Aerin. He needed fangs. He believed that once the Wood Elves regained their strength, those legendary units would reappear.

Orion turned his piercing gaze on Xylia. "You spoke of Goliath Treants and Eagle Knights. Don't you want to see them walk out of the pages of history and back into the world?"

Every word was like a log being added to a pyre inside her.

"I've already seen the potential," Orion added. "In the past few days, I've seen your people practicing the Treesong, performing rituals of supplication. If that dedication is focused, I have no doubt that the high-tier, sentient Treant warriors will walk the Forest of Nature once more."

His final words were the match that lit the pyre. The existing Wood Elves were just a spark. But Orion could see it in the depths of Aerin's and Xylia's eyes—that spark was already threatening to become an inferno.

"My lord... can we truly do it?" Xylia asked, her voice thick with excitement and disbelief. She desperately wanted to see that golden age reborn.

"You can. And it all begins with taking back what is yours."

Orion turned back to the map, his finger landing decisively on the forest's core. "Reclaim your homeland. Awaken the Tree of Life. Restore your people's full legacy. That is the first step to the revitalization of the Wood Elf race."

They had to change, and they had to be integrated seamlessly into the Stoneheart Horde's system. Orion was playing the long game. Most of the races in the Horde were built for conquest—they were consumers.

But the Wood Elves were a creative race, a people who could build the foundation upon which a lasting civilization could stand. He would keep them close, and controlling their military meant controlling their destiny.

Standing silently to the side, Caesar had listened to the entire exchange. Awe washed over him. Holy shit. That's why he's the Big Boss. The vision, the sheer scale of his thinking... it's on another level. Compared to this, my own efforts at managing a city feel like child's play.

Chapter 1028: More of them?

Far beyond, on the outer fringes of the Forest of Nature.

Within the gathering place of demonic monsters, on the fifth floor of the Black Tower.

A flicker of void energy distorted the air, and a sinister figure materialized, settling onto a throne of polished obsidian. The chamber was a palace, a sanctum afforded only to a High Priestess of the Cult of Four.

Yilaya, the Witch, leaned back against the throne and, with a lazy wave of her hand, commanded the grand doors to swing open. It was a signal. Only with the gates agape would the lords on the fourth floor know she had returned.

While she waited for her subordinates to assemble, Yilaya produced a grotesque fruit shaped like a human heart. She bit into it without ceremony, its dark juices replenishing the power she had expended, knitting together her wounds.

She had been injured in her duel with the Moon Elf, Isilra, back in Staghelm City. They had traded blows, and both had paid a price. The infuriating thing was that Isilra was one of the elemental sprites; by simply bathing in moonlight, she could regenerate her strength at an alarming rate. In a battle of attrition, the Witch had lost. Or rather, this particular avatar of the Witch had lost.

Still, the injury, combined with the intel Rize had sent, had provided the perfect excuse to retreat to the Black Tower and escape the massive headache that Staghelm City was becoming.

I knew it. Any place that can birth a Moon Elf is never going to be simple. There has to be another powerful demigod hiding in that city. Taking Staghelm would be a nightmare. Even if a Pontiff came in person, it wouldn't be a guaranteed victory. They'd need several.

The Pontiff... Hah. A sneer touched her lips. She had thrown in her lot with the Reaper, but as one of the Survivors, she and the clown were constantly on guard. The Reaper was just a ladder, a means to accelerate their own ascension. A powerful ladder, but an unpredictable one. She and the clown had to tread very, very carefully.

Her own entanglement with the Cult of Four wasn't as deep as the clown's. Below the four Reapers, the Cult's hierarchy consisted of four Archbishops, twelve Pontiffs, and thirty-six High Priests and Priestesses. The clown was one of the twelve Pontiffs. She was merely one of the thirty-six.

It was an organization that dwarfed the Champions Alliance, which was one of the reasons the clown's offer had been so tempting in the first place. And to be fair, joining the Cult had granted them benefits beyond their wildest dreams.

Her thoughts were interrupted by the arrival of the Mist Wraith lord, Rize, who glided into the palace alone.

"Only you?" Yilaya's voice was laced with amusement. It wasn't a question. "I see. You finally got Hebika killed."

The Mist Wraith let out a dry, rasping chuckle, which was all the confirmation she needed. He was one of her most trusted inner circle; she knew his nature well.

"So, tell me," she said, her tone shifting. "What was so urgent that you had to recall me?"

Rize's initial report had been vague, mentioning only a 'significant change' in the Forest of Nature. He was clever. He knew that if he had given too many details, she might have decided her business elsewhere was more important and ignored his summons. He'd learned that lesson before.

"High Priestess," Rize began, bowing low. "I suspect there is an arch lord hiding within the Forest of Nature."

The Witch said nothing. She shifted on her throne, adopting a languid pose, crossing her legs with a slow, deliberate grace. Propping her chin on her palm, she gazed down at him, her beautiful, unnerving face a canvas of shifting arcane runes. A hint of a smirk played on her lips, her eyes seeming to say, Go on. Dazzle me.

"Otherwise... otherwise a Cyclopes lord as powerful as Hebika would never have fallen so easily," Rize stammered, swallowing hard against a dry throat. He launched into the speech he had meticulously prepared.

"So you've personally scouted the Forest to confirm this?" Yilaya asked, her voice dangerously soft.

She retained the memories of a past life. Even a fool would have learned a thing or two about deception after clawing their way to her level of power. And Yilaya was no fool. Rize's lie was transparent.

"I... dispatched all of our agents, Your Grace. Every single one who entered the forest lost contact." Seeing he'd been caught, Rize switched tactics to brutal honesty, which he knew she sometimes appreciated. "A place that dangerous... I did not dare enter it myself."

"And if...?" she prompted.

"If what?"

"If I had been lost in the forest, Your Grace," he said carefully, "the Black Tower would be left without a commander. There would be no one to keep the demonic monsters in check."

Yilaya's smirk vanished. She withdrew her gaze. "A passable excuse."

Rize slowly let out a breath he didn't realize he'd been holding. He'd passed the test.

"An arch lord..." Yilaya murmured to herself, her attention now elsewhere. "Do the Wood Elves even have one left? Could the Tree of Life have awakened from its slumber? Interesting... very interesting..."

She herself had slain the Wood Elf king. The Tree of Life had intervened, but seeing the battle was lost, it had sealed itself away in a hidden dimension. Finding it in a place as ancient and vast as the Forest of Nature was a task as difficult as Ascension itself. It was one of the reasons she'd grown bored and moved on to other fronts.

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Godforsaken Land, the Death Spiral Zone.

After Orion and the skeletal dragon combined their might to annihilate two Gnasher Reavers sent as reinforcements, the invading armies had pushed deeper into the hostile territory. The resistance from the Gnasher Race grew fiercer with every step, the enemy numbers swelling.

On the front lines, Gnasher beasts and sand scorpions collided in a frenzy of snapping jaws and tearing claws. The brutal conflict raged not just on the surface, but underground as well, as both sides burrowed and ambushed.

The sheer violence of the fighting disrupted the very air, causing the sandstorms perpetually whipped up by the scorpions to falter and die.

In place of the howling wind, a new sound filled the air: the death-rattle shrieks of Gnashers and scorpions being torn apart. The sound was a razor against the ears, an anthem of agony that fueled the bloodlust on both sides, echoing across the battlefield as if trying to rip the world itself asunder.

If the war between the Gnashers and the sand scorpions was hot-blooded carnage, the battle between the undead armies and the Gnashers was a thing of chilling, clinical horror.

The legions of the undead advanced in absolute silence, no cries of pain escaping them as they were shattered or torn. They were a relentless tide of bone and steel, lances and blades pushing ever forward.

Clad in cold bone-plate armor, their eye sockets burning with ethereal ghostfire, they were like demons clawing their way out of the abyss, exterminating the charging Gnashers with pitiless efficiency.

It was a war of attrition, brutal and simple. As the invaders, they formed a single, unstoppable spearhead, grinding forward through sheer force.

As the defenders, the Gnasher Race burst from the earth and down from the ridges, throwing themselves against the combined flood of undead and scorpions.

Periodically, colossal scorpions would erupt from beneath the sand, their massive pincers scything through the Gnasher ranks, clearing out any who broke through the lines.

The sickening crunch of bone and the final screams of the dying were the only sounds that accompanied the silent march of the dead.

Orion watched from above, a remote god of war observing the brutal calculus of the battlefield. The cruelty, the endless loss of life, sparked no emotion in him.

He stood watch for what felt like an eternity before his gaze shifted from the carnage below to the distant horizon.

"More of them?" he murmured.

Two new arch lord auras were approaching at incredible speed.

Chapter 1029: We wait

A high-pitched thrumming vibrated through the air, the sound of wings beating fast enough to shred reality itself. The noise grew louder, closer.

Crack!

A winged Gnasher Reaver materialized directly in front of Orion. Its massive upper mandibles, lined with serrated teeth, snapped shut like a pair of shears, cleaving the Deathly Soul-Reaper's torso in two.

This was an arch lord at its peak, the strongest of the four Reavers, and one of the two most powerful beings in their race besides Matriarch Jynara herself.

Despite being bisected, Orion felt no panic. The Soul-Reaper's form was most resistant to this kind of physical trauma; its body would simply knit itself back together.

But he never let an attack go unanswered.

With a whisper of displaced air, the blood-red scythe in the Soul-Reaper's hands swung toward its attacker.

It never connected. A sharp clang of metal on chitin rang out as a second, even more robust Gnasher Reaver intercepted the blow, locking the scythe in its powerful jaws. At the same time, the first Reaver opened its mandibles again, aiming to decapitate the Soul-Reaper.

Just as Orion was about to play one of his trump cards, an enraged roar erupted from beneath him. A wave of ice and deathly silence rolled out from the skeletal dragon.

A cracking sound echoed through the air, but this time it came from the Gnasher Reaver's feet. Frost, black and absolute, was creeping up its legs, encasing it in a tomb of ice. The Reaver thrashed, its four arms hacking at the ice with bladed weapons, but it couldn't shatter the frost faster than it was spreading.

A cold smirk appeared on Orion's face. He released his grip on the trapped scythe. In a blur of motion, his hands shot out and clamped around the neck of the freezing Gnasher. The move not only nullified the immediate threat but turned the tables completely.

As the ice consumed the Reaver, the Soul-Reaper's grip tightened with terrifying force. In the space of a single heartbeat, Orion ripped the Gnasher's head from its shoulders with a wet tear of flesh and chitin.

The battle came to a sudden, violent stop.

But as a flicker of triumph registered in Orion's mind, he caught a glimpse of the second Gnasher Reaver—the one holding his scythe—turning to flee.

So that was their plan. The realization came a fraction of a second too late.

BOOM!

A double explosion rocked the heavens. The headless Gnasher Reaver had self-destructed.

An arch lord at its peak, detonating with the force of a miniature nuke.

The resulting wave of incandescent energy washed over the battlefield below. The Gnasher beasts, sand scorpions, and undead locked in their death struggle were instantly vaporized, turned to ash and dust.

For a moment, the entire war ground to a halt.

Deep within the Death Spiral Zone, in the heart of the Nest.

"Are they all dead?" Matriarch Jynara's voice was devoid of emotion. The death of her Reavers was not a tragedy; it was their duty, their destiny.

"Great-Tusk's self-destruction had meaning," one of her royal guards declared with solemn respect for the Reaver's sacrifice and courage.

"Great-Tusk failed."

The guard fell silent as the Matriarch's tone turned impossibly grave.

Back at the epicenter of the blast, high in the sky.

The form of the Deathly Soul-Reaper solidified out of the roiling energy, almost completely unharmed.

The skeletal dragon below it, however, had not been so fortunate. Seventy percent of its body was simply gone. With a final, agonized cry, it dissolved into light and reformed as a cracked and battered bone signet on Orion's finger.

There was no time for grief. Orion swung his scythe, his eyes locking onto the Gnasher Reaver escaping in the distance. He teleported. A colossal phantom of his scythe sliced through the void.

A brief, frantic series of impacts rang out, then silence.

When Orion reappeared, he was holding a severed head.

The fight was over. The last two Gnasher Reavers of the Gnasher Race had been slain. But this time, it had cost him his skeletal dragon, which was now too damaged to be summoned.

In truth, an explosion of that magnitude could never have seriously harmed the Soul-Reaper. The tendrils of Death-Soul that had been vaporized in the blast would simply reform, weaving themselves back into existence. The only things that could truly damage it were attacks imbued with conceptual power, forces that could permanently corrode or erase the Death-Soul itself.

"Is that all of them?"

Orion extended his senses, probing the area for any other Gnasher arch lords. He found nothing. The moment his perception touched the borders of the Death Spiral Zone, it was nullified by some unknown power emanating from deep within the Nest.

"Or," Orion murmured, his gaze fixed on the hazy depths, "is the real opponent just not ready to make their move?"

In the heart of the Nest, before the mysterious statue.

Matriarch Jynara and her four guards stood in stunned silence. The sight of the Deathly Soul-Reaper emerging from the blast unscathed had shattered their understanding of the enemy.

"Is its body... harder than ours?" one of the guards asked, his voice trembling with a fear he couldn't conceal. "Our carapaces are fused with black gold!"

"No," the Matriarch said, shaking her head. "Its body is not durable. Great-Tusk's mandibles wounded it, cutting it in two." This was a fact, a key piece of intelligence they had sacrificed two arch lords to obtain.

"The reason it is unharmed is that the tendrils making up its form possess the ability to regenerate instantly. This trait is... terrifying. It means the enemy is effectively immune to most forms of physical attack."

As Matriarch Jynara spoke, her brow was deeply furrowed. An enemy like this wasn't just difficult. It was dangerous on a whole other level.

"Matriarch, what are our orders?"

After a long pause, Jynara's composure returned. "We wait."

This Godforsaken Land was the domain of their ancestors. The decision to stay or to leave was not hers to make.

The lull in the war was brief. The fodder on the front lines had been annihilated, clearing a path for the endless swarms of smaller scorpions and the tireless undead armies behind them. The Gnasher Reaver's final act had also blasted away the surrounding ridges, turning a single invasion path into three.

The coalition forces seized the opportunity, pushing their advantage.

But just as quickly, new waves of Gnasher beasts clawed their way from the earth and the canyon walls, halting the advance once more. The front line devolved back into a meat grinder.

The fearlessness of the skeletal warriors, the howls of the undead, the charge of the sand scorpions, and the absolute refusal of the Gnasher beasts to retreat—all these wills clashed and were extinguished in the crucible of death.

Silverwood Realm, the Forest of Nature.

As Tangere's forces continued to clear out the demonic monsters around The Stillness, the chances of survival for the Wood Elf refugees still hiding in the northern forests grew with each passing day. The plan to clear the forest had recently been updated, with a new division of labor.

Chapter 1030: The one who will regret this is you

Tangere directed the main force of his Plague-thralls southward, clearing out the demonic monsters as they began the slow process of reclaiming the former Wood Elf territories.

Meanwhile, Caesar and Xylia took a smaller contingent of Plague-thralls and Shield Warriors north, fanning out to search for the elven refugees who had fled into the deep woods.

"What a fertile land," Tangere mused to himself, walking through the forest. The sheer abundance of low and mid-tier magical plants was astonishing. While they were of no use for his own advancement, they were invaluable for his faction and for cultivating new Plague-thralls. The Forest of Nature was a treasure trove. He could see why the arch lord Orion, was so determined to claim it.

Perhaps spreading my plague a little... wider... could help me break through to the next level. A wicked smile formed internally. If the demonic monsters can spread pestilence, why can't I?

His thoughts were cut short as he stopped dead in his tracks. Ahead, a cloying, bone-white mist was seeping through the trees, blanketing the area in a silent, unnatural fog.

Having encountered a Mist Wraith before, Tangere knew immediately he had company. He felt no alarm.

A pool of ink-black liquid seeped from the ground at his feet. As it spread, any tree or flower it touched instantly withered, crumbling into gray dust. He had already saturated the immediate environment with his own plague. Any creature that tried to approach him would be detected, and likely, controlled.

"So, it is you who has disrupted our cleansing," a voice hissed from within the mist. It was sharp, cold, and laced with malice.

"I don't answer questions from rats," Tangere replied, his own voice a low, resonant baritone. "Especially not the kind that hide in the shadows." He stared into the fog, unmoving. The enemy wasn't making a move, so neither would he.

"My, what a clever tongue you have," the Mist Wraith lord, Rize, cackled. He was genuinely curious about Tangere's composure.

According to the Cult of Four's intelligence, the native lords of this world were supposed to react with terror when confronted by their demonic monsters. Yet this one showed no fear. In fact, Rize had the unsettling feeling that Tangere was looking into the mist as if sizing up his prey.

"You are not one of the Wood Elves. Do you have any idea of the consequences of interfering in this war?"

Tangere just shrugged, an expression of pure indifference on his face. This is another world. As long as an arch lord doesn't show up, I'm the top of the food chain. I can walk all over this place. It was a sense of superiority that came with being one of the Survivors. Of course, that confidence was backed by the hard reality of his own power, which allowed him to punch far above his weight class.

"If you wish to leave the Forest of Nature alive, then submit to us. Serve the Black Tower," Rize's voice offered from the mist, attempting to sound magnanimous.

Tangere found the situation deeply amusing.

"Are you afraid of me?" he asked. A slight smirk touched his lips, but he was gentlemanly enough not to laugh out loud.

"Are you mocking me?!" Rize's voice suddenly became shrill and vicious. He had made what he thought was a genuine, kind offer to join the Black Tower. Of course, the main reason was that if Tangere joined, Rize could continue to hide out in the Black Tower and pass off the Witch's dangerous new assignment to the rookie.

"You're angry because, deep down, you know how ridiculous you sound, don't you?" Tangere's tone remained infuriatingly calm. He couldn't care less about Rize's offer. With a backer like Orion, a low-level operator like Rize was utterly beneath his notice. Besides, as one of the Awakened, as a Survivor, his pride would never allow him to be enslaved and used as someone else's pawn.

"You'll regret refusing me!"

"No," Tangere shook his head, a chuckle finally escaping him. "The one who will regret this is you."

As he spoke, a chorus of guttural roars echoed from within the mist—the sound of his Plague-thralls. While he had been talking, his minions had been moving, feeding him vital information about his enemy's position.

"Found you."

Tangere opened his mouth and exhaled a cloud of virulent green plaguemist, which shot into the bone-white fog like a serpent.

Rize seemed to realize what was happening. The white mist churned violently, surging forward like an avalanche to envelop Tangere completely.

The next moment, a series of thunderous booms ripped through the forest. The green and white mists collided, creating a roiling, toxic storm. The two transcendent powers tore at each other, the shockwaves felling ancient trees for yards in every direction. The fallen trunks quickly rotted, turning to black mulch.

"A pity," came Tangere's voice from the dissipating fog. "If you had remained in your wraith form, my plague might not have infected you. The victory is mine!"

A light breeze finally cleared the last of the mist. All that remained was a desolate clearing of decay and death. Tangere stood before a pile of gray ash, the ink-black liquid at his feet slowly reabsorbing into his body. He gazed at the ashes of his enemy, a deep sense of satisfaction washing over him.

Then, in the instant he let his guard down, a black hand shot out from the pile of ash and clamped around his neck.

Tangere's pupils dilated in utter disbelief. His neck dissolved into black fluid as he threw himself backward. The liquid swirled, reforming his neck almost instantly.

"The victory isn't yours just yet, you unfamiliar little shit!"

A second arm emerged from the ash, followed by a head crowned with six malevolent eyes. Within a breath, a hideous abomination had pulled itself from the remains of the Mist Wraith, fixing Tangere with a look of pure venom.

"You destroyed my body, you little insect," the new Rize snarled, stepping into the air. An oppressive aura that didn't belong to a mere lord radiated from him, a pressure so immense it pinned Tangere in place, making even the thought of escape impossible. "So I'll just have to take yours!"

"Arch lord!" The word escaped Tangere's lips as a choked gasp of terror. In his memory, only an arch lord could exert this kind of soul-crushing pressure.

"Arch lord? He's not even close."

Suddenly, Orion's deep, calm voice resonated beside Tangere's ear.

At the same time, a Bestial Fang Talisman Tangere carried flew out from his pouch, pulsing with a brilliant light. It was a gift from Orion; he would never send his primary vanguard into enemy territory without some form of protection.

"Or—"

Tangere tried to speak, but the talisman flared, unleashing the phantom of a colossal arm.