

Titan King 1041

Chapter 1041: Two Million Skeletons

Long after he left the Survivor's Platform, Orion's gaze remained distant and grim.

The Cult of Four. Before Arthas had explained, Orion had assumed it was just an organization led by four demigods. Now he understood. The true patrons of this faction were likely four actual gods. Otherwise, brilliant and cunning individuals like the clown and the Witch would never have so easily betrayed the Champions Alliance and their commander.

To make matters worse, Arthas had confirmed that while the clown's rank might still be arch lord-peak, his true power was, without question, at the demigod level. He was absolutely certain of it.

"The path forward is no longer what I had envisioned," Orion murmured to himself. His original plan was simple: conquer the Forest of Nature, then expand outward. But learning that his enemy was the Cult of Four—the very faction the clown and the Witch had defected to—filled him with a profound sense of caution.

He stood in silence for a long time before letting out a slow, heavy breath.

"It all comes down to one thing: I'm still too weak."

That was the root of it. If he were a demigod, he could afford to largely ignore the Cult of Four. In fact, they would most likely leave him alone, content to let him carve out his own territory in the Silverwood Realm. But he was only an arch lord. To challenge a demigod-backed faction, he had to rely on the help of his brothers in the Champions Alliance. It was both his greatest strength and his greatest vulnerability.

With one last sigh, Orion let the silence of the castle settle around him again.

Silverwood Realm, The Stillness.

“We poured a massive amount of manpower and resources into building this camp—the castle, the walls, the homes. We cannot allow the war to be fought within these walls.”

Orion’s gaze swept across the faces of Aerin, Caesar, and Tangere, who were gathered in the conference hall. His strategic plan was now clear.

“My lord,” Tangere began, “does that mean we are not fighting a defensive war?”

In formal settings, they all addressed Orion as ‘my lord’. It was a necessary convention, crucial for forging a sense of unity and command structure in the fledgling camp. Of those present, only Tangere had the standing to truly question Orion’s strategy; his Plague-thralls were the only force numerous enough to coordinate with Orion’s own troops. Caesar’s five thousand Shield Warriors were a drop in the ocean against the coming horde, and Orion had already mentally discounted Aerin’s thousand or so Wood Elves from his frontline calculations.

“Correct. We are not fighting a defensive war, and we are not fighting a guerrilla war,” Orion stated. “I need you to command your Plague-thralls to join me in a blitz.”

He let the shocking proposal hang in the air.

“Before the enemy can react, we are going to punch through the Forest of Nature and take out the Black Tower in a single, decisive strike.”

His initial plan had indeed been to defend. But after his debrief with Arthas, he’d received a critical piece of intelligence: the sixth floor of the Black Tower remained unlit. That meant there were no demigods stationed there. Without a demigod to worry about, Orion’s options expanded dramatically. He would strike first, topple the tower before a demigod could descend, and seize all the resources the Cult of Four had plundered from the forest.

It was an insane idea. But when he had discussed it with Arthas, his brother had promised him support.

“Are... are you sure that’s possible?” Tangere stammered, swallowing hard. The plan sounded suicidal. It was the most honest, unfiltered thought he’d had since arriving in this world.

“Come with me,” Orion said simply. He turned and led them from the conference hall.

At the entrance, Orion raised his right hand. The plaza before the castle groaned and split apart, stone grinding against stone as a section of the ground sank away, revealing a grand staircase leading down into darkness. A dark, gaping maw of a cavern, exhaling a palpable aura of death, lay below.

ROAR!

A guttural cry echoed from the depths. Green spheres of ghostly witchfire ignited in the distance, floating closer. They were followed by the heavy, rhythmic tramp of armored feet.

From the oppressive darkness, a lone figure emerged. Clad in ancient armor, a Skeletal Knight, holding high the tattered war banner of the stoneheart horde, ascended the steps with grim solemnity. Behind him, five thousand more Skeletal Knights marched in perfect formations of ten, their weapons held ready. They were followed by four monstrous Blight Wyrms, which burst from the cavern and began to circle low over the castle, their piercing draconic shrieks growing louder with each pass.

And then came the infantry.

An endless river of skeletons began to pour out of the subterranean darkness. Silent, disciplined, and innumerable. An army so vast it defied description. The sight immediately drew the stunned attention of every Wood Elf and Shield Warrior in the camp. The rhythmic clatter of bony feet on the stone plaza was the only sound—a chilling, unified percussion that echoed through the settlement. It was the sound of death itself.

Orion stood silently, his face an emotionless mask, as the plaza filled with his legions. The number of undead swelled until counting them was an impossibility.

After what felt like an eternity, Clymene emerged from the cavern. Flanking her were a being shrouded entirely in mist and a towering Cyclopes lord. She walked to Orion’s side.

“My lord,” her deep voice rumbled, a sound that hit Aerin, Tangere, and Caesar like a physical blow, “the summoning of two million skeleton warriors is complete.”

They felt as if they had misheard. Two. Million.

In addition to the resources Tangere had been constantly gathering, Orion had funneled an immense amount of materiel from the stoneheart horde for this campaign. His minimum objective was to secure the entire Forest of Nature, and this was only a fraction of his total investment. In his eyes, two million undead soldiers was hardly an overwhelming number compared to the endless demonic monsters. Time was the critical factor; he had to strike before a demigod arrived at the Black Tower. The previous skirmishes had been nothing more than a prelude.

"You have done well," Orion said.

"For the horde! For my lord!" Clymene declared, placing a fist over her heart in a military salute.

Her cry was taken up by every undead creature on the plaza capable of speech.

"FOR THE HORDE! FOR MY LORD!"

"FOR THE HORDE! FOR MY LORD!"

The chant rolled across the plaza, a deafening roar of absolute loyalty, punctuated by the guttural hisses and clattering jaws of the lower-ranked skeletons.

Chapter 1042: This Land is Mine

Orion raised a hand, and the roaring and hissing of the undead armies fell silent.

"The plaza is overflowing," he announced, his voice cutting through the sudden quiet. "The war begins now."

It was a command, and the signal for the entire army to advance.

Clymene nodded, then turned and leaped onto the back of a swooping Blight Wyrms. She let out a bone-rattling roar that echoed to the heavens, and the legions on the plaza began to march in disciplined order out of the camp.

Only then did Orion turn back to Tangere.

"Our objective is the Black Tower. Take your Plague-thralls and join the vanguard. I believe that after this battle, you will have absorbed enough plague essence to reach the peak of the Legendary level."

"Done," Tangere replied without a moment's hesitation. With a two-million-strong undead army at his back, he felt confident enough to take on the whole world, let alone a single tower.

"As for you two," Orion said, addressing Aerin and Caesar, "the camp must be guarded during the war. Straggling demonic monsters will undoubtedly appear in the vicinity, and it will be your job to clean them up."

Aerin and Caesar were still only Alpha-level. Throwing them into the meat grinder of the main battlefield was out of the question. They were too weak, and the risk of a fatal accident was too high. Orion felt a sense of responsibility for them and had no intention of letting them take unnecessary risks before they reached the rank of Lord. He didn't want a reputation for getting his allies killed.

"As you command, my lord," Caesar said with a solemn bow.

"As you command, my lord," Aerin echoed.

The atmosphere was grave. They both understood they couldn't contribute to the main assault. Just mopping up the remnants would be more than enough to keep Caesar's five thousand Shield Warriors busy.

"Guard our home," Orion said. With that, he leaped into the air, landing gracefully on the back of another Blight Wyrms and joining the invading column.

Tangere followed suit, launching himself into the air and landing on a third wyrm. After a series of guttural calls to one another, the great beasts flew out of the camp in formation.

"Captain, is... is my lord leading the army himself?"

The camp wasn't that large, and the commotion in the plaza had been impossible to ignore. Every Wood Elf had been roused from their homes. The braver ones had crept to the edge of the plaza to watch, while the more timid observed from the safety of their treehouses.

Xylia and Angel were among the brave. They stood by the plaza, their eyes a mixture of awe and terror, watching the silent, orderly columns of the undead march out of their home.

"Yes," Xylia whispered, her voice filled with wonder. "My lord has gone to war." The sight had completely shattered their understanding of the camp's true power.

"Let's go!" she said after a moment, her mind made up. She grabbed Angel's arm and began running back toward the Elf Treehouses.

"Captain, what are you doing?" Angel asked, letting herself be pulled along in a daze.

"Gather the squad! Grab your gear! We're marching with them!"

"What?!" Angel's eyes went wide with disbelief. "Captain, are you...?"

"Don't just stand there! If we don't hurry, we'll lose them!"

Fifteen minutes later, a fully equipped elven squad, led by Xylia, after a hasty farewell to Aerin, fell in with the rear of the undead army and marched out of the camp.

"Aerin, my lady, why didn't you stop them?" Caesar asked, watching the small squad of elves disappear into the forest.

"I couldn't. And I shouldn't," Aerin replied with a sad smile. "They may face great danger on that battlefield. They may not return. But it is their choice to make. They are different from us, Caesar. They are the guardians of the Wood Elves, born for battle. I am not yet their queen. They would not listen to me now."

She shook her head. It wasn't that she didn't want to stop them; she simply didn't have the authority. Xylia was an Alpha-level guardian, a position that, before the fall of their race, held more practical authority than Aerin's own title as a figurehead elder. Her current leadership status was largely due to her connection with Orion, Caesar, and Tangere. It was that connection alone that allowed her to command the respect of a portion of her people.

"But I believe," she continued, her eyes growing sharp and clear, "that after they witness this war, they will learn to truly fear my lord. And in time, they will learn to respect me. And you, Caesar. When you advance to the rank of Lord, you will be my official ally. That will only hasten their submission."

Aerin looked at Caesar, a genuine smile on her face. She knew with absolute certainty that he was destined to reach the Legendary level. He was her future. She understood a simple truth: if you lack internal power, you must rely on external strength. She would use the power of her allies to unite the Wood Elf race under her rule. She was realistic about her own abilities; she knew she would not be reaching the Legendary level anytime soon.

"My lady Aerin, you have my word," Caesar said earnestly. "When I become a Lord, I will help you."

"I know you will," she replied. "I believe in you."

Godforsaken Land, on a mountain ridge.

After descending upon the battlefield and personally annihilating all remaining Legendary-level Gnasher Race commanders, Orion withdrew from the main combat. He now stood atop a high ridge, ignoring the battle raging in the Death Spiral Zone below, his gaze fixed on the roiling black clouds in the sky.

The clouds masked the demigod battle from all senses. They were thick and dark, layered like an inverted funnel. A sliver of brilliant gold and a sliver of pure white occupied opposite halves of the vortex, trimming the edges of the storm.

Orion could feel it. The heart-stopping radiance of the sword light in the sky was growing stronger, more intense. That could only mean one thing: his brother Arthas had gained the upper hand.

Within the void of warring realities, the two divine powers were locked in a struggle with only one possible outcome. It was a battle of pure attrition. There was no escape.

"Apologies," Arthas's voice echoed from the heavens, cold and final. "This Godforsaken Land is mine."

He swung his sword. A flash of light, a fusion of bone-white fire and divine power, sliced deep into the stone statue. The being had changed since it first appeared. Worn down by the constant struggle, its form had grown rigid, its features becoming clearer, more stone-like.

"I will remember your aura," the statue grated, a last-ditch effort to save face. "Our feud begins today!"

Arthas paid the threat no mind. He swung his sword again, and the statue was shattered into a million pieces, which were then incinerated into fine ash by the bone-white flames.

Chapter 1043: A World Fragment

"I have so many enemies," Arthas remarked with a touch of dry arrogance, sheathing his sword as he began to retract his divine power. "One more or less makes no difference."

At that exact moment, in the Gnasher Race's Nest, a pillar of teleportation magic flared to life. The target wasn't a person or a beast, but a swirling pool of liquid darkness.

From his vantage point on the ridge, Orion didn't hesitate. He swung his scythe, launching an attack at the teleportation formation. But someone was faster. A blade of pure light descended from the heavens, shattering the formation and cutting off the escape.

Arthas's form appeared in mid-air, intercepting the pool of black liquid.

"Bro, is this the black gold?" Orion asked, teleporting to his side.

"It is," Arthas confirmed. "This is why I came. But this cache they had stored up... it's not enough for my needs."

Arthas was of a different race than Orion. As a skeletal being, the durability of his own bones was paramount. Now that he had ascended to demigod, strengthening his own frame was the most direct path to increasing his power. While he was a master of many arts, his skeletal frame was the foundation of his strength.

"Not enough?"

Arthas nodded. He needed the black gold not only to temper his own bones but also to refine his white bone-forged sword. Ascending it to the level of a relic would consume a vast amount.

"So, what's our next move? Do we need to dig in and defend this place for the long haul?"

Hearing this, Arthas glanced at him. "You have somewhere else to be?"

Orion didn't hesitate. "You know I do. I need to launch a blitz on the Black Tower in the Silverwood Realm. I was planning on using this Deathly Soul-Reaper avatar to help. If we're fortifying this position, I can't spare it."

Arthas considered this for a moment. Then, his demigod phantom split in two. The larger portion flowed into the body of the Deathly Soul-Reaper, reinforcing it.

"Go," Arthas said. "We don't need to defend this place. And we don't need to mine the black gold."

His words left Orion completely baffled. But you just said there wasn't enough.

As if reading his mind, Arthas reached out a hand. From the battlefield far below, the corpse of an Alpha-level Gnasher beast flew into his grasp. A flicker of bone-white fire engulfed it, and in seconds, the beast was incinerated into nothing.

Well, not quite nothing. In Arthas's palm lay a single grain of black gold, smaller than a sesame seed.

"If we render down every last member of the Gnasher Race," Arthas stated calmly, "it should be just about enough."

Orion fell silent, looking down at the Gnasher beasts still fighting desperately in the valley below. He offered them a silent, grim eulogy.

"I told you," Arthas continued. "Once we took the Godforsaken Land, the black gold would be mine, but the territory would be yours. Have you decided what to do with it?"

This time, it was Orion's turn to be silent. The Godforsaken Land was vast and produced a priceless resource. If he were to occupy and manage it properly, his own power would grow immensely.

"The undead armies can't stay here," Arthas said, pre-empting his thoughts. "Some have to be sent back to guard the Emerald Dream Realm, and the rest need to return to reinforce my other fronts."

"Besides," Arthas added, glancing at Orion with a knowing look, "once you've extracted all the black gold, this land will be completely barren. The world itself will begin to collapse."

Arthas saw right through Orion's little scheme. He knew Orion wasn't just thinking of mining the gold, but of using a Source Siphon Array afterward to extract the world's core, trying to have his cake and eat it too.

"If you want this territory, you'll have to occupy it and defend it with overwhelming force," Arthas laid out the options. "Do so, and you'll not only gain a rare resource, but you'll likely advance to arch lord-peak within two or three years. However, it will be extremely dangerous. We conquered this world; its coordinates are now exposed. The defeated demigod will likely regroup and launch a counter-invasion."

He was giving Orion the unvarnished truth. It was both advice and a warning.

“So, my recommendation is this: once I’ve rendered the black gold, we use the Source Siphon Array to destroy this place outright. At the very least, you’ll get a sizable World Fragment out of it.”

The moment Arthas said “World Fragment,” the decision was made.

“We’ll go with your plan, bro,” Orion said firmly. “Destroy the Godforsaken Land.”

Arthas nodded, giving him a long, silent look. He knew exactly what Orion wanted the World Fragment for: to save a single woman. And in truth, if Orion had insisted on keeping the territory, Arthas would have done everything in his power to help him hold it, at least until he reached arch lord-peak. That had been his intention all along.

Was it a decision based on sentiment? Perhaps. If Orion hadn’t yet reached the rank of arch lord, Arthas would have thought so. But Orion was a powerful arch lord now. The fact that he could still hold true to his heart, choosing the World Fragment over the immense temptation of power and resources, earned him Arthas’s quiet respect.

Arthas’s philosophy was simple. Before a Survivor was truly powerful, they had to shed all attachments and focus solely on their own growth. But once they had grown strong, they had to reclaim the things they’d cast aside, to find their true selves again and not lose their way.

“Alright,” Arthas said. “Once I’ve finished the rendering, I’ll help you extract the World Fragment.”

“Thanks, bro.”

Arthas said nothing more, turning and speeding toward the undead tower. Since Orion’s avatar was heading to the Silverwood Realm, the task of extracting the world’s core would fall to him.

To resurrect Violet, Orion needed three things: the Spring of Life, a World Fragment, and an Abyssal Springhead. He had the Spring of Life, and the World Fragment was now within reach.

As for the final piece, the Abyssal Springhead, he already had a plan.

Once the Deathly Soul-Reaper helped his other avatar destroy the Black Tower and stabilize the situation in the Forest of Nature, he would dispatch it to the Abyss. Previously, he had intended to wait until he reached the demigod level himself before daring such a journey. But after fusing the two Silver-Eyed irises to his Deathly Soul-Reaper and seeing its performance in real combat, he felt he finally had the power to make the attempt.

As it was now, as long as he didn't run into a demigod's true body, his Deathly Soul-Reaper could escape from anything—even a demigod phantom.

Chapter 1044: Warden Dirtclaw

Haven of the Clans—it was the honorific given to Stoneheart by all the southern races. And the city lived up to it. The outer city was a vibrant tapestry of commerce, its streets teeming with the sounds of a thousand different voices, the air thick with the smell of exotic spices and smithy smoke. It was a bustling crossroads where the myriad clans were as common as cobblestones. The inner city was a testament to power and prosperity, its architecture a magnificent and orderly blend of styles, where the elite of all races had gathered to make their homes.

Tonight, even the King of the Giants himself, Orion, had emerged from his castle.

In the brightly lit plaza, a grand bonfire roared, casting a warm glow on the faces of those who had returned from the Dragon Crucible in the Emerald Dream Realm. At the center of it all was Lilith, hosting the celebration in honor of a momentous occasion.

The theme of the night: to celebrate her ascension to the Legendary level. It was a milestone for the stoneheart horde, and a joyous event for all.

“Bright eyes, strong limbs... not bad. A couple of pups with good potential.”

At a large round table, Orion held Anubis and Wepwawet aloft, one in each hand, dangling by the scruff of their necks. The two little ones trembled but made no sound, their sharp eyes darting cautiously around the table, sizing up the formidable Clan Elders seated there. They were Dirtclaw's sons, and in the entire horde, only Orion would dare handle them so casually. Their father, now a Lord and a Warden of the realm, had been dispatched on a mission. So, upon their return from the Dragon Crucible, Anubis and Wepwawet had been placed in Lilith's care, alongside Pallas and Elara.

“Look at those shifty eyes,” Rendall chuckled from his seat beside Orion. “Just like Dirtclaw. No doubt they’re his pups.” He took a long drink of ale, his gaze approving. He had no objection to them becoming protectors for Pallas and Elara. He respected Dirtclaw, and he respected the sons he had personally trained.

“From now on, we’ll have to call him Warden Dirtclaw,” Onyx added with a grin from the other side. Only the old guard who’d mentored him had the right to give Dirtclaw such a hard time.

“Daddy, Anubis is scared!”

At some point, Elara had snuck up behind Orion, her small hands tugging on the hem of his tunic as she tried to peer around him, gesturing for him to put down her little protectors.

“Daddy, Wepwawet is scared too!” Pallas, ever her sister’s shadow, popped out from Orion’s other side, echoing Elara’s plea.

“Mr. Rendall, Mr. Onyx, you just keep drinking! I’ll go get you some of Daddy’s special reserve wine in a little bit!” Elara’s big eyes twinkled. The clever little imp knew exactly how to get what she wanted.

Hahaha! “Such a good girl, Elara!”

“That’s our clever Elara!”

Rendall reached out and gently patted Elara’s head.

“Alright, alright. Go on and play,” Orion said, a rare, warm smile spreading across his face as he set Anubis and Wepwawet down. He had only been testing them, checking to see how their talents had developed. They were to be lifelong companions to his daughters, and he would accept nothing but the best.

Hee hee, “Thank you, Daddy!” Elara giggled. She shot Anubis a playful wink, then turned and scampered off toward a corner of the plaza where a gaggle of other younglings were playing. It was clear she and Pallas had come to show off their first official protectors.

Pallas ran a short distance, then doubled back. “Thank you, Daddy! Thank you, Mr. Onyx! Thank you, Mr. Onyx!”

After receiving nods from the three elders, she took Wepwawet’s paw and trotted off to catch up with her brother.

“The future is bright... yes, the future is bright,” Rendall mused, watching them go.

Orion smiled and raised his goblet, his gaze sweeping over the others gathered at the table—Onyx, Ursa, Thundar, Fergus, Earthshaker, Rockwell, and the other elders.

“My friends! To the horde, and to the bright future ahead of us! Let us drain our goblets!”

“To the horde! To the future!”

“To the horde! To the future!”

A chorus of voices rose as one. They raised their cups, cheered, and drank deep.

“The Dragon Crucible may have closed,” Orion announced after the toast, “but our own Heroic Altar has yet to open. For those who did not achieve their goals this time, there is still much to look forward to!”

The altar was ready, and the slots had already been assigned. The elders who heard this beamed with delight, for they too were about to receive a powerful inheritance. Earthshaker, Onyx, Rendall, and Delilah were living proof of its power—all four were now at the Alpha peak, with the potential to ascend to the rank of Lord. The other elders had long coveted a chance to enter.

Laughter and cheer filled the air as they feasted and drank deep, their spirits high.

After three rounds of drinks, Rendall's expression grew more serious. "Lord, how fares the War of North and South?" he asked. He had been sequestered in the Emerald Dream Realm, tending to the giant tribe's population growth, and was out of touch with the recent conflicts in the Titanion Realm.

"Under the leadership of Lorelia, Aldous, and Xalathar, we achieved a great victory and secured a vast swathe of new territory," Orion reported, his tone calm and measured as he shared the results of the recent summit in the human kingdom's Soaring Bird City. "Our borders to both the north and south have expanded."

He continued, "The blood elf race ceded a portion of their southern territory to us. In exchange, we granted the ogres a corridor of our land, allowing them to connect their holdings with their new northern conquests. The land east of the ogre territory, bordering the human kingdom—Prince Theodore's former domain—is also ours now. As for the half-dragons to the north, their territory is now ours as well; they have become our vassals."

In exchange for these gains, the stoneheart horde had relinquished its claims on the dwarven lands to the east and other tribal territories to the north. In the great carving up of the spoils of war, the biggest winners were the human kingdom and the dragons, whose lands bordered those of the dwarves. The humans had annexed eighty percent of the dwarven tribe's lands. The dragons, for their part, had claimed a number of islands and a stretch of coastline, establishing a new northern domain.

Without an arch lord to back their claim, the blood elf race had to settle for a smaller slice of the pie. They had acquired a respectable piece of land, but it was disconnected from their main territory. It took a great deal of diplomacy and negotiation with both the horde and the humans for them to finally secure a small corridor to link their domains.

Chapter 1045: The Witch Approaches

In effect, the blood elf race had now become a buffer state between the human kingdom and the stoneheart horde. Furthermore, the terms of the summit stipulated that the blood elves could not levy tariffs on any of the horde's official trade caravans passing through their new lands. It was one of many hard concessions; far away in Soaring Bird City, Sylvana was still fighting for better terms.

"Lord," Onyx said, his voice suddenly serious after Orion had finished his summary. "A few of us... we want to continue the fight. For you, and for the horde."

Orion paused, then slowly raised his eyes and scanned the faces of the elders at the table. Onyx, Ursa, Thundar, Fergus, Earthshaker, Rockwell... they were his old guard, his most decorated veterans.

Their eyes burned with a fierce, desperate hunger.

Orion realized that he didn't know when, exactly, these familiar faces had begun to quietly fade from his daily life. If not for the journey to the Dragon Crucible, he might not have seen these loyal companions for months. His only connection to them had become the cold, immutable orders sent down from the castle. Since Lumi and Soraya had ascended to the Legendary level, these old warriors had drifted further into the background.

They had resigned themselves to their fate, believing their own talent and potential could no longer keep pace with his. But Dirtclaw's ascension to the rank of Lord had ignited a spark of hope in their hearts. If Dirtclaw could endure the trials necessary to break through, then so could they.

And so they now sat before him, desperate for a chance to return to the battlefield, to seek that razor-thin hope of advancement in the crucible of battle and the shadow of death. Even Rendall, who had once fallen into a deep despair, now had a fire in his eyes that Orion hadn't seen in years.

Is that so? Orion mused, draining his goblet in one long swallow. Perhaps... they don't need my protection after all.

The thought struck him with the force of a revelation. Ever since the formation of his sand scorpions, cave spiders, and undead armies, he had made a conscious effort to shield these old friends. In the most brutal, high-risk battles, he would instinctively hold them back, sending in the disposable armies to bear the brunt of the assault. He had kept them safe, but in doing so, he had likely severed their chances to grow in the flames of war.

Perhaps it's better to let fate run its course for each of them.

His decision was made. He raised his goblet to them all.

“My friends, I understand what you ask of me. After tonight, go home and get your affairs in order. I will have new assignments for all of you. The expansion of the stoneheart horde is not over, and I expect your journey is not over either. I expect you to be with me when I ascend to the very pinnacle of power.”

He raised his cup higher. “To victory!”

A roar of approval went up. They all leaped to their feet, raising their goblets, their faces alight with ecstatic, fanatical smiles. Orion chuckled. In their eyes, he saw the same fire he remembered from the very beginning.

Silverwood Realm, Forest of Nature.

Orion led the charge personally, with Tangere, Gustalon, and Clymene at his back. Hidden within the ranks of the undead army below, a Mist Wraith lord and a Cyclopes lord moved with them. It was a vast force with considerable power. Every demonic monster in their path became just another casualty in their path.

They marched from The Stillness, sweeping through the heartland of the former Wood Elf domain and beyond, cleansing the forest of the vast majority of the demonic infestation.

They soon reached a place of great significance: Taur’asimil, which in the old Elven tongue meant ‘Place of Origin.’

“Captain... we’re home.”

Angel stared at the familiar tree-dwellings of her former home. She felt a desperate urge to cry, but the tears wouldn’t come. Her grief was a silent, hot stream that ran down her cheeks. Since the day the forest had fallen, she had dreamed of this moment, of walking the paths of her home once more.

“Yes,” Xylia said softly. “We’re home.”

She gazed at the ruins. Under the demonic monsters' occupation, every single treehouse had been shattered and pulled down. A sickly green moss and twisted, magically corrupted plants now covered everything. But to see her home again, even in this broken state, brought her a strange sense of peace.

"Let's go," she said, turning away without a flicker of hesitation. "We will follow my lord, we will tear down the Black Tower that birthed these monsters, and then we will return to rebuild."

She knew with absolute certainty that until the monsters were gone for good, this ruin would remain a ruin. Only by driving them out could they ever truly have a home again.

"Right behind you, Captain," Angel said, wiping the tears from her eyes. She and the rest of the tear-streaked elven squad turned and marched back into the heart of the war.

At the edge of the Forest of Nature, the undead army was finally met with fierce resistance. The leadership of the Cult of Four, stationed in the Black Tower, had clearly reacted quickly. The demonic monsters that had been scattered across the landscape were now converging on the army, slowing their advance to a crawl.

"Any idea where my lord went?" Tangere asked, a note of concern in his voice. The moment the resistance had stiffened, Orion had flown off on his own.

"The wind tells me a terrifying presence is approaching from afar," Gustalon said, his form hovering in the air as he stared into the distance. "My lord has likely gone to face an enemy we cannot."

The distance was too great for Tangere or Clymene to sense it, but Gustalon was different. The very elements whispered to him, and they were screaming of danger ahead.

"An enemy we cannot face... an arch lord being?" Tangere mulled over Gustalon's words, the implication dawning on him.

"Our orders are to reach the Black Tower as quickly as possible," Clymene declared, her voice cutting through the tension. She steered her Blight Wyrms into a steep dive, slamming into the ground and, in a single coordinated strike, obliterating an Alpha-level demonic beast that was charging their lines.

“Let’s focus on the fight,” Gustalon said, glancing at Tangere. “A tower capable of producing this many monsters will not be a simple target.” He then dissolved into a gust of wind, rejoining the battle. With his deadly efficiency added to the fray, the army’s advance began to quicken once more.

“Right...” Tangere said, taking a deep breath. “A little unsettling, but I must admit, the plague in the air... it’s exhilarating.” For him, the foul energies radiating from the demonic monsters were pure nourishment.

Without Orion, he felt exposed, but there was no turning back now. All he could do was proceed with caution.

Far in the distance, sensing the approach of another arch lord, a recovering Yilaya the Witch emerged from the Black Tower and flew to meet her new foe.

Chapter 1046: Too Late

BOOM!

Yilaya was blasted backward, catching herself in the air. She hovered, her six arms held ready as she studied the cloaked, trident-wielding giant before her.

“My, my,” the Witch purred with a giggle. “We’re both children of the Abyss. Are all you handsome giants so rough?”

That single, probing strike had told her everything she needed to know: this one was trouble.

“And who are you supposed to be?” Orion demanded, leveling his trident at her.

It wasn’t that he didn’t want to go all-out for a one-hit kill. But first, he needed to know if this was her—the traitor to the Champions Alliance, the one they called the Witch. The fact that his opponent was female had raised his suspicions, and he was determined to fish for information.

“The name’s Yilaya,” she cooed, “of the Nali race.” The six-armed serpent-demons preferred to be called the Nali; their common name was an insult given to them by outsiders.

“Yilaya? Nali? Never heard of you,” Orion said, his tone turning dismissive. Good. As long as it’s not the Witch, this is simple. I just have to kill her. He was eager to face the clown and the Witch, but he was also wary. He had no doubt they were on the same level as Arthas and Leonidas—beating them would be no easy feat.

“This Forest of Nature is my territory,” Orion declared, his gaze sweeping over her with an air of absolute authority. His voice was cold steel. “Either get lost, or die.”

Hee hee hee, Yilaya giggled, swaying her hips in a sinuous, provocative dance. “So strong and commanding. You’re just my type, handsome giant. But you still haven’t told little Yilaya who you are, or which layer of the Abyss you call home.”

The twisting, arcane tattoos on her face writhed as she spoke. To Orion’s eyes, it looked less like an alluring mystery and more like some gauche, outdated tribal marking. It held zero appeal.

“I hail from the Third Layer,” Orion lied smoothly, “and this place is my territory now.”

Leonidas held territory on the Third Layer and had often shared tales of his domain. Orion knew enough to bluff his way through a conversation. It should be enough to fool her.

“The Third Layer? Oh, I know the Third Layer quite well. I have many, many friends there,” Yilaya purred. “Tell you what, handsome giant. Why don’t you join our Cult of Four? I’ll have one of the Pontiffs grant this entire realm to you as your personal territory. Don’t underestimate little Yilaya’s influence. I can make it happen.”

She shot him a suggestive wink.

“The Cult of Four,” Orion said, playing dumb. “Are you supposed to be strong?” As he spoke, he lunged, his trident a blur of motion as he executed a flawless Instant Impact.

Simultaneously, a shadowy fiend serpent erupted from the void where he had just been standing, its fangs snapping on empty air.

BAM!

Yilaya's form vanished in a flicker of movement. Orion's trident hit nothing.

Arch lord-peak, he concluded. And one of the trickier ones. After two exchanges, he had a clear measure of her strength.

Hee hee hee, her voice echoed from a new position. "There's no need for violence, handsome stranger. If you want territory, we can talk. We can go back to my Black Tower and discuss it over a glass of wine. With your power, you could have so much more. You could even have... me."

From her perspective, it was a simple calculation. He was a giant, an Abyssal creature. Offer him enough power, and he could surely be won over. Ideally, he would become her plaything, and a potent new weapon in her arsenal. She sent another sultry look his way.

It was met with a gaze of pure ice. Orion had tried to pry information about the Cult, the clown, and the Witch from her, but she was just as evasive, constantly probing him in return. Their little chat had yielded nothing of value.

The time for games was over. His mission was to topple the Black Tower. He didn't know if any other arch lords were hiding inside, but the correct move was to eliminate the enemy in front of him as quickly as possible.

Orion raised his trident. A host of spectral spider spears, each glowing with a holy light, materialized in the air around him, locking onto Yilaya. It was a combination of his Aegis of Light and Eightfold Spear Barrage, imbuing each spear with the power of light—anathema to Abyssal dark creatures like her.

"The Law of Light!" Yilaya gasped, her playful demeanor vanishing. "No, wait... the aura is off."

But before she could analyze it further, Orion attacked. The spears tore through the air with a series of sharp whistles, converging on her from all sides. They struck home, but there was no sound of tearing flesh.

“Let’s be allies, handsome giant,” her voice whispered, now directly behind him. Her tone was soft and pleading, her eyes wide with a look of desperate longing. “Join the Cult of Four, and I promise you, the Forest of Nature is yours.”

Her hand, however, told a different story. A vicious, slender sword was already plunging fast and true toward Orion’s heart.

His face remained a mask of cold fury. He didn’t turn, instead parrying with a backhanded thrust of his own trident, aiming to trade blows.

Yilaya saw the move but pressed her attack. Her target was his heart—a fatal blow. His counter-attack, she calculated, would strike a non-vital area. Trading a wound for a kill—it was a bargain she’d take any day. She did not retreat.

SHLICK! SHLICK!

The sounds of a sword and a trident sinking into flesh rang out at the same time. Orion stumbled forward; Yilaya was thrown backward.

Hee hee, she giggled, clutching her abdomen where a searing light was corroding her flesh. The pain was excruciating, but her voice was triumphant. “I’m stronger than you, handsome giant. I win.”

“Are you stronger?” Orion’s voice rumbled as he steadied himself and turned to face her. “Are you really the one who won?”

Her laughter died in her throat. The wound she had inflicted—a clean puncture through his heart, laced with her deadliest serpent venom—was already gone. A faint, shallow scar was all that remained.

It was his Siren's Regeneration. As long as his head and heart were not completely destroyed, any wound would heal in moments.

Seeing the impossible, feeling the holy fire burning in her gut, Yilaya didn't hesitate. She turned and fled toward the Black Tower.

"Too late," Orion said, raising his trident. A single drop of her blood dripped from its tip.

"Dragon-ghost, slumbering in the endless dark," he began the ancient incantation, his eyes fixed on her retreating form. "Hear my call. With this blood as the medium, I offer you a tribute you so desire..."

Chapter 1047: Passing the Buck

"What is this thing?"

A Ghost Dragon phantom materialized directly in Yilaya's path, its spectral form freezing her in mid-air. The only thing she could still move was her mind. A suffocating wave of despair washed over her. This is it. This serpent-demon avatar is a lost cause.

A crackle of lightning echoed from behind her. An instant later, a bolt of incandescent fire and lightning tore through her, incinerating her body from the inside out. Death had come so suddenly, she never had a chance to prepare.

Orion collected the Survivor's loot box that dropped from Yilaya's vaporized form. A clean, efficient kill. It was a good start. After a quick scan of the area revealed no other surprises, he resumed his inexorable advance on the Black Tower.

The Black Tower, Fifth Floor.

Within the grand palace that belonged to Yilaya, the oppressive darkness receded, revealing a hall that was equal parts opulent, sinister, and profane. On the high walls all around, countless figures were hung upside down. They were Yilaya's trophies, all long dead, their bodies drained of every fluid until they resembled desiccated husks.

CRACK!

Suddenly, the throne at the center of the hall exploded, as if destroyed by a force from within. The violent spray of debris only added to the chamber's grotesque atmosphere. From a hidden compartment beneath the shattered throne, a single, enormous serpent egg was revealed.

The egg shuddered, and cracks began to form, spreading outward from the inside.

CRUNCH!

A slender, pale hand punched through the shell. Two hands tore the opening wider, and Yilaya, covered in a foul-smelling, viscous fluid, stepped out of the egg, completely unharmed.

"Ssstupid... giant!" she hissed, her voice slowly transitioning from a sibilant snarl to articulate speech. "An entire arch lord avatar, destroyed just like that. Damn you! Just wait until I get my hands on you. I'll drain every last drop of your essence."

Yilaya shook her body, flinging the viscous fluid away. A dense layer of scales erupted across her skin, then hardened and sharpened, forming a suit of interlocking scale mail that encased her body. She cracked her neck and strode toward a side chamber.

This room was bare, containing only a single altar and a mysterious, serpent-like statue. Yilaya approached the altar and poured fresh, unknown blood into its central vessel, then began to chant a prayer.

Less than three minutes later, the blood in the vessel had evaporated. The statue before the altar stirred as if coming to life.

"What is it?" a voice rumbled from the stone, and a mighty aura washed over the room, filling Yilaya with an overwhelming urge to prostrate herself.

“Lord Pontiff,” she said, her head bowed low. “There is a situation in the Forest of Nature. A vast army of the undead has descended upon the realm. Their leader is an Abyssal giant of incredible power. My primary avatar engaged him and was easily destroyed.”

Lying to a demigod-level Pontiff was a death sentence. The unvarnished truth was the only form of respect such a being would accept. The Witch was confident she wasn’t much weaker than a demigod, but her true body wasn’t here. Adopting a deferential posture was her best play.

“Based on my probing, he is likely an Over-tier existence,” she continued. “His attitude is arrogant and dismissive; he holds no respect for the Cult of Four. They are advancing on the Black Tower now, intending to overthrow our rule and seize this fertile land from our holy order.”

While she couldn’t lie, a little embellishment was necessary to ensure the Pontiff took the threat seriously.

“I suspect a mighty power is backing him from the shadows. I beseech you, Lord Pontiff, to send down your will and expel these invaders.”

Passing the buck, diverting the threat—it had always been the Witch’s preferred style. Leveraging the power of others was just another tool for destroying her enemies.

“What does this enemy want?” the statue asked, not immediately agreeing to her request. As a Pontiff of the Cult, he was well aware of the true capabilities of his High Priestesses.

“Lord Pontiff, I attempted to recruit the giant arch lord, but I failed,” the Witch sidestepped the question. “He is brutish and unreasonable, demanding the Forest of Nature for himself and showing nothing but contempt for our holy order.”

She waved a hand, and a large mirror flew from the side of the hall, positioning itself beside the statue.

“Lord Pontiff, the enemy is approaching the Black Tower’s core territory as we speak.”

She tapped the magic mirror. Its surface rippled like water, then cleared. It showed Orion, trident in hand, wreathed in lightning, speeding toward them. In the mirror, however, Orion suddenly looked up. A flash of lightning erupted from his body, and the image in the mirror dissolved into static. He had detected their scrying and destroyed the link. The Pontiff saw it all.

Undeterred, the Witch tapped the mirror again. This time, it showed the front lines of the undead army's advance. Blight Wyrms circled in the sky while a knight in bone armor raised his sword, causing more skeletons to claw their way out of the heaps of fresh corpses. Amidst the chaos, the Witch and the Pontiff could even see two of their own demonic monster lords, now twisted and reanimated to fight for the other side.

"Lord Pontiff, I have no confidence I can defeat this foe," the Witch said, her voice grave. "The situation is critical."

Presenting hard evidence was her most persuasive argument. She knew this greedy Pontiff would be unwilling to abandon a territory as rich as the Forest of Nature. Furthermore, they had both invested heavily in the construction of the Black Tower.

"A powerful Abyssal giant, you say?" the statue mused. "Strange. Why would a giant be leading an army of the undead?"

The demigod was no fool; he sensed that something wasn't quite right. But there was no time to ponder the mystery. Orion and his army were, undeniably, advancing on their position.

"Prepare for battle," the statue commanded. "I will undo the seals on the Black Tower's guardians and place them under your temporary command. I will then make my way there and descend my will into the tower as soon as I am able."

As he finished speaking, the statue began to glow. The divine power stored within it flowed out, seeping into the very foundations of the Black Tower itself. The statue then returned to its normal, inert state.

A faint, cruel smile touched the Witch's lips. She had gotten everything she wanted.

She vanished, reappearing in the lowest level of the Black Tower. In the center of the vast summoning and conversion formation, the floor had opened up into a massive birthing pit. The walls of the pit were lined with countless, pulsating gestation pods.

As the seals were undone, one by one, they began to stir.

Chapter 1048: Never Underestimate Them

Creatures with powerful limbs and leathery wings, their skin the color of polished jet, began to drop from the gestation pods. They looked like nothing less than true demons, and as they landed, their consciousness slowly returned.

This was the true power of the Black Tower. Every such fortress built by the Cult of Four held a sealed legion of these guardians. They were immensely powerful, nurtured by the tower's own energy in times of peace.

When the tower was threatened, the Pontiff would awaken them to serve as its ultimate defense.

Most importantly, the guardians had no fear of death, for they could be reborn within the Black Tower itself. Their minds and combat experience would remain intact. The only cost was a vast amount of resources and a three-day gestation period.

"By the law of the Four Gods, the guardians will now obey your command," the Witch intoned, making a prayer-like gesture. The demigod had granted her the authority; she was now their commander.

Batch after batch, the Black Tower guardians awoke. They were the tower's elite, each one possessing power at the hero level or beyond. They were also a source of faith for the Cult. Slaves brought to the tower with sufficient talent were converted into guardians; the weak were simply turned into demonic monsters.

Titanion Realm, Stoneheart.

Orion sat upon his throne, focused his mind, and logged into the Survivor's Platform to contact Alexander.

"Bro, you're awake from your slumber?" Orion sent, then immediately realized it was a stupid question. Alexander wouldn't be contacting him otherwise.

"Mostly recovered," came the reply. "I got Arthas's message and decided I'm coming out of my recuperation early. I hear you've run into the Cult of Four."

The name alone was enough to get Alexander's attention, precisely because of its connection to the clown and the Witch. He knew far more about the organization than Orion did.

"That's right," Orion confirmed. "My forces in the Silverwood Realm have identified the enemy as the Cult of Four. There's a Black Tower just outside the territory I've secured. I'm leading an army to tear it down now and remove the root of this infestation."

He held nothing back. Since this involved the traitors of the Champions Alliance, he knew his brothers would inevitably be drawn in.

"Walk me through the entire sequence of events," Alexander requested.

And so, Orion began his tale, starting with his first encounter with Aerin. He was meticulous, leaving out no detail. For the next half hour, Orion spoke while Alexander listened, interjecting with questions. Between the two of them, they picked apart the entire situation in the Silverwood Realm.

After a long pause, Alexander sent a new message. "If I'm not mistaken, the person you fought was the Witch."

The Witch? Orion's mind reeled. No way. That arch lord serpent-demon? Did I really kill the Witch that easily?

Alexander's assertion felt impossible. Orion held the two traitors in the highest regard, viewing them as equals to Arthas and Leonidas. For the Witch to have fallen to him so easily... it didn't seem right.

“Bro, are you kidding me?” Orion typed back, still in disbelief. “I killed the Witch?”

“What makes you think you killed her true body?” Alexander retorted. “She can’t use an avatar? Besides, knowing the Witch, with a Black Tower to fall back on, even her avatar might not be truly dead.”

Before Orion could respond, Alexander continued, laying out the reasoning behind his theory.

“When you’re dealing with the Witch and the clown, never underestimate them. The clown is easy to identify. If you encounter Cult forces using puppets, cursed dolls, or marionettes, he’s pulling the strings. He doesn’t trust anyone but his own creations.”

Orion had to agree. Intelligence from the recent War of North and South had mentioned strange puppet armies appearing on the front lines, armies that would have inflicted massive casualties on the allied forces if not for the intervention of a human Saint.

“The Witch’s signature,” Alexander continued, “is plague. But it’s not a normal plague spread by pathogens. Her plague is born from emotion. Wherever there is jealousy, her plague can take root. Without a specific counter-artifact or spell, demonic monsters infected by it are incredibly difficult to deal with.”

The pieces clicked into place. Orion finally understood Alexander’s certainty.

“Bro, if you’re right, then I really did kill the Witch’s avatar?”

“Not necessarily.”

“What do you mean?”

“We’ve been through this before. When we were hunting them, there were times we destroyed their avatars, only for them to reappear later.”

Can an avatar be resurrected? The thought crossed Orion's mind, but he dismissed it. Even powerful beings like himself and Leonidas couldn't recover a fallen avatar.

"Based on our intel and past experience, we believe it's connected to the Black Towers," Alexander explained. "They are special structures of the Cult, imbued with a divine quality. It would be a waste to destroy it. Capturing the Black Tower is the best option."

He had just given Orion critical intelligence.

"Teleport this to the Silverwood Realm," Alexander said, trading him a mysterious token. "I'm coming myself."

With the token, Alexander and his elite Blade Hall could begin their own incursion into the realm.

"The Black Towers have teleportation capabilities. Just in case, you should move fast. If you're quick enough, I might just make it in time to say hello to that traitor myself."

Orion accepted the token, sensing the cold killing intent behind Alexander's words. He ended the conversation and logged off the Survivor's Platform.

He sat in silence, replaying the fight with the Witch's avatar in his mind, moment by moment. The initial clash, her attempt at recruitment, his surprise killing blow...

If that really was her avatar, he thought, then its combat strength could only be described as adequate. It wasn't weak, but it wasn't as overwhelmingly powerful as he would have expected.

Or perhaps my final attack was just too sudden, and she didn't have time to react?

He analyzed the battle again and again but came up with little. The Witch had died too quickly for him to gather any meaningful intelligence.

As he was lost in thought, a familiar aura suddenly appeared far to the north of his territory in Stoneheart.

Chapter 1049: I Am Your Home

“What is that?”

Orion shot to his feet, vanishing in the next instant. He reappeared at the Stoneheart military base’s teleportation circle, then immediately transferred to the one in the horde’s main subterranean plaza. From there, he moved with the utmost speed, crossing the continent to the city of Lysinthia, built upon the shores of the Mist Bay.

Since the dragon-purchased Sea-Devouring Warship and its Ocean Hunter escorts had been stationed there, a deep quiet had fallen over the Mist Bay. The neighboring Sea Race clans no longer dared to raid its shores.

At the end of the main harbor pier, a lone, beautiful figure stood against the horizon. A sea-blue gown trailed on the weathered wood, its silken fabric dancing in the wind in perfect sync with her long, flowing hair. Marina stood motionless, her expression serene, as if she were feeling a final farewell from the ocean itself.

The waves crashed against the rocks below. Seabirds cried as they wheeled through the sky. The cloudless heavens were a deep azure, a perfect mirror of the sea, and Marina seemed to have merged with the painting, becoming one with the seascape.

A large hand reached out, wrapping around her waist and pulling her back from the edge, back from the dreamlike vista.

“I thought I’d never see you again.”

Orion pulled her into his embrace. This beautiful woman, so familiar and yet so changed, was someone he had long believed to be dead. Even with Lady Seraphina’s assurances, he had always suspected it was just an excuse. As time passed and Marina never appeared, he had come to accept the demigod’s words as a beautiful, kind lie.

"I knew you'd come for me," she whispered, her cheeks flushing as he lowered his head and claimed her lips in a deep kiss.

Tilting her head back, she gazed up at the face she had longed to see. The Marina of today was no longer timid or shy. She met his gaze without hesitation, boldly studying the man she loved.

"You've changed," he said, his voice thick with a complex storm of emotions. To lose her and find her again—it was overwhelming.

"I've been through a few things, Orion," she replied, her voice calm and strong. "I've grown stronger. Do you still like me like this?"

Gentle, poised, and confident. This was the new Marina, a side of her that had been hidden away, now finally set free.

"You are my Marina," he said, his voice raw. "No matter how you change, I will always love you. You are mine."

He swept her up into his arms, spinning her around twice on the pier out of pure, unadulterated joy. At that exact moment, a large wave crashed against the pier, sending a spray of white foam into the air, creating a perfect backdrop for their reunion.

The next morning, at the same pier.

After a night of passion, the deep longing they held for each other had finally found some release. The sun pierced through a thin layer of clouds, its light scattering across the surface of the sea in a million glittering diamonds.

Marina, now dressed in a simple white gauze gown, sat on the edge of the pier, dangling her pale feet in the water, letting the gentle waves lap at them.

“Aren’t you afraid?” she asked, tilting her head and looking with curious eyes at Orion, who was lying beside her, hands clasped behind his head.

“Why would I be afraid?” he asked, opening his eyes to meet her gaze, his expression full of tenderness.

“You didn’t just defeat Lady Seraphina’s avatar,” she teased. “You... well, you know. She’s a demigod.”

During their reunion, Marina had told him everything—her true identity and all that had happened after she returned to the mermaid race.

“Demigod is not so far out of my reach,” Orion said, sitting up and pulling her into his arms. “Besides, she’s sleeping now, isn’t she? By the time she wakes up, I might be a demigod myself. And when that day comes, I’ll make her mine as well.”

He spoke with such bravado that Marina couldn’t help but giggle.

“Orion,” she said, her tone softening as she shifted, straddling his lap and looking down at him. “I have no home anymore. I can’t go back to the mermaid race. You won’t abandon me, will you?”

“I am your home,” he said, his voice firm and absolute. “The stoneheart horde is your home.”

It was a strange worry, born of insecurity, the kind that drives a woman to constantly seek reassurance from the man she loves, as if only in his sweet words can she find a true sense of safety. Even the new, independent Marina was no exception.

“I have a city for you,” he said, standing up and lifting her with him, turning to face the sea as the wind whipped around them. “In the south. It’s called the City of the Guardian, at the Ironveil Escarpment. It is the central hub connecting the stoneheart horde to the mainland and the Sea Race.”

He held her tighter. “And if you don’t like that, I have a massive island, ceded to me by the Sea-Drake race. With you there, I believe we could finally make it prosper.”

The wind grew stronger, the clouds overhead began to race, and the waves crashed with a growing intensity. In the rising crescendo of the elements, Orion held Marina close and shouted over the wind.

“And if you still don’t like it, I can find you an ocean of your very own in another world! As long as it’s the sea, I know you’ll love it!”

Marina said nothing. She simply smiled, basking in the moment. His words are so beautiful. I wish he would say more. She wanted to stay in this perfect, fleeting moment of happiness forever.

But two weeks later, their time was up. Orion took Marina from Lysinthia, and after a brief stop in Blackstone City, they returned to Stoneheart.

Silverwood Realm, near the Black Tower.

Orion’s avatar hovered in mid-air, a deep frown on his face as he surveyed his surroundings. Not long ago, he had sensed he was being watched, but he couldn’t locate the source. He had used his transcendent power to collapse the space around him, severing the connection. But now, as he drew closer to the Black Tower, the feeling of being spied upon had returned, stronger than before.

BOOM!

A low rumble of thunder echoed, and the feeling vanished again. Orion halted his advance. The closer he got, the more intense the sense of unease became. It was time to bring in reinforcements. The Deathly Soul-Reaper, carrying a will projection from Arthas, should be able to block the enemy’s scrying. It was the safer play.

He took out an Arcane Astrolabe and began to pinpoint the Deathly Soul-Reaper’s location.

Godforsaken Land.

Receiving the coordinates from Orion, the Deathly Soul-Reaper tore open a teleportation scroll, simultaneously sending a message to Arthas, who was deep within the undead tower.

A brilliant flash of light enveloped the avatar, and in the next instant, the Deathly Soul-Reaper vanished from the Godforsaken Land.

Chapter 1050: Is this the omen of a coming battle?

A suffocating blanket of black clouds pressed down on the city, streaked with a dense web of lightning that flickered without pause. The ceaseless, rolling thunder and the violent cracks of lightning filled the demonic monsters emerging from the Black Tower with a primal fear. Lightning was the natural enemy of all dark things.

From her palace chamber, the Witch watched the storm rage outside her window. A tangled knot of oppression, anxiety, and unease tightened in her chest, a disquiet that made the very shadows in the tower seem to writhe and hiss.

“Is this the omen of a coming battle?” she whispered to herself. She was sensitive to such things, and she felt a deep sense of dread. This sixth sense had saved her life countless times before.

It’s been a long time since I’ve felt this way, she mused. The last time... I think it was when the commander and the Deputy Commander were hunting me.

She couldn’t understand it. The enemy was just a single arch lord. A demigod-level Pontiff would be descending soon. What could possibly be the source of this profound unease? With the Black Tower and a demigod at her back, the giant lord leading the attack should be no threat at all. It was a vexing mystery.

High above, the Deathly Soul-Reaper and Orion’s avatar stood side-by-side in the eye of the storm. Small arcs of electricity danced across Orion’s body, feeding into the roiling clouds above. The apocalyptic weather was his creation.

The Black Tower was already shrouded in a natural gloom; Orion had simply used his power to seize control of the weather, accelerating the process and shaping it to his will. In a thunderstorm like this, his own combat power was amplified.

“It is time,” Orion said, raising his trident.

He summoned his Eightfold Spear Barrage. Countless spectral spider spears flickered into existence for a bare instant before vanishing, their collective energy coalescing at the highest point in the sky. There, they formed a single, colossal trident of crimson energy, crackling with raw electricity.

The crimson trident took shape, then plunged downward. As it entered the storm clouds, they dissolved into nothing, every last bolt of lightning sucked into the descending weapon. The sky above the Black Tower was suddenly, unnaturally bright, and the torrential rain stopped in an instant.

From her window, the Witch saw the abrupt change. She looked up and saw a sun. A sun of blinding red light and raw lightning, so bright it hurt to look at.

Her eyes widened in horror. “Shields!”

With a mere thought, the Black Tower’s defensive protocols activated. A shimmering black dome of energy snapped into place, enveloping the tower and sealing it off from the demonic monsters still swarming outside.

But it was too late. The moment she saw the falling sun, Orion’s fully charged attack had already arrived.

There was no explosion. No roar. When the descending sun met the Black Tower’s shield, there was only a silent, all-consuming flash of brilliant white light.

For three miles in every direction, every demonic monster caught outside the shield—from Alpha-level grunts to Legendary-level champions—was instantly vaporized into fine grey ash. Even the Witch, deep within the tower, was caught in the blast. The light seared her flesh. There could be only one explanation: the shield had been shattered. The tower itself had been pierced. The new suit of black scale mail she had just grown was flayed from her body, disintegrating into dust.

It was the single most powerful blow Orion had ever struck since his ascension to arch lord. It was a fusion of his blood-based transcendent power, the raw power of the storm itself, and even a sliver of the holy aura from his Aegis of Light—the very thing that had made the attack appear as a brilliant, cleansing sun.

“Damn it! How can he be this strong?!” the Witch shrieked. “No arch lord should be able to unleash this kind of power!”

A shroud of Abyssal energy enveloped her. Her armor gone, she instantly transformed into her six-armed serpent-demon beast form for greater defense. But at that exact moment, a phantom scythe materialized in the space behind her.

SHLICK!

Her serpent-demon form was cleaved in two. Her massive tail flew into the air, writhing in agony. She whipped her head around, her eyes wide with utter disbelief.

“A... Death-Soul...” she stammered.

ARGH!

Being bisected was not a fatal wound for her. But as she roared in fury, the severed lower half of her body suddenly exploded into nothingness. In its place, a crimson, cubic ward snapped into existence, sealing the Deathly Soul-Reaper within it. At each of the cube’s eight corners, a small, blood-red serpent appeared, pumping supernatural power into the Sealing Ward.

Just as the Witch was about to breathe a sigh of relief, the sound of tearing void echoed behind her. Orion, trident in hand, was already upon her, executing a perfect Instant Impact, the tip of his weapon aimed directly at her head.

Impossible... Is this avatar going to die... this quickly?

But just then, a soft pop emanated from the side chamber of her palace. A mighty force, the power of a demigod, descended. An overwhelming pressure of pure law washed over the chamber, freezing Orion in place. The walls of the side chamber melted away, and a shimmering, indistinct demigod phantom strode out, its form both beautiful and terrible.

With every step the phantom took, the pressure on Orion intensified.

WAAAGH

The supernatural power within Orion raged, his will roaring in defiance. He fought against the demigod's crushing aura, trying to break free through sheer force of will. Break free, and seize victory. But could a middle arch lord truly overcome the divine power of a demigod with willpower alone? It was impossible. He remained frozen, his every muscle straining against the invisible bonds.

"Abyssal giant... and I can even sense the aura of a Titan..." the demigod's voice echoed, fragmented and slow at first, then coalescing into a smooth, cold judgment. "...Unprovoked attack on... a Black Tower... You will be slain. Seizing the territory... of our Cult of Four... You will be slain. Attempting to assassinate... my High Priestess... You will be slain."

The phantom's aura grew more terrifying as it drew closer. It raised a hand, which morphed into a dragon's claw, and lunged, intending to crush Orion into pulp.

Suddenly, from deep within Orion's body, came the roar of a sword.

"Die."

The phantom of a skeletal king, wreathed in an aura of absolute death, erupted from Orion's form, its blade lashing out in a single, perfect strike.

The ambushed demigod had not yet reacted, but the Witch let out a piercing scream.

"Arthas!" she cried, recognizing the mighty skeletal apparition. "A demigod!"

The moment Arthas struck, the Black Tower demigod's binding shattered.