

Titan King 1031

Chapter 1031: Incredible

The colossal arm squeezed. The abomination that was once Rize was crushed into nothingness, its form dissolving into a cloud of pure faith energy, which the spectral arm then absorbed before retracting.

The turn of events had been so sudden, the conclusion so absolute, that Tangere thought it was all over. Then, a new voice slithered out from the surrounding forest—seductive, enchanting, and dripping with venom.

"My, my... what a powerful display. To kill a priest of the Black Tower so casually... so very casually..."

The voice echoed, and Tangere's vision swam. The world dissolved around him as he fell into a trance.

"Awaken."

Orion's voice, cold and sharp as splintered ice, detonated in Tangere's sea of consciousness. The illusion shattered. Tangere gasped, his mind his own again. A cold dread washed over him. In those few short moments, he had broken out in a sweat so profuse it had soaked through his clothes.

That was too close. He knew with absolute certainty that if Orion hadn't intervened, he would have been lost, his will broken and his body enslaved.

"Thank you," Tangere said, his voice filled with genuine gratitude as he addressed the phantom before him.

The Bestial Fang Talisman now hovered in the air, no longer a simple ornament but a shimmering, humanoid phantom. The will projection Orion had stored within the fang was too weak to manifest a full form on its own. But after absorbing the faith energy from Rize, it had been empowered enough to take shape.

"Stay put. Don't move," the Orion phantom commanded. With those words, it shot forward, transforming into a streak of light that blazed into the dark forest. It moved so fast that by the time Tangere opened his mouth to reply, it was already gone.

"Incredible..." The sheer, casual power of an arch lord gave Tangere a chillingly clear perspective on the chasm that separated them.

Deep within the woods, Orion's will projection slammed into a massive boulder with unrestrained force. The rock exploded into dust, revealing a black fiend serpent coiled beneath it. The serpent was instantly pulped, but its purpose had been served. A serpentine phantom, shimmering with ethereal light, erupted from the mangled corpse and lunged, jaws wide, at Orion's projection.

The two wills collided. No blood was spilled; their attacks were a pure contest of power, each blow eroding the very substance of the other. They became a whirlwind of raw energy, tearing through the forest.

Within the vortex, Orion's phantom seized the serpent's neck with one hand while coalescing crackling lightning in the other, blasting away at its form. The serpent phantom, in turn, coiled its long tail around Orion's waist and pummeled his body with six spectral arms.

The fact that the serpent could hold its own, even for a moment, told Orion everything he needed to know. The master of this projection was, at minimum, an arch lord at its peak.

Miles away, in the Black Tower, the Witch came to the exact same conclusion.

"Enough of this," Orion's projection snarled.

It swelled in size, shifting into its Titan Form. Activating Titan's Maw, its head expanded into a vortex of devouring energy. It bit down, swallowing the serpent phantom's head, then its body, consuming the enemy will inch by agonizing inch until nothing was left.

The projection then streaked back to Tangere's location.

"The enemy has an arch lord on the field. Fall back and assist Caesar with the search for the Wood Elf survivors. I'm taking over here."

As the voice faded, the will projection dissolved, reforming into the Bestial Fang Talisman and landing gently in Tangere's hand. He closed his fist around it, knowing this small piece of bone was his ultimate guarantee of survival in this otherworldly war. He treasured it, carefully stowing it away. After one last glance at the slowly dissipating mist in the distance, he turned and headed back towards The Stillness without hesitation.

Beyond the Forest of Nature, the Black Tower stood as a monument to corruption, an endless stream of demonic monsters flowing in and out of its gates.

On the fifth floor, the Witch's eyes snapped open. She shot up from her throne. She had been browsing for goods on the Survivor's Platform when she felt the psychic backlash of her will projection being utterly destroyed.

An abyssal race that uses lightning? That aura... it's familiar... where have I felt it before...?

Giants! Why would an Abyssal Giant be here? Has the location of the Silverwood Realm been leaked? Or did the Wood Elves open a passage to the Abyss themselves? Did they summon them? No... that's not right... those zombie-like things, the lord himself... they have no Abyssal energy... Who is this enemy? Where did they come from?!

The Witch paced frantically before her throne, her mind racing. Having her will projection not just defeated but consumed was a catastrophic loss. It meant the arch lord in the Forest of Nature was her equal, or perhaps, even her superior. This six-armed serpent-demon avatar of hers was at the arch lord peak. While not invincible, it was rare to meet a true rival.

"So, something major really has happened in the Forest," she murmured, finally slumping back onto her throne. She rested her chin on her hand, her eyes narrowed in thought. "There's not enough intel. I have no idea who I'm up against."

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Forest of Nature, The Stillness.

Inside the castle, Orion stood up abruptly. He had been monitoring the situation ever since Tangere first encountered the Mist Wraith.

Unlike the Witch, he was not surprised by the outcome of the psychic battle; he had expected to win. The enemy's power level didn't concern him either. He'd killed several arch lords at their peak.

What shocked him was the state of the Mist Wraith Rize after Tangere had defeated him. The way he had reformed from ash... Orion recognized the principles behind it.

It was a secret technique, akin to the Rite of the Three Idols—a forbidden ceremony through which lords could ascend as arch lords, weaving for themselves a vessel born of faith. Rize had endured only because he had already remade his flesh through that very rite.

And only a true, cross-dimensional superpower, a faction that spanned worlds, would possess a secret technique of that caliber.

The invaders were not some random demonic horde. They were a major power.

Realizing this, Orion took a deep breath and slowly sat back down in his chair.

"It seems," he said to the empty room, "that things are not as simple as I thought. The situation in the Silverwood Realm is becoming more complex... and far more interesting."

Chapter 1032: Hear my summons and arise

In the Godforsaken Land, Orion's coalition advanced with the unstoppable momentum of a righteous crusade. Their undead armies were relentless, a perfect weapon for this war. They felt no fear, no pain—only an infinite capacity for slaughter. Countless skeletons, little more than cannon fodder, clawed their way out of the corpse piles and charged the enemy lines like automatons. For the ferocious Gnasher Race, this emotionless, unyielding tide was a special kind of nightmare.

"The enemy's momentum is too strong. We cannot let this continue."

This was a war of attrition where the enemy's numbers only grew with each battle. Jynara, the matriarch of the Gnasher Race, saw the horrifying calculus of the rolling snowball and knew she had to act. She had been hesitant before, caught off guard by the sudden invasion and the lack of intelligence. But now, with the battlefield so clearly defined, a plan had formed in her mind.

"Black Guard One, Black Guard Two," she commanded, addressing her elite protectors. "Take your broods through the deep tunnels. Bypass the front lines and execute a surprise attack on their rear—target the undead tower and the main monster nest."

"Black Guard Three and Four. You will join the main battle. Your mission is to eliminate the necromancers hiding behind their front lines."

She paused, her voice hardening. "Remember: if the enemy arch lord moves to intercept you, you are to retreat immediately. When he pursues, we fall back. When he withdraws, we press the attack. If you find an opening, inflict as much damage on their armies as you can."

It was a clear shift in strategy. While the Gnasher Race hadn't gained an advantage in a direct confrontation, this was the Death Spiral Zone. This was their home. They could not avoid the war, but they could choose how they fought it.

Jynara's objective was simple: destroy the enemy's lair and sever their source of reinforcements. It was a classic feint, designed to lure Orion away from the front lines where the sheer pressure of his Deathly Soul-Reaper form was causing the Gnasher forces to buckle. She also hoped to probe the invaders, to see if they had any other trump cards left to play.

"As you command!" the four guards responded in unison. They bowed low, then disappeared into the yawning underground passage before them. Four distinct, echoing shrieks summoned their broods, and a chorus of chittering screeches answered from the depths of the Nest.

Half an hour later, Arthas, commanding the coalition's rear guard, felt the shift in the battle.

"Enemy contact imminent! Prepare for battle!" he projected, his regal voice booming in Dirtclaw's mind. At that very moment, the ground began to tremble.

The earth buckled and swelled. Moments later, the plain in front of the undead tower collapsed inward, revealing two bottomless pits from which a tide of Gnasher beasts erupted. They charged the undead tower and the sand scorpions' nest, their sudden appearance cutting off the flow of reinforcements to Orion's front line.

Aroooo!

Dirtclaw let out a piercing howl. Dropping low to the ground, his claws dug into the earth, ready to spring. Protecting the sand scorpions' nest was the task his master had given him, and he would complete it, his mind a snarl of predatory fury. I don't care who you are. I will tear you to pieces!

On the front lines, Orion immediately sensed the chaos erupting in his rear. He started to turn, but the two arch lord auras that had been approaching from the front were now closing in fast, forcing him into an impossible choice.

"Don't worry about the rear," Arthas's voice suddenly resonated in his mind. "I can handle them."

Orion let out a slow breath of relief. It wasn't his brother-in-arms he was worried about; it was Soraya and Dirtclaw. This subterranean assault was clearly aimed at the broodmother and the undead tower. The two arch lord signatures rising from the tunnels were a clear indicator of the enemy's intent. Destroying his reinforcement engine would halt the invasion in its tracks.

There's a clever commander on their side, Orion thought grimly. With his rear secure, he could focus on the immediate threat.

He teleported forward to engage the two approaching Gnasher guards. But just as he moved, they split apart, streaking in opposite directions towards the flanks of his front-line troops.

"Son of a bitch." The classic pincer movement left Orion caught in the middle. He couldn't be in two places at once. To save one flank was to condemn the other.

He was decisive. In the space of a single breath, he made his choice. If I can't stop both of them, then one flank gets wiped out regardless. Fine. I'll make the trade. My cannon fodder for one of their top-tier arch lords.

The thought solidified into pure, cold killing intent.

"Die!"

A phantom of his scythe materialized in the air, locking onto one of the guards. The creature tried to flee, but it was too late. There was no escaping Orion's mark.

Boom!

The targeted guard, seeing no escape, sacrificed one of its own four arms, detonating it to block the initial strike. Then, with shocking ferocity, it charged forward, wrapping its remaining arms around Orion's Deathly Soul-Reaper form in a death grip.

"Sacrificial Art: Tomb of the Crushing Earth!" it shrieked.

The guard's body began to emit a black smoke, its flesh corroding and dissolving as it dragged Orion down, plummeting into the ground below. The earth itself seemed to fold in on them. A cage of pure energy and compressed soil formed around Orion, trapping him deep beneath the surface.

Within the prison, a bizarre gravity formation flared to life, pinning him in place, rendering him immobile. The force was so strong he couldn't even gather the energy to teleport.

Back at the undead tower, the two Gnasher arch lords leading the assault forced Arthas's hand. He had to abandon the summoning formation and step outside.

"Insects," he murmured, his voice laced with contempt as he strode out into the open air. "Drawn to a flame you cannot comprehend."

The full might of his arch lord peak aura washed over the battlefield. An energy of absolute frost, white and deadly, coalesced in his hands. Two massive skeletal claws, etched with black, glowing runes, appeared out of thin air and shot towards the attacking guards.

Simultaneously, a ripple of black energy expanded from his feet, an aura of pure entropy. Wherever the wave passed, the very air seemed to shudder, and life withered. This was his death domain. Within it, his power was magnified to terrifying levels.

He sensed the sudden disappearance of the Deathly Soul-Reaper's aura from the front lines and pointed a single, skeletal finger toward the distant battle.

"Spirits of eternal silence, heroes sleeping in the dust! You who are brave, you who are fearless, you who are immortal! Hear my summons and arise!"

A beam of black light shot from his fingertip, crossing the miles in an instant and striking the main battlefield. The fresh corpses of the coalition soldiers slain by the other Gnasher guard began to decay at a hyper-accelerated rate, dissolving not into dust, but into a thick, black fog that began to swirl across the field.

Chapter 1033: You're confident

The ground groaned, then split with a deafening crack as a colossal, Accursed Monolith tore its way out of the earth. It immediately began to pulse, a dark beacon drawing in all the necrotic energy and raw despair from the blood-soaked battlefield.

ROAR!

From the churned soil at its base, a Dread Revenant clawed its way free. Clad in shattered armor from a forgotten age, its aura was ancient and suffocating. It took one look at the battlefield, its hollow eye sockets locking onto the Gnasher Race arch lord still carving through the allied fodder.

"An arch lord!" a Gnasher Race guardian cried out in shock. The creature Arthas had summoned was an arch lord itself.

The Dread Revenant bellowed and launched itself forward like a cannonball, closing the distance to engage the enemy in a savage, close-quarters brawl.

Behind the lines, seeing his summon successfully engage its target, Arthas turned his attention back to the two enemies still caught in his ethereal Wraithgrasp.

Eight arch lords total. More than I bargained for.

Five minutes earlier. Death Spiral Zone, the heart of the Gnasher Race Nest.

Not long after Matriarch Jynara had dispatched her guardians, the monolithic statue behind her finally stirred.

"More invaders?" a voice rumbled from the stone, thick with the dust of millennia, as if waking from a dream that had lasted eons.

"Ancestor, the invaders' elites are powerful," Matriarch Jynara reported, her head bowed. "They have an undead tower, and its contents remain shielded from our scrying."

In her eyes, the only piece of intel truly worthy of the Ancestor's attention was that tower. As the war raged, the Gnasher Race's only real hesitation stemmed from that single, ominous structure looming behind the undead armies. It was the sole reason Jynara herself had not yet joined the battle.

But now, with the Ancestor's will descending, she finally had the confidence to step out of the Nest and crush her enemies.

"Go," the statue commanded. "Slaughter every last intruder on our territory. Let their bodies pile high as a warning to any who would dare covet this land."

As the last word fell, the statue cracked open, stone flaking away as the being within came fully alive. It shot upward, bursting through the roof of the Nest and appearing in the sky high above the battlefield.

Its arrival was timed perfectly to the moment Arthas had snared two enemy guardians in his Wraithgrasp, preparing to execute them.

"Invaders die here," the Ancestor declared, its gaze fixed on Arthas's lich avatar. It gestured, its finger tracing a sigil in the void.

A monstrous, Gnasher-like maw of pure energy materialized above the lich, preparing to bite down and annihilate it.

"Hmph. About damn time you showed your face."

From within the lich's form, the Phantom of the Bone Sovereign erupted—a spectral projection of Arthas's true power—and shattered the maw with a single, contemptuous punch.

The Ancestor wasted no words. Its attack thwarted, it simply strode through the air toward Arthas.

Arthas met the charge without a hint of fear, his own power flaring. Shedding his lich form, his true avatar met the Ancestor head-on.

BOOM!

High in the sky, the two demigod phantoms collided. Warring realities ground against one another, their fundamental rules clashing, repelling, and dissolving into chaos until the very fabric of the sky began to boil. The sight was apocalyptic.

Down below, the now-unoccupied lich avatar grew colder, its empty sockets glowing as it summoned two more skeletal arms. But at that exact moment, the two ensnared guardians, seemingly acting on a new command, began to glow with sacrificial energy.

The ambient elements went into a frenzy, space itself warping as miniature cores of raw fire began to coalesce.

VREEEN!

One guardian's ultimate skill activated first—Final Reckoning: Voidlock. The lich was instantly imprisoned, banished to a pocket dimension of absolute nothingness. An instant later, the second guardian's ability triggered—Final Reckoning: Pyreburst. An incandescent, soul-searing firestorm erupted, incinerating the Voidlock and everything within it from existence.

And just like that, the last of the immediate arch lord threats on the field was gone.

Matriarch Jynara's figure finally descended, appearing serenely above the battlefield. With a flicker of teleportation, she was behind the Dread Revenant, a single punch reducing the ancient creature to a cloud of dust and bone fragments.

But it wasn't over. The Revenant began to reform at the base of the Accursed Monolith.

Jynara's brow furrowed in annoyance. She teleported again, shattering it with another blow. Realizing the source of its immortality, she teleported a final time, appearing before the Accursed Monolith itself. She drove her fist into the black stone, and it exploded into a million pieces.

This time, the Dread Revenant stayed dead.

A cold smirk touched Jynara's lips. Now, she was the single most powerful being on the field. Her gaze shifted, locking onto the distant undead tower. It was time to tear down the fortress that had brought this war to her people.

"Victory belongs to the Gnasher Race!" she declared to the heavens, striding through the air. In her wake, the swarming small scorpions and skeletal soldiers on the ground below disintegrated into dust, unable to withstand her sheer presence.

Awwrooo... awwrooo...

Crap, crap, crap, what do I do? What do I DO?! Thinking isn't my strong suit!

Watching the enemy arch lord advance, Dirtclaw, posted as guard before the Sand Scorpion Nest, felt his mind go completely blank. He had only just hit Legendary level; the thought of fighting an arch lord was something out of a nightmare.

This is it. I'm all in.

AWOOOOOO!

Primal instinct took over. Despite his bloodline's evolution into the formidable Hell-Drake Hound, in this moment of pure terror, all Dirtclaw could do was let out a desperate, gnollish howl. It was a sound of pure, unadulterated panic.

THUMP.

Just then, a deep, resonant impact echoed from deep within the earth.

The ground bucked and shuddered, a tremor so violent it even drew Matriarch Jynara's attention. As she looked down, the battlefield split open. A bottomless fissure tore through the land, stretching from the epicenter to the horizon.

An overwhelming aura of dread erupted from the chasm.

In the next instant, a phantom scythe materialized in front of Jynara, swinging in a lethal arc. She teleported reflexively, the blade cleaving through the space where she'd been a nanosecond before.

It was obvious who had caused the tremor. Bursting from the newly formed canyon, freed from the sacrificial prison, was Orion, the Deathly Soul-Reaper.

"Don't be so sure victory belongs to you," Orion said, his presence slightly diminished. He had been forced to use a brute-force method to break the guardians' trap. He knew that if he was out of the fight for too long, Arthas would be overwhelmed, and both the undead tower and the Sand Scorpion Nest would fall.

Unfortunately, he was still a step too late.

He could no longer sense Arthas's lich avatar. Its presence had been completely erased.

Orion's heart sank. He glanced up at the highest point in the sky, where two mighty, incandescent powers were still locked in a world-breaking struggle.

"I knew the Tomb of the Crushing Earth wouldn't hold you," Matriarch Jynara said, eyeing him with an unnerving calm. "But I didn't expect you back so soon." As an arch lord at her peak, she had no fear of the Deathly Soul-Reaper. She already had a plan to deal with him.

"A broodmother," Orion noted, pulling his gaze from the heavens to lock onto Jynara. Her eyes were sharp, calculating. He could practically taste the killing intent rolling off her. "You're confident."

Chapter 1034: The secrets of becoming an arch lord

The broodmother's confidence was absolute. She seemed utterly convinced she could kill him.

"Invader," Jynara said, her voice unnaturally calm. "Tell me, where do you come from?"

Orion's eyes narrowed. She wanted him dead, but the feeling was mutual. He had every intention of putting this broodmother in the ground and turning the tide of this battle.

Fzzt.

Orion vanished. He launched a surprise attack, his scythe carving through the space Jynara had just occupied. But she was already gone. The moment he teleported, so had she. His blade met only empty air, slicing through a fading afterimage.

CRACK. CRUNCH.

A sickening sound echoed across the battlefield. Orion snapped his head toward Jynara's new position, his brow furrowing in disbelief. She was doing something completely bizarre. Her jaw unhinged to an

impossible degree as she seized the guardian who had just been fighting the Dread Revenant and swallowed him whole. The cracking and grinding sounds were coming from inside her abdomen as she digested her own soldier.

"INTRUDERS. MUST. DIE!" Jynara roared, and her body began to distend.

Her form warped and swelled. Jagged, tooth-like spines erupted from her vertebrae. Dozens of new arms, a writhing forest of limbs, burst from her back. Orion made a quick estimate—at least fifty of them.

But it wasn't over.

Her ribcage split apart with a wet tear, and eight heads—writhing on fleshy stalks—forced their way out from the gaping cavity in her chest. Each head was a twisted mask of agony and rage, and every single one of them was staring daggers at Orion.

So that's it, he realized. He finally understood why none of the Gnasher Reavers or guardians he'd killed had left behind a body of faith. They weren't individuals. They were just extensions of the Matriarch. The eight heads now squirming from her chest were those of the four Gnasher Reavers and four guardians who had already fallen in battle. With their deaths, their power had simply returned to the source.

This was the broodmother in her true, terrifying form.

"You destroyed our home," Jynara snarled, a monstrous grin splitting her primary face. "For that, you die!"

She teleported, appearing directly in front of Orion. Her fifty-plus arms, wielding a chaotic arsenal of weapons, descended on the Deathly Soul-Reaper from every conceivable angle.

Orion's form dissolved into shadow, escaping the blow.

Jynara whipped her head around, spotting him a short distance away. She had only hit an afterimage. Orion had teleported out the instant her attack began.

"You can't run!" she shrieked. The eight heads on her chest detached, launching into the air and scattering in all directions.

Orion watched them go, his eyes narrowing again. A moment later, he understood their purpose. He prepared to teleport, but it was too late.

SKREEEEEEEE!

Eight synchronized, soul-shattering howls erupted, their psychic vibrations overlapping to form a perfect cage. The very fabric of space in the area locked down. He was trapped. Teleportation was impossible. He had become a caged animal.

"You're finished," Jynara hissed. "Caught in my Voidlock."

As she spoke, the screams from the eight heads intensified, shifting into a frequency that attacked the soul itself. The psychic assault slammed into Orion, throwing the Deathly Soul-Reaper's form into disarray. He was paralyzed, unable to move.

"Die!"

Jynara teleported beside him. Her fifty arms became a blur of motion, a relentless storm of blades and bludgeons that hammered into his body. Tendrils of shadow were blasted apart, only to writhe and reform an instant later.

Matriarch Jynara had anticipated this. She had countless arms, and her assault was endless. She knew the Deathly Soul-Reaper's regeneration had a limit. Unless it was fueled by a true law of reality, it could be broken.

She just had to keep hitting it until it did.

And so the bombardment continued, a storm of destruction that fell again, and again, and again.

Silverwood Realm, The Stillness.

Tangere returned without issue, finding Orion waiting for him in the conference room.

Orion looked him over, a flicker of concern in his eyes. "Are you alright?"

Tangere subconsciously touched his neck, the site of his last injury. It was a good thing he'd already reforged his body into a vessel of pure plague; as long as the core strains survived, he could recover from almost anything.

"It's nothing serious," Tangere said, his voice a little rough. "Just lost some of my primary plague cultures."

Orion nodded. That tracked with his expectations. As one of the Survivors, Tangere was bound to have a few aces up his sleeve.

"You must have a lot of questions," Orion said. "Ask away. I'll answer what I can."

Tangere fell silent. He'd had a million questions swirling in his mind, but now, face to face with Orion, he didn't know where to begin.

Orion wasn't in a hurry. He pulled out two chairs, gesturing for Tangere to sit. He poured two glasses of a dark spirit. Tangere took one and downed it in a single gulp before finally speaking.

"That last battle... did we win?"

Orion nodded, understanding Tangere's concern. If they had lost, their little invasion force would be packing up and heading home. A victory meant they could keep pushing into this new world.

A spark of light returned to Tangere's eyes, and the tension in his face eased slightly.

"Even if I had lost that fight, I would have taken the Forest of Nature by force," Orion stated calmly. "And you would have received your share of the spoils. Don't worry. The enemy is strong, but they're not invincible."

His words were meant to reassure him. Right now, Tangere was the most capable asset he had, and Orion had no intention of letting his best fighter lose his nerve.

Tangere accepted a second drink before asking his next question. "What was that thing I fought?"

"Something similar to a body of faith, but weaker. Flawed. You know what a body of faith is, right? It's the hallmark of an arch lord."

Tangere nodded. He had not only seen an arch lord before, but he had also been subjugated by one. He knew all too well what a body of faith was.

"The enemy used a corrupt secret technique," Orion explained. "It allows them to gather the dispersed faith within their followers to create those... bizarre entities you encountered. You can think of them as flawed incarnations."

Tangere nodded again, though the confusion hadn't fully left his eyes.

Orion considered for a moment. As an upper Legendary-tier powerhouse, Tangere was close to the threshold. It wouldn't be jumping the gun to give him a glimpse of what lies ahead.

"Since we're on the topic, let me tell you about the secrets—and taboos—of becoming an arch lord."

He leaned forward slightly. "The most critical step in advancing from a Lord to an arch lord is manifesting a body of faith. Its creation depends on the amount of genuine faith you command. However... there are darker paths. Vile shortcuts that grant a fraction of an arch lord's power prematurely."

"These methods rely on secret techniques to forge an incomplete body of faith."

Orion went on, explaining the intricacies of power, faith, and ascension. He hoped that by sharing this knowledge, he could build a stronger bond with Tangere. The man's performance on the battlefield had been impressive, and Orion was beginning to see a much greater potential in him.

Chapter 1035: The opening act of a full-scale invasion

Three days later, a much calmer Tangere entered the castle's conference room.

"The number of demonic monsters in the Forest of Nature has exploded. They're starting to form an encirclement. The enemy is here," Tangere said, bursting into the room to find Orion.

Although Tangere himself had withdrawn to the safety of The Stillness, he had left a vast network of Plague-thralls on the front lines to serve as his eyes and ears. Over the past two days, those thralls had been systematically overwhelmed by massive hordes of demonic monsters, their numbers dwindling rapidly. With the instincts of a born opportunist, Tangere knew exactly what this was: the opening act of a full-scale invasion.

"We haven't seen any Legendary-level threats yet," he added, "but they're definitely planning something big."

Orion gestured for the anxious plague lord to take a seat. He had fully expected a response from the forces behind the demonic monsters. After losing a high-ranking lord and an arch lord's phantom, a major faction with access to such potent secret techniques would never let the loss slide. This new wave of monsters wasn't just a probe; they were actively hunting for their stronghold.

"Our undead armies require a vast number of corpses and living sacrifices," Orion said with unnerving ease. "In a way, their timing is perfect, isn't it?"

To Orion, this offensive, while massive, was a hollow threat. The complete absence of high-level enemy combatants told him everything he needed to know. The faction behind the demonic monsters had a clear goal: use an endless tide of cannon fodder to pinpoint the allied coalition's location and test their strength.

"Pull your Plague-thralls back," Orion instructed. "Have them form a defensive perimeter around our core territory. For now, put the search for the scattered Wood Elves on hold."

He stood by the window, gazing out at the rapidly expanding encampment as he laid out the next phase of their plan.

Tangere raised no objections. Consolidating their forces and hunkering down was the smartest possible move.

As he stood frowning and mulling over the situation, a faint, cool breeze drifted into the conference room, feeling strangely out of place. The refreshing chill on his skin was instantly eclipsed by a primal sense of danger.

"My lord."

Tangere looked up. A figure clad in white had materialized behind Orion and was bowing deeply.

"You've worked hard," Orion said, turning from the window. He walked to the conference table, waiting expectantly.

Gustalon followed and produced a map from within his tunic, spreading it across the table for Orion to inspect.

"Report your findings," Orion commanded.

Gustalon nodded, gathering his thoughts. "My lord, the demonic monsters are all being deployed from a single structure outside the Forest of Nature: a Black Tower. It has six floors. During my observation, the first five were active."

As he spoke of the tower, Gustalon's eyes grew distant, his professional curiosity clearly captivated by the strange structure.

"The aura around the Black Tower is... odd. Not even the wind can get close, so I was unable to ascertain the specifics of its interior. However, I overheard some of those who emerged from it. They belong to a faction called the Cult of Four. The term they used most often was 'High Priest.'"

He added, "I suspect 'Priest' is a title or class for their Legendary-level commanders."

Gustalon seemed frustrated. He had only ever encountered structures capable of repelling the very wind in the territories of the Stoneheart Horde and the Valkorath Realm. He understood what that kind of power implied and knew better than to risk getting any closer.

Orion listened intently, nodding for him to continue.

"At all hours, a steady stream of demonic monsters ushers slaves and supplies into the Black Tower. The volume is immense; it must contain a massive pocket dimension. Beyond the tower, the density of demonic monsters in other regions drops off sharply. My assessment is that the Black Tower is the central hub for their entire invasion and resource-gathering operation. I'll need to scout further afield to confirm."

This was exactly the intelligence Orion needed. He suspected the Wood Elf leadership might have known some of this, but their race had been shattered. The survivors he had, Aerin and Xylia, were mid-level at best and thus weren't privy to high command's intelligence.

"The Black Tower is likely preparing a direct assault on us," Gustalon concluded. "On my way back, I observed large forces bypassing the former Wood Elf heartland and heading directly for The Stillness."

This matched Orion's predictions perfectly. This was the same region where Tangere had encountered the Black Tower's Mist Wraith lord. It was only logical they would now use that area as a starting point to search for them.

"Good. For the time being, halt all external operations," Orion ordered. "It seems The Stillness is about to be besieged."

He chose his words carefully. A siege was exactly what it was. Based on their visible forces—Tangere's hundred thousand Plague-thralls and his own five thousand Shield Warriors—an attack by the Black Tower's seemingly endless hordes would be an annihilation campaign.

"When will they arrive?" The question came from Tangere, who had moved closer to the table as soon as Gustalon unfurled the map. The intel had been so critical that he hadn't dared to interrupt.

"Ah. This is Tangere, one of our allies. A powerful plague lord," Orion said, glancing up and making the introduction. "And this is Gustalon, my right hand."

Gustalon gave Tangere a curt nod, his silence indicating he wasn't one for small talk with strangers.

Tangere nodded back, not daring to underestimate the man. The way Gustalon had simply appeared sent a chill down his spine. If he were an enemy... if that appearance had been an attack... I never would have seen it coming.

An unusual silence fell over the room. Orion studied the map, Gustalon awaited further orders, and Tangere watched the master spy from the corner of his eye. The atmosphere was thick with unspoken tension.

Tangere's mind drifted to the other mysterious figure in their alliance—the undead lord hidden in the great tomb beneath the castle, the one constantly summoning legions of skeletal soldiers. For a fleeting moment, he felt a surge of fear at the sheer depth of Orion's power.

It was quickly followed by a wave of profound relief that they were on the same side.

In the Godforsaken Land, the outcome of the battle remained uncertain. Millions of sand scorpions now lay as corpses, their purpose fulfilled. Many had been caught in the crossfire of the arch lords, vaporized without a trace. Their existence had been a prelude, a foundation of bone and chitin upon which the true undead armies would be built.

Chapter 1036: Final Offer

On the battlefield, the sandstorm raged. Through the swirling grit and chaos, the silhouettes of small scorpions could still be seen throwing themselves at the enemy, sowing confusion and buying precious time for the undead armies.

The longer the war of attrition dragged on, the more terrifying the advantage of the undead became. While the mortal sand scorpions and the Gnasher Race's beasts grew weary, the undead armies fought on, tireless and relentless. With Orion and Arthas drawn into their own high-stakes battles, command of the ground war had fallen to their undead lieutenants, who orchestrated countless localized skirmishes. Legendary-level Gnasher beasts were actively hunting key commanders like Bone White, Bone Red, and Vexis. They had already claimed a casualty in Rumbold, cut down by a flanking arch lord. Whether Arthas could resurrect him remained to be seen.

High above this maelstrom, Orion was taking a beating.

The Matriarch Jynara was relentless, forcing his Deathly Soul-Reaper form into a vicious cycle of destruction and regeneration that was rapidly approaching its breaking point. Finally, with one last overwhelming onslaught, the Deathly Soul-Reaper exploded, dissolving into nothing.

"Truly an invincible foe," a voice mused from a distance.

Outside the area of the Voidlock, the Deathly Soul-Reaper reappeared, completely unscathed. Orion stared at Jynara. This broodmother, he thought, is easily in the top tier of all arch lords. In all his experience, he would have considered her unbeatable by any of her peers.

But then again, so was he. It was still anyone's game.

"Impossible!" Jynara shrieked, her shock mirroring Orion's assessment. "How can you be unharmed?"

She had felt it. She had felt his form break and shatter under her fists. The tactile feedback, the raw sensation of annihilation, could not have been faked. He was well and truly dead.

"In this world," Orion's voice echoed, "nothing is impossible."

A phantom scythe flashed through the void. This time, Orion's blade targeted the eight heads writhing from Jynara's chest. His logic was simple: destroying them should significantly weaken her.

ROAR!

The eight heads screamed in unison, projecting an invisible shield of pure sound that deflected the phantom scythes. At the same time, Jynara and her grotesque attachments teleported, closing the distance to Orion once more.

"Cage of Spines!" she hissed.

The moment she appeared, the bone spurs on her back detached, fanning out like the petals of a corpse flower and wrapping around the Deathly Soul-Reaper, imprisoning him. Immediately, the eight heads flew out, re-establishing their Voidlock and unleashing another soul-shattering howl.

It was the exact same combo as before, and once again, it trapped him. Jynara's fists and weapons rained down, and the Deathly Soul-Reaper was thrown back into a state of passive endurance. But through it all, its silver eyes showed not a single flicker of panic.

In the highest reaches of the sky, the war of demigods continued.

They stood within a pocket reality forged by their own warring laws, a statue and a phantom, facing each other in stillness. Though they were not trading physical blows, the clash of their divine power had been raging since the moment they met.

"Withdraw now," the statue's voice intoned, its stone lips unmoving, its expression blank. "And perhaps we can still be allies."

"You expect me to leave empty-handed?" Arthas's voice was ice. There was nothing to discuss.

"Leave, agree to help me defend this Godforsaken Land, and I will grant you a tenth of the black gold." The statue knew precisely what treasures the land held, and it knew why a demigod like Arthas had come.

"A tenth?" Arthas sneered, a sword of pure white bone coalescing in his hand as he amplified his power. "Is that supposed to be a serious offer?"

The statue was unfazed. "Two-tenths, then. That is my final offer. This is the territory of the Gnasher Race. Don't overplay your hand."

"I have no interest in your two-tenths," Arthas declared, leveling his bone-forged sword at the statue. "Once I drive you out, this land and all the black gold in it will be mine."

"Hmph. You don't appreciate a generous offer," the statue boomed, its own divine power flaring to match his. "Do you truly believe I fear you?"

Heh.

And the silent, brutal struggle between the two demigods resumed with renewed intensity.

Silverwood Realm, The Stillness.

Led by Caesar, a delegation of Wood Elves—Aerin, Xylia, Angel, and another newcomer—emerged from the castle to meet with Orion.

"My lord," Xylia began, her voice respectful but firm, "why have you ordered a halt to the rescue of our people?"

Orion said nothing at first. He looked at the anxious expression on Xylia's face, then to Angel and the other elf, who shared the same look of confusion and barely concealed anger. In recent weeks, their rescue efforts had been effective, swelling the number of Wood Elf refugees in the camp to over a thousand. But compared to the hundred-thousand-strong tribe they once were, it was a painfully small fraction.

"I am not stopping the rescue, nor am I abandoning the Wood Elf race," he finally said.

Of the group, only Aerin remained calm. She said nothing, her trust in Orion absolute. She had already tried to explain the situation to her people before they came, but she knew they wouldn't be convinced until they heard it from the man himself. For many of the Wood Elves, Orion was a commander, not yet a leader. They felt no deep-seated trust and, therefore, little reverence.

"Outside the Forest of Nature, the demonic monsters are gathering in force," Orion explained, sitting calmly before them. "In half a month at most, their search will lead them to our gates. The Stillness is about to face a defensive battle that will decide the fate of every single person here."

He let that sink in.

"An innumerable horde of demonic monsters is closing in. At a time like this, we must stand united and repel the enemy. The plan to rescue your people has only been paused."

This was his decision. He was willing to be patient with the Wood Elves, a race that had pledged allegiance but had not yet given him their trust. He would allow them to question him, even doubt him, during these early days of building their new home.

He took a sip of tea, his eyes scanning their faces before his tone shifted.

"Besides, consider this: for the next few weeks, The Stillness will be drawing the vast majority of the enemy's attention. For your people still hiding in the forest, they will actually be safer."

Chapter 1037: Phantasmal Echo

"Of course," Orion continued, his voice devoid of warmth, "I will not force the Wood Elves to stay. With a great battle imminent, you are free to leave The Stillness. We will not hold you against your will."

This was, unmistakably, a test.

As more Wood Elf refugees had been rescued, dissenting voices had begun to emerge. The proof was right here in the room. Of the four representatives—Aerin, Xylia, Angel, and the newcomer, Lyra—the reactions were starkly different.

Aerin and Xylia's expressions were grim, but their resolve was unshaken. Angel looked lost, her gaze darting to Xylia for guidance like a rudderless ship in a storm. But Lyra was a different story. The moment Orion mentioned the coming demonic horde, a thick, suffocating dread washed over her face. Her eyes shifted nervously; she was already planning her escape.

"But remember this," Orion added, his gaze sweeping over them, his voice dropping to a cold, hard edge. "Once you walk out of The Stillness, you can never return. Traitors do not deserve peace."

He let the threat hang in the air.

"As of now, all Plague-thralls, Shield Warriors, and Wood Elves are recalled to defend the camp. We are preparing for a siege. Anyone who disobeys this command will be considered a deserter, and I will cast them out myself."

Issuing such a harsh ultimatum right before a battle was a surefire way to undermine morale. But Orion knew it was only the Wood Elves' morale at risk. Tangere and Caesar hadn't come here to hide; they were invaders, here for the spoils of war. A good fight was what they had signed up for.

After a long, tense silence, Aerin was the first to speak. "My lord, the Wood Elf race will follow you. We will not betray you." She had made her choice. Her time in the camp had not been fruitless; she had personally gathered a following of two or three hundred elves. Even if Xylia, Angel, and Lyra left with the majority, she could form her own branch and preserve a fragment of her people's legacy.

Her decision was built on an unshakable faith in Orion's power. In the absolute worst-case scenario, if The Stillness were to fall, she believed Orion had the means to escape with her and her followers to another world. They would lose everything, becoming utterly dependent on him with no power to negotiate, but it was still better than total extinction.

"My lord," Xylia said, her voice firm, "I will not abandon you, nor will I leave The Stillness."

"My lord, me too!" Angel added immediately. Where Xylia went, she followed. Her captain was the only leader she trusted.

"I... I will too," Lyra finally stammered. Her voice was a bare whisper, her expression a mask of indecision. The words sounded as if they had been forced from her lips.

"Very well. Plans change," Orion said, dismissing them with a wave. "Go and prepare for battle."

He didn't really care about their pledges. The only Wood Elves he would trust were the ones still standing inside the camp after the siege was over. Right now, words were cheap. The real test was yet to come.

In the Godforsaken Land, the carnage was unrelenting. For the Gnasher Race, this was their territory, their home. To defend it, to uphold their faith and repel invaders, was a sacred duty for which they would gladly give their lives. Even as the tide of the undead armies swelled, they did not yield a single step.

Conversely, the combined invasion of the sand scorpions and undead armies was the absolute expression of Orion's and Arthas's will. The enemy fought to defend their home; they fought to expand their own. It was a clash of irreconcilable beliefs, two colossal beasts of ideology tearing at each other on the field of battle.

And high above, the masters of those beasts were locked in their own life-or-death struggle.

SLASH! CRUNCH! BOOM!

Claws and weapons hammered into the Deathly Soul-Reaper. Matriarch Jynara had once again found her relentless tempo of destruction. Under the endless barrage, its body exploded for a second time, dissolving into nothing.

Jynara whipped her head around, her senses scouring the area for any sign of him. Sure enough, just outside her Voidlock, the Deathly Soul-Reaper coalesced back into existence.

"What is that ability?!" she roared in frustration. "I refuse to believe you can't be killed!"

She teleported again, lunging at him, but this time Orion was faster, slipping away from her grasp before the trap could be sprung.

"To kill me," Orion's voice taunted, "you'll need more than that."

He was actively trying to provoke her, to force her to reveal any other trump cards she might be hiding. The truth was, Matriarch Jynara was an invincible existence among arch lords. Without playing his own trump cards, the Deathly Soul-Reaper was no match for her. Only Orion's true self, descending upon this realm, could slay a broodmother of her caliber with ease.

The card he had just played was called Phantasmal Echo. It was an ability derived from the third eye of a Silver-Eyed Being. During the invasion of the Dusk Continent in the Emerald Dream Realm, Orion had acquired two of their eyes, each with a unique power.

One was Phantasmal Echo, an ability to perceive and project oneself through higher dimensions, using reflections from parallel timelines to negate a fatal blow. It was like a dream, an illusion. The "Deathly Soul-Reaper" that Jynara had just destroyed was nothing more than a phantom echo.

The other eye's ability was Chronostasis, a powerful technique that could drastically slow the flow of time in a targeted area.

Before descending into the Godforsaken Land, Orion had installed both eyes into the Deathly Soul-Reaper. This avatar, now immensely powerful, was armed with two of his most potent abilities. Arthas had warned him this invasion would be a meat grinder. Orion had suspected that a standard arch-lord-peak avatar wouldn't be enough.

Now, it seemed his foresight was paying off.

SKREEEEEEEE!

Jynara unleashed another soul-shattering howl and attacked again. She truly had no idea how he was surviving. Unable to comprehend what was happening, she could only fall back on the one strategy she knew could grievously wound him. The feeling of his body breaking under her fists had been real, after all.

She clung to a single belief: if he truly had a method of resurrection, it had to have a limit. If she just kept killing him, over and over again, eventually, this bizarre and powerful enemy would have to stay dead.

Chapter 1038: A Fatal Mistake

Forest of Nature, The Stillness.

Ever since they learned of the coming war, Aerin had been leading the other Wood Elves in a constant ritual, moving along the camp's walls and casting a Verdant Blessing on every arrow tower. It was a unique Wood Elf art, a prayer that infused structures with the resilience of ancient trees.

"In the battle to come, these towers will be our lifeline," Caesar remarked, watching as a shimmering green aura sank into the timber of another tower. He stood beside Aerin; he had been present when the elves sought out Orion and had walked with them from the castle.

Aerin concluded the ritual and turned to him. "I am no warrior, brother, but I know that a fighter is only as good as their weapon. In a siege, these towers will be the most reliable weapons we have."

Caesar nodded, his hand resting on the hilt of his sword as he stared south, toward the enemy. "If we can hold them off this time, our coalition will finally have a foothold in the Forest of Nature. Only then will your people truly begin to see this camp as their home, a place where they can finally feel safe."

While Caesar was a brilliant fighter, strategy and administration were not his strong suits. But his time as a castellan had taught him a thing or two about the hearts of men—and elves. Having been part of the rescue missions from the start, he understood the Wood Elves' plight. He saw no sense of belonging in their eyes yet. Compared to the Shield Warriors he had brought with him, the elves were always on edge, perpetually braced for the next disaster.

"Don't worry," Aerin said with a gentle smile. "I have faith in you, brother, and in Tangere. And most of all, I have faith in my lord."

She and Caesar got along well. It wasn't a romantic connection, but a simple harmony between the aura of nature inherent in the Wood Elves and the sense of righteous order that burned within Caesar. It made their companionship easy and comfortable.

You are all the chosen ones. And so am I.

The final thought resonated deep in her soul. From the moment Orion had descended with Tangere and Caesar, her life of desperate, terrified flight had ended. She had never felt such a profound sense of security. Sometimes, when she thought about who—and what—they were, she wondered if she hadn't stumbled into a game world, and the powerful figures around her were simply Player One, Two, and Three.

As they spoke, a Shield Warrior approached from the camp.

"Commander, Elder Aerin," the soldier said with a salute. "My lord requests your presence in the castle conference hall."

Caesar nodded and gestured for Aerin to join him. If Orion was summoning them now, it meant the plan for the defense was finally ready.

Godforsaken Land.

The battle was a merciless grinder for both sides. Every second, more lives were extinguished, and in this endless war, both factions were desperate for victory.

The undead were like ghouls, the skeletons like demons. The more necrotic energy saturated the battlefield, the more terrifying the undead armies became. They had gradually seized the advantage, their battle lines pushing inexorably toward the heart of the Gnasher Race's territory. This unfavorable turn of events only drove the Gnasher lords and their beasts into a greater frenzy. They charged the undead lines with suicidal abandon, a hysterical effort to delay the inevitable until their Matriarch could destroy her foe and return to save them.

They didn't know that their Matriarch was in the exact same state of hysteria.

“Kill!”

Seeing the Deathly Soul-Reaper rematerialize outside her Voidlock, Jynara teleported and unleashed another furious storm of blows. Once again, Orion was trapped, paralyzed.

This time, however, he was ready.

Squelch. Squelch. Squelch.

The wet, tearing sound of flesh being pierced echoed eight times in quick succession. The eight heads Jynara had positioned to maintain her trap were each impaled by thick, shadowy tendrils—the very substance that made up the Deathly Soul-Reaper’s body. Orion hadn’t just been passively taking the hits; with every “death,” he had secretly left behind fragments of his shattered form, hidden in the void. Now, with those tendrils outside the Voidlock, he could command them with a mere thought.

Aaargh!

A chorus of agonizing screams erupted—eight distinct cries of pain from a single being. With her heads impaled, the Voidlock destabilized.

The Deathly Soul-Reaper broke free. A phantom scythe bloomed into existence, sweeping toward Jynara. The eight heads tried to retreat, but the tendrils coiled around them, binding them tightly until they were eight grotesque, fleshy spheres cocooned in shadow.

CRACK!

Jynara sacrificed two of her own arms to block Orion’s scythe, buying a precious second to forcibly retract her eight heads. In her desperation, she pulled back everything—even the tendrils that were still latched onto them—into the cavity of her chest.

“A fatal mistake,” Orion’s voice hissed.

The tendrils on the Deathly Soul-Reaper's body began to writhe and pulse, creating a violent resonance with the ones now trapped inside Jynara. She let out a choked, agonized howl as her chest cavity was forced open from within. The eight heads shot back out, hurtling toward Orion as he teleported beside her.

"Reap!"

Orion was waiting. With a single swing of his scythe, he lopped four of the heads clean off.

The pain was unimaginable. Jynara let out a feral, tiger-like roar, shaking from the grievous wound. She immediately pulled back her four remaining heads and teleported away an instant before Orion could press his attack.

His offensive rhythm broken, Orion halted his advance and watched her from a distance. Her chest heaved violently, her face contorted in a mask of agony as if she were fighting something internally. He was about to move in for the kill when the writhing in her chest suddenly stopped. It split open once more.

Eight heads flew out.

Orion instinctively froze. The eight heads were back. Four were dripping with blood, and four were covered in a viscous, amniotic slime, as if freshly born. The black tendrils that had infested them had been bitten off and spat out onto the ground.

Even with Jynara seemingly restored, Orion did not hesitate.

Did she just sacrifice four of her heads to purge my tendrils? The thought flashed through his mind as he urged the Deathly Soul-Reaper forward again. This time, he closed the distance, unafraid of her Voidlock.

His aggression, however, only ignited Jynara's primal fury. Her body convulsed and warped, transforming into a monstrous broodmother dozens of feet long, her maw lined with enormous, jagged teeth. She snapped at him with a deafening roar, and Orion was forced to parry with his scythe.

But in the next moment, eight enormous heads launched from behind her, unleashing a coordinated assault of six different abilities: a Sonic Cage, her signature Voidlock, a Pyre Burst, a Gravity Well, an Acid Torrent, and a storm of razor-sharp Wind Blades.

Chapter 1039: Chronostasis

In that instant, the Acid Torrent splattered across the Deathly Soul-Reaper. Its shadowy form sizzled and steamed, the writhing tendrils that composed it dissolving into nothing. Jynara saw her opening. With a triumphant roar, the great-toothed broodmother's jaws gaped wide, and she swallowed the trapped, weakened Deathly Soul-Reaper whole.

Inside the stomach, Orion was immediately submerged in an endless sea of corrosive fluid. He knew instantly, This is a losing battle. This was a specialized digestive space, an internal dimension designed for one purpose: to dissolve foreign matter.

Matriarch Jynara was terrifyingly clever. Through their continuous clashes, she had found his avatar's weakness. The Deathly Soul-Reaper, augmented by Phantasmal Echo, was nearly immune to physical attacks; he could let her shatter his form all day. But this was different. This was an attack of attrition. While her stomach acid lacked the obliterating power of true divine power or holy fire, being trapped here was a death sentence. It was only a matter of time.

Worse, if Jynara were free to attack the undead armies, their entire invasion would end in failure.

Left with no other choice, Orion played another card.

Outside, having swallowed her foe, Jynara didn't immediately turn on the undead armies. She watched, her senses focused inward. Seeing her digestive fluids effectively corroding the Deathly Soul-Reaper, a wave of relief washed over her. Fighting this thing had been an exhausting, nerve-wracking ordeal, even for a warrior as confident as herself.

Just as a smile touched her lips, it froze.

SHING!

A sound like a singing sword split the air. Arthas's demigod phantom, wielding its white bone-forged sword, appeared from nowhere. With a single, elegant slash, it sliced open Jynara's digestive dimension from the outside, the same blow effortlessly extinguishing every last spark of her broodmother form's life force.

The Matriarch of the Gnasher Race was dead.

Or so I thought, Orion mused, noting the conspicuous absence of a body of faith.

High in the heavens, Arthas sensed that Orion had deployed his emergency trump card. He immediately exerted his will, recalling the phantom to finish the battle before him.

"Be careful," the demigod phantom said to Orion, its voice a whisper on the wind before it shot skyward to rejoin the war of gods.

Within the pocket reality of warring laws, the phantom emerged and merged with Arthas's true form. His avatar solidified, its aura growing until it surpassed the stone statue's.

"Withdraw now and cede this Godforsaken Land," Arthas commanded, a white flame erupting along his bone-forged sword. "Do this, and I may spare your life today."

"Never!" the statue roared, refusing to be intimidated. The clash of their divine powers resumed, more violent and desperate than before.

Back on the battlefield, the moment Arthas's phantom vanished, a brilliant golden light erupted from the main nest in the heart of the Gnasher territory. A figure bathed in that light, wearing a crown and carrying nine severed heads upon its shoulders, rose into the air. It was a body of faith, and it strode through the void toward the Deathly Soul-Reaper.

"Imprison," the golden figure commanded. With a single word, the Deathly Soul-Reaper was frozen in place once more. This was no Voidlock; this was a cage woven from pure faith energy.

Jynara was nothing if not a cunning opportunist. The moment Arthas's demigod phantom had appeared, her true body of faith had remained perfectly still, hidden. The second she was certain the phantom had rejoined the divine war, she made her move, intent on crushing Orion once and for all.

Faith energy was, in essence, a protomorphic form of divine power. By expending a massive amount of it, a user could mimic some of its traits. That was what Jynara was doing now: burning through the faith her race had accumulated over countless years for one overwhelming, decisive strike.

"Die!" Jynara bellowed as her body of faith closed the distance. She reached out an arm, which instantly transformed into a wickedly sharp, serrated blade, and brought it down in a killing blow.

The blade stopped, hovering less than half an inch from Orion's body.

"You shouldn't have come so close," Orion's voice sneered from within the paralyzed form.

Suddenly, the world slowed to a crawl. The blade froze, the air grew still. The Deathly Soul-Reaper, breaking its bonds through an unseen power, moved with impossible speed. Its scythe became a blur, unleashing a storm of countless phantom blades.

The scythes fell, and Jynara's body of faith was instantly diced into a thousand pieces.

Even so, she was not dead. So long as the faith energy she controlled still existed, her body of faith could not be truly destroyed. But she knew she couldn't stay. A pillar of teleportation magic erupted behind the scattered fragments of her form. Before Orion could even think to disrupt it, the portal was stable.

With a final, piercing shriek of hatred, Jynara fled, taking a fraction of her remaining faith energy with her as she teleported out of the Godforsaken Land entirely.

Jynara was gone. Orion stood motionless for a long moment before finally lowering his scythe. He took out a small, humanoid statue—a Faith Locus—and used it to absorb the ambient faith energy left scattered in the void.

She had escaped with roughly a third of her power. Another third had been annihilated by his attack. The final third was now his.

“A pity,” Orion said to the empty air. “I couldn’t finish her.” It was no surprise that a broodmother like Jynara had an escape plan. The duel between arch lords had ended in his narrow victory.

Now, everything depended on the outcome of the battle between Arthas and the statue.

Orion looked down at the battlefield below. While his front lines were advancing steadily, the undead tower and the sand scorpions’ main nest were being besieged by a sea of Gnasher beasts.

ROAR!

A dragon’s cry echoed across the field. Dirtclaw, the Hell-Drake Hound, was a walking inferno. A trail of unquenchable hellfire burned in his wake, turning the ground he trod into a vision of hell. Gnasher beasts that charged him were either torn apart by his jaws or incinerated by the flames. The few that slipped past were immediately swarmed and annihilated by the undead and small scorpions guarding the nests.

Hahahaha... This feels AMAZING! I’ve never felt so alive! Is this supernatural power?

Slaughter... fire... what a beautiful symphony!

ROAR!

The Hell-Drake Hound opened his jaws and swallowed a charging Gnasher beast whole.

He was really starting to love this battlefield.

Chapter 1040: The Twelve Pontiffs

Whenever he felt fatigue creeping in, when the hellfire within him began to flicker, he just had to devour an enemy, and new strength and fresh flames would bloom inside him.

At this rate, Dirtclaw thought, his chest swelling with power, I could probably take on a Legendary-level champion and win.

But just then, a meteor shower of phantom scythes rained down from the heavens. The enemy forces charging the undead tower were instantly and utterly annihilated, their bodies vaporized into steam and ash.

A chill of pure terror shot down Dirtclaw's spine. He realized with sickening certainty that he wouldn't have been able to withstand even a single one of those phantom blades. His newfound ego evaporated in an instant.

He swallowed hard, trying to force down the sudden wave of fear. Just then, Orion's familiar voice boomed across the battlefield.

"The broodmother has fled! Their will is broken! New objective: destroy the enemy Nest!"

The voice crashed like thunder, and for a single, stunned moment, the entire warzone froze. Then, the slaughter resumed. Every slash, every bite, every breath was still filled with deadly intent. But something fundamental had shifted.

The morale of the Gnasher Race had completely collapsed.

In contrast, the allied undead and sand scorpion armies surged with triumphant energy. They became an unstoppable tide, beginning to steamroll the Gnasher forces. With Orion looming in the sky above, the outcome was no longer in doubt. Wherever the enemy clustered most thickly, he would unleash his power, and they would be wiped from existence. Against an arch lord, low-tier soldiers were nothing.

"It's my lord!"

"My lord won! We won!"

“Charge! Kill them all!”

The loudest cheers came from Dirtclaw. The undead and sand scorpions, after all, weren’t much for conversation. But even as he roared with victory, he remembered his duty. He didn’t join the charge, instead holding his ground before the undead tower and the sand scorpion Nest, a loyal and unmoving guardian.

After Orion had played all his cards, the invaders had finally turned the tide.

Titanion Realm, Stoneheart.

With the invasion of the Godforsaken Land progressing, Orion reached out to Arthas.

“Bro, the broodmother in the Godforsaken Land teleported away. I couldn’t finish her. Is that going to be a problem?”

Arthas’s demigod phantom was still locked in combat, but his true body was free to communicate.

“Don’t worry about it,” Arthas’s voice echoed back. “My fight here is almost over. We’ve won.”

It was good news. The dust was finally settling on their campaign. The non-stop, high-intensity warfare had taken a huge toll on Orion. He was eager to end it and shift his full focus to the Silverwood Realm. Based on the intel he had gathered, it was a world of considerable size. Conquering it wouldn’t just expand his territory; it would be a crucial step in leveling up his own power.

“Bro,” Orion began, changing the subject, “have you ever heard of the Cult of Four?”

If Arthas said the Godforsaken Land was a done deal, he believed him. It was time to probe for information on his other front. The Cult of Four has a secret technique for creating arch lords, he reasoned. They have to be a major faction. It was possible that ancient beings like Arthas and Leonidas had encountered them before.

“The Cult of Four?” Arthas replied. “Did the clown recognize you? Is he trying to recruit you?”

Orion froze. What? I’m talking about the Cult, what does that have to do with the clown?

Then, the horrifying implication clicked into place.

“Bro... is the clown a member of the Cult of Four?”

“Yes,” Arthas confirmed. “He is one of their twelve Pontiffs. The Witch is also with them.”

Orion felt a sinking feeling. His plans to conquer the Silverwood Realm were likely dead in the water.

“What did the clown say to you?” Arthas pressed before Orion could respond.

“Bro, I don’t think he’s seen me. I stumbled into a world that the Cult of Four was already in the process of invading.”

Orion quickly explained the situation with Aerin and the Wood Elves. Arthas was silent for a long time.

“Explain it again, clearly,” he finally said.

Orion recounted the entire story.

When he finished, Arthas’s reply was dry. “You lucky bastard. We’ve been hunting for them for ages with no success, and you just happen to trip over the clown and the Cult of Four.”

Orion ignored the jab. “Bro, what are the chances I’ll run into the clown and the Witch in the Silverwood Realm?”

“Very high. The Cult of Four typically invades in force.”

“Then what’s our move?” A grim feeling settled in Orion’s gut. If those two were really in the Silverwood, carving out a new territory for himself would be next to impossible.

“Just because you’ve found the Cult doesn’t guarantee you’ll face them,” Arthas said. “In an age without active gods, our Champions Alliance fears no enemy. Continue your invasion. I’ll notify Alexander and have him keep an eye on your situation.”

This was Arthas’s advice. By bringing in Alexander first, fewer people would be asking for a slice of the pie Orion had discovered.

“If it proves to be too much for you, sharing the Silverwood with the Alliance isn’t a bad outcome for you.”

Orion had to agree with that.

“To be honest, bro, my plan was always to bring the whole crew in on this eventually,” Orion admitted. “I just didn’t expect the demigod faction I ran into would be the damn Cult of Four. I wanted to establish a foothold first, you know?” He hadn’t planned on explaining himself, but he figured it was better if the story came from him, through a bro like Arthas.

“I understand,” Arthas said. “With your current strength, you can defend yourself, but you can’t suppress an entire demigod faction.”

Arthas’s words struck him like a bone-forged sword driving straight through his fragile mind.

“Hey, don’t sell me so short,” Orion shot back playfully. It was a relief that Arthas understood, but being seen through so completely was also a little annoying.

“Even if you wanted our help, it wouldn’t be possible right now,” Arthas continued. “After this battle in the Godforsaken Land, I’ll be entering a period of slumber, just like the Deputy Commander and Alexander. If you need backup, you’ll have to wait for Leonidas to awaken.”

A faint smile entered Arthas's tone. "Knowing his personality, I'm sure he'd be more than happy to jump at the chance of beating the hell out of the Cult of Four."