

## **Titan King 1051**

### Chapter 1051: House Call

Freed from his bonds, Orion lunged forward with murderous intent and without a shred of hesitation.

CRACK!

The Witch's head exploded into a shower of gore.

The moment she died, the cubic ward imprisoning the Deathly Soul-Reaper shattered. The eight blood serpents at its corners popped like bubbles, their power source gone.

But the fight wasn't over.

From the lowest level of the Black Tower, four figures shot upward. They were the Gatewardens—winged guardians who were each arch lords in their own right, tasked with defending one of the tower's four cardinal directions. The battle had unfolded so quickly that their unsealing process had only just completed.

They didn't attack individually. Instead, they cast out their chains, weaving them together to form a spherical cage of energy, trapping both Orion and the Deathly Soul-Reaper inside.

Outside, the demigod from the Cult of Four was already on the defensive, having lost the initiative to Arthas's surprise attack. But he was still a demigod, and the two were locked in a battle of pure attrition.

Within the spherical prison, countless chains lashed out, whipping and coiling toward Orion and his counterpart. The Deathly Soul-Reaper swept its scythe in a wide arc, batting away the first wave. Its shadowy tendrils then writhed and expanded, forming a protective sphere around itself and Orion, deflecting the storm of chains. The tendrils continued to push outward, seeking the four anchor points of the prison. But the closer they got, the denser the attacks became, creating a tense stalemate.

Orion was not satisfied. He had come here for a blitz, to take the Black Tower in the shortest time possible. He couldn't afford a protracted battle, not when the tower had teleportation capabilities. He wouldn't risk himself or Arthas.

He pulled out the token Alexander had given him and crushed it in his fist.

In the next instant, Alexander's will projection appeared before him.

"What's the situation?"

"Bro, we're inside the Black Tower," Orion explained, his words a rapid-fire burst. "Arthas is holding off a demigod, and I'm trapped in this weird prison." He finished his report and stared at Alexander expectantly.

"I see," Alexander muttered to himself. His projection flickered once. "Alright, the ward is broken. Have the Deathly Soul-Reaper stand down."

Trusting him completely, Orion gave the command. As the protective sphere of tendrils receded, he saw the four Gatewardens, now frozen in place, each with an ethereal dagger protruding from their forehead. Orion was stunned. From his perspective, Alexander's projection had done nothing more than shimmer for a fraction of a second, and in that instant, the prison had dissolved and his enemies had been neutralized.

"They're not dead yet," Alexander's voice echoed. "You can have the cleanup. Consider it my fee for this house call."

With that, he transformed into a spectral dagger and shot upward, joining the fray between Arthas and the Cult of Four demigod.

Fifteen minutes later, the battle was over.

Titanion Realm, Stoneheart.

Everyone in the castle knew that a new master had taken up residence. Compared to the Marina they once knew, the new, Legendary-level Marina was indeed a different person. For Elara and Pallas, she was new as well.

"Auntie, I'm Elara!"

"Auntie, I'm Pallas!"

Led by Elara, the two children gave Marina a sweet, formal greeting.

Dressed in a flowing blue gown, Marina smiled and retrieved two unique shells from a seashell pouch she carried.

"These are Whispering Shells," she said, handing one to each child. "No matter where you are in the Titanion Realm, you can use them to speak to each other."

Her expression was full of genuine kindness for Orion's children.

"Really?" Pallas asked, her eyes wide with a mix of curiosity and doubt. She had never seen such a marvelous thing.

"Thank you, Auntie!" Elara said, giving Pallas a light tap on the head before accepting the gift with a sweet smile.

"Thank you, Auntie!" Pallas quickly corrected herself, following her sister's lead.

"Alright, go on and play," Orion said with a wave. The two children clutched their new treasures and scampered off deeper into the castle.

"That little girl is very interesting," Marina said, turning to Orion with a smile.

"That's Elara, my adopted daughter," Orion explained, without going into the details of her past. "She'll be your adopted daughter now, too."

"Really? I would be honored," Marina said. Though she was only a demigod's avatar, she could perceive things that even Lilith and Soraya could not.

Just then, Lilith, now a Lord in her own right, emerged from the castle's depths and waited for them at the end of the hall.

"Welcome home, little sister," Lilith said warmly.

"It's so good to see you again!" Marina ran forward and took Lilith's arm, the two of them the very picture of sisterly affection.

"You two catch up," Orion said. "I have some things to attend to." He turned and walked back toward the main palace at the front of the castle. The war in the Silverwood Realm was not yet over, and he needed to monitor the situation.

"Marina, I've had the maidservants prepare your rooms," Lilith said, ignoring Orion's departure. "This is your home now."

"Thank you."

"Don't be silly. Here in the stoneheart horde..."

The two women walked arm-in-arm, chatting and laughing as they disappeared into the castle's residential wing.

Silverwood Realm, Black Tower.

Orion's surprise attack had crippled the Black Tower, preventing it from sending any reinforcements to the front lines. Clymene, Gustalon, and Tangere had led the undead armies on a relentless march, cutting through the demonic monsters they encountered like a scythe through wheat. They had finally arrived at their objective, right on schedule.

But when they reached the Black Tower, braced for an epic battle, they were met with an unnerving, absolute silence.

"What's going on? Where's the enemy?" Tangere demanded.

"Where is my lord?" Clymene asked a half-second later.

Their different questions perfectly captured their different priorities. Both of them then turned to look at Gustalon. They had come to deeply respect the power and strange senses of the elemental lord.

"I don't know," Gustalon admitted. "There is a powerful field inside the tower that repels the wind. But," he added, his form rippling slightly, "the wind tells me there is no danger ahead."

#### Chapter 1052: Hitting the Jackpot

As Tangere, Clymene, and Gustalon stood there, deep in thought, Orion's voice echoed in their minds.

"The Black Tower is ours. Split your forces into four groups. Using the tower as your center point, cleanse this land of all remaining demonic monsters."

The three commanders were stunned for a moment, then they all acknowledged the command.

"As you command!"

"As you command!"

"As you command!"

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The Black Tower, Fifth Floor.

Orion and the Deathly Soul-Reaper stood amidst the wreckage. Nearby, the will projections of Arthas and Alexander surveyed the chamber. The demigod from the Cult of Four was gone, annihilated by their combined power.

"It's definitely a Cult of Four Black Tower," Alexander said, his eyes scanning the architecture with intense curiosity. "Hulk, you've really hit the jackpot this time."

"I damaged it pretty badly," Orion noted. "Can it be repaired?" Taking possession of a massive, unique structure like this was an opportunity he didn't want to waste.

"I've already erased the tower's primary teleportation runes," Arthas stated, ever the cautious strategist. "The Cult can no longer use this tower as a node to send reinforcements. And just in case they have a backup method, I've also placed a ward in the surrounding area to block all incoming teleportation."

Orion shot him a grateful look. He was thoroughly impressed by the capabilities of his two brothers.

"So," Alexander began, "no sign of the clown or the Witch, then?" He had arrived late, after Orion had already dealt with Yilaya's avatar.

"It was the Witch," Arthas corrected him. "Orion killed her avatar. She recognized me, which means Hulk's identity is blown as well." His tone was heavy. If not for the demigod's sudden arrival, he would have preferred to remain hidden. His appearance had inadvertently exposed Orion.

"Damn, you're something else," Alexander said, turning to Orion with a complex look in his eyes. "Killed the Witch twice in a row. You'd better watch your back from now on. She holds a grudge like no other. Pissing off a woman with that much jealousy is asking for trouble."

Alexander had entered the Champions Alliance in the same cohort as the Witch; he knew her better than most. He could only imagine her, hiding in some dark corner of the universe, shrieking in hysterical rage after losing two avatars to the same person.

"I've never been one to worry about future enemies," Orion said, his voice firm. "If the clown and the Witch come for me, I'll try to kill them. For your sakes alone, I will always stand against them."

Hearing this, Arthas and Alexander fell silent, each lost in their own thoughts.

After a long pause, Orion broke the silence, his eagerness showing. "So, my brothers... how do I go about repairing my new trophy?"

"For now, leave most of the internal runes and formations as they are," Arthas advised. "Wait until the Deputy Commander is out of his recuperation and have him take a look. You are not a demigod; many of these systems operate at their level of power. At the very least, you must purge everything that belongs to the Cult of Four. Otherwise, it will be extremely dangerous."

"And before you do anything else, start gathering materials," Alexander added. "You'll need a massive amount to reconstruct the tower's defensive shield and its teleportation array. Also, that demonic monster conversion formation at the base of the tower... if you don't want the Cult to use it against you someday, you'll need to modify it."

"I'd recommend converting it into a formation for creating Skeletal Knights," Arthas suggested. "With this tower, you won't need to go to the trouble of establishing graveyards in this realm. You can transform this place into something like my undead tower."

At this, Orion's eyes lit up. He had long been envious of Arthas's undead tower and Leonidas's Palace. The idea of having his own mobile fortress, a base of operations he could relocate at will, was a dream come true. If the conversion was successful, the stoneheart horde's offensive capabilities would jump two tiers overnight.

"Alright," Alexander said, walking to a shattered window and gazing south. "Since we've run into those bastards from the Cult of Four here in the Silverwood Realm, let's talk strategy." It was clear to him that the Cult wasn't just here for a small piece of territory; they were aiming to conquer the entire world. As their sworn enemies, the Champions Alliance had no choice but to intervene.

"For now, we consolidate our hold on the Forest of Nature," Arthas said cautiously. "As for our next move, we wait for the Deputy Commander and Leonidas to awaken. We'll see what they think. To

invade an entire world, the Cult will have committed several demigods. Just the two of us won't be enough."

"Fair enough," Alexander agreed. "I'll need to gather more intelligence on this world anyway. Hulk, don't forget to save a spot for my Blade Hall when you're setting up shop."

"I'm out," he declared. His will projection dissolved, shooting out of the Black Tower and vanishing into the distant sky.

"Once I'm done in the Godforsaken Land, I'll send more troops over," Arthas said. His phantom then dissipated, returning to the small skull Orion carried.

Orion looked down at the dormant demonic monsters and Black Tower guardians in the tower's lower levels, his gaze deep and calculating.

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Godforsaken Land, outside the sand scorpions' Nest.

The Hell-Drake Hound, Dirtclaw, lay sprawled on the ground, letting out an enormous, bored yawn.

"The battle's over, right? Why haven't we gone home yet?"

In truth, he probably knew the answer. But standing guard here was just so, so boring.

"The mighty one's rendering is not yet complete," Soraya's voice echoed from within the Nest. "Until they leave, we cannot. Besides, the demigod who escaped might return. We are auxiliaries to the undead armies; we can't just abandon them. Orion can leave. We cannot." She, at least, was content. Though her small scorpions had suffered heavy losses, she was happily incubating a new generation within the Nest.

"My lady," Dirtclaw called out without turning his head, his senses still sharp despite his endless yawning. "I was wondering... could I request some of your sand scorpions as companions for my sons?"

The best and most common mounts in the stoneheart horde were the cave spiders, the small scorpions, and the icefield snow wolves. They were numerous and easily replaced. Dirtclaw had already secured plenty of the other two for his pups. Now, he was hoping to give them another option.

#### Chapter 1053: The Morning Light is Upon Us

"When we return," Soraya's voice echoed from the Nest, "I will select a troop of my finest veterans from this war for you."

Heh heh, "Thank you, Lady Soraya!" Dirtclaw let out a happy yelp, his gratitude utterly sincere. Even as a Legendary-level Warden of the horde, he was always respectful to Orion's women. He got along with everyone in the high command; even the aloof Gustalon would receive small gifts from him from time to time.

"Prepare yourselves," Arthas's voice suddenly cut in, emanating from the distant undead tower. "The Source Siphon Array will be activated in two weeks. You will be teleported out beforehand."

"As you wish!"

"As you wish!"

Dirtclaw and Soraya immediately sent their acknowledgments and began preparing for their return.

Titanion Realm, Stoneheart.

Deep within the castle, in Marina's chambers.

She stood by the open window, the evening breeze toying with the strands of hair around her ears. She gazed out at the sea of lights that was Stoneheart, her beautiful eyes filled with a mixture of curiosity and longing.

"The cities on land are so different from the scenery of the sea," she mused aloud. "They have more of this... the warmth of civilization."

It was a different kind of prosperity. Stoneheart had less of the cold opulence of the deep sea courts, and more of an earnest, living energy that she found herself falling in love with.

"Do you like it?"

"I love it."

Orion appeared behind her, his hands sliding around her waist, pulling her gently against him. He inhaled the scent of the sea that lingered in her hair.

"I've already sent out the order," he murmured into her ear. "The City of the Guardian is to be renamed Marina. It is your fiefdom now. It has close ties to the Sea Race clans, and many of their people live there. I thought you would like it."

Marina nodded, graciously accepting the gift. In her few days here, she had learned that each of Orion's women presided over her own city. Now, she had one as well. It was a symbol of status, and even if she didn't care for such things, she knew she couldn't refuse it.

"But I'll be made a Warden of the horde the moment I arrive, with no merit to my name," she said, turning to meet his kiss. "I'm afraid that might cause some resentment."

"That large island you mentioned," she continued, her tone shifting, "I know the one. Give it to me. I am the right person to bring it under our control."

Orion pulled back slightly, studying her with curiosity. There was a deeper meaning to her words.

"It's a pirate haven in the Trident Sea," she explained. "A gathering place for criminals and exiles from all the great Sea Race clans. The Sea-Drake race didn't cede it to you out of the goodness of their hearts."

As a member of the Sea Race herself, she knew far more about their dirty politics than he did.

"If you were to conquer it by force, you would offend several of the major sea powers at once. Most of those criminals on the island still have connections to powerful families."

She reached up, her fingers gently tracing the side of his face. "If your people set foot on that island, conflict is inevitable. The result will be the stoneheart horde making enemies of all the major Sea Race clans. Even if they don't go to war with you, they will make life hell for any of your subjects who sail the seas. Any attempt you make to expand your influence on the water will be checked at every turn."

Her analysis aligned perfectly with Orion's own initial suspicions.

"Therefore," she concluded, "letting me, a Sea Race lord, handle the integration of Aenari Island is the best possible choice. Besides," she added, her eyes twinkling, "you're in need of new territory to expand your influence, are you not?"

He was still an arch lord. To reach for the power of a demigod, he would need vast territories and the faith of countless followers. Marina understood this better than anyone.

"We can put a pin in that for now," Orion said softly. "I'm still making preparations. But when I'm ready, you will have plenty to keep you busy." He knew what she was doing. She wanted to contribute, to earn her place and solidify her position in the horde through her own accomplishments.

"This is beautiful," she whispered, letting him kiss her again. She looked out at the moonlit city, at the distant, brightly lit plaza, and listened to the faint sounds of laughter and music drifting on the wind. The city was overflowing with life.

This is what she must have wanted to see, Marina thought, a fleeting image of her true body, Lady Seraphina, flashing through her mind. The life she was living now was likely the one the demigod had always dreamed of.

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Silverwood Realm, Black Tower region.

"Captain... am I dreaming?" Angel whispered, her head tilted back as she stared up at the Black Tower in the distance. At its highest point, a familiar silhouette stood against the sky.

It was the master of The Stillness, the my lord to whom they had pledged their loyalty. The great being who had promised them peace, security, and the chance to rebuild the Wood Elf race.

And now, he stood victorious atop the demonic Nest, having driven the enemy away.

"It's real, Angel," Xylia replied, her own gaze fixed on the tower. The surprise in her eyes was tempered by something deeper: reverence. "You're not dreaming."

This place had been a symbol of their deepest fears, a landmark the Wood Elves had spent years desperately avoiding. Now, the legendary Black Tower stood before them, its spire partially shattered. Their lord stood upon that broken pinnacle, looking down upon the subordinates who had rushed to join him.

Xylia couldn't imagine what kind of earth-shattering battle had taken place, but looking at the ruined tower and the scorched, barren earth surrounding it filled her with a profound sense of awe.

"Angel, perhaps we haven't found true peace just yet," she said, her voice thick with emotion. "We may have countless wars still ahead of us. But I think... I think our people finally have a safe place to live."

Tears welled in Xylia's eyes, but they were tears of hope, making her gaze exceptionally bright. "We Wood Elves can live and thrive freely in the Forest of Nature once more. Elder Aerin's choice was the right one. When I return, I will support her in re-establishing the Elder Council. The Wood Elves need her wisdom, and they need her friendship with my lord."

She turned to face the elven squad that had followed her.

"For now, our duty is to hunt down the remaining demonic monsters and search for our people still lost in the forest. The dawn has come, my friends. The morning light is upon us. Soon, the very air of the Forest of Nature will be clean again."

As Xylia poured her heart out, giving voice to the hope that had bloomed within her, Orion stood upon the tower, his mind already on the future. The conquest was over; now, the planning began.

He needed to build a new city, and it was clear to him that the strategic location of the Black Tower was a far better choice than The Stillness, deep within the forest.

#### Chapter 1054: Traitors

The ground here was level, the view stretching for miles in every direction. To the north lay the vast Forest of Nature. To the south, the Hydraea Plains of the moon giants. To the east, the territory of the Raging Fury gnoll tribe. And far to the west rose the Kiso Mountains, rumored to be the home of the shape-shifting, Roc-blooded race.

This was the basic geography of the region, as explained to him by Aerin and Xylia. Of course, whether any of these races still occupied their ancestral lands after the Cult of Four's demonic invasion remained to be seen.

Orion suspected the Roc-blooded of the Kiso Mountains were the most likely to have survived, free and un-enslaved. The reason was simple: they could fly. They commanded the skies. The Black Tower's ground-based hordes would have had a difficult time cornering a race that could retreat into the endless sky.

But city-planning was only one part of his considerations. His true enemy was the Cult of Four. That meant the forces of his brothers—the Deputy Commander, Arthas, Alexander, and Leonidas—would inevitably descend upon this world. They would come not only to hunt the traitors but also to claim territory.

The question was, would they consolidate their forces and strike as one, or would they fan out, each carving their own domain? The decision had yet to be made, but Orion had to plan for the long term. With the Black Tower now under his command, the surrounding region was already firmly within the stoneheart horde's grasp.

He gazed down from his perch, watching the undead armies cleansing the land of the last demonic monsters, his mind lost in deep, strategic thought.

The Abyss, an unknown region.

In one of the Witch's many lairs, the atmosphere was different. The host of male servants that usually attended her were gone. More accurately, they were dead—flayed by the Witch's own hand.

In the center of her grand hall hung a massive crystal chandelier. Its arms extended downward, ending not in lights, but in rows upon rows of sharp hooks. Her male servants now hung from those hooks.

The Witch held a small, razor-sharp knife, and with meticulous care, she was carving strips of flesh from the body of a fallen angel. Carving flesh from bone: it was a hobby of hers, and a ritual she used to calm her nerves whenever she felt the icy grip of fear.

"Arthas... has ascended... to demigod..."

With each slice of flesh she carved away, she would pop it into her mouth, chewing slowly as she muttered the fragmented words to herself.

"Has the commander... awakened...? Has the commander... ascended to godhood...?"

Her hand trembled. Every time she spoke the title 'commander,' her knife would freeze for a moment. She couldn't even bring herself to say his name.

What do I do...? Arthas must have recognized me. Will they... be able to track me... to here? No... no... that was just an avatar. They can't find me. Yes. They can't find me.

She continued to mutter, her voice a low, continuous drone. Only when the fallen angel hanging before her was nothing but a clean skeleton did the storm in her mind begin to subside.

“It seems that powerful giant must be a new member of the Champions Alliance,” she finally said, her voice clear and certain. A warrior with Orion’s strength had to be one of the Awakened—a Survivor. It was the only thing that made sense. And if he was a Survivor who could channel Arthas’s will projection, then his allegiance was clear.

“Damn it!” she hissed. “I knew it! To have my avatar killed in the very first exchange... it was never going to be that simple. So, the coordinates for the Silverwood Realm have been discovered by the Alliance. Was it a coincidence? Or... was the clown behind this, intentionally leaking my location?”

It wasn’t baseless paranoia. She had, after all, recently rejected an invitation from him. Given the clown’s ruthless nature, it wouldn’t surprise her in the least if he had arranged this as petty revenge. But she couldn’t be certain.

For the Witch, however, suspicion was more than enough to warrant a test.

Her eyes narrowed as she focused her mind and logged into the Survivor’s Platform. She found the clown in her contacts and sent a single, direct message.

“Arthas has ascended to demigod.”

It was critical intelligence concerning their old organization. She knew that if the clown saw it, he would respond immediately.

“You saw it yourself?” his reply came almost instantly. “Are you certain?”

The Witch fell silent. His reaction—his surprise—implied he didn’t know.

Or does it? Is he just playing dumb?

“Witch,” the clown’s voice came again, sensing her hesitation. “Did something happen? Or are you suspecting me of something?”

“So you deny this was your doing?” she shot back.

“Witch, you rejected my offer, and yes, I was displeased,” the clown replied, his tone even. “But you should understand, we are allies. Partners. We are the traitors who fled the Champions Alliance together. You are more useful to me alive than dead. I’m not stupid enough to sell you out and cut off my own arm.”

His words, for what they were worth, rang true. Compared to his new ‘allies’ in the Cult of Four, the clown trusted and felt closer to the Witch. She was one of the few beings he had who could serve as a true confidant. In her presence, he could lower his guard, just a little.

“Traitors?” The Witch’s lips curled into a sneer of pure derision. “Heh. How amusing to hear that word from you. Do you really see yourself as a traitor, clown? After everything the commander was to you... to all of us...” Her voice grew unsteady, and she began to ramble.

“Enough,” the clown cut her off. “There’s no point in dredging up the past. While I may have tempted you, the final choice was yours. Besides, we both got what we wanted, didn’t we? There are no second chances.”

His last words finally struck a chord with her. It was the one truth that was both her greatest triumph and her deepest regret.

“So,” the clown asked again, his voice soft. “Arthas is truly a demigod now?”

“Yes.”

A heavy silence fell between them.

An unknown realm, in a small wooden cabin in a forest.

Sunlight filtered through the canopy of green leaves, dappling the windows of a quaint cottage nestled by a meandering river. Inside, a puppet with the face of a clown sat at a table, its chin propped up on its hand like a human, silently watching the beauty of the forest through the glass.

## Chapter 1055: A Quagmire

On the wall behind the clown puppet hung a collection of brightly colored, disarmingly cute stuffed toys. Nearby stood a small wooden table, covered with an embroidered cloth and adorned with a simple vase of white wildflowers. It was a quaint, whimsical, and utterly wholesome little cabin.

“So, Arthas has ascended to demigod,” the puppet murmured, its voice devoid of judgment, impossible to read. “I imagine Leonidas and Alexander are not far behind. And here we are, the Witch and I... with the power of demigods, yet still trapped at the peak of the arch lord rank.”

The Clown’s thoughts drifted back to his old teammates in the Champions Alliance. Yes, teammates. If he hadn’t betrayed their commander, that’s what they would still be.

The power we gained... it belongs to others. We are merely pseudo-gods. Was this power... worth the regret?

By betraying the Champions Alliance and joining the Cult of Four, the Clown and the Witch had been granted a boon from the gods, becoming pseudo-gods and gaining the power of demigods ahead of their time. But the path they had chosen had bound them irrevocably to the Cult. The Clown had embraced it fully, throwing himself into his new role and becoming one of the twelve Pontiffs. The Witch, however... he knew she still held onto some fragment of her past.

He didn’t resent her for it. In a way, that small, lingering attachment she held was a reflection of his own. The feeling had been faint, unnoticeable, back when the Deputy Commander, Arthas, Alexander, and Leonidas were still lords. But now, with the news of Arthas’s true ascension, of him grasping the laws of reality for himself, the hearts of both the Clown and the Witch were in turmoil.

“Tell me what happened,” the Clown said, his inner storm subsiding. His eternally fixed smile betrayed nothing.

“I encountered a giant lord in the Forest of Nature in the Silverwood Realm,” the Witch’s voice came through the platform. “He destroyed my avatar in two consecutive engagements. Before I was eliminated, I saw Arthas’s will projection descend upon him.”

Her voice had regained its composure. She had come to the Clown to solve a problem, to find a strategy. She laid out the facts.

“One moment. I’ll look into it.” As one of the twelve Pontiffs, the Clown had access to the reports from other regions. He could pull the after-action report from the Pontiff responsible for the Witch’s sector.

A few minutes later, he responded.

“Pontiff Yriel’s will projection was destroyed. According to him, his demigod phantom was annihilated by a joint attack from a skeletal apparition and, later, a dagger phantom. I imagine the dagger was Alexander.”

He had not only confirmed the Witch’s intel but, with this new information, had also deduced that Alexander, too, had ascended.

“You and I both knew this day would come,” the Clown said, his tone flat. “Given the talent and foundation of our old teammates, I’m not surprised they’ve become demigods. I just didn’t expect it to be so soon. Our quiet years are coming to an end.”

In the past, the main force hunting them had been their commander and the Deputy Commander. At the time, they had fatally underestimated the commander’s terrifying power. The Cult of Four had dispatched one of their Archbishops to protect the two of them. The result? The Archbishop, a being of immense status within the Cult, was killed by Commander Thresh in three slashes.

After that, the Cult, the Clown, and the Witch had all gone into hiding, avoiding Thresh and the Champions Alliance at all costs. Their only saving grace was that Commander Thresh, after being betrayed, had fallen into a deep slumber. With Arthas and the others still lords, the Clown and the Witch had been granted a period of peace.

Now, with the re-emergence of Arthas and the appearance of a new member of the Alliance, they both knew their peaceful days were over.

“So,” the Witch’s message came, her anxiety palpable. “Do we fight or run?”

“Why must we choose either?” the Clown replied.

Before she could ask what he meant, he sent a rapid-fire series of questions.

“Witch, you seem panicked. Does this mean you’ve exposed your own location? Are you afraid of Arthas hunting you down? Or has the commander awakened?”

Any of those three possibilities was a nightmare he didn’t want to face.

“No,” she replied, her relief evident. “I haven’t exposed my position. Arthas only saw my avatar. There was nothing on it that could be traced back to my true body. And as for the commander... I don’t know if he’s awake.”

“Then what’s the problem?” the Clown said. “It was just an avatar. You can afford the loss. As for the Silverwood Realm, we just walk away. Find a new world to invade. Let the rest of the Cult of Four deal with the headache of the Champions Alliance.”

His meaning was clear: as long as their true bodies remained hidden, all they had to do was lie low and avoid their old comrades.

“You’re saying we just ignore Arthas?”

“Yes. And no.”

“Explain.”

“We will ignore them personally. That doesn’t mean we can’t arrange for others in the Cult to cause problems for them.”

“You want to use the Cult’s forces to tie up the Champions Alliance in the Silverwood Realm,” the Witch quickly grasped his logic. “That way, no matter where we hide, we’ll be safe.” She could see the brutal elegance of the plan.

“In fact,” the Clown continued, “your exposure might actually be a good thing. Before, we never knew where they were, and they never knew where we were. We were constantly on guard. But if we create a smokescreen in the Silverwood Realm, we can fix their attention there. We’ll know exactly where they are and what they’re doing. And that,” he concluded, “is how we guarantee our own safety.”

He had a knack for seeing the bigger picture. In his eyes, this disaster was an opportunity.

“If those incompetents in the Cult aren’t enough to keep them busy, we can even send an avatar or two ourselves just to keep their attention focused. The only prerequisite is that the Cult must commit enough forces to the Silverwood Realm to actually be a threat to the Alliance.”

In the span of a few moments, the Clown had already formulated a counter-strategy.

“The Pontiff in charge of that invasion is Yriel. His strength alone won’t be enough. We’ll have to manipulate at least one more Pontiff into going to help him. Only then will they have enough power to tie down our old comrades.”

“The Silverwood Realm is a fine place, Witch,” he mused, a hint of sinister amusement in his voice. “All we have to do is make sure we turn it into a quagmire for them.”

Hee hee hee...

Chapter 1056: What’s the Catch?

Emerald Dream Realm, Kasenna Sea, Leonidas’s Palace.

Golden sunlight, a sapphire sea, and waves of the purest white, endlessly crashing against the shore. The scenery was breathtaking, and Orion’s mood was peaceful.

Leonidas's Palace was a strange and wondrous place. No matter how large the waves, they would break and fall away just before reaching the palace plaza, never touching the pristine marble. This was with the main defensive shields down—a truly extraordinary phenomenon.

As Orion stared at the palace railings, pondering the source of this magic, a whirlpool formed on the surface of the sea just beyond them. Kraken, in his massive octopus form, was perched atop the head of his captain avatar as it strode out of the vortex, walking on water.

With a final splash, the avatar landed in the palace plaza. The whirlpool behind it collapsed, spraying water into the air.

“Nothing to show for it,” Kraken sighed, coming to a stop. His captain avatar slumped onto a nearby sun lounger and closed its eyes, while the massive octopus form leaped into a large glass tank on the round table next to Orion. “Those two dragon arch lords we’re supposed to be facing are refusing to fight. They just send small packs of sea beasts to skirmish with us.”

Orion passed a goblet to Kraken, who extended a tentacle, wrapped it around the cup, and took a deep gulp. “After the last big war, we collected a lot of dragon corpses. They must have figured something out.”

“So you’re saying my chances of collecting more dragon bodies are pretty slim right now, huh?”

Kraken didn’t argue; he already knew it was true. His sigh was less about the missed opportunity and more about the sheer boredom of it all. For Survivors like them, an endless series of wars was infinitely preferable to this life of a beach bum.

“Damn those dragons,” he grumbled. “They won’t fight, and they won’t make peace. They’re just trying to wear us down by waiting. It’s infuriating. It’s not so bad for you, Orion. You have a few arch lord avatars you can use. But me? I’ve been stuck here ever since I ascended. There are so many things I want to do, and I can’t do any of them.” His voice was full of mock pity for himself.

“Be patient,” Orion said calmly. “The situation is improving. Not long ago, our demigod ally from the Dawn Continent met with Arthas. They discussed the terms of a formal alliance. I believe our two continents, Dusk and Dawn, are about to be officially joined.”

“Once that news gets out,” he continued, “the dragons will have to react.”

An alliance with the Dawn Continent wouldn't necessarily increase the Champions Alliance's direct power in this world, but the very existence of powerful allies was a form of deterrence. Faced with this new reality, the dragons would have two choices: either commit to another all-out war, or finally agree to let things cool down. Orion was betting on the latter. The dragons had come to the Emerald Dream Realm to get their slice of the pie, not to bleed their resources dry in a pointless war of attrition. They knew it, and he knew it. The Champions Alliance had felt the same way, before the dragons' initial invasion of the Dusk Continent had become a direct insult to their honor.

“Honestly, I'm kind of hoping for a fight,” Kraken said with a slightly wicked grin. “It's the only way for me to keep growing. Heh heh heh.” In the last war, the team had funneled resources to him, allowing him to breed countless Sea Race cannon fodder and accumulate a vast amount of faith energy. Since becoming an arch lord, he'd personally slain two of his draconic counterparts, reaping massive rewards.

“Speaking of war,” Orion said, seeing his opening, “you should probably start preparing.” He raised his goblet and clinked it against the glass tank.

“The Deputy Commander has spoken to you about the two traitors from our Alliance, hasn't he?”

“Yeah,” Kraken said, taking another drink. “The clown and the Witch.” The gears in his head started to turn. “Wait... you've found them?” His eyes lit up, and he turned his full, eager attention to Orion.

“During an incursion into another world, I stumbled upon the Witch's trail,” Orion explained. “And I found the faction behind them. A major power called the Cult of Four. Their resources and strength are comparable to our own, if not greater.”

He then recounted the events that had transpired in the Silverwood Realm in detail.

“While I haven't found any oceans there yet,” he concluded, “a world with that many different races is bound to have them. Several of our brothers will be descending there soon. So, you should get ready.”

Now that Kraken was an arch lord, he was qualified to join the invasion. As long as he didn't run into a demigod and kept a relatively low profile, he should be fine.

“Damn, Orion, if what you’re saying is true, I really do need to prepare,” Kraken said, his excitement growing. “This time, I definitely can’t risk my massive octopus true body. It’s a shame I still haven’t found a suitable avatar to walk on land for me. I’ve been dreaming of claiming my own territory on dry land for ages.” He spoke with genuine longing. In the days before he could pull his own weight, he had often wished he’d been born a land-based race.

“That’s easy enough to solve,” Orion said with a casual wave. “Once I find a sea, I’ll set aside a piece of coastal territory for you. You’ll have a domain that connects both land and water.”

“Really? You’d do that?”

Orion nodded, a strange, sly smile playing on his lips.

“Hang on,” Kraken said, his tentacles twitching. “I’m getting a weird vibe from that smile, old friend. It’s a little... sinister. You’re giving me territory, making all these grand promises... what’s the catch? What do you want from me?”

Orion’s smile widened. He raised his goblet, and after they both drank, he said slowly, savoring the moment, “Don’t worry, the land territory is as good as yours. But before that... I’m going to need a little support from you.”

“My stoneheart horde is about to launch an operation against an island offshore. I’ll need you to provide me with a detachment of your Sea Race troops.”

He had made a promise to Marina. She wanted to be the one to bring Aenari Island into the fold. As a demigod’s avatar and a Lord in her own right, she wouldn’t allow the horde to see her as merely ornamental, like Sylvana.

Of Orion’s official consorts, only Sylvana lacked a fiefdom and any real power. Of course, her own strength wasn’t exactly top-tier, and she hadn’t accumulated the same level of merit as the others. As a result, in the merit-based society of the stoneheart horde, she had become something of a beautiful, powerless figurehead.

Marina would not allow herself to suffer the same fate. She intended to join the stoneheart horde with a mountain of accomplishments to her name, to become a Warden in her own right—a woman of power, influence, and status at Orion's side.

Chapter 1057: Augurath Sanctuary

"Are you in a hurry?"

"Yes," Orion replied. "I only have my Ocean Hunters. The force is too specialized; it's not enough."

Hearing the certainty in Orion's voice, Kraken grew serious. After a moment of thought, he looked up. "Since you need troops urgently, I'll lend you some of my personal guard. I was going to train a unit of Sea Race soldiers for you anyway."

With that, Kraken launched himself from the glass tank and plunged into the sea. When it came to important matters, he didn't waste time. He was already on his way to gather the promised forces.

Orion leaned back, a faint smile on his lips as he waited for his friend's return.

Silverwood Realm, Staghelm City.

In a hidden sanctuary within the city, the Moon Elf Isilra stood before a luminous Moonwell, her expression one of serene reverence.

"Mother," she said softly, "something has happened outside the city. The demonic monsters have withdrawn."

The Moonwell was more than a source of sacred water; it was their Spring of Life, a holy site that represented the hope of all elves. Many believed the wells were a direct gift from the Elven mother deity.

Hovering above this particular Moonwell was a phantom, its face indistinct, but its aura radiating a gentle, maternal glow. The silver moonlight caught in the well's pristine water reflected upon the

phantom, giving it a clearer form. The water itself was crystal clear, so pure and tranquil it seemed capable of washing away all darkness from the mind.

The "mother" Isilra spoke to was the phantom of the Moonwell itself.

"Isilra, this is the result of your valiant resistance," the phantom's voice whispered, warm and kind. "You and the defenders have saved the people of Staghelm City from disaster. You have protected your home."

Isilra had no mother in the traditional sense; she had been born from the well's magic. Thus, she had always called it Mother. And this was no ordinary moonwell; it had achieved a form of divinity. Put simply, the Moonwell of Staghelm City was a demigod. Unlike others of her kind, however, the laws she commanded were not for combat. Her power lay in healing, in mending grievous wounds and restoring vitality and stamina to the city's defenders.

This was the true reason the Cult of Four's demonic hordes had never been able to conquer Staghelm City, even when a demigod from the Black Tower had personally led the assault.

"Mother," Isilra said, gently dismissing the praise, "the moonlight tells me it was not we who drove the enemy back. They are withdrawing their forces on their own. It seems they are shifting their focus to the north."

"The north?" the Moonwell's voice grew somber. "The north is the Hydraea Plains, the domain of the moon giants. Their people have been driven out, enslaved. Only a few scattered remnants still cling to life in their ancestral territory." As a benevolent demigod, it pained her deeply to see any race blessed by the moonlight cast out from their homes. Not long ago, Staghelm City had taken in a group of moon giant refugees, and their strength had proven invaluable in the city's defense.

"Mother, could they be heading for the far north? To the Forest of Nature?" Isilra asked. "The Wood Elf Tribe lives there. I wonder how they have fared." As fellow elves, and a peaceful race, Isilra had always felt a kinship with them.

"The Wood Elves are gone as well," the Moonwell replied, her voice filled with an even deeper sorrow. She had a mystical connection to the Tree of Life in the Forest of Nature, and she could no longer feel its

presence. Either it had withered and died, or it had sealed itself away to preserve some remnant of the Wood Elf race's legacy.

"The aura of the Tree of Life has vanished from the north," she confirmed. "However, a new, unfamiliar faction has appeared there. Perhaps it is they who have driven the demonic monsters away." Her perception was unclear, but she knew that the demonic presence in the north had been drastically reduced in recent days.

"Mother, should we send scouts to the north?" Isilra proposed. "If the survivors of the Wood Elf race could join us in Staghelm City, with your blessing, they might be able to awaken the mighty Goliath Treants and Treant Guardians. With their strength added to ours, Staghelm City's defenses would be greatly enhanced. It could become a true sanctuary."

To create a safe haven for all the peoples of the land in a world overrun by a demonic blight—this was Isilra's dream.

"You may try," the Moonwell consented. "In the face of this calamity, we must unite all who can be united."

It was a noble dream, and by a strange twist of fate, it was one that perfectly mirrored Orion's own.

"From this day forward, this place shall be known as Augurath Sanctuary."

In the old tongue of this world, "Augurath" meant Survivor. Orion's intention was simple: to use the name to attract others of his kind. More Survivors meant more faith, and more faith could give rise to entirely new kinds of soldiers.

"Augurath... Augurath... Augurath Sanctuary," Xylia whispered the name, her head tilted back as she and Angel stared up at Orion, who stood on the broken steps of the Black Tower, proclaiming his intent to build a city on this very spot.

"My lord," Angel asked, "will this place truly shelter all the Survivors on the continent?"

"Of course," Orion replied, his voice calm but carrying. "Augurath welcomes every Survivor who is willing to live by the rules. In my territory, labor earns you food. Contribution earns you a home. Military service grants you special privileges. I will build a sanctuary here, the safest place on this entire continent."

He wasn't shouting. The only audience before him was the small elven squad led by Xylia. The undead and Plague-thrall armies were still out cleansing the land; his plan to build a city was, for now, still in the planning stages. But that didn't stop him from painting a vision for the Wood Elves. He needed them, Xylia and Angel, to carry his ideas and his philosophy back to their people. With the Black Tower broken, the number of demonic monsters would dwindle, and the elves who had been hiding in the deep woods would soon emerge. He needed to plant the seeds of his values in them early.

Speaking of the Wood Elves, back in The Stillness, a small but significant event was unfolding. With Orion and the main army gone, Caesar and Aerin were the only two left in command. Caesar was a warrior, his focus always on defeating the enemy.

#### Chapter 1058: Two Matters to Address

As a result, Caesar was almost always in the field, leading his Shield Warriors and a contingent of Plague-thralls on sweeping patrols through the northern regions of the Forest of Nature, clearing out demonic monsters and rescuing scattered Wood Elf survivors. With Caesar away, the responsibility of managing the camp fell solely to Aerin.

Today, just as she had finished leading a prayer to strengthen the trees near the camp's walls, a commotion erupted at the main gate. As the one in charge, she immediately rushed to the scene.

Pushing her way through the gathered crowd, Aerin saw her. It was Freyla, and she was dying.

One of her arms was gone, and a massive wound had torn open her abdomen. She was clinging to a final, ragged breath, her vacant eyes staring up at the sky. Aerin knelt beside her. Her face came into Freyla's view, and the dying elf's eyes, which had been so empty, suddenly regained a spark of light.

"Elder... you were right," Freyla rasped. "Outside the forest... there is no... no home for the Wood Elves..."

"They... they all died... We couldn't get away..."

At the sight of her, Aerin's eyes instantly filled with bloodshot tears, which began to stream down her face. Freyla had been her assistant. Before Orion's arrival, they had relied on each other, supported each other, giving one another warmth and encouragement through the darkest of times. But Freyla hadn't been able to let go of the past, and so she had left The Stillness.

"I... I watched our people... fall... one by one... they died in my arms..."

"I wanted... to bring them back... to you... but..."

"So many... died... It's all my fault..."

Her breaths were short and shallow, her words broken, her voice fading with every syllable.

Aerin wept, casting one healing spell after another, but it was no use. Freyla's life's flame had already dwindled to a final flicker. No magic could pull back someone who already had one foot in the grave.

"Compared to the outside..." Freyla whispered, "...this place... it feels more like... home..."

"Elder... Freyla was wrong."

With the last of her strength, she raised her remaining hand, trying to reach for Aerin's face, to wipe away her tears, just as they had always done to comfort each other in the past.

But her hand fell limp halfway, and the light in her bright eyes was extinguished forever.

Freyla felt like she was falling. The pain from her wounds vanished. The world before her eyes began to change.

The sky is turning blue again. The plague is gone. I think... I can hear birds singing... and the sound of elven songs...

In the next instant, her world faded to black and white. And then, only eternal darkness remained.

Aerin held Freyla's body, her hands trembling. Her tears had run dry, and in their place was a profound, chilling calm.

"We found her while she was being eaten by demonic monsters," Caesar said, his voice low. He had arrived with the body. "She kept muttering your name, my lady. I told her I knew you, that I would bring her to see you. I think that's the only reason she held on for so long. About three miles from where she fell, we found the rest of her group. Over a hundred of them. We brought them all back."

He didn't know how to comfort her. All he could do was report the facts. He was a righteous man and he sympathized with the Wood Elves, but he was a pragmatist. He had not lived their tragedy; he couldn't truly share their pain.

"Thank you, Caesar," Aerin said, her voice hollow. "You must be exhausted. Go and rest. I will handle things here."

She lifted Freyla's body into her arms and walked toward the center of the camp. She would bury her friend herself.

Caesar looked as if he wanted to say something, but he held his tongue. He watched her go, then turned to his men.

"Brothers, get some rest. Tomorrow, we continue the rescue mission." He dismissed the Shield Warriors and, with a heavy sigh, walked toward his own quarters.

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Titanion Realm, Stoneheart.

The castle throne room was abuzz with activity today. Beside Orion on his throne sat the newly appointed Warden, Marina. Below them, standing in two disciplined rows, were Rendall, Beyn, Torba,

Drakthul, Dace, Earthshaker, Gronthar, Onyx, Thundar, Ursa, and the other elders. Such a gathering of Alpha-level commanders meant that something significant was about to happen.

With Orion's true body now residing in Stoneheart, his word was law. These founding members of his war council, long relegated to administrative duties, were now being freed up and brought back to a state of war readiness.

Orion's gaze swept over the warriors he trusted most, the elders who had fought and bled for the horde. They deserve to forge their own path, to follow their own fate.

"There are two matters to address," he announced, his voice echoing in the hall. "The conquest of Aenari Island, and an otherworldly invasion."

"This is Marina, a Lord of the mermaid race, and the newest Warden of the stoneheart horde."

The elders bowed in unison, and Marina, conducting herself with regal poise, returned the gesture with a nod. Some of them knew her from before; others only knew of her by reputation. Regardless, her status as a Legendary-level lord earned their instant respect.

Marina, for her part, looked back at Orion with a flicker of curiosity in her eyes. The conquest of Aenari Island was the task she had set for herself. But an otherworldly invasion? So, she thought, this big lug has been hiding a great many secrets. That explains his rapid rise to the rank of arch lord. She didn't press the issue. She knew the time to ask questions was when he chose to share the answers.

"Rendall, Beyn, Torba, Drakthul, Gormathar," Orion's voice turned sharp and formal. "You will take your five armies, board the Sea-Devouring Warship, and follow Warden Marina to sea. Your mission is to bring Aenari Island into the fold."

"As you command!" the five generals roared, their eyes burning with a fanatical light. Each of them hoped to become the next Dirtclaw. They believed that the path he had walked, they too could follow.

"Onyx, Dace, Earthshaker, Gronthar, Thundar, Ursa," Orion continued, turning to the other group. "You too will muster your armies. In the coming days, you will descend upon another world to wage war on its native races and expand the horde's territory."

His voice rose, filled with a fire that ignited the hearts of every warrior in the room.

"Send word to the warriors! Ask them if their weapons are still sharp! If their blood is still hot! If their will to fight still burns!"

He knew that war, and only war, was the true measure of an army.

"WE OBEY!" the commanders thundered as one, their voices a testament to their unwavering loyalty.

#### Chapter 1059: Gifts and Spoils

Orion hammered out the final details of the war council with the others.

Soon after, the horde elders began filing out of the castle, a palpable buzz of excitement radiating from the group.

"Orion," Marina said, falling into step beside him. "The Stoneheart Horde is even more badass than I imagined."

Orion just gave her a small, knowing smile. He reached into his tunic and produced an urn, holding it out to her.

She looked at it, then at him, a question in her eyes.

"There's an undead sealed inside," he said, his voice even. "An ancient, archlord-level giant-horned whale." He pressed it into her hand. "I'll feel better knowing you have this out at sea."

Marina didn't hesitate. She took the urn with a grin, her fingers tracing its surface as she felt the power thrumming within. She recognized it as his silent way of looking out for her, and she wouldn't dream of turning it down. A warmth spread through her chest, a gesture that meant more than any grand declaration.

Controlling it should have been impossible for Marina, who was only at the Legendary level—a full tier below the whale’s archlord power. But Orion knew her demigod avatar played by a different set of rules.

He could tell from the delighted way she handled the urn that she could command it. He was right.

"So that’s where this went," she realized aloud. "I remember. This is the same one you rode when you raised hell in the Silvercurrent Sea."

The great hall was empty now. Marina moved close, settling into his lap on the throne and pulling him into a deep, possessive kiss.

A wind of change was sweeping through the fortress. Out at sea, the merfolk legions stirred and the Elder Wyrms took to the deep. The tide of war was turning.

The next day, Marina departed the castle, leaving Stoneheart City behind. The former City of the Guardian had been renamed in her honor, and as its new lord, she had to get the lay of the land. There was the official handover of power, administrative duties to oversee, and—most importantly—her city would serve as the staging ground for the naval invasion.

Her absence left the throne room feeling quiet and vast. Orion fell into a familiar state of contemplation, pulling out the two Survivor’s Chests he’d acquired in the Silverwood Realm. A flicker of anticipation sparked in his eyes.

He opened the first.

[Serpent-Demon’s Grasp]

Quality: Legendary

Granted Skill: Serpent-Demon’s Grasp

Description: Equipping this item allows the user to summon six draconic claws to aid in combat.

Flavor Text: A soulfused artifact, crystallized from the very essence of a six-armed serpent-demon.

Orion studied the object, which looked like a single vertebra, jet-black and unsettling to the eye. So it's a piece of gear that grants a skill.

He shrugged and decided to just go for it. Equip.

The vertebra vanished from his hand, and he felt a strange sensation as it fused seamlessly with one of his own spinal bones. The process was unnervingly natural.

With a mere flicker of his will, six shadowy-black draconic claws erupted from his back. They were vicious-looking, all sharp angles and armored plates. He mentally commanded them, and the six claws moved independently, executing six different actions at once—a forward lunge, a rearward stab, a fist clenching with power, and a raised block. The coordination was flawless.

Holy crap, this is insane. He immediately saw its potential. With this, no one was getting close to him ever again.

Damn, it's a hell of a mental drain, though.

Controlling all six claws effectively required serious multitasking. He practiced a few more complex maneuvers before retracting the claws, satisfied. He turned his attention to the second Survivor's Chest.

A shimmer of light, a scattering of ash, and a skill scroll appeared in his hand.

[Void Trap (Fragmented)]

Type: Banishment Skill

Quality: Legendary

Description: Creates a sphere of absolute darkness, sealing any enemies caught within into a pocket dimension.

Note: The seal must be broken from the inside to escape.

Flavor Text: A sealing art devised by a forgotten god for his divine attendants. The ultimate lockdown ability.

"Nice," Orion said, a grin spreading across his face. "Very nice."

He tore the scroll without a second thought, the knowledge flooding his mind. Even as a fragmented skill, Void Trap filled a major gap in his arsenal. He'd lacked a reliable crowd-control ability. His Ghost Dragon Summon could lock down an enemy, but it was a finisher—a trump card reserved for life-or-death stakes, burdened by restrictions and a lengthy setup.

Void Trap was different. It had zero offensive power; it was pure, unadulterated lockdown. For him, that was infinitely more versatile.

Still, good loot is getting harder and harder to come by.

These two chests had dropped from the Witch's avatar and four archlord Black Tower guardians in the Silverwood Realm. Compared to his usual hauls, the drop rate was actually quite good. These days, killing a standard archlord rarely yielded a Survivor's Chest. And then there were the demigod phantoms—not only were they a nightmare to fight, but half the time they dropped nothing at all. He'd even had to burn through some of his own trump cards just to win, often ending up with a net loss.

He was starting to understand why most powerful archlords just avoided demigod phantoms altogether. Win or lose, the risk-reward was completely skewed.

This haul, though, was solid. Both items were things he could use immediately. He spent the next hour opening the rest of his Survivor's Chests—loot his subordinates had collected from their own kills. The quality was lower, but it all went into his personal stash, adding to the growing reserve of power for the Stoneheart Horde.

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Meanwhile, in the Silverwood Realm, the Cult of Four was already making its move.

Just outside the southern Staghelm City, within the corrupted domain of a Black Tower, space warped and twisted. A figure stepped through the shimmering tear in reality. He was an archlord with serpentine marks crawling across his face, his slender build giving him an androgynous, almost delicate look.

This was the avatar of Yriel, the demigod Pontiff to whom the Witch answered. His true form was far away, but as an avatar, he was still powerful enough to manifest on the sixth floor of the Black Tower.

"Heh heh heh... You got here fast, Yriel," a grating voice echoed from the shadows. "Someone's anxious. Those strangers from the north really pissed you off, didn't they?"

The speaker was Konak, the current master of this Black Tower and one of the other demigods invading the Silverwood Realm. Of all the Cult of Four factions, his tower was the closest to the Forest of Nature.

Chapter 1060: Marina City

"Konak, spare me the sarcasm," Yriel snapped, his voice sharp. "If you'd been attacked by two demigods, I doubt you'd be in any better shape."

Konak's grating laugh was thick with schadenfreude, a naked display of mockery that set Yriel's teeth on edge. If the bastard hadn't agreed to help him crush the invaders and retake his Black Tower, Yriel wouldn't be caught dead here.

"The spatial anchor inscribed in my Black Tower was erased," Yriel seethed, his frustration boiling over. "No one knows what happened there. You, of all people, should know how many resources the Cult of Four pours into building a single tower." He had come to Konak and paid a steep price, not just to reclaim his territory, but to forge an alliance against Arthas and Alexander. The memory of his last encounter with them was a bitter pill, a potent mix of anger and humiliation.

"My friend," Konak oozed, his tone dripping with false sympathy. "Sometimes mockery is a form of kindness. A little something to fuel your drive. And look, I see it in your eyes now—a fire, an unyielding will to fight. That's a good thing, is it not?"

He let out another grating chuckle, though it was more restrained this time. Heh heh...

Yriel ignored him, placing a hand to his forehead and closing his eyes. "Where the Four Gods walk, glory follows! With honor in my heart and clarity in my mind, I beseech the Four to hear my plea. Grant us strength, heed our united voice, and help us reclaim our Black Tower! May the holy names of the Four echo across all realms of The New Age!"

It was both a prayer and a political maneuver. By invoking the Four Gods, Yriel was formally requesting Konak's aid, a gesture of sincerity meant to bind them to a common cause. Of course, he knew Konak would fleece him for everything he was worth behind closed doors.

Hearing the oath, Konak fell silent. He rose from his throne and mirrored Yriel's gesture. "May the holy names of the Four be known across all realms of The New Age!" he intoned. "For you, Yriel, and for the glory of the Four, I have already abandoned my campaign against Staghelm City, setting aside immense personal gain." He spread his hands magnanimously. "I have raised the banner of our gods above my own interests. I hope this is satisfactory."

Yriel scoffed internally. He knew from the Witch that Staghelm City was a fortress. The demigod hidden within it was a formidable opponent; it would take several more beings of their level to even think about wearing her down. Her true form was a Moonwell, located at the very heart of the city. Konak thought he could take it with a mere demigod phantom? What a fucking joke. Even Konak's true self would have struggled to conquer that city.

But Konak was now an ally, and such thoughts were best left unsaid.

"The glory of the Four is with you, Konak," Yriel said instead.

"Indeed," Konak replied, his expression one of utter sincerity. "So, when do we march north?"

"Not yet. Give me some time. My demonic legions suffered heavy losses in the assault on Staghelm City. I need to regroup."

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Titanion Realm, Marina City.

The city was a marvel, built directly into the cliffs of the Ironveil Escarpment. A series of man-made canals served as its arteries, connecting the Stoneheart Horde's inland territories with the open waters of the Trident Sea. The main castle and the city's core structures clung to the cliff-face, with the inner and outer districts radiating outwards from that central point.

Marina stood on a high balcony, overlooking her new domain. The view was breathtaking.

"How does it compare to Stoneheart City?"

Orion's voice came from behind her. He appeared at her side, slipping an arm around her waist.

"It's more alive," she said, leaning back against him. "This is more my speed. Even the breeze tastes like the ocean."

Orion smiled. He knew exactly what she meant. Thanks to the canals, Marina City had become a melting pot, drawing in races from all over who were looking to make a living. A permanent delegation from the Sea Race also resided here, causing the population to swell and giving the port a constant, energetic buzz.

"See that triangular patch of land at the mouth of the canal?" he asked.

"Mhm."

"That's the trade district we run with the Sea-Drake race. We get a sixty-forty split on all profits. We take sixty."

"The Sea-Drakes get that big a cut?" Marina asked, surprised. The land, the canal, and the surrounding waters all belonged to the Stoneheart Horde. Forty percent seemed overly generous.

"It's part of our agreement," Orion explained. "They guarantee that all sea goods from the territories they control only come through this port. It's a monopoly. For that, forty percent of the profits isn't too much to give up."

Understanding dawned on her. This wasn't just a partnership; it was a shared monopoly. That explained the generous split.

"This city is vital to the horde," Orion continued, his tone growing more serious. "It's always been garrisoned by a Legendary-level lord. The last one was reassigned to the front lines for the North-South War and hasn't returned yet. With you in charge, I think the Sea Race who've settled here will feel a stronger sense of belonging."

Marina noted the shift in his tone. This was the leader of the Horde, explaining the strategic weight of his gift.

"Don't worry," she said, her head resting on his shoulder. "This is my fiefdom now. No one, Sea Race or otherwise, will be causing trouble here on my watch."

She understood the weight of his gesture. Giving her this city was a profound sign of his trust, but it was also something more.

"You see those arrow towers on the walls? And the Mage Towers scattered through the city?"

"Yeah."

Orion pointed to the spires rising at various points across the skyline. "The city still lacks a large-scale defensive formation. We need to defend against threats from the sky and the sea. My original plan was to wait until our little Elara was old enough to handle the project."

"But with you here," he went on, "we can give Marina City its own aquatic defense formation much sooner."

The port's strategic value was undeniable. In any major war, this link between the land and the sea would be a prime target. A powerful defensive ward wasn't just an option; it was a necessity.

"I get it," Marina said, her voice firm. "Leave it to me. As soon as I conquer Aenari Island for you, I'll get started on it."

Orion nodded, his gaze softening as he leaned down and kissed her forehead. Marina savored the simple, affectionate gesture, half-closing her eyes as she looked out towards the horizon, a slow smile spreading across her lips.

After a long moment, Orion pulled back and reached into his pouch, retrieving three shell-like Nests and placing them in her hands.

"What are these...?"

"One Deepsea Razorgill Nest, one Specter Mahi Nest, and one Blacksea Carapacer Nest."