

Titan King 1061

Chapter 1061: Double down on this war

Marina gazed at the three Sea Race Nests in her hands, an eyebrow arching in amusement. As the avatar of Lady Seraphina, she had seen every treasure the oceans had to offer, but even she was impressed.

The shells used to construct the Nests weren't just rare; they contained pocket dimensions capable of nurturing living creatures. Such artifacts were treasures even among the merfolk, rarely if ever leaving their possession.

"Orion, don't tell me you have another Sea Race demigod wife in some other world," Marina said, her eyes flashing with a mix of suspicion and playful curiosity as she looked up at him.

"A gift from an ally," he replied. "He knew I was planning a naval campaign and shared some of his best assets."

To be honest, Kraken had gone all out to help him. He had truly come through, Orion thought, mentally cataloging the units. The three Nests would spawn Deepsea Razorgills, Specter Mahis, and Abyssal Chitin-Warriors. The Razorgills were massive beasts, perfect for taking on large sea monsters and pulling transport duty.

The Specter Mahis were an upgraded version of the Ocean Hunter, deadlier individual fighters that could form a lethal underwater blade formation when swarmed. The Abyssal Chitin-Warriors were amphibious, humanoid soldiers from the deep, possessing decent intelligence and melee skills. It was a perfect starter kit for conquering a sizable chunk of the ocean.

"Your ally is very generous," Marina remarked, her tone light.

Orion just smiled. He didn't have a choice. Among all his contacts, Kraken was his only friend from a Sea Race.

Marina carefully stored the Nests and leaned against his chest. A comfortable silence settled between them as they continued to watch the vast expanse of the sea.

Silverwood Realm, Augurath Sanctuary.

Over half a month had passed by the time Aerin, Tangere, and Caesar arrived at the Black Tower. In that time, the Forest of Nature had been completely purged of demonic monsters. Small squads of Shield Warriors and Elven archers were now conducting a final sweep, mopping up any stragglers.

With the threat gone, the Wood Elves who had been hiding in the deep woods emerged and pledged their loyalty to The Stillness, accepting Orion's rule. There was, of course, some dissent. But after Clymene made a decisive and brutal example of the most vocal opponents, the rest of the Wood Elf race fell in line.

Aerin played the role of the compassionate diplomat throughout the process, earning a great deal of respect and support from her people. She convinced them that Orion's rule was a far better fate than the enslavement and slaughter offered by the demonic monsters. The scattered Wood Elves needed a powerful protector, and Orion, the man whose armies had driven back the darkness, was the obvious choice.

"The situation's changed," Orion said, getting straight to the point. "There are things you need to know."

The four of them sat around a circular table laden with fruit, wine, and roasted meat.

"We drove out the demonic monsters and secured a huge swathe of territory, including the Forest of Nature and this tower," he began. He had brought Aerin, Tangere, and Caesar into this, but the next phase would involve the Clown and the Witch. If his original allies continued, their status as Awakened would eventually be exposed, making them prime targets for assassination.

"But according to the intel we've gathered, we've pissed off a major faction called the Cult of Four. This Black Tower we're in right now? It's one of their invasion fortresses."

He let that sink in.

"The Cult of Four has plenty of arch lords and demigods. With your current power levels, you're not equipped to be on the front lines of this war."

His tone was flat, unsparing. Aerin and Caesar were still just Alpha-level. While not exactly cannon fodder, they'd be nothing more than lambs to the slaughter against an arch lord.

"Whatever you say, boss. We're with you," Caesar said immediately. He knew his own limits. He was leagues below Orion and couldn't hope to hold his own in the same conflicts.

Orion gave Caesar a nod of approval before turning his gaze to Aerin and Tangere. They both nodded in agreement.

"Good. Then here's the plan for you all." Orion picked up his goblet, took a small sip, and looked directly at Aerin.

"First, Aerin. Your Wood Elf race has submitted to me, so I'm granting the Forest of Nature to you as a fiefdom. It's a win for you both."

To advance to the lord-tier, Aerin needed her own territory. The Forest of Nature was the ancestral home of the Wood Elves, so giving it to her not only fulfilled her needs but also restored her people's heritage. Orion was convinced the forest would be most productive under their care.

"The soil is rich, the elemental energy is dense, and the Wood Elves are masters at cultivating magical plants. It will become a stable breadbasket for all of us," he added. "Caesar, Tangere—as participants in this campaign, you'll get a share of all future resources produced there."

The two men nodded, waiting for him to continue. Aerin, however, was visibly moved. Orion had essentially conquered the Forest of Nature and handed it to her as a gift.

"Caesar," Orion continued, "you can take one-third of the territory between the Forest of Nature and the Black Tower. Build your own city, develop your own domain."

A third of that land was a massive area, enough for at least three major settlements. In one cross-realm invasion, Caesar had just tripled the size of his holdings.

"Boss, that's... that's way more than I earned. But I'll take it."

Orion nodded, then turned to the last man at the table. "Tangere, the other two-thirds of that land is yours. Any objections?"

Tangere shook his head. Having been there for the entire invasion, he knew exactly how vast that territory was. This new land alone was larger than his entire existing domain.

Just as he began to process the sheer scale of his reward, Orion's voice cut in again.

"I have a second option for you, though. If you're interested."

Tangere's eyes narrowed. He had a feeling this was the real offer. "I'm listening."

"Our enemy is powerful. I'll be bringing in several demigod allies to help with the next push. We're going to take a lot more land," Orion explained. "Naturally, they'll be taking a bigger slice of the pie."

He leaned forward slightly. "If you want more than what I just offered, I suggest you integrate your armies directly into my command structure. Double down on this war."

Chapter 1062: High risk, high reward

In truth, though Orion had presented it as a choice, he already knew the answer. Tangere would pick the second option. He had to. He wanted more.

As an upper-tier legendary powerhouse, this recent expansion had pushed Tangere to the very peak of his rank. Soon, he would have to start preparing for his ascension to arch lord, a process that required immense amounts of faith and territory.

An opportunity to campaign alongside arch lords and demigods was not to be missed. Of course, the risks were enormous. That was why Orion had made him choose. When the fighting started, there was no guarantee he'd be able to protect Tangere. This is his test. Let's see his conviction.

"What would you recommend?" Tangere asked, his caution evident. He wasn't committing without getting a read from Orion first.

A playful smirk touched Orion's lips. He didn't give a straight answer. "High risk, high reward."

"I understand," Tangere said after a moment of silence. "I'll integrate my forces into your battle armies." He upped the ante. "I can mobilize another two hundred thousand Plague-thralls for the coming war." That was his limit; any more would leave his own territory vulnerable.

"Done," Orion confirmed. "In that case, we'll put your land grant on hold for now. Once the dust settles, I have a feeling you'll have earned much more."

Tangere said nothing, his expression unreadable. But Orion could see the gears turning in his deep-set eyes, already calculating the potential trajectories of the war.

Beside them, Aerin and Caesar could only manage wry smiles. They wanted in on the action, but they knew they didn't have the stats for this raid. For now, they were on the sidelines.

Titanion Realm, the city of Stoneheart.

The outer city was a chaotic symphony of life. Throngs of people from every race choked the avenues, weaving between stalls and the exotic beasts being led through the market.

But today, the usual bustle had a distinct direction. A current in the crowd flowed steadily toward the Stoneheart Horde's military encampment. The lines of applicants at the city gates stretched back for miles.

Near the back of one line stood two strangely dressed figures. They weren't wearing clothes so much as cloaks woven from reeds and grass, their faces hidden by wide-brimmed straw hats.

"Brother, are you sure we can really join the Lord's armies?" asked the younger of the two, his voice tight with anxiety. It was clearly his first time in a city like Stoneheart.

"Don't worry, little brother," the older one replied, his voice calm. "The Lord put out a recruitment order, and as Frogkin, we're aquatic. We meet the requirements." He gave his brother's shoulder a reassuring pat with a webbed hand. "Besides, we're both hero-level. They won't turn talent like us away."

The older brother passed the younger one a Blackstone coin for the entry fee—a pittance, really, not even enough to buy a loaf of bread.

"Heh, you two here for the recruitment drive?" a booming voice asked from in front of them.

They looked up to see a towering warrior of giant blood, tall and broad with long tusks jutting from his jaw. A Starveil giant, no doubt.

The older Frogkin answered politely, aware that he was speaking to one of the Lord's own kin. "Yes, sir. You as well?"

"You know it!" the giant bellowed, thumping his chest. "For the glory of my Lord!" He grinned, his expression open and friendly. "Name's Bluetusk. What do they call you?"

"I am Lokro, and this is my younger brother, Lökk," the older Frogkin replied, relieved that the giant's temperament wasn't as fearsome as the rumors suggested.

"Sir Bluetusk," Lökk mumbled, still a bit shy.

"Hah! I like the sound of that!" Bluetusk laughed, drawing stares from those nearby. "If you make it into the Stoneheart Horde, we'll be brothers in arms for real." The Frogkin brothers shrank a little under the attention.

Lokro lowered his voice. "Brother Bluetusk, do you know who the Horde is preparing to fight?"

"Beats me. Does it matter? We sign up, we follow orders."

"Ah... I see. Well, do you know what the trials will be?"

"Nope. We'll find out when we get there!"

"..."

As they shuffled forward, the unlikely trio—one Giant and two Frogkin—continued to talk, their shared journey already beginning. Bluetusk, for all his bravado, was cheerfully clueless. He was a classic example of his kind—strong, straightforward, and not burdened by complex thought. His tribe lived in the wilds and was not part of the Stoneheart Horde's inner circle.

This recruitment drive was a direct result of Marina's arrival. Orion needed new armies for his expansion across the sea, specifically an army that could unite the scattered aquatic races within his territory and draw in warriors hungry for glory.

And so, the call had gone out, drawing thousands like Lokro, Lökk, and Bluetusk to the gates of Stoneheart.

Godforsaken Land.

The invasion was in its final stages. From his undead tower, Arthas had overseen the rendering of the entire Gnasher Race, extracting the vast quantities of black gold he required. With the grim work finished, it was time for the final step: the world's annihilation.

"You may leave," his voice echoed in the minds of Soraya and Dirtclaw. "In one day, this place will be erased. It will fall into the void."

As he spoke, two wooden boxes flew from the tower. One landed before Dirtclaw, the other in front of the sand scorpion's Nest. They were gifts for seeing this through to the end. Though they were only following Orion's orders, they had shared in Arthas's risk. And Arthas, as a demigod, was generous to his loyal followers.

"Thank you!"

"Thank you for your generous gift!"

Hearing the telepathic message, Soraya emerged from her Nest and, alongside Dirtclaw, bowed deeply toward the undead tower. With a swift motion, she tore a teleportation scroll. In a flash of light, she, Dirtclaw, and the massive Nest vanished, returning to the Emerald Dream Realm.

Not long after, Arthas himself walked out of the undead tower and began the final activation of the Source Siphon Array.

Stoneheart City, inside the castle.

Orion sat motionless on his throne, his consciousness fully immersed in the Survivor's Platform. A message from Arthas had just come through.

"If anything comes up in the Silverwood Realm, talk to Alexander. I'm going into hibernation for a while."

Arthas's work in the Godforsaken Land was done.

"Understood, bro," Orion replied. "Was the black gold yield enough?"

"It's decent. But with black gold, there's no such thing as 'enough.' The more, the better."

Orion was speechless. Arthas's appetite was truly bottomless.

"Here's what you asked for."

A trade request popped up. A moment later, a fist-sized World Fragment materialized in Orion's hand. He examined the Mysterious Artifact as it pulsed with an inner light. It was an impossible object, shifting in his perception. One moment, it was a sphere of liquid light, rippling with internal currents. The next, it was a captured star, impossibly dense and brilliant.

Orion touched a finger to the space between his brows. A shimmering, mist-wreathed font of water floated up from his sea of faith, hovering over his other hand.

The Spring of Life and the World Fragments are ready,

he thought. All that's left is the Abyssal Springhead.

His mind drifted. Violet... Caelus...

After what felt like an eternity, he shook himself from his reverie and focused on the Champions Alliance public channel. Coincidentally, just as Arthas was going into hibernation, the Deputy Commander, Edward, had awakened.

[Edward]: Has Arthas or Leonidas woken up yet?

It was Alexander who replied.

[Alexander]: Arthas just went into hibernation. He overextended himself during the Godforsaken Land invasion.

[Alexander]: Leonidas is still in his metamorphosis. Hasn't stirred. His neighbors are getting restless without his presence keeping them in line.

A long pause followed as Edward processed the information. Orion kept quiet. Since Alexander was aware of the situation with Leonidas's territory, he would undoubtedly intervene if things got out of hand.

[Kraken]: Day 361 of missing Leonidas!

[Makareth]: Hah! Waiting for the Big Boss to come back and carry us all, Barnacle?

[Kraken]: I don't care about being carried. I just want to get these damn dragons off my back so I can finally go get myself an avatar.

[Isabella]: Ugh, I want an avatar too. Managing a territory is SO annoying.

With both the Deputy Commander and Alexander active, Kraken was clearly fishing for help. Isabella, on the other hand, was just venting. Her domain in the northern Dusk Continent had expanded too quickly, leaving her short on talent to manage it all.

[Edward]: I'll keep an eye on the dragons, Kraken. Focus on what you need to do.

[Kraken]: Yes, sir, Deputy Commander!

[Kraken]: Hulk, you've got the watch over the Kasenna Sea!

Seeing his handle pop up, Orion, who had been lurking, decided it was time to chime in. But before he could type, Makareth beat him to it.

[Makareth]: Wait.

[Makareth]: He mentioned you, Hulk. And told you to keep watch.

[Makareth]: Sir Hulk, I smell a war coming!

The demon was sharp. Isabella caught on just as quickly.

[Isabella]: Hulk, you didn't start another new warfront, did you?

[Hulk]: This new front isn't for you guys. You should focus on consolidating your gains from the last war.

It sounded dismissive, but it was the truth. The Silverwood Realm might have the Witch and the clown. If the two of them, both lords in the Champions Alliance, were spotted there, they would draw an insane amount of aggro and be eliminated instantly. That was why neither Arthas nor Alexander had mentioned bringing them in. The rewards in the Silverwood Realm came with a lethal price tag.

[Makareth]: I get it. Weakness is a sin.

[Isabella]: Whatever. If you think we can't handle it, just say so.

Orion ignored their griping. They were smart; they knew there had to be a good reason. But he couldn't risk discussing the Witch and the clown in a public channel.

He opened a private message.

[Hulk]: Deputy Commander, we've found traces of the Witch and the clown.

The reply was instant.

[Edward]: Report.

Orion typed out everything that had happened in the Silverwood Realm, including his current focus on repairing the Black Tower.

[Edward]: Understood.

[Edward]: Take this scroll to the Silverwood Realm. When you tear it, I will descend.

A trade request appeared, and a magic scroll was transferred to Orion's inventory. He immediately relayed it to his avatar. A wave of relief washed over him. With the Cult of Four as an enemy, he was playing things extremely carefully. Having another demigod on the board was the best insurance he could ask for.

Silverwood Realm, inside the Cult of Four's Black Tower.

At the very moment Orion was pulling the Deputy Commander into the conflict, the teleportation array in another Black Tower flared to life. A four-winged Fallen Angel and a puppet-like Death-Soul wielding a massive scythe materialized on the platform.

"Hahaha! Pontiff Jack, welcome!"

Pontiffs Yriel and Konak walked forward together to greet the newcomer.

"May the glory of the Four be with us all," the new arrival said, bowing deeply. "Pontiff Yriel, Pontiff Konak, it is an honor." His voice was cheerful and his bearing charismatic. "My dear friend, Yilaya the Witch, felt great shame for losing this tower. She personally invited me to lend my strength to our holy cause."

But as he spoke, Yriel and Konak noted the flat, mechanical undertones in his voice. This was no living being. It was a construct.

Chapter 1063: A Lack of Foundation

Despite this, neither Yriel nor Konak raised any objections. The construct before them held the same rank of Pontiff, and it was clear they were on good terms.

The four-winged Fallen Angel beside the puppet stepped forward. "Pontiff Yriel, I have failed you," she said, her voice laced with guilt as she bowed. This was the Witch, clad in her new avatar.

"This wasn't your fault," Yriel said, shaking his head. He held no grudge. "The enemy brought two demigods. The loss of the tower was not your fault." The Witch's previous avatar had been of the Nali race, a six-armed serpent-demon, the same as Yriel's own. They were kin, after all, which was one of the reasons she served under his command.

"Gentlemen! And lady," Konak boomed with a laugh, stepping in to play the host. This Black Tower was his domain now. "This is no place for such serious talk. Please, follow me. Your arrival will surely accelerate my conquest of the Silverwood Realm!"

Further north, at Augurath Sanctuary.

Orion stood at the highest point of the Black Tower and tore the magic scroll the Deputy Commander had given him. Space rippled, and a figure materialized before him—a mage clad in dusty grey robes, the air growing cold around him. An aura of necromantic power, subtle but unmistakable, clung to the avatar.

Orion's eyes widened in realization. A necromancer?

"It's me," the figure confirmed. The tone was familiar, but the voice itself was a hoarse, dark rasp, a product of the new form.

"Welcome to the Black Tower," Orion said, allowing a hint of his surprise to show. After all this time, he was finally seeing another side of his ally.

The title of necromancer was almost always synonymous with evil. This grim figure seemed a world away from the wise, grandfatherly scholar in the Valkorath Realm. I wonder if Elara would even recognize her mentor like this.

"Let me take a look," the Deputy Commander said, nodding. He closed his eyes, his senses expanding to permeate the entire structure, assessing the damage Orion had already described.

"It's not bad," he concluded after a moment. "The damage isn't critical. We can repair it." He looked at Orion. "You were lucky. The core materials for the teleportation formation are intact. I just need to re-inscribe the magical formation." He began to walk, gesturing for Orion to follow him toward the lower levels. "The guardian formation, however... that's more difficult."

They descended into the tower's depths, passing vast storage chambers still filled with the corpses of demonic monsters and the tower's former guardians—the foundation of the Cult of Four's invasion force.

"We have enough raw materials here," the Deputy Commander noted, his gaze fixed on the intricate runes etched into the floor. "But the medium for the guardians themselves has been destroyed."

The technical jargon went over Orion's head. "The medium for the guardians?"

The Deputy Commander didn't look up. "Yes. According to the schematics inscribed in this tower, it was designed to be protected by four arch lord-level guardians. You didn't kill them, did you?"

Understanding crashed down on Orion. It all clicked into place. The four arch lords Alexander had trapped, the ones he himself had finished off. By killing them, he had destroyed the very vessels the guardian formation relied on.

"Deputy Commander," Orion asked, feeling a pit form in his stomach. "What do we do now?"

"Do you have any complete arch lord corpses? With their souls intact?"

"No," Orion admitted, shaking his head. His fighting style was too destructive; most of his enemies were either sacrificed to his Ghost Dragon or utterly annihilated.

The Deputy Commander finally looked up from the runes. His statement was simple and direct: "You have much to build."

"You're right," Orion conceded immediately. The critique hit home. He had immense combat power, but he'd ascended to arch lord so quickly that he lacked the deep reserves of a true veteran. Gear, skills, unique troop sources, territory infrastructure, faith reserves... he was deficient in all the fundamentals. Not to mention the intangibles like technological development, esoteric knowledge, and political connections.

His allies—the Deputy Commander, Arthas, Leonidas, Alexander—they had been arch lords for years. In the long centuries when their personal power had plateaued, they had studied other disciplines, alien cultures, and arcane arts.

When Orion had first taken this tower, the magical runes covering its walls had been meaningless scribbles to him. Arthas, while no expert, had at least been able to identify and neutralize the most immediate threats. Every one of those actions was backed by an invisible mountain of accumulated knowledge. That was what the Deputy Commander meant. He was all power, no foundation.

"Are you certain you want to convert the demonic monster formation into a formation for Skeletal Knights?" the Deputy Commander asked, changing the subject.

As he spoke, he touched a ring on his left hand. Four motes of light shot out, landing perfectly on four key stellar points of the magical formation on the floor. They solidified into the pristine, undamaged corpses of four arch lord-level monsters. Orion stared, dumbfounded.

"My thanks, Deputy Commander," Orion said, swallowing his pride. For now, he had no choice but to accept the handout.

"You didn't answer my question."

"Is there a reason I shouldn't?" Orion asked, sensing there was more to it. "Are the demonic monsters better than Skeletal Knights?"

"The tower's conversion matrix is already configured for three types of demonic monsters: Cyclopes, Red-Eyed Ghouls, and Mist Wraiths," the Deputy Commander explained, his attention already returning to the runes on the surrounding walls. "Compared to your single-minded request for Skeletal Knights, the Cult of Four's lineup is more balanced and far more efficient to produce. My recommendation is to alter just one of the production lines to create your knights. It's easier for me, and it gives you more strategic options."

He ran a hand over the glowing glyphs, a look of pure fascination on his face. Say what you will about the Cult of Four's morality, but their Black Towers were masterpieces of magical engineering. The arcane knowledge woven into their walls was so complex that even he would need a great deal of time to fully comprehend it.

Chapter 1064: Before the Storm

"Deputy Commander, if we keep the tower's original monster conversion types, are there any security risks? Any backdoors?" The Black Tower was a product of the Cult of Four. If Orion was going to make it a mobile war fortress for the Stoneheart Horde, he had to be certain it was clean.

The Deputy Commander glanced up at him, and his look seemed to say, Are you questioning my expertise?

"No," he said curtly. "The demonic monster conversion formation contains the mental imprint of the tower's original master. I will erase their imprint and replace it with yours. From now on, every monster converted will be stamped with your mark. There will be no possibility of them being turned against you."

Orion was, for all intents and purposes, magically illiterate. Seeing his confusion, the Deputy Commander gave him a simplified explanation of the process.

"Then I'll choose to remove the Cyclopes," Orion said with a slightly embarrassed smile. He quickly regained his composure and made the call. "We'll keep the Red-Eyed Ghouls and Mist Wraiths."

"Mm," the Deputy Commander grunted, already turning his full attention back to the magical formation.

Orion, meanwhile, was running a cost-benefit analysis in his head. Demonic monsters were, at their core, cannon fodder. The ones that had invaded the Forest of Nature were only special because the

Witch had empowered them with her emotional plague. That was the real weapon that had broken the Wood Elf race.

And his Stoneheart Horde was not short on cannon fodder. His undead, sand scorpion, and cave spider armies all filled that role perfectly, and they had synergy. He chose to scrap the Cyclopes because they were resource hogs—too clumsy and stupid to be useful for anything other than absorbing damage on a frontline charge.

The other two, however, offered unique utility his forces lacked. Ghouls had a keen sense of smell, making them excellent trackers.

The Mist Wraiths were even more valuable. Until Demon Makareth's promised Shadow-fiends arrived and his own succubus scouts were more numerous, the Wraiths would be his best option for intelligence gathering and assassination.

Adding his own Skeletal Knights into that mix? For his purposes, the Black Tower's new configuration would be far more effective than the one the Cult of Four had designed.

With the decision made, Orion's role was reduced to that of a gofer, running errands and handing over materials. The real show belonged to the Deputy Commander.

Titanion Realm, Stoneheart City.

In the manicured gardens of a lavish manor in the inner city stood a crude, sprawling tent made of stitched beast hides. This was Rendall's residence. He preferred the tent he had lived in for most of his life to the more civilized and luxurious palace.

Inside, his family was gathered. Rendall, Ursa, and Steelblade sat in a circle, while a gaggle of giant younglings chased each other around with wooden swords.

"A toast!" Rendall roared, raising his cup. "When you get to the barracks tomorrow, kill many enemies! Bring more glory to the Tribe!"

Both Rendall and Ursa were on the deployment list. Rendall was shipping out for the campaign to conquer the overseas islands, while Ursa was descending into the Silverwood Realm for the cross-realm invasion.

"Daddy, take care of yourself," Ursa said, downing her drink before refilling her father's and her son's cups. She raised her own again in a toast to Rendall. Her father had volunteered for this campaign; no one could have stopped him. Ursa knew why. He was chasing that sliver of hope, the chance to ascend and become a lord himself. Warden Dirtclaw's success had lit a fire in the hearts of all the old veterans. They had clawed their way up from the battlefield, and they believed that if Dirtclaw could walk that path, so could they.

"Hahaha! You're the one who needs to be careful! Your old man is still stronger than you!" Rendall laughed, clapping Ursa proudly on the shoulder. His daughter was now late-stage Alpha-level, her power nearly rivaling that of the elders.

"Grandfather, Mom, I toast you both," Steelblade said, raising his cup. "May you return victorious, and stronger than ever."

"Heh, you're a good lad," Rendall beamed. "You'll be greater than both of us one day. Keep working hard. Try to catch up to Rolan."

Steelblade nodded solemnly. Surpassing Rolan was his ultimate goal.

"Enough war talk!" Rendall declared. "It's rare we're all together. Let's drink until we can't stand!"

The outer city walls.

On the high ramparts of Stoneheart, two tall, dark figures stood silhouetted against the faint glow of the city below. Onyx and Rockwell were long past the need to stand guard duty, but tonight, they had both been drawn to the wall. Aside from the central castle, it was the highest point in the city—the only place where they could see further, beyond the horizon.

"I remember standing on the sacred mountain of our homeland, looking down at the Black Forest," Onyx's voice was deep and distant, as if echoing across time. "The forest seemed so vast. I used to wonder how long it would take me to conquer it all. At first, I thought ten years. Then it became fifty. Finally, a hundred."

Though magic lamps lit the ramparts, Rockwell could only see a hazy silhouette when he turned to look at Onyx. In that moment, his mentor felt impossibly far away.

"I didn't understand why my estimate kept getting longer," Onyx continued. "But eventually I did. I understood more, I became more rational... and I became more hesitant."

Rockwell couldn't picture a young Onyx. For as long as he could remember, the prophet had been as he was now—either teaching him or meditating alone on a mountaintop.

"Prophet, do you miss the Black Forest?" Rockwell asked, trying to find common ground. "To be honest, I miss it a little, too." He figured that if his mentor was talking about the past, he must be feeling homesick.

"You must work hard, Rockwell," Onyx said, his thoughts elsewhere. "I believe you can lead the obsidian golems to a brilliant future."

"You forget, Prophet. I'm not the lord anymore. Gort is," Rockwell said with a small laugh.

Onyx shook his head, not bothering to argue the point. He knew that regardless of who held the title, the one who truly led the Tribe to glory would always be the strongest.

Just as if Orion were to cede his throne to Pallas tomorrow, everyone would still know that the true king of the Stoneheart Horde was Orion.

Chapter 1065: The Clown's Gambit

"I'm heading to the battlefield tomorrow," Onyx said suddenly, his voice cutting through the quiet of the night. "I'm not coming back until I've become a lord."

It was his vow, his unbreakable will. It didn't matter where the battle was or who the enemy was. His mind was set.

After a long silence, Rockwell followed his mentor's gaze toward the distant horizon. "We'll be waiting for you, Prophet," he replied softly.

That night, in the countless corners of the city, some reveled, some polished their armor, some sharpened their blades, and others shared a final meal with their families.

Silverwood Realm, Augurath Sanctuary.

Under the Deputy Commander's tireless efforts, the Black Tower's self-repair functions had finally reactivated. The gaping, light-spewing hole in the tower's roof, a scar left by Orion, was now seamlessly sealed, leaving no trace of the damage.

One day, as Orion stood beside the Deputy Commander, trying to learn what he could about the magical formation, a demigod phantom materialized next to him without a sound, making him jump.

"Alexander! Can you please not do that? You nearly gave me a heart attack."

Alexander glanced at the Flame of Will that had already sprung into Orion's hand and remained utterly unfazed.

"Is there news?" the Deputy Commander asked, not looking up from his work. He knew Alexander better than Orion did; he wouldn't show up without a reason.

"The other Black Tower to the south is on the move," Alexander said, his voice cold. "They're driving a massive horde of demonic monsters north." He paused. "Judging by their pace, they're coming for us."

A palpable killing intent emanated from the phantom.

“The clown has arrived.”

That explained the murderous aura. The news made both the Deputy Commander and Orion narrow their eyes.

“However,” Alexander added, after another dramatic beat, “it’s just an avatar.”

The tension that had seized Orion and the Deputy Commander instantly dissipated.

“Bro, would you stop talking in cliffhangers?” Orion snapped, feeling the urge to punch something. The emotional whiplash was infuriating. He decided against it. He probably couldn’t beat Alexander anyway. “And where did you get this intel?”

“I recorded the signature of that particular avatar a long time ago.”

“If the clown’s avatar is here, the Witch’s has likely descended as well,” the Deputy Commander muttered, his head still bowed over the magical formation as if he hadn’t heard Alexander’s explanation. “They know we’ve arrived.”

Orion, however, fell into thought. Alexander’s words made one thing clear: the clown was smart. And judging by the demigods’ reactions, he was a threat they took very seriously.

“They’re coming for us,” Alexander continued, ignoring the others as he voiced his own assessment. “They either want to kill us, or they want information from us. Otherwise, the clown wouldn’t risk deploying such a powerful avatar. It’s bait.”

“Bait?” Orion finally looked up. “Bro, do we look like fish to you?”

“I don’t. You do,” Alexander stated flatly.

The deadpan humor actually made Orion let out a short, awkward laugh.

“So they’re fishing,” the Deputy Commander mused, his focus still on his work. Magic gathered at his fingertips, a tool of pure energy scribing complex runes in the air. The glowing symbols dove into the ground like a school of fish. “Who are they trying to catch? Hulk? Leonidas? Arthas? You and me? Or perhaps the commander himself?”

A final torrent of power flooded from his hand into the stone slabs at his feet. The magical formation blazed, and a holographic sphere of pure magic coalesced in the air above it, shining with unbearable light. When the light subsided, the formation went dormant.

At the four cardinal points of the chamber, four figures now stood in silent vigil. They were towering, obsidian-skinned Demons, high-tier arch lords radiating an aura of ancient malice. Their presence was even more potent than the guardians of the tower that had once imprisoned the Deathly Soul-Reaper.

“The guardian formation is repaired,” the Deputy Commander announced, finally straightening up to face Orion and Alexander. “We need to pick up the pace.” The message was clear: it was time to mobilize the troops.

Alexander nodded and Orion gave his assent. Just as the two phantoms were about to depart for the top of the tower to rest, Orion stopped them.

“Deputy Commander, Alexander, I want to recommend a new member for the Champions Alliance.”

They paused.

“His name is Tangere, a plague lord. He’s committing two hundred thousand Plague-thralls to my command for this war. If it’s possible, I’d like you to have him vetted in secret.”

Orion had been thinking about it for a while. Tangere seemed like a good fit for their group. He was still in his probationary period, but Orion wanted to give them a heads-up. Besides, having the demigods run a background check would give him greater peace of mind.

“Understood,” the Deputy Commander said.

“I’ll arrange it,” Alexander added.

With that, their phantoms dissipated and reappeared on the top floor, where a focusing array would help conserve their divine power.

Recommending Tangere was a carefully considered decision. Of the Survivors Orion knew, Caesar, Tangere, and Scarecrow were the most suitable. Caesar had the best character by far; he was a genuinely good person. But his righteousness made him a poor fit for the Champions Alliance. Orion liked and trusted Caesar as a friend, but bringing him into their fold would be a disservice, making his path far more difficult.

The Alliance operated on a chaotic neutral axis. Caesar’s innate goodness would become a liability, a fatal weakness that others could exploit. In Orion’s mind, Caesar was the perfect ally for crusades against chaotic evil factions and demonic planes. But ask him to invade a lawful good world for the sake of resources? A man like that would hesitate. And in their line of work, hesitation was a death sentence. Everyone loves a hero, but in this business, heroes get themselves and their friends killed. Both Aerin and Caesar shared that compassionate flaw.

Orion rubbed his temples, shaking off the thoughts. He walked to the window, gazing down at the skeletons in the plaza below, already digging trenches and building fortifications. The Cult of Four wasn’t giving them any time to breathe. Augurath Sanctuary would have to be forged in the fires of the coming war.

The teleportation array is repaired, but one undead army is not going to be enough.

Chapter 1066: The Gathering of Armies

Emerald Dream Realm, the city of Lorelia.

“To maintain the peace of the world, I will vanquish them in my master’s name!”

“For the horde! To spread the glory of my master across all the realms, we will crush them!”

“For Soraya’s gifts, and for the eternal friendship of Lorelia and Dirtclaw, we will annihilate them!”

Soraya couldn’t help but laugh. Perched atop Dirtclaw’s back, Lorelia was a whirlwind of adorable seriousness, brandishing the longsword Orion had given her. She pointed it toward the sky, shouting slogans as she reviewed her little spiders, who were marching in an orderly line into their transport Nest.

Ever since receiving Orion’s order to join the battle in another realm, Lorelia had been vibrating with excitement, and she had dragged Soraya into this little departure ceremony. The most ridiculous part was Dirtclaw, the shameless Hell-Drake Hound, who was gleefully playing along, barking out his own versions of her chants.

“For the eternal friendship of Lady Lorelia and Dirtclaw, we will annihilate them!”

“For the horde! For Lady Lorelia! For my Lord, we will annihilate them!”

The two of them chanted until they both burst out laughing.

“Lady Soraya, you just wait! Lorelia will bring you back lots and lots of presents!” Lorelia promised, her face beaming.

During her time assisting Arthas in the Godforsaken Land, Soraya had received a parting gift—two strange fruits that could enhance one’s power. Upon returning to Lorelia, she had eaten one, ascending to the rank of an upper-tier legendary powerhouse.

She gave the second to Lorelia, who advanced to a middle-tier lord. Dirtclaw, her loyal mount, had also reached the upper-tier legendary rank. Arthas, the demigod boss, was nothing if not generous.

Dirtclaw was itching for a real fight. Guarding the sand scorpions Nest in the Godforsaken Land hadn’t been nearly exciting enough. Now, he was more than ready to accompany Lorelia to the Silverwood Realm.

“Be careful,” Soraya said, her tone shifting from amusement to seriousness. This was for Lorelia. Then, she looked at the massive hound. “Protect her.”

To the south, the city of Marina.

The assembly of the Stoneheart Horde’s five regular armies, plus one newly recruited legion, had not gone unnoticed. The six armies massing in Marina City, combined with the fleet of Sea-Devouring Warships moored in the harbor, had set tongues wagging among citizens and spies alike.

“Has a war started?”

“Which faction is stupid enough to pick a fight with the Stoneheart Horde?”

“There are so many warships... are we going to war with the Sea Race again?”

“That can’t be right. There’s been no official war declaration within the Horde.”

“It’s strange. If there was a war, the city alarms would be sounding. We’d be on high alert...”

Rumors swirled through the streets, passed between clueless newcomers, high-ranking Tribe members with connections, and grizzled veterans who had survived the first war for this very city. No one knew what was going on, but one thing was certain: the Stoneheart Horde was on the move. And that critical piece of intelligence was already on its way back to the Sea-Drake race.

In the military camp near the port, Rendall looked up at the fortress carved into the cliffside above. “See that? Another great city of our Stoneheart Horde!” he boomed with pride.

Marina, the city’s lord and guardian, stood on the cliff’s edge, her powerful aura blanketing the city below—a silent reassurance to all that they were watched over by their lord.

“I was stationed here for a while, back in the day,” Drakthul said, standing beside Rendall. “It’s changed so much.” They weren’t just looking at Marina; they were looking at what she represented—a true lord of their people.

Elsewhere in the camp, the mood was far more somber. For Beyn and Torba, this place held a painful memory. Otho, their brother-in-arms, had died here during the brutal early days of the city’s construction, fighting the Sea Race.

Now, Dace was in the Silverwood Realm, and they were being deployed overseas with Marina. The four guards who were supposed to stand by Orion’s side were scattered, one to the grave. Returning to this place, they felt no excitement.

“Dace was right,” Beyn said, his gaze fixed on the western horizon, where Otho’s memorial stood. “This separation is temporary. It’s so we can become strong enough to stand by His Majesty’s side again, to follow our king even further.”

“The way we are now, we don’t deserve the title of ‘guard’,” Torba added, his voice low. No one else in the Tribe would say it, but they knew the truth. Did an arch lord like Orion really need four Alpha-level guards? The answer was no.

That’s why they had volunteered to leave, to join the armies, to throw themselves onto the battlefield. It was the only way they could one day earn the right to return to his side.

“We have to try,” Beyn said, clapping Torba on the shoulder. “If Dirtclaw can endure it, if he can face those battles, so can we.”

For now, all they had was each other.

Silverwood Realm, Augurath Sanctuary.

After the Black Tower's teleportation array was repaired, the first forces to arrive were not Orion's, but the Deputy Commander's.

It was the first time Orion had ever seen his ally's formal armies, and they were a sight to behold. There were two legions. One was a force of melee troops, clad head-to-toe in immaculate silver plate, divided into disciplined phalanxes of warriors and knights.

The other army was composed entirely of mages. They were organized into three distinct wings, identifiable by the color of their robes. Black for the necromancers, crimson for the destructive elementalists, and pure white for the abjurers and enhancers who specialized in support magic.

As Orion stared at the ten-thousand-strong mage army, a wave of pure, unadulterated envy washed over him. He was practically drooling.

"Deputy Commander, could I possibly..."

"No."

The arrival of his troops had drawn the Deputy Commander down from the sixth floor of the tower. He cut Orion off before he could even finish the question.

"Don't even think about it," Alexander's phantom said, appearing beside Orion. The fact that the Deputy Commander had deployed his main forces told Alexander everything he needed to know. This wasn't a casual intervention. He was taking the threat of the clown, the Witch, and the Cult of Four with the utmost seriousness.

Chapter 1067: There is Only War

The demonic monsters mass-produced by the Black Tower were, to the Cult of Four, nothing more than cannon fodder. Their true, professional armies had yet to even appear on the battlefield. The Deputy Commander's mage legions were here for them.

"Bro, what are you trying to say...?"

“That silver-clad guardian army won’t be joining the main battles,” Alexander explained. “Their sole purpose is to protect the mages.”

“What about your shadow army, then?”

“That’s different.”

Alexander didn’t elaborate, leaving Orion to stew in his own questions. It seemed the Deputy Commander’s forces didn’t fully trust Orion or Alexander to protect them.

“You don’t understand. It’s their own protection mechanism,” Alexander clarified, sensing Orion’s thoughts. “It has nothing to do with trust. They simply value their own lives more than most.”

With those final words, the phantom vanished, leaving Orion alone to ponder their meaning.

The next day, the teleportation array in the Black Tower flared to life again and again. Onyx, Dace, Earthshaker, Gronthar, Thundar, Ursa, and the six regular armies of the Stoneheart Horde had arrived.

Orion stood waiting in the plaza, personally welcoming his subordinates.

“My lord, Onyx reports for duty!”

“My lord, Dace reports for duty!”

“My lord, Earthshaker reports for duty!”

...

One by one, every commander of Alpha-level or higher came before him, their faces alight with a fanatical devotion. They couldn't tell the difference between his main body and this mirror avatar; all they knew was that the man standing before them was the Giant King of the Stoneheart Horde, the pillar of their strength and the vessel of their collective glory.

Orion greeted each of them with a warm smile, moving down the line.

"Prophet, it's been too long."

"Dace, well done. You've reached the peak of the Alpha-tier."

"And Thundar, that youngling of yours, Degar. I have high hopes for him."

"Earthshaker, I've received intel that the minotaurs have a presence in the Silverwood Realm. I expect you to defeat their chieftains and unite the realm's tribes under our banner."

It was rare to see their king so approachable. It reminded the oldest among them of the early days, back when they were a small tribe fighting for survival in the Black Forest.

Caught up in the emotion of the reunion, Orion felt a surge of passion. "This is a new battlefield!" he declared, his voice ringing across the plaza. "For the future of the horde, for a greater world for our younglings to inherit, we will fight and we will conquer! From this moment on, we are the masters of this land!"

His impromptu speech ignited a fire in his commanders.

"My lord, wherever your blade points, we will follow!"

"This is our territory now!"

"We are the masters here!"

Their blood was hot, their fighting spirit soaring. Orion said no more, simply ordering them to assemble their armies and prepare for battle.

After his commanders departed, Orion remained by the portal. Once the last of the horde's armies had come through, Lorelia and Dirtclaw from the Emerald Dream Realm arrived.

"Master! Lorelia missed you so much!"

The moment she saw him, she launched herself through the air. Orion simply extended a finger and pressed it gently against her forehead, stopping her mid-flight.

"Be serious," he said, his tone firm but not unkind. "This is a warzone."

Her eyes immediately welled with tears. Pouting, she trotted over and stood beside him, her lower lip trembling.

Dirtclaw then stepped forward, bowing so low his snout nearly touched the ground. "My lord! Your most faithful servant, Dirtclaw of the Hell-Drake Hounds, offers you his greetings and his eternal devotion!" As always, the sycophancy was laid on thick.

"Upper-tier legendary," Orion noted, genuinely surprised. "Very good." It seemed Dirtclaw had profited handsomely from his time with Arthas in the Godforsaken Land.

"The battle is not far off. Stay sharp," Orion said, shifting his attention. He handed a storage pouch to Lorelia, filled with the resources allocated to her for the campaign. In this war, the two biggest resource sinks would be the Black Tower and Lorelia herself.

He had summoned her because the tower's conversion process had a fatal flaw: it required living sacrifices.

While there were still some slaves in reserve, that supply wouldn't last forever. In a war of unknown duration, bringing in a broodmother was a strategic necessity. He was responsible for the entire campaign, and for every warrior fighting in it.

After settling in Lorelia and Dirtclaw, Orion went to the sixth floor of the tower. Alexander was there, his phantom staring out a window into the distance.

“Bro, what are your orders?” Orion asked, getting straight to the point. He knew Alexander well enough by now; he wouldn’t be waiting here unless he had something to say.

Alexander turned, his expression serious. “A master of attack is one whose enemy does not know what to defend. A master of defense is one whose enemy does not know what to attack.”

Orion understood immediately. Alexander was telling him not to play by the book.

“Alright, cut the philosophy, bro,” Orion said, a grin touching his lips. “Just tell me what to do. You’ve got command.” He had no ego about it; Alexander was a demigod with vastly more experience.

“An army’s strength is in its morale; a general’s strength is in his will,” Alexander continued.

The meaning was clear. The plan clicked into place for Orion.

“Bro, you could have just said you don’t want to play defense and would rather take the fight to them,” Orion deadpanned. A year ago, he would never have dared to be so familiar. But after everything they’d been through—the Crucible, the Slaughter Space, Dragonflame Island—he’d grown close to this quietly intense demigod.

“It’s not that simple,” Alexander replied, his voice dropping. An aura of glacial fury radiated from the phantom, so intense that Orion felt the temperature in the room drop.

“I will use our actions, our morale, to send a message to those two traitors. To let them know that we are here.”

His eyes seemed to burn with a cold fire. “I will show the clown and the Witch that against us, there is no strategy, no retreat. There is only war.”

Chapter 1068: The Bait is Cast

"Besides," Alexander's voice shed the last of its killing intent, replaced by cold logic. "You don't have time to build fortifications. And razing this land to scorched earth isn't what you want, either."

The logic was undeniable. Pushing the battlefield far away from the Black Tower was the only way to buy the time he needed to build a proper defense. The more time he could secure, the stronger their foothold would become.

"Unleash the demonic monsters you've converted," Alexander instructed. "Send them south to intercept the enemy's advance. Let the war erupt in their territory, not ours."

Using their own tactics against them. There's a sadistic genius to it, Orion thought, studying Alexander's deep-set eyes. He was beginning to see a vicious streak of irony hidden in his ally's soul.

"The clown wants to go fishing, doesn't he?" Alexander continued. "Fine. Let's crash his fishing trip. I'm curious to see who ends up on whose hook."

Orion's eyes lit up. He loved the sound of that. "Bro, who's the bait?"

He regretted the question the moment it left his lips. Alexander was already staring at him, an intense, unblinking gaze that made the answer obvious. Among the members of the Champions Alliance present, he was the perfect lure.

"Excellent. You're self-aware."

The words hit him like a physical blow.

"But you won't be the only piece on the board," Alexander elaborated, his voice turning cold again as the killing intent began to bleed back into his tone. "We will continuously raise the stakes. We will blunt their advance, then reverse it. We will push the front line all the way back to their Black Tower and set their doorstep on fire. Only then will the real powers in the Cult of Four show themselves. When enough

of their lords and arch lords die, the demigods will be forced to intervene. And if the situation becomes desperate enough, the clown and the Witch will have no choice but to enter the field themselves."

It was a plan that was simple in concept and brutally difficult in execution. To kill the Cult's commanders, the bait had to be strong enough to slaughter anyone and anything that stood in its way, short of a demigod.

In other words, Alexander had complete faith in Orion's ability to do just that.

"Even if they only send avatars, we will tear them to pieces," Alexander hissed. "We will kill every single one they send. We will slaughter them until their courage fails, until their morale shatters, until their very will is broken."

Orion's throat felt dry. He swallowed hard. Alexander's ruthlessness was chilling. For a powerhouse at the peak of the arch lord tier, poised to ascend to demigod, a psychological blow like a shattered will or a loss of nerve could be a fatal, permanent wound, making advancement impossible. Alexander didn't just want to kill them; he wanted to cripple them forever.

He's terrifying.

"In that case, we shouldn't waste any time," Orion said, taking a deep breath. The first battle would set the tone for the entire war. As the bait, he had to be the first one on the field. "I'll leave things here to you, bro."

"Go," Alexander said. "My shadow army is already in position."

Orion nodded once, then turned and descended from the tower.

Titanion Realm, the Trident Sea.

The closest Sea-Drake race outpost to the Stoneheart Horde's territory was the Azurecrown Royal Harbor. Since the two powers had formed their alliance, the third prince, Voryn, had been stationed there to oversee the garrison and manage all trade affairs.

At that moment, Prince Voryn was lounging in his palace of iridescent coral, watching mermaids trace patterns in the water and sea-nymphae perform their hypnotic dances.

The tranquil, decadent scene was shattered when a Merfolk warrior burst into the hall, rushing to deliver a sealed message.

Voryn shot the panicked messenger an annoyed glare before taking the missive. As he read its contents, his leisurely expression vanished. He shot up from his pearl-encrusted throne.

"Everyone, out!"

At his sharp command, the dancers vanished into the currents, followed by the now-trembling messenger. Voryn paced frantically before his throne, his mind racing. Unable to decide, he retrieved a small seahorse from a pouch at his belt.

The creature spat out a shimmering silver bubble of water. Voryn used his transcendent power to stabilize the bubble, then initiated a secret technique to contact his father, the Sea-Drake king.

"What is it?" a voice finally grumbled from within the bubble, heavy with the annoyance of being awakened from a deep slumber.

"Father, the Stoneheart Horde is on the move!" Voryn said, his voice tight with panic. "They've launched a massive fleet of Sea-Devouring Warships and Ocean Hunters. I don't know if their target is my Azurecrown Royal Harbor. Our agents in Marina City tried to approach their military camp and were captured. We don't know if they're alive or dead. Father, are they breaking the treaty? Is this war?"

"Calm yourself," King Neptor's voice boomed from the bubble. Voryn was his favored son, and this panicked display was a deep disappointment. "Who told you their fleet is aimed at us?"

"But Father, I—"

"In your recent trade dealings," the king cut him off, "has anything unusual occurred? Have our people been shorting their shipments? Lowering the quality of goods? Has there been a conflict between our people and theirs?" Though they were questions, a cold anger was already brewing in the king's tone.

"No, none of those things!" Voryn insisted, shaking his head. He knew how important the trade was. He had been meticulous. "Father, I swear to you, I personally inspect every shipment. We have the Stoneheart Horde's own contractual ledgers as proof. And there has been no violence. The agents I chose for Marina City are all level-headed. I instructed them to report any issues to me directly so I could resolve them."

The king believed him. A long silence followed. Voryn waited, his heart pounding in his chest.

"This fleet," the king's voice finally returned, "is the Giant King leading it himself?"

"No. It's a lord named Marina."

"Marina?" the king mused. "Why does that name sound familiar?"

Chapter 1069: City of Miracles

The Sea-Drake king murmured the name to himself. He was sure he'd heard it somewhere before, but the memory wouldn't surface.

"Rest assured," the king said, his voice firm with conviction, "as long as the Giant King is not leading the expedition himself, their target is not the Sea-Drake race."

He had no doubt about it. The Sea-Drakes were a major faction with their own arch lord. Without Orion at the helm, any force the Stoneheart Horde could muster would simply be swallowed by the sea.

"Then who is their target, Father?" Voryn pressed. "Could it be... Aenari Island?"

A heavy silence hung in the water between them. The king had all but forgotten about the island. Gifting it to the Stoneheart Horde had been a calculated move to push a problem onto his new neighbors. When Orion made no move to claim it, the king assumed he'd seen through the ploy, and the matter was never mentioned again.

"Send an envoy to their fleet," the king commanded, his mind already formulating a plan. "Tell them that as their partners, in the spirit of our friendship, the Sea-Drake race would be honored to offer our assistance. Provide them with detailed charts of the surrounding waters. Offer them guides." He paused. "Under the guise of this aid, discover if their destination is indeed Aenari Island."

Voryn's eyes lit up, filled with admiration for his father's cunning. "And if they refuse, Father?"

"This is their first major naval expedition. They won't refuse," the king said with the ingrained superiority of a sea-dweller discussing a land-dweller. "But if they do, dispatch a small squadron to follow them. Openly. From a great distance. Make it clear you are observing, not threatening. Do not get close enough to provoke them. It is a statement of our presence. If the one leading the fleet is intelligent, they will understand."

After a moment's thought, he added a few more details, and Voryn, his earlier panic replaced by his father's confidence, hurried off to make the arrangements.

In a deep, unknown trench of the sea, the king did not return to his slumber.

An attack on Aenari Island... does this mean the Stoneheart Horde has hit a developmental bottleneck? Are they expanding to meet new needs? he mused. Has the Giant King himself hit a ceiling, forcing him to conquer new territory to harvest more faith?

He considered the target. Aenari Island was a forsaken place, a penal colony for the dregs of every race. Can the horde actually conquer it? Where does their confidence come from? And should we, the Sea-Drake race, get involved?

He immediately shook his head. The Sea Race exiles on that island, criminal though they were, still had families and clans in the deep. Intervening would inevitably drag his kingdom into conflicts with other undersea powers. It was not in his people's best interest. No. We will pretend we see nothing.

Having made his decision, he activated the communication bubble again and left a final, concise message for his son. "If you confirm their target is Aenari Island, recall the squadron immediately."

Silverwood Realm, the Hydraea Plains.

This land had once belonged to the moon giants. After the demonic invasion, it had fallen to the Cult of Four. Now, with Orion's capture of the Black Tower, it was technically Stoneheart Horde territory—though that claim was tenuous at best.

At this moment, Orion looked like a mythic shepherd, driving his flock of demonic monsters steadily south across the vast plains. His "sheepdog," Dirtclaw, trotted eagerly beneath him. The hell-hound had enthusiastically volunteered for the role of mount after Orion had asked, "Do you dare ride with me to the front lines?"

"Your two boys," Orion said conversationally as they moved, "I've arranged for them to study under Elara and Pallas."

"Lilith will look after them as if they were her own," he continued, directing the monstrous horde with his will. "They will receive the best education and cultivation resources we can provide."

"Praise be to the Queen!" Dirtclaw barked, his voice filled with genuine joy. "And praise to Princess Elara and Prince Pallas! For Anubis and Wepwawet to serve them... it is the greatest honor imaginable!"

He was ecstatic. This was the reward for his promotion to Warden and his service in the Godforsaken Land. Under normal circumstances, his sons would never have been granted such a privilege. He had tried many times before his ascension to get his boys into the royal household, but he and his sons had been deemed unworthy.

Only after he became a lord, securing the future of his bloodline, had Anubis and Wepwawet truly earned Orion's notice. It was an unspoken acknowledgment: in Orion's eyes, his sons now had the potential to reach, at minimum, the Legendary level. The thought made the hellfire wreathing Dirtclaw's body burn a little brighter.

"My lord," Dirtclaw said after a moment, "I would ask a favor of you."

"Speak."

"I wish to rename the city you granted me. I want to call it the City of Miracles."

Orion was intrigued. "Why?"

"My lord, for a gnoll like me to have risen to this height... to my people, it is a miracle," Dirtclaw said, a hint of pride in his voice. "It may sound foolish to you, but the story of my success has spread throughout the entire gnoll race, and even across the horde." He let out an embarrassed chuckle. "I know my 'miracles' are nothing compared to yours, my lord. But if that is what they believe, then I want to use it. I want to rename my fiefdom the City of Miracles to inspire my people. I want them to believe that one day, more like me can rise from that city."

Orion listened, and for the first time, he saw past the fawning sycophant. He saw a leader—one who was ruthless to his enemies, but deeply loyal to his master, and fiercely devoted to his family and his tribe. In that moment, Orion felt a surge of genuine respect for him.

"Granted."

AWOOOO!

At Orion's consent, Dirtclaw threw his head back and let out a triumphant howl, his paws pounding against the earth as he broke into a joyful, loping run.

Chapter 1070: Strategic Alliances

The Black Tower was a hive of activity. With Orion now acting as bait on the front lines, the entire fortress had roared to life. Fueled by a steady stream of resources, the conversion chambers churned out a constant flow of demonic monsters.

Under Clymene's command, the undead armies swelled their ranks. Even Tangere's two hundred thousand Plague-thralls had arrived and were now amassed in the plaza outside, awaiting their orders.

On the sixth floor of the tower, two phantoms materialized. The Deputy Commander, having finished his work on the magical formation, appeared beside Alexander, following his gaze down at the mustering forces.

"The quantity and quality of the undead army are insufficient," the Deputy Commander stated, identifying their primary weakness with a single glance. Clymene had summoned two armies a million strong, but they were composed mostly of basic skeleton warriors—pure cannon fodder.

"Before he went into hibernation, Arthas transferred command of some of his subordinates to me," Alexander explained. "We lack the proper summoning materials here in the Silverwood Realm, so I've had them gather power in their own graveyards. When their numbers are sufficient, they will teleport here en masse."

The Deputy Commander nodded. While the Black Tower had materials, they were earmarked for converting demonic monsters and the new Skeletal Knights. Summoning the undead legions here from scratch would waste precious time and create a window of vulnerability.

"Are there any other surviving factions in the region?" the Deputy Commander asked, his gaze drifting toward the distant horizon.

From a certain point of view, the native inhabitants of this realm were their de facto allies against the Cult of Four. If any organized resistance remained, they likely had a demigod of their own. The Champions Alliance was more than willing to extend a hand to such a group.

More importantly, local allies could hit the Cult of Four from a second front, catching them in a pincer. That was what the Deputy Commander truly wanted.

"We've found traces of gnolls to the east, but the Fury tribe the Wood Elves spoke of is nowhere to be found," Alexander reported. He waved a hand, and a holographic map of the surrounding area shimmered into existence. "In the Kiso Mountains to the west, Rocs still circle the peaks. It seems the Cult's influence hasn't reached that far yet."

He pointed to a location south of their position. "There is also a place called Staghelm City. I can sense a demigod's aura there. And even further south is a kingdom of the Nightwing race, centered around a city called Auri, but my scouts have yet to return with detailed intel."

He sighed. "Time is short. Our intelligence is incomplete. But it's clear that a portion of this world's elite are still fighting." He paused, a thoughtful frown on his face. "What I don't understand is, with so many Survivors here, why haven't they united against the Cult of Four?"

The Deputy Commander stared at the map, then tapped two locations: the western mountains of the Roc-blooded race and the southern Staghelm City. "Can you contact them?"

His tone was certain. "To have survived this long, their leadership must be intelligent. Extend an offer of alliance. I'm confident they will accept."

The Cult of Four was a tsunami; those left standing were either the strongest rocks or the cleverest fish. "Let them know we have the strength to confront the Cult head-on. All they need to do is harass the enemy's flank and not get in our way."

Alexander agreed. Even if the locals refused, it was unlikely they would side with the Cult. If they were cautious, they would simply keep their distance and let the two sides tear each other apart.

"I will go myself," Alexander said. His presence as a demigod would lend weight and sincerity to the offer.

"Staghelm is the priority," the Deputy Commander added, a ruthless edge creeping into his voice, a hint of the necromancer beneath the wise leader. "If they agree, they can stab those bastards in the back." When it came to the Cult of Four, to traitors, his usual tolerance vanished.

"My owls are already in the air," Alexander replied. "A rough world map will be sent to you shortly. But you'll need to send out explorers to confirm which factions still exist."

It was their usual dynamic. As the two bosses strategized, a new wave of demonic monsters flowed out from the tower, followed by a legion of undead and Tangere's Plague-thralls. From the tower's peak, it looked like a roiling tide of cannon fodder, crashing south across the plains.

To the south, on the Hydraea Plains.

This fertile grassland had once been the domain of the moon giants. During the day, the sky was a vast, cloudless blue. At night, a brilliant moon hung in the sky, its light cascading down like a liquid river, shattering into a million points of starlight on the grass.

The sight was breathtaking. And then, the howls of the demonic monsters would begin, and the tranquil beauty would be torn to shreds.

"The elements are rich, and the moonlight is gentle," Dirtclaw remarked from his position beside Orion on a low hill. "This is the second-best world Dirtclaw has ever seen."

"Second best?"

"Hehe, my lord, for a gnoll, nothing beats the Emerald Dream Realm," he said, his tail thumping against the ground. "There, my people can grow stronger just by sleeping! For the Stoneheart Horde to have conquered half of the Dusk Continent... it was the wisest, most brilliant decision ever made! My lord, may your glory and the Tribe's majesty pierce the veil between worlds and shine upon countless realms like that one!"

Dirtclaw turned his head, his eyes glowing with fanaticism as he stared up at the great figure beside him. For the first time, he felt truly close to his lord, as if he were basking directly in the Giant King's radiance.

Orion looked down at the hell-hound, a thoughtful expression on his face. "You still have a contract with Delilah, don't you? Would you like me to release you from it?"