

Titan King 1071

Chapter 1071: A Bond of Loyalty

Orion gazed into the distance, ignoring Dirtclaw's sycophantic praise. Instead, he raised the one topic the hound had been so carefully avoiding.

With Dirtclaw now an upper-tier legend and Delilah an Alphapeak, their power dynamic had completely inverted. To maintain the contract under these conditions was... improper.

And now that Dirtclaw was a Warden, Orion, as King of their race, had to consider the optics. It was a matter of personal dignity and the honor of the horde.

Dirtclaw and Delilah had never brought it up, mostly because the final word rested with Orion. Without his initiative, the bond could never be broken.

A long, low howl escaped Dirtclaw's throat. It wasn't loud or sharp, but a smooth, mournful cry that seemed to hang in the air.

In that moment, a shimmer of moisture welled in his flame-wreathed eyes. It was the glint of gratitude, of being seen not just as a subordinate, but as one of their own. He was genuinely moved that Orion had raised the subject himself. That alone was almost enough.

After a moment, Dirtclaw reined in his emotions. "My lord, I refuse to dissolve the contract." His voice, now calm, was firm and resonant. "You may not understand my reasoning, but my answer is final."

"Why?" Orion tore his gaze from the horizon, turning to study the Hell-Drake Hound before him. He had been the one to personally subjugate Dirtclaw, the one who'd assigned him to Delilah as a slave. Now, when he offered to personally strike the chains from him, he was being refused. It was the last thing he'd expected. Doesn't he want to be free?

"Praise to you, My lord," Dirtclaw said, dipping his head. "And praise to the most beautiful, brilliant, and understanding master a soul could ask for—my all-knowing Queen!"

Thinking of Delilah, a new light ignited in Dirtclaw's eyes—a complex fire of gratitude, feverish devotion, and profound reverence. “My lord, my station may have been that of a slave, but I was never, not for a single day, treated as one.”

A nostalgic glow softened his features as he looked back. “From the moment I became the master's slave, I held a certain status in the cannon fodder troops. No one dared to look down on me. I rode that prestige all the way to Deputy Commander.”

His voice was full of pride, reliving the blood and fire of those early days. “Onyx was in charge of the cannon fodder troops back then. In every major battle, the prophet and I were on the front lines together. I knew, deep down, he saw me as his people. As a brother.”

He paused, a vivid memory flashing in his eyes—the image of an Alpha-level powerhouse bearing down on him, only for Onyx to plant himself in its path, his massive axe a wall between Dirtclaw and certain death. “I'll never forget it. Whenever we faced a real threat, the old man always had my back. He took the killing blows meant for me, saved my hide more times than I can count.”

He continued, his voice thick with emotion. “Later, it was the Arch Elder, Thundar, Dace, Earthshaker, Gronthar... all of them. They never treated me like an outsider. We bled together. We were brothers in arms. Everyone said I was the toughest, the one who never quit, the one who always pushed harder. I became some kind of role model for them all.”

A low, rumbling chuckle escaped him, full of pride.

“But I knew the truth,” he admitted. “The only reason I could charge in like that, the only reason I could risk it all, was because I knew Onyx, Thundar, Earthshaker... all my brothers... were right behind me. And above them all, my master. I could fight without fear because she had all my bases covered. I never had a single thing to worry about.”

A genuine, happy grin spread across his features. “Food, gear, magical plants for my training, custom-built regimens... she even looked after my family. Everything I could ever need, she provided. Some of it was for comfort, sure, but most of it was designed to keep me alive on the battlefield.”

He looked up, his gaze locking with Orion's. It was the gaze of a subordinate—humble, respectful, but utterly resolute. “Tell me, my lord. What kind of idiot throws that away?”

Looking into those clear, unwavering eyes, Orion suddenly broke into a smile. "Onyx and the others underestimated you. Perhaps you're smarter than any of them."

"Heh..." Dirtclaw's grin turned goofy, almost foolish. "I'm not trying to be smart, my lord. I just want to be the guy they can all count on. The example for our Stoneheart Horde. Always."

"The offer stands," Orion said, respecting his decision but not abandoning his own conviction. "If you ever change your mind, come find me. I'll release you."

Just then, Orion's relaxed expression vanished. In an instant, his entire demeanor shifted, and he became a blur of lightning, rocketing toward a moonlit patch of land three miles away.

"Wait here!"

The command still echoed in Dirtclaw's ears when a deafening CRACK of thunder ripped through the night, silencing the howls of the demonic monsters and stunning the very sky into silence.

Orion hovered in the void, trident in hand, his gaze fixed impassively on the spot where the lightning had struck. But the enemy he expected to see wasn't there.

He didn't move. His senses told him they were still there. Hiding.

"You have the guts to spy on me, but not the courage to fight?" His voice rolled through the empty space around him, but no one appeared.

Just moments ago, a prickle of danger had washed over him, a razor-thin premonition that had allowed him to lock onto the enemy's position. But they were cloaked, their tracks completely hidden.

"It seems cowards only learn the hard way."

Orion raised his left hand. Supernatural power condensed around his five fingers as runes of a divine art blazed into existence. It was a sealing skill he had recently mastered: Void Trap.

A low hum vibrated through reality as space itself collapsed.

In the patch of void Orion had targeted, the very fabric of existence was locked down. Elements were frozen, light was snuffed out. A bottomless rift of absolute nothingness tore open, swallowing the unseen enemy whole and sealing them within the Void Trap.

Only then did the feeling of being watched finally vanish. Orion let out a quiet, internal sigh of relief.

That feeling... the threat wasn't overwhelming. It meant his opponent wasn't a demigod.

Chapter 1072: The Clown's Introduction

Titanion Realm, the Trident Sea.

An endless sapphire sky stretched over an abyss of crushing black. Between these two infinities, a storm raged. Gale-force winds howled and monstrous waves crashed over the decks of the warships, sending them pitching and rolling through the churning chaos.

For Rendall, Drakthul, and the others, it was a terrifying, alien landscape. The violent sea was a beast, the hurricane winds a legion of Shadow-fiends, painting a terrifying and magnificent portrait of the Trident Sea's infamous power.

Yet for Marina, standing on the foremost point of the deck, it was just another day. She stood against the gale, perfectly serene, as if the wind and waves were nothing more than a summer breeze. No storm, it seemed, could ever faze her.

"Elder," a handler of the piranha-like scout fish whispered, hurrying to Rendall's side. "The fish up front were spooked by something. An unknown disturbance. Should we send a party to investigate?"

Rendall immediately walked the slick deck to where Marina stood. He was keenly aware of the chain of command. Marina was the designated leader for this territorial expansion. She was the Giant King's woman, a princess of the mermaid race, a lord in her own right, and a Warden of the Horde.

Orion trusted her, and so, Rendall would trust her. He was here to do his job.

"There is no need to address me so formally, Elder. Marina will do," she said, turning to face him. Her blue dress whipped around her in the wind, a splash of vibrant color against the storm-gray world, creating a striking, almost regal silhouette.

"A small school of sea beasts crossed our path," she explained, her voice calm and clear over the wind's roar. "Your scout fish encountered them, but the beasts have already been devoured. There's no need to send anyone."

Though new to the Stoneheart Horde, Marina had learned much about Orion and his people. She knew the man before her, this powerful Alphapeak, was as close as a brother to their king. He was a man worth her respect, an ally worth winning over.

"Marina," Rendall said, gesturing to the tense warriors on deck. "This is the first time at sea for most of my people. They know nothing of this world, and frankly, they're terrified. Is there anything you can teach us?"

He wasn't questioning her authority; he was being a leader. This was a military operation, a prelude to war, and he wouldn't let pride or posturing get in the way of his duty.

Marina's gaze swept over the elders and warriors. She could see it clearly on their faces—a deep, instinctual fear of the open ocean.

"You are right. That is my oversight," she said, a warm smile spreading across her face. She lifted a slender hand, and in response, a towering wave rose from the churning sea beside the Sea-Devouring Warship. It climbed toward the sky, then dissolved into a fine, gentle rain that drifted down upon the deck.

As the droplets touched them, a soft, pale-blue aura ignited around Rendall and the others.

“Now, Elder,” Marina said. “Look upon the sea again.”

Rendall and the others turned their gazes back to the storm.

“This...”

“It’s beautiful.”

The feeling that washed over Rendall was indescribable. As a creature of the land, he was born with a natural dread of the deep ocean. But now, as he watched the massive swells rise and fall, he felt a profound sense of tranquility within the chaos. It was as if their desperate fight against the storm had suddenly ended, replaced by a quiet acceptance, a feeling of being at peace within the gale.

“This is the Blessing of the Tides, a gift from my people,” Marina explained. “Have your warriors come on deck to bathe in it, and they will receive the sea’s favor. The magic has no real combat application, but it will help them feel a kinship with the ocean, and let go of their fear.”

Hearing this, the warriors who had been cowering from the spray now stepped willingly into the magical rain.

“What are you waiting for, you idiot?” Rendall roared, planting a boot on Beyn’s rear. “Signal the other ships!”

“Oh—right! Yes! Signal the other ships!” Beyn snapped to attention, scrambling off with a goofy grin. For a younger warrior like him, a kick from the Elder was a sign of rough affection, a sign he was one of the inner circle.

Marina said nothing, simply continuing to draw the seawater into the sky, sustaining the blessing for her new people.

“Hahaha! With this, I feel like I could swim the whole damn ocean!” one warrior boomed.

“Yeah, this rain... it feels good! Really good!”

“Holy crap, I was about to puke my guts out a minute ago. Now I feel fantastic!”

“BRING IT ON, STORM!”

As the men cheered, a small smile played on Marina’s lips, and she glanced discreetly toward the rear of the fleet. Far behind them, hidden beneath the waves, a squad of Sea Race soldiers was tailing them.

The bloodline warriors of the Stoneheart Horde couldn’t sense them, but she could. This was the Trident Sea, territory of the Sea-Drake race. Any soldiers here would be theirs.

She made no move, content to let them follow for now.

You’d better be friendly. Or else...

Silverwood Realm, Hydraea Plains.

Orion thrust his trident without hesitation into the violently fluctuating patch of void before him. Ten minutes after he had sprung his Void Trap, his quarry was finally fighting back.

A muffled explosion echoed from within non-space as the Void Trap shattered. The unknown enemy stepped out.

They were met by the three points of Orion’s trident lungeing for their heart.

“Hehehe... impressive,” a chillingly cheerful voice echoed from the figure. “Looks like the Champions Alliance found a powerful new recruit after we left. I am Clown, friend. And who might you be?”

CRACKLE!

The only answer was the lightning that erupted from the trident’s tips.

“You don’t deserve to know my name,” Orion stated flatly as his weapon struck home. The enemy was impaled, with no chance of escape.

“Ooh, feisty! I like it!” the voice laughed, impossibly cheerful and arrogant even as the figure was run through. “Well then, consider us introduced... hehehe...”

The laughter hung in the air, long after the figure went limp.

With a sharp crackle, the enemy died.

Orion withdrew his trident. Impaled on its tines was not a body, but a flimsy paper effigy held together with transparent tape. Its aura was gone. The last wisp of Clown’s will that had animated it had been utterly extinguished.

Orion flicked his wrist. A ball of flame erupted from the trident, incinerating the paper construct until nothing but ash remained.

So, Clown has made his move.

He was impressed. Even his proxy is this elusive. No wonder he was on the same level as my old comrades.

A slow smile crept across Orion’s face. The thought of facing Clown, and the Witch, ignited a spark of genuine interest. A battle against opponents of that caliber, he mused, would be one hell of a learning experience.

Chapter 1073: A Message in the Moonlight

“Let them come,” Orion murmured to the empty air. He turned, leaving the quiet threat to hang in the silence.

A moment later, he reappeared as a streak of light on the hill where Dirtclaw waited.

“My lord,” the hound asked, his voice rumbling with awe. “Is the enemy dead?” He had heard the violent clap of thunder and the concussive boom that followed.

“Dead.”

Orion’s tone was flat, but to Dirtclaw, that single word was the very definition of absolute power.

“Take this.” Orion tossed a single beast tooth to the hound. Dirtclaw caught it in his maw and swallowed, storing it safely in his dimensional gut. He didn’t know what it was, but if his lord wanted him to have it, he would guard it with his life.

“Let’s go,” Orion said, turning south. “We continue driving the demonic monsters forward. I have a feeling our true enemies are not far off.”

And so, man and hound bathed in the pale moonlight, herding a sea of monsters as they pushed ever deeper into the south.

Staghelm City, at the site of the Moonwell.

Under the clear night sky, the water of the Moonwell shimmered with captured starlight. Beside it, the Moon Elf Isilra meditated, her entire form glowing with a soft luminescence.

“Isilra,” a gentle voice murmured, as calming and clear as spring water. “With your talent, it won’t be long before you ascend to the rank of demigod. When that day comes, Staghelm City will have more options. Our situation will not be so dire.”

Isilra was a Moon Elf, a being akin to the elemental sprites. Wherever the moonlight touched, she could train and recover her strength at an astonishing rate. Gima, the demigod of the Moonwell, believed her potential was boundless. Isilra would not only reach the demigod realm but climb far beyond it.

“Mother, I feel... incomplete,” Isilra said, opening her eyes. A flicker of frustration crossed her beautiful features as she sighed. “I’m missing something. I can’t find the catalyst to break through.”

She was already at the Archlord-Peak, a formidable warrior in her own right—her victory over the Witch’s avatar was proof enough of that. But she was stalled.

“Do not rush it, my child,” Gima soothed. She was the consciousness of the Moonwell, and Isilra was the most gifted of all the children she had birthed from the moonlight. “Power is a gradual accumulation. When the time is right, you will feel it, and the moon will guide your way.” She paused. “Is there any news from the north?”

Isilra shook her head, knowing what her mother was truly asking. “Our scouts could not sense the Tree of Life’s aura. We have to assume the Wood Elf race... is gone.”

The Moonwell fell silent. Had the Tree of Life been rooted in Staghelm City, their lives would have been far easier.

“Then what of the demonic monsters?” Gima asked. “Did your scouts discover why they migrated north?”

Isilra shook her head again, then nodded grimly. “The monster horde was too dense, and scouts reported powerful entities from the Black Tower operating in the region. We lost eighty percent of the people we sent out.”

Her brow furrowed. "All we know is that a new faction has appeared in the north. They also seem to be from the Black Tower. Our surviving scouts didn't dare get close, they could only observe from a great distance using sympathetic magic through plants and moonlight. But this new power is strong."

The implication was terrifying. An enemy from the Black Tower was an enemy of Staghelm City, period. The horde outside their walls had moved north, granting them a temporary reprieve, but Isilra knew it wouldn't last. If these two Black Tower factions were to join forces, she couldn't begin to imagine the consequences.

"A civil war, then? Between Black Tower factions?" the Moonwell demigod mused. "Perhaps things are not as bleak as you imagine. Something in the north threatened them, forced them to move their entire army. Whatever it is, it must be more powerful than we are." A decision was made. "I will see for myself."

The water in the Moonwell began to churn as Gima drew upon its power, pulling on the threads of moonlight that stretched far to the north. Soon, the surface calmed, becoming a clear, transparent screen reflecting a series of images.

The first vision was of the Black Tower in Augurath Sanctuary, tirelessly converting living beings into demonic monsters. Each creature that emerged immediately began marching south.

"Mother... is that the northern Black Tower?" Isilra's voice trembled. "They're making more monsters... and sending them south. Are they going to merge the two hordes?" If that happened, the pressure on Staghelm City would become unbearable. If her mother's power failed, the city would fall in days.

Gima didn't answer, her focus entirely on the scrying. The image shifted.

Now, the water reflected countless legions of the undead. Skeletons and shambling corpses bathed in the moonlight, slowly absorbing its essence, their power growing with each passing moment.

"Undead!" Isilra gasped, swallowing hard. The demonic monsters were bad enough. If they had to face an endless army of the undead as well, Staghelm City was doomed.

Then, the reflection changed again. A man and a hound stood on a small hill. The man was tall and powerful, his cape billowing behind him, cutting a heroic silhouette against the moon. The Hell-Drake Hound beside him was a creature of myth, its body covered in glowing runes and wreathed in perpetual hellfire.

“Mother, who are they?” Isilra whispered. “It looks like... they’re the ones herding the demonic monsters!”

Before she could ask more, the scene shifted perspective. A shadowy entity, hidden in the void, was spying on the man and the hound. Suddenly, lightning flashed, space itself collapsed, and the hidden being was trapped and utterly destroyed.

The vision tried to shift one last time, back to the northern Black Tower. But when Gima tried to pull on the moonlight that fell upon the tower itself, she was met with a wall of nothing. The light that entered the tower never came out. It was a black hole, absorbing everything.

At the same time, the surface of the Moonwell began to heave violently, shattering all the images.

Whoosh.

Gima released her hold on the moonlight, and a wave of exhaustion emanated from the well.

“The master of the northern Black Tower has locked down the moonlight,” she said, her voice weary. “I cannot see any more. In trying, I have exposed my location to him. But I sent a sliver of goodwill along with the scrying. If they are not allies of the Cult of Four... I believe they will find us.”

The demigod sounded drained but resolute. She had seen similarities between the two towers, but she had also seen differences. And that brief, violent encounter on the Hydraea Plains... it had given her a sliver of hope.

Perhaps this new power in the north was not an enemy after all.

Chapter 1074: A Shortcut to Power

“Mother, perhaps I should go north myself,” Isilra proposed. “I could search for the Tree of Life and, at the same time, determine whether this new faction is friend or foe.”

Staghelm City was isolated. The Nightwing race to the south were not an option for an alliance due to bitter past grievances. They desperately needed allies, wherever they could be found.

“Patience,” Gima’s voice advised. “In a few days, the two demonic hordes will meet. Then we will know if the Black Towers will turn on each other, or if they will unite as one.”

The Moonwell demigod was not opposed to Isilra venturing out. The girl was protected by a sliver of Gima’s own demigod will; unless she was ambushed by two or more demigods at once, she would always have a chance to escape. Besides, Isilra was a Moon Elf. As long as the moon was in the sky, any place touched by its light was a potential escape route.

“Very well. I will listen to you, Mother,” Isilra conceded. “I will wait a few days before heading north.”

She closed her eyes and submerged her consciousness in the moonlight. Her physical form began to shimmer and fade, as if she were dissolving into the pale, ethereal light.

The Cult of Four, within a Black Tower.

In a cavernous hall, Clown and Witch sat across from each other, a great distance separating them.

“Interesting,” Clown said, his neck cracking audibly. The puppet body he inhabited had been motionless in a pose of deep thought for so long that his movements were unnaturally stiff. “It seems that since our departure, the Champions Alliance has cultivated a formidable new talent.”

“We didn’t ‘leave’,” the four-winged Fallen Angel corrected him from across the hall, an eyebrow arched in irritation. “We defected.”

“Such a harsh word, Witch,” Clown chided, shaking his head. “Must you insist on calling yourself a traitor? I prefer to think the Champions Alliance’s vision was simply too small to contain our future.”

“Let me remind you, Clown,” she shot back, “that as far as we know, the Deputy Commander, Arthas, and Alexander have all reached the demigod realm. Leonidas hasn’t shown his face, but do you really think he’s lagging far behind? Or are you truly satisfied with this... pseudo-deity status of ours?”

Pseudo-deity. Witch wasn’t wrong. In truth, both she and Clown were stalled at the Archlord-Peak. However, by channeling the immense faith of the Cult of Four, they could wield the power of a demigod—a power that, in some cases, surpassed that of a newly ascended one. Clown, in particular, as one of the Cult’s twelve Pontiffs, could draw upon a far deeper well of power than she could. It was one of the reasons he was so much more committed to their path.

“Honestly, hearing that Arthas and the others have ascended... it does inspire a certain envy,” Clown’s voice echoed softly, a strange, unfamiliar note in his tone. “Had I known this would be the outcome back then, I might have hesitated. I might not have turned my back on them.”

His voice suddenly sharpened, ringing with unshakeable conviction. “But that path is closed to us now, Witch. You shouldn’t entertain such unrealistic thoughts. We have thrown our lot in with the Cult of Four, and there is no going back.”

He met her gaze. “Yes, I admit that in terms of our own innate strength, we have fallen behind them. But now we are part of the Cult. We wield the divine power of the four gods and have limitless faith to command. If we were to face Arthas and the others in open battle right now, I’m not so certain we would lose.”

There was no regret in his voice, only cold confidence. Power was power, no matter the source. Whether it came from the Champions Alliance or the Cult of Four was irrelevant, so long as he could use it.

“Besides,” Clown’s voice dropped to a conspiratorial whisper, a reminder of their old partnership. “Surely you understand the principle of using their ladder to reach our own goals?”

If he could secure Witch’s full support, he was certain he could climb higher within the Cult, perhaps even to the rank of Archbishop. And with his influence, he could see her elevated to Pontiff. But to do that, they needed to be united.

“Use their ladder?” Witch laughed, a harsh, mocking sound. “I’m worried we’re the ones being fattened for the slaughter, Clown.”

“You underestimate yourself,” he chided gently. “And, of course, you underestimate me.”

His ambition was boundless. Since they had joined the Cult, he believed they should embrace it completely. In an age where the gods were silent, they could ascend the ranks, claim the title of Archbishop, and become the supreme mortal arbiters of the Cult’s power.

And when the day came that the gods could once again walk the earth, was it so impossible to imagine usurping them—seizing their power, their followers, their very divinity?

Clown was certain their chosen path was no detour. It was a shortcut. By embracing the Cult, they had millions of followers who would lift them to the highest peaks of power.

“Witch, we have no retreat,” he said, rising from his seat and making a gesture of prayer to the four gods. “Our only choice is to embrace the Cult and bathe in the glory of our new masters.”

Her willingness to even be here, to send an avatar to participate in this plan, told him that deep down, she still believed in the choice they had made. The truth was, the old Commander of the Champions Alliance had left an indelible shadow on her soul—an image of unbeatable power.

Clown felt that shadow too, but he was convinced that one day, he would not only match the Commander’s strength but surpass it, wiping that shadow from existence forever.

“If you think of this as a race, we haven’t fallen behind,” he said, his puppet’s eyes empty yet seemingly profound. “On the contrary. Arthas, Alexander... they poured out their blood and sweat, they struggled and fought, just to reach the same position of power we now hold. From that perspective... are they not the ones who are trailing us?”

He was shoring up her wavering faith, reinforcing her commitment. But he knew words weren’t enough. Witch needed external pressure. And their old comrades in the Champions Alliance were the perfect instruments to provide it. That was the secret reason he had worked so hard to lure her into this scheme

in the Silverwood Realm. He didn't need to kill Arthas or the others. He just needed to create enough trouble to draw their full attention, to make them bleed.

Seeing them struggle, seeing them look weak, would solidify Witch's resolve. And with her truly at his side, he was confident he could one day challenge the four gods for their thrones. After all, the Cult of Four worshipped gods. Whether they were old gods or new ones made little difference, did it?

Witch remained silent. She hadn't been won over by his speech. Arguing the point was meaningless. She was the type who never made a move without a guaranteed reward. Until she saw a tangible, undeniable profit, she would not be swayed by Clown's grand designs or honeyed words.

Chapter 1075: Confidence and Command

"I seem to have gotten carried away," Clown said, steering the conversation back to their original topic. "Let's return to this new member of the Champions Alliance. A powerful giant lord. A creature of the abyss who commands lightning. Arrogant. No respect for his elders. He needs to be taught a lesson."

Even though they had defected, he and Witch were still his seniors, weren't they? It was a matter of principle.

A cascade of laughter, theatrical and dripping with mockery, suddenly erupted from Witch. "This is the man who, as a Mid-Archlord, challenged an Archlord-Peak to a standstill and walked away. I am intensely curious, Clown, as to how you plan on 'teaching him a lesson'?"

She leaned forward slightly, her beautiful eyes curving into crescents of pure derision. "Surely you don't think he's running around without a demigod's will projection for protection?"

Witch knew the personalities of her old comrades inside and out. For Orion to have risen so far, so fast, meant he had gotten in good with the old guard. As allies, as partners, there was no way Arthas and Leonidas hadn't given him some form of high-level insurance.

Clown, however, remained completely unfazed by her scorn. "One does not always have to act personally to discipline someone." He steepled his fingers. "The Pontiffs Yriel and Konak have

dispatched a total of seven Archlord-class champions to the front lines. If Arthas and his friends don't send reinforcements, those seven will be more than enough to handle our little friend."

He said it with absolute certainty. Each Pontiff in the Cult of Four commanded four Archlord-level High Priestesses as part of their official retinue. (These were distinct from the four Archlord guardians of the Black Tower, who were bound by its formation and could not travel far.) On top of that, each Pontiff had their own private forces. Mustering a few extra Archlords was trivial.

"In that case," Witch said, leaning back, "I will be waiting to see how that turns out." She offered no further argument, nor any agreement. She knew Clown's methods, but she also knew the true depth of the Champions Alliance's power. Arthas and Alexander would never let their new prodigy fight alone.

Besides, she had faced Orion herself. She knew how powerful he was. Could the so-called 'champions' of the Cult of Four, whom she privately considered trash, really stand against a talent forged in the fires of the Champions Alliance? She kept that particular opinion to herself.

Silverwood Realm, Hydraea Plains.

Night on the open prairie was unnaturally silent. The plague seemed to have sterilized the land, wiping out nearly all life. Without orders from Orion, the demonic monsters marching south had also fallen quiet, an unsettling calm descending over the horde.

Beside a crackling campfire, Dirtclaw was dozing. He couldn't for the life of him understand the purpose of the fire. His own body was wreathed in hellfire; there was no way Orion could possibly feel cold with him nearby. And did a being as powerful as his lord truly need a simple campfire for comfort? He couldn't figure it out, and he didn't dare ask.

"Report," Orion said suddenly, poking the flames with a stick. "What's the situation?"

Dirtclaw's eyes snapped open, assuming his lord was speaking to him. But then a figure flickered into existence from the shadows behind Orion, and he realized the question was for one of the shadow army.

Dirtclaw was familiar with them; their agents had protected him and other key commanders in many battles, striking from the darkness at critical moments.

“My lord,” the agent said, his voice a dry whisper. “At our current pace, we will make contact with the southern demonic horde in three days. Their numbers are more than double our own, and their elite combatants have begun appearing on the front lines.” The shadow held out a scroll. “The Hall Master instructed me to give you this. He said you would understand upon opening it.”

Orion turned. With a slight curl of his finger, the scroll flew from the agent’s hand into his. The moment it left his grasp, the shadow melted back into the darkness and was gone.

Orion felt the faint aura emanating from the scroll, and a slow smirk spread across his face.

That’s my crew for you. Always one for the subtle play.

Without another word, he tucked the scroll away, his confidence for the impending battle fully restored.

Titanion Realm, the Trident Sea.

Marina stood at the prow, with Rendall, Beyn, Torba, Drakthul, and Gormathar arrayed behind her. Together, they watched the small combat squad from the Sea-Drake race depart into the churning waves.

The squad had delivered detailed sea charts and had learned that the Stoneheart Horde’s destination was Aenari Island. Marina had flatly refused their offer to provide an escort.

Once they were gone, Rendall, prompted by nudges and meaningful looks from the others, stepped forward. As the ranking elder, it was his place to ask. “My lady, what is your assessment of the Sea-Drakes’ intentions?”

“Our fleet of Sea-Devouring Warships and Ocean Hunters is a considerable force,” Marina said, turning to face them with a calm smile. “Their presence in these waters has made the local Sea-Drake king... nervous.”

Her voice was gentle, yet carried an unshakable authority. “That group was sent on his behalf. It was a formal greeting, but also a polite reminder that the Trident Sea is their territory.”

As a natural leader, she had read the Sea-Drake king’s intentions perfectly.

Drakthul, emboldened by her approachable demeanor, stepped forward. “My lady, will they move against us?” It was the question on everyone’s mind, adrift as they were in the middle of the hostile deep.

“Their visit was their gesture of goodwill,” Marina replied, standing firm against the wind. Her composure was a tangible thing, a quiet display of a sovereign’s might that commanded respect. In that moment, no one dared to underestimate their new Warden.

“In my own city, the Sea-Drakes have a deep and cooperative relationship with the Stoneheart Horde,” she continued, her gaze fixed on the distant horizon, where the sea met the clouds. “As long as we do not provoke them or cause any unnecessary bloodshed, they will leave us be.”

Her expression was serene, her lips curved in a slight, confident smile. “Now that they have provided us with detailed charts, we no longer need to navigate blindly. Everyone, prepare yourselves. We proceed at full speed. The sooner we reach Aenari Island, the sooner we can claim it for the Horde.”

Rendall, Drakthul, and the others looked at her, a sense of awe dawning on them. That calm confidence, that natural air of command—it was a bearing they had only ever seen in their own lord, Orion.

She is truly a princess from a great Sea Race faction, the thought echoed in the minds of the elders. The way she commands the situation, that calm strength that is neither arrogant nor subservient... it’s the unmistakable air of true nobility.

With her words and her actions, Marina had won their absolute trust.

Chapter 1076: The Colosseum

A guttural roar ripped from Dirtclaw's throat as hellfire ignited across his body. Without hesitation, he charged, a living battering ram aimed at the tide of demonic monsters swarming across the horizon.

The war had begun, sudden and brutal.

Orion hovered mid-air, a silent observer looking down upon the clashing tides of demonic flesh. It was a surreal spectacle—creatures of the same hellish origin, same monstrous forms, same fearless contempt for death, tearing each other apart.

He frowned. Maybe I jumped the gun. The thought was a quiet critique of his own recent decision.

The two armies of demonic monsters, each spawned from a Black Tower, were now locked in a maelstrom of violence, and Orion's forces were on the back foot.

His legion was primarily composed of Cyclopes, Mist Wraiths, and Ghouls. The enemy's ranks, however, were built on Flail Brutes, Mist Wraiths, and Ghouls.

The Cyclopes and the Flail Brutes filled a similar role on the battlefield—hulking, frontline behemoths. But where his Cyclopes wielded massive spiked clubs and axes, the enemy's brutes swung devastating flails on long chains.

The critical difference, Orion observed with tactical coldness, was that the Flail Brutes could link the chains of their weapons, forming small, localized kill-zones that shredded anything caught inside. With his Cyclopes outnumbered, it was the swarming Ghouls that paid the price. Pockets of Flail Brutes erupted throughout the battlefield, their chained weapons a whirlwind of iron that pulverized the Ghouls leaping into the fray.

Looks like I'll have to even the odds myself.

Orion raised his trident, and an array of countless blood-red spears materialized in the air around him. He unleashed the Eightfold Spear Barrage, deciding that if he couldn't match the enemy's tanks, he would simply annihilate their cannon fodder.

The spears rained down, a torrent of crimson death that fell upon the areas where the Flail Brutes were rampaging.

BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!

Each spear detonated on impact, obliterating a huge swath of the Cult of Four's demonic monsters. In a single moment, the tide turned.

Orion's beleaguered forces seized the opening, surging forward to smash deeper into the enemy's disorganized rear lines.

Just then, a sudden spike of danger pricked at his senses.

Acting on pure instinct, Orion snapped the trident down, ramming the haft into the space just below his feet.

CLANG!

A colossal impact threw him skyward, the force of the blow launching him higher into the air. His unseen attacker, thrown back by the rebound, slammed into the ground below, carving out a small meteor crater upon impact.

The shockwave radiated outwards, indiscriminately annihilating demonic monsters from both sides and clearing a wide circle in the chaotic battlefield. The few that survived were instantly buried under the displaced earth.

High above, still ascending, Orion's body flickered. He activated Instant Impact, vanishing from his position and reappearing like a thunderbolt inside the very crater his attacker had created.

A split second later, the afterimage he'd left behind in the sky was shredded into nothingness by a strange wooden club that swung out of the void.

The ambush, the counter, the kill—all executed in a blink.

A brief, heavy silence fell over the crater.

Orion slowly stepped out of the impact zone. Impaled on the tines of his trident was a lifeless body that looked like it had been dead for centuries.

He looked up. Four figures, arch lords all, slowly materialized from the void, positioning themselves to lock down all escape routes. Then, directly above him, a fifth figure appeared, a silhouette cloaked in a black so deep it seemed to swallow the light, its face completely hidden in shadow.

“A decoy artifact?” Orion’s lip curled into a smirk. “You’ve got a lot of nerve, trying to ambush me.”

He shook his Flame of Will trident gently. A lick of fire erupted, incinerating the decoy and turning it to ash.

“Is it not beneath an arch lord’s station to slaughter those who are defenseless?”

The voice came not from the cloaked figure, but from a female arch lord clad in golden plate armor to the east. She couldn’t be human; a pair of magnificent black wings grew from her back. Though her wings were dark, they radiated no evil aura. She wasn’t a Fallen Angel.

“Beneath my station?” Orion shot a glance at the female knight, his tone dripping with sarcasm. “You mean like picking on the little guy?” He paused, his gaze sweeping over the others. “Or was that an unfair fight? Maybe you think I lack sportsmanship?”

Orion cracked his neck, his eyes gleaming with a manic excitement as he stared up at the five arch lords surrounding him. A decent lineup, but it’s not nearly enough.

“So what do you call five of you ganging up on me, starting with a cheap shot from the shadows?”

Before the knight could retort, Orion pressed his advantage, turning their own actions into a weapon against them.

For a moment, the knight was silent. The other four remained pointedly quiet as well.

“Hahaha... It’s always the same with your kind,” Orion laughed, his voice booming across the field. His aura flared, sharp and defiant as a sword thrust into the heavens.

The sheer force of his arrogance seemed to put all five of his would-be assassins on edge.

“He’s gathering power! Take him out, now!” the cloaked figure above commanded. His voice was the trigger. As the other four arch lords instantly moved to attack, the leader once again vanished into the void.

But by the time he had spoken, Orion was already gone.

Aura Lock.

Instant Impact.

His target was the female knight with the black wings—the middle arch lord. Rule one of a group fight: take out the weakest link first.

He was too fast. Even though his enemies were reacting, they had no time to intervene. A flash of crackling energy and a deafening sonic boom later, a shower of black feathers drifted down from the sky.

Orion pulled his trident back, a slight frown on his face.

He had definitely hit the winged knight, and the blow should have been lethal. But he knew, with a sinking certainty, that she wasn't dead. An arch lord always has an ace up their sleeve.

Sure enough, a short distance away, the fabric of space rippled and the female knight reappeared. Her golden armor was cracked and scorched, and the magnificent wings on her back were gone.

But Orion wasn't even looking at her.

The moment he realized his attack hadn't been a one-shot kill and that her allies hadn't moved to save her, his focus had already shifted. He had seen the truth. While he was launching his assault on the knight, the cloaked leader had reappeared in a different position, joining the other three to erect a spatial containment field.

The world around him warped and twisted.

When his vision cleared, he was standing on the sand-swept floor of a massive arena that looked just like the colosseum.

Chapter 1077: A Berserker's Ecstasy

On the perimeter of the vast arena stood four colossal statues, their features blurred and indistinct. Every time Orion's gaze swept over them, he felt a crushing pressure, a strange sensation as if his very sight was being devoured.

The Four Gods? he thought. The statues had to be representations of the Cult of Four's deities. They were powerful, mighty. Even as inert stone, they radiated an oppressive aura that weighed on him.

"Welcome to the Killing Floor of our Cult of Four," the cloaked figure's voice echoed. "Consider it an honor to die here."

The leader finally threw back his hood. Orion saw him clearly now—a human. One by one, the other four arch lords on the arena floor revealed their faces. Aside from the female knight, the group included a

hulking Moon Giant carrying a bizarre wooden club, a Demon with a long, barbed tail, and a Firelord with crimson hair and a ghastly, contorted face.

Orion's eyes locked onto the Moon Giant. So that's who shattered my afterimage.

"The Killing Floor. Catchy." Orion leveled his trident, a relaxed smile on his face. He showed no trace of fear, no awareness that he was trapped and outnumbered. "So, what's the plan? Are we doing this one at a time? Taking turns? Or is this just a five-on-one clusterfuck?"

No one answered him. The five arch lords simply tightened their circle, their intentions brutally clear.

The Moon Giant was the first to move. The club in its hands seemed to hum with a strange power. As it swung the weapon in a devastating arc, the very air whistled and tore, leaving faint, dark fissures in the void itself.

"WAAAGH!"

In that instant, Orion's smile vanished, replaced by a mask of bestial fury as he activated his Titan Form. His figure flickered, sidestepping the massive blow. He didn't try to block or parry.

It wasn't that he was afraid. In his Titan Form, his strength wouldn't be outmatched in the slightest. He simply saw no point in a direct confrontation. A block was a wasted move. For Orion, every action had one purpose: not to negate an enemy's attack, but to take an enemy's life.

He reappeared behind the Moon Giant, his trident already lunging for the kill.

But the trap was sprung. The human leader materialized directly behind Orion, a one-handed sword with a cruel, hooked tip aimed at his skull. Simultaneously, the female knight and the long-tailed Demon closed in from his flanks. The knight's lance and the Demon's venomous, spear-like tail shot forward. Life and death hung on a razor's edge.

"KILL!" Orion bellowed, a primal roar that vibrated in the soul. The feeling—the raw, exhilarating danger that made every cell in his body scream—sent him into a berserker's ecstasy. He felt wild, unstoppable.

ROAR!

The roar of his Titan Form was the Titan's Roar, a sonic attack that blasted outwards. At the same time, a blood-red aura, the defensive state of his Battle Will Surge, erupted around his body.

He didn't stop his attack. He didn't pull back to defend. He drove the trident forward with even greater force.

SQUELCH!

The trident punched clean through the upper arch lord Moon Giant's chest. The electricity and fire coiled around the weapon's tines erupted inside the giant's torso, incinerating its organs. The Moon Giant was dead before its body began to fall.

Of course, the price was paid instantly. The leader's sword, the knight's lance, and the Demon's tail all found their mark. The Battle Will Surge held for a fraction of a second—and then shattered.

That single moment was all Orion needed. He ducked and bowed his head, shoving the giant's massive corpse forward. The hooked sword tore through the leather binding his hair but missed a fatal blow. The attacks from the sides, however, were unavoidable. The lance and the tail impaled him, churning his abdominal organs into a ruin and shredding a small part of his heart.

"Hahaha... what a rush!"

Blasting out of the encirclement, Orion laughed maniacally as he leaped into the air, narrowly avoiding a series of miniature volcanoes that erupted from the arena floor. Dragons of molten rock, Magma Drakes, surged from the craters, hounding him relentlessly.

Gritting his teeth against the searing pain, Orion activated Instant Impact again, teleporting to the far side of the arena. The Magma Drakes, their target vanished, crashed into each other in a shower of sparks. The attack, clearly, had come from the Firelord who had yet to engage him directly.

Orion raised his trident, ignoring the three enemies that were already closing in on him again. His attention was fixed on the dying Moon Giant, whose eyes were beginning to dim.

"I heard the Hydraea Plains were the territory of you Moon Giants," Orion said, his voice laced with venom, twisting the knife. "I was wondering why I didn't see a single one of your kind on my way south. Turns out you abandoned your faith." He let out a cold chuckle. "Too bad the Cult of Four couldn't protect you either."

The giant opened its mouth to speak, but Orion didn't let him.

"I bet you don't dare summon your body of faith, do you?" he taunted. "Hehehe..."

As Orion laughed, the last spark of light in the Moon Giant's eyes extinguished. His entire body was consumed by the residual flames from the trident, burning to a pile of ash in seconds.

"Alright," Orion said, shaking the gore from his weapon. He fixed his wild gaze on the knight, the leader, and the Demon. "Let's continue."

The three of them said nothing, their expressions grim. They watched as the gaping wounds in Orion's abdomen were already scabbing over. His chest and stomach pulsed and writhed as if alive. It was obvious that his shredded organs, in just a few short moments, had already mostly regenerated.

This terrifying regeneration sent a chill down their spines.

It was his siren regeneration. As long as his head and heart were not completely destroyed, any wound would heal, any severed limb or ruined organ would regrow in a short amount of time.

His recovery was unnervingly fast. That, combined with his suicidally aggressive fighting style and the corpse of the Moon Giant at his feet, gave the remaining three arch lords pause. None of them wanted to be the next target of his all-or-nothing charge.

The atmosphere grew thick with a tense silence.

This was a development Orion was more than happy to see. As powerful as his siren regeneration was, it still needed time.

“Honestly,” Orion said, his voice dangerously cheerful. “It’s been a while since I’ve had this much fun. That was the best rush I’ve had in ages.” He gave them a bloody, predatory grin, using his own battle ecstasy as a weapon to stall and intimidate.

“So really... thank you.”

Chapter 1078: You don’t have the chance

“Pathetic.”

A new voice, harsh and unfamiliar, echoed across the Killing Floor.

It was followed by another. “Let me have this one. Just my type of meal.”

Two imposing figures appeared in the arena. Orion’s senses, sharp as they were, detected no ripple of spatial energy. They hadn’t teleported in. They had been here the entire time, hidden somewhere he couldn’t perceive.

At their arrival, the knight, the leader, the Tailed Demon, and the Firelord all took a subtle step back, ceding control of the engagement to the newcomers.

“You look delicious,” one of the new monsters snarled. It took a step forward, swinging a massive, chained flail that whistled ominously through the air. Its smile was pure malice. “Tell you what. I’ll even let you pick the seasoning I use when I eat you.”

It looked Orion up and down, its eyes lingering on his form. “Ooh, look what we have here. I can see the murder in his eyes. It runs bone-deep. I’m so scared.” The monster feigned a shudder. “So cold! Should I be trembling?”

The hulking creature's gaze was that of a butcher contemplating a cut of meat, deciding where to take the first bite.

"That's a mean glare you've got," it chuckled, a low, grating sound. "Maybe I should run back to the Abyss?"

"No," Orion said, his voice dangerously calm. "You don't have the chance. I'm going to kill you."

His emotions had just whiplashed. The sudden calm was a mask for a cold, deep-seated rage. The monster taunting him, the one so certain of its victory, was an Abyssal Devourer.

A perversion of the giant race. A sin made flesh.

Abyssal Devourers were monsters from the Abyss that fed on the giant tribe. Orion had seen their kind before. Balor, the former King of the Giants, had been one. But Balor had been different. He had devoured his own kind in secret, burdened by the responsibilities of his crown. He was only half-lost to his depravity.

This one, however, was a peak arch lord. To reach this level of power, the number of giants it must have consumed was beyond imagination. This was a creature utterly lost to its nature. A kill-on-sight target for any giant.

Orion had a sinking feeling this was no coincidence. The Cult of Four had sent this specific monster to the front lines just for him.

"Hahaha..." The Abyssal Devourer's laughter grew stranger, more maniacal. "Come on, then! I really want to see how you're going to kill me. Hehehe..."

With a final, sickly cackle, it charged.

Orion's form blurred. He reappeared on the far side of the arena, a scroll already in his hand. "Don't worry," he said, his voice flat. "You're next on the menu."

He tore the scroll. Five figures emerged from the released energy, standing silently behind him: Sever, Bone White, Bone Red, Bone Green, and Bone Blue.

Sever, from the Blade Hall, was one of Alexander's own subordinates. Orion had last seen him on the battlefield of Dragonflame Island.

As for the four Bone brothers, he'd first encountered them in the Valkorath Realm fighting the slime molds. They had only been at the Legendary level back then. He hadn't expected that in the time it took Arthas to ascend to demigod, they would have already reached the rank of arch lord.

These five were the trump card Alexander had prepared for him—the key to ambushing and annihilating the Cult of Four's elite forces.

"The five of you will hold back their five. Any problems?" Orion asked.

Sever and the Bone brothers remained silent, their faces impassive.

"Good."

The word had barely left his lips before the five swordsmen shot forward. Whether it was intentional or not, Orion noted that every one of the reinforcements Alexander had sent him was a swordsman.

With his allies in motion, Orion's gaze locked onto the Abyssal Devourer. The message was clear: You're mine. Don't even think about moving.

"Mmm... I can already smell the pure demonic blood," the Abyssal Devourer murmured, sniffing the air. It paid no mind to the five figures charging its allies.

Sever was the fastest. With a single slash, he created four illusory duplicates that were indistinguishable from the real thing, each one peeling off to engage the knight, the leader, the Tailed Demon, and the Firelord. Sever's true form, meanwhile, streaked toward the second newcomer who had appeared alongside the Devourer—an Infernal, a massive demon wreathed in hellfire.

The four Bone brothers took a different approach. Instead of engaging directly, they split off, each racing to a different corner of the arena and plunging their long, white bone-forged swords into the ground.

Instantly, a mysterious undead incantation filled the air. Countless wraiths and vengeful spirits clawed their way out of the ground from the four embedded swords. The spirits swirled, forming a vortex that trapped the five enemy arch lords inside an undead barrier, with the four Bone brothers acting as the formation's anchors. Sever, who was already inside their perimeter, was sealed in with them.

Once the barrier was active, the Bone brothers drew their bone-forged swords from the ground and vanished, reappearing inside the swirling vortex of souls.

Immediately, the barrier erupted with flashes of sword light, ghostly wails, bursts of fire, and plunging shadows. The newly formed enclosure, stable only a moment ago, began to tremble violently from the sheer power being unleashed within.

Looks like they didn't buy me much time, Orion thought, pulling his focus back to the Abyssal Devourer.

"In the Abyss, every giant knows to steer clear of me. You're no exception," the monster sneered. "They were fools to leave you behind to die. Looks like you've been abandoned. Gak-gak-gak..."

Orion shook his head. "It's the opposite. They trust me to kill you quickly and come back them up."

"Oh, hahaha! When I crack open that skull of yours, I'm going to scoop out your brain and see what makes you think such ridiculous things!" the Abyssal Devourer howled with laughter.

ROAR!

ROAR!

With two furious bellows, Orion and the Abyssal Devourer charged each other.

Their weapons met with a deafening crash. The chained flail and the trident clashed, and both combatants were thrown back by the sheer force of the impact. But neither's momentum slowed. They instantly adjusted, and their weapons slid past each other as their bodies collided, the handles of the flail and the trident slamming together between their chests.

A dull thud echoed in the arena. Orion and the Abyssal Devourer stood locked together, motionless. In a contest of pure, brute strength, neither one could overpower the other.

Chapter 1079: A Sea of Blood

The Abyssal Devourer let out a sick chuckle. With a rattling sound, the heavy flail in its hand trembled, and the spiked ball at the end suddenly burst apart. A vicious, barbed chain shot out from within, snaking directly for Orion's neck.

"You giants are all muscle, no brains! Hahaha!"

Seeing the chain about to find its mark, the Abyssal Devourer couldn't help but laugh. In this contest of strength, the first to let go would lose their footing and be forced to endure the other's next full-powered attack.

But just as the chain was about to close, six draconic claws sprouted from beneath Orion's ribs.

The Abyssal Devourer's laughter died in its throat.

"I told you," Orion's voice was a low growl. "I'm going to kill you."

Two of the draconic claws shot out and seized the barbed chain, wrenching it away from Orion's neck. In the Abyssal Devourer's eyes, now wide with terror, the other four claws went to work. Two of them, balled into fists, hammered its head from both sides like synchronized pistons. The last two grabbed its arms and began to tear them outwards with inhuman force.

It seemed that life and death would be decided in that single, brutal instant.

“GRRAAAH!” the Abyssal Devourer shrieked. It abandoned the contest of strength, pouring all of its power into a desperate retreat.

But Orion wasn’t about to let this chance slip away.

“Die!”

He twisted the trident he held at his side and thrust it forward, aiming to shred the monster’s heart. Facing annihilation, the Abyssal Devourer roared, its eyes glowing with a feral light as it used its last ounce of strength to wrench its body sideways.

The next moment, two sickening, grating sounds filled the air as the Abyssal Devourer was blasted away. It flew across the arena, about to be flung out of the Killing Floor’s dimension entirely, but a transparent barrier shimmered into existence and slammed it back onto the bloody sand.

It was the arena’s containment field.

“Such a beautiful sound,” Orion hissed. His face was a mask of pure ferocity, his eyes blood-red, his aura radiating boundless killing intent. “Just beautiful.”

He took a step forward, his trident held loosely in one hand. “The sound of tearing muscle. The crunch of snapping bone. The sound of a soul screaming.”

He walked slowly toward the fallen Abyssal Devourer. Behind him, two of his six draconic claws now gripped the monster’s severed arms.

The Abyssal Devourer had been decisive. By shifting its body, it had avoided having its heart obliterated. But the price was still catastrophic. Its arms had been ripped from their sockets by the draconic claws, and Orion’s trident had blasted a massive, gaping hole in the right side of its chest. Inside the wound, currents of electricity and lingering bonfire still crackled and burned.

Despite it all, the arch lord was still alive.

“Damn you... FUCK YOU! CURSED GIANT, I’LL EAT YOU!” Lying in a pool of its own blood, the armless Abyssal Devourer thrashed and roared in agony.

“This sin must be purged.”

Orion reached the monster’s side and, without hesitation, plunged his trident through its skull.

The arch lord’s struggles ceased. For a moment, there was silence. But just as Orion believed it was over, the Abyssal Devourer’s corpse suddenly dissolved into a pool of blood.

The bizarre sight sent a warning flare through Orion’s senses, and he immediately leaped back. Standing near the spreading puddle, he felt a palpable sense of danger.

Before his eyes, the pool of blood began to churn and bubble like a spring, expanding at an impossible rate. The volume of blood was far greater than what the monster’s body could have contained. It was as if the pool was a gateway to some other void, a wellspring of endless gore.

Sizzle! Hiss!

The feeling of crisis intensified. Unwilling to wait and see what would happen, Orion began hurling trident phantoms wreathed in lightning into the pool. The air filled with the crackle of electricity as blood was vaporized and blasted away, but it was useless. The pool replenished itself faster than he could damage it. The amount he destroyed was negligible compared to the amount gushing forth.

What the hell is this thing? Orion frowned, his mind racing as his attacks continued unabated, his guard now fully raised.

Titanion Realm, the Trident Sea.

War erupted the moment the Stoneheart Horde's fleet approached the waters surrounding Aenari Island.

A massive swarm of monstrous, leviathan rays, whose Nest was located near the island, rose from the depths. To them, the appearance of the Sea-Devouring Warships and Ocean Hunters was an invasion. And invaders were to be driven off or killed.

There was no parley, no warning. The battle began in a frenzy of blood and churning water.

"My lady, the Tribe's Ocean Hunters are not easy to raise. Rendall requests permission to join the fight!" Rendall came up behind Marina, giving a quick salute as he made his plea.

It wasn't easy for the Stoneheart Horde to build up its strength, and Rendall, having helped raise the war beasts in both Mist Bay and the Dusk Continent, couldn't stand to watch them dye the ocean red.

"The time is not yet right," Marina said, turning to deny his request.

She knew Orion had entrusted these forces to her as a sign of his faith. On the battlefield, death was a constant, but Marina was determined to minimize the Stoneheart Horde's losses as much as she was able.

Before Rendall could protest further, Marina produced a large seashell. "Orion anticipated this."

She opened the shell and tossed it into the sea. Moments later, an endless stream of giant Specter Mahi poured out from the shell's magical Nest. The first Specter Mahi to exit the shell shot forward, and the attack began.

From the decks of the Sea-Devouring Warships, the horde watched in awe. The first Specter Mahi was the tip of a blade; those that followed were its impossibly long edge. A colossal blade formation made of living creatures carved its way through the ocean, slamming into the swarm of leviathan rays.

The battlefield, already a meat grinder, had just been upgraded to a shredder. And behind that shredder lay Aenari Island, the new territory of the Stoneheart Horde—in name, at least.

The Aenari Sea was an inland sea, connected to the greater Trident Sea by only three major rivers. On an island in the center of this sea, four figures were gathered.

"I've given you the message. Whether you stay or go is your call." The speaker was Orrak, a lord of the Sea-Drake race. Three days ago, he had received a release order from his people. His term of exile was over; he was being summoned home. With the summons came information about the new ownership of Aenari Island and what was to follow. As a friend, he had passed the news on to the other three.

"Orrak, tell me something," a six-armed naga with a serpentine tail hissed, her voice shrill and tinged with hysteria. "We are exiles. Where else are we supposed to go?"

Chapter 1080: An Exile's Gambit

"The ocean's a big place," Orrak said with a shrug, his gaze flicking to the naga, Eshyra. "Not my problem where you end up. Besides the Trident Sea, there's the Starfall Sea, the Silvercurrent Sea, the Kygard Expanse, the Sunrise Sea... I'm sure you'll find a home somewhere." He then deliberately shifted his attention to Dadur of the Reverse Whale race.

At Orrak's subtle gesture, both Eshyra and the Dreadfin lord, Cyclon, turned their eyes to Dadur.

Dadur was an upper-tier Legendary, the most powerful being among them. Most of the time, the various Sea Race gathered on this island deferred to his judgment.

"There's one thing I don't get," Dadur said, his voice a low rumble. He ignored the expectant stares from the naga and the Dreadfin, his full attention on Orrak. "With the strength of your Sea-Drake race, why would you be afraid of some land-dwellers? Afraid enough to just hand over a major island like this?" He leaned forward slightly. "I'm guessing it's not as simple as them having an arch lord."

"You know I've been locked up here," Orrak countered, gesturing vaguely at his surroundings. "I'm out of the loop on clan business. I think... it probably has something to do with that new coastal trade city they opened. Word is, it's bringing in a ton of profit. All the elders are thrilled with it."

Though imprisoned, Orrak had ways of hearing things from the outside, but he only ever got the broad strokes. He knew nothing of the history between the Sea-Drake race and the Stoneheart Horde. Naturally, the details of Marina city's establishment and the profit-sharing agreements were completely beyond him.

"Well, that would explain it," Dadur mused. "Trading with the surface? Of course that would bring the Sea-Drakes countless benefits."

"Dadur, we're talking about whether we stay or leave," Eshyra hissed, her patience wearing thin. Though a naga, she had a notoriously short fuse, and the conversational detour was grating on her. "What's your call?"

A slow, cunning smile spread across Dadur's face, but he didn't answer her immediately.

Cyclon, the Dreadfin lord, was far more patient than the naga. He knew the Reverse Whale's nature well. "You've already made a move, haven't you?"

"If Orrak's intel is right, those newcomers have already met my little vassal school," Dadur said, a low, wicked chuckle rumbling in his chest. "Right now, I'm very curious to see if they can survive an encounter with my gargantuan rays. Heh heh heh..."

His laughter was dark and malevolent.

"Dadur, I'm pretending I never heard this," Orrak said, rising to his feet. "And I was never here today." His body shimmered and swelled, shifting into his massive true form before he plunged into the ocean without a second glance, disappearing down the river on the far side of the island.

"What the hell was that?" Eshyra snapped, her six arms gesturing in frustration. "He just up and leaves?" Orrak's abrupt departure amplified the sense of crisis that had been gnawing at her.

"His sentence was up. Unlike us, he's not a prisoner anymore, not Banish-ed. Why would he stay?" Dadur said calmly. "Let him go. This is the Trident Sea, Sea-Drake territory. It's better for Orrak not to be involved in this."

The Reverse Whale lord watched the ripples where Orrak had vanished, his eyes narrowing. Orrak has always been arrogant and domineering. For him to wash his hands of this completely... the Sea-Drakes must have really put the screws to him. And the source of that pressure was the very same group of outsiders about to land on their shores.

To the Sea Race, all land-dwellers were outsiders.

"Orrak's gone. No outsiders here now," Cyclon stated, his voice a low gravel. He stared at Dadur, knowing the Reverse Whale hadn't spoken freely before for Orrak's benefit—both to keep him in the dark and to spare him a difficult choice. "You can tell us the plan."

"It's simple," Dadur began, immediately capturing both Eshyra's and Cyclon's undivided attention. "There are only two possibilities. One: their arch lord shows up in person. If that happens, we pack our bags, get the hell out, and go our separate ways. No discussion."

They all knew the Stoneheart Horde was a major faction with an arch lord; Orrak had made that clear.

"And if the big gun doesn't show?" Eshyra pressed, her eyebrows raised. Unconsciously, her six hands drifted down, hovering over the hilts of the long knives sheathed at her waist. She'd known Dadur a long time; she knew exactly what kind of person he was.

"There is no 'if'," Dadur said with absolute certainty, a broad, predatory grin spreading across his face. "The arch lord is not here. Just now, the rays sent word back. They've made contact with the incoming fleet."

A jolt went through Eshyra and Cyclon. If the rays were still able to send a message, that was all the proof they needed.

"So, what's the play?" Eshyra asked again, her voice now sharp with anticipation.

"Nothing," Dadur said smoothly. "As of a few moments ago, I officially dissolved my vassal pact with the rays. They have absolutely nothing to do with me now."

Both Eshyra and Cyclon fell silent, a chill running through them at the sheer audacity and ruthlessness of the move.

“It’s just a probe,” Dadur explained. “If these newcomers survive the rays, then they’ve earned the right to talk to us. And if they manage to wipe out the entire school? Well, then they’ve just cleaned up our mess for us, haven’t they?”

Dadur glanced at the other two. All three of them were exiles from the outer seas, with no real power base in the Trident Sea. They had clawed their way into controlling Aenari Island, building up a small faction and a following under the dismissive gaze of the Sea-Drakes. They couldn’t just abandon it all on the whim of the local hegemon.

They didn’t dare challenge the Sea-Drakes, the true masters of this territory, but a group of outsiders from the land? That was a different story.

Most importantly, Dadur was betting that the Sea-Drakes would never allow a land-based faction to freely slaughter other Sea Race within their domain. When push came to shove, he was confident the Sea-Drakes would, however reluctantly, side with them.

After a long moment, Cyclon asked the crucial question. “And what if they actually make it to the island?”

“Even simpler,” Dadur chuckled. “We let them land. We meet them. If they’re weak, then I’m sorry, but Aenari Island remains ours. If they’re strong... well, then we go back to being wanderers. Back to being Banish-ed.”

Silverwood Realm—The Dais of Judgment.

What in the hell is that thing?

As the thought crossed Orion’s mind, a figure began to coalesce within the churning pool of blood.

The monster was a nightmarish fusion of giant and beast. It was several times larger than any giant he'd ever seen, with a long, whip-like tail thrashing behind it. A ridge of razor-sharp bone spurs erupted from its spine, a wicked crest running from the nape of its neck all the way to the bloody tip of its tail.