

Titan King 221

Chapter 221 Battle Statue

"Let's go!"

At Orion's command, the four senior elders—Onyx, Rendall, Thundar, and Delilah—leapt off the city walls, leading their respective forces to drive back the beast tide.

In the skies above, the piercing cries of eagles echoed continuously. Thunderhawk Rayden, following Orion's instructions, coordinated with the four senior elders, fully committing to the effort of dispersing the beast tide.

Outside the city, the roars of beasts filled the air as the tide of creatures retreated at a speed visible to the naked eye.

A stampede of beasts!

It was a rare and awe-inspiring sight, a grand spectacle that left the bloodline warriors guarding the city walls wide-eyed in amazement.

"The walls are pretty badly damaged in some places. We've got a lot of work ahead of us!" Lilith remarked as she surveyed the battered sections of the city walls, her tone filled with emotion.

Orion cast a glance at the walls but didn't seem particularly concerned. If they were damaged, they could simply be repaired. After all, the walls were built for defense, and their destiny was to endure destruction.

"When Onyx returns, have him lead the cannon fodder troops to repair the walls before winter arrives. That should be enough."

With the beast tide retreating, there were still two months left until winter—and two months until the next dark beast tide. This brief respite would allow the horde to recover and rebuild.

Even Orion himself needed to take this time to strengthen his own power.

That very night, a council meeting was held in the chieftain's tent.

Council elders Earthshaker and Desdemona, under the envious gazes of many other elders, were awarded Alpha-level resources as promised.

Following this, Delilah led the war debriefing and analysis. The horde had achieved a decisive victory against the beast tide, and Orion declared a three-day celebration. During this time, all members of the horde would eat and drink to their hearts' content—including the cannon fodder troops.

When Orion and the council members appeared by the bonfire in Blackstone City's central square, the gathered tribespeople erupted into cheers.

Orion carried a roasted beast leg in one hand and a jug of wine in the other. He walked among the crowd, calming their excitement with his presence.

"Orion, come on, let's drink!" Rendall called out as soon as Orion sat down, challenging him to a drinking contest.

Orion didn't refuse. Instead, he pulled Onyx, Thundar, Rendall, and a few others into the mix, and they began drinking heavily.

By the time Orion stumbled back to his tent, thoroughly drunk, he unleashed his pent-up desires on Lilith and Lysinthia. He didn't stop until deep into the night, indulging in both women until exhaustion overtook him.

The next morning.

The sounds of grunts and shouts from training outside the tent woke Orion from his slumber.

"Does this youngling really have such extraordinary talent?" he muttered to himself, still groggy. "The other younglings in the horde are all weak from the plague, but he looks completely unaffected."

Grumbling under his breath, Orion released the two beauties from his embrace, got up, and changed into a light leather outfit before stepping out of the tent.

"Good morning, Chieftain. Did you sleep well?" Beyn and Torba, the guards on duty, bowed respectfully. They had taken over the watch before dawn, replacing Dace and Otho.

Orion tossed them two bottles of Pet Pills, instructing them to feed the Frost Wolves, then made his way toward Rolan.

"Mentor!" Rolan greeted him enthusiastically.

"Not bad. Keep it up," Orion said, adjusting Rolan's stance slightly before leaving him to his training.

Orion found a spot nearby and began his own light training routine. These actions were part of a ritual Orion had decided to follow before consuming an Alpha-level crystal core to enhance his strength.

The council's decision to allocate Alpha-level resources to Earthshaker and Desdemona had left Orion with two remaining Alpha-level crystal cores. Originally, he had only one, but the horde's victory over the beast tide had yielded additional spoils: one black-armored salamander and two millipede centipedes, all of which had provided Alpha-level crystal cores.

Orion planned to consume one core himself and reserve the other for the horde's future needs. This was his rightful reward and the culmination of his efforts to strengthen the horde over the past two years.

Better days were on the horizon. Orion could feel it—he was close to the day when Alpha-level resources would be freely available to him.

But before that, there was one more task to complete: opening the survivor chests he had collected.

Back in his tent, Orion found that Lilith and Lysinthia were gone. He didn't need to guess where they were—they had likely gone to the caves in Moonshadow Valley to try taming the broadskull ravens.

Orion lay down on the fur rug and began opening the 22 survivor chests he had accumulated. The items inside were varied but of mediocre quality. The best item was an elite-grade armor, which Orion had no use for. He tossed it into his Bagbird pouches for storage.

Finally, it was time for the main event: the chest dropped by Ridi, which had been fused with a fragment of will projection.

Rubbing his hands together in anticipation, Orion opened the chest. A small, intricately carved statue fell into his hands. Examining its properties, Orion's face lit up with delight.

[Battle Statue]

- Type: Statue

- Quality: Alpha

- Description: Activating the statue summons an Alpha-level demonic dragon to fight for you until its energy is depleted.

- Special Note: Once the demonic dragon's energy is exhausted, the statue requires a sacrificial offering to recharge.

This was undoubtedly a treasure—and one that could be put to immediate use. Unlike the Slaughter Tyrant, which required faith energy to activate, the Battle Statue was practical and versatile. Several candidates came to mind, but Orion ultimately decided to give the Battle Statue to Spider Queen Lorelia.

As the horde's only broodmother, Lorelia desperately needed a trump card to protect herself. The Alpha-level Battle Statue was the perfect solution.

Lilith already had the frost giant egg, which would eventually provide her with a powerful guardian. Delilah had the taming collar and her own plans in motion. Lorelia, however, had no such advantage and was tasked with guarding the underground fissure. This statue would fill that gap.

After finishing with the chests, Orion retrieved several vials of a rare potion. These potions were specifically designed to aid in the absorption of crystal cores and were highly valuable. To date, only the horde's high-ranking members were allowed to receive a vial when consuming Alpha-level resources.

Orion then took out a pitch-black crystal core—the core of the mother millipede centipede.

Channeling the power of his bloodline, a crimson aura of blood energy appeared in his palm. He crushed the potion vial, letting the liquid flow into his hand, where it began to corrode the crystal core. Slowly, the core softened, melting into a black liquid.

Without hesitation, Orion swallowed the mixture of potion and crystal core liquid.

The next phase was crucial: refining the violent energy contained within the crystal core.

Chapter 222 No way out

Even for Orion, the boost from Alpha-level resources was immense.

Over the course of the following week, Orion continuously refined the crystal core, pushing his strength to its maximum limit of 5,000. His other attributes—Agility, Intelligence, and Constitution—also saw significant increases, nearing their respective caps.

- Strength: 5000/5000 (+10200)

- Agility: 4758/5000 (+226)

- Intelligence: 4801/5000 (+200)

- Constitution: 4725/5000 (+200)

Orion could feel it—his ascension to Legendary level was no longer far off. However, even as his strength reached its apparent limit, Orion didn't feel constrained by his body. This suggested that the "limits" displayed on his data panel weren't his true physical limits but rather the threshold for advancing to the next level.

This realization wasn't new to Orion, but it had only recently begun to solidify in his mind. Of course, it was still just a theory. Regardless, the newfound power filled Orion with confidence.

Two months passed in the blink of an eye.

On this particular day, Orion was conducting his routine inspection of the underground fissure, monitoring the activity of the bottomless abyss. His sister, Clymene, and her team had descended into the abyss long ago, and there had been no word from them since. This silence weighed heavily on Orion's mind.

His concern had only deepened after the emergence of the black-armored salamander and the millipede centipedes from the abyss. He wasn't the only one worried—Rendall shared his unease.

Orion knew all too well that Clymene's expedition into the bottomless abyss would be anything but peaceful. In fact, it was likely fraught with danger.

"Have any of the little spiders returned recently?" Orion asked, his gaze fixed on the abyss. For a brief moment, he felt an almost irresistible urge to jump in and see for himself.

"Master, none have returned recently. I find it strange as well," Lorelia replied, standing behind him with a solemn expression. It was clear that she, too, was deeply apprehensive about the abyss, especially after the emergence of the salamander and centipedes. If not for Orion's insistence that she remain stationed here, Lorelia would have likely relocated long ago.

"I've been sending Alpha-level warriors here on rotation every day. Don't even think about slacking off," Orion said, turning to glance at Lorelia.

Lorelia stuck out her tongue sheepishly, clearly embarrassed. Recently, Orion had given her the Battle Statue, and after familiarizing herself with its use, Lorelia's confidence had grown significantly.

"Winter is almost here," Orion said, his tone shifting. "Take this opportunity to strengthen your brood. I suspect that once the weather warms next year, our horde won't have much peace."

Though his words were directed at Lorelia, his tone suggested he was also speaking to himself.

"Master, winter has already arrived," Lorelia replied softly.

Orion turned to her, puzzled.

"Master, the little spiders from Blackstone City just sent word—it's snowing outside."

Orion fell silent, his expression unreadable. After a long pause, he turned and began walking away from the abyss.

"Keep a close watch here," he said, leaving this final instruction before departing the underground fissure and heading straight for the chieftain's tent.

When Orion arrived at the chieftain's tent, most of the horde's elders were already present. This was customary—before the onset of winter, the horde always held a council meeting, which also served as a pre-war mobilization.

Taking his seat at the head of the table, Orion gestured for the council members to sit before he began speaking.

"You've all seen it—it's snowing. Winter has arrived."

As he spoke, Orion's gaze swept across the room, starting with the four senior elders and then moving to the eight council elders. When his eyes landed on Earthshaker and Desdemona, he let out a sigh.

Both Earthshaker and Desdemona had failed. Despite being among the first to receive the horde's cultivated Blood Mushrooms, neither had managed to ascend to Alpha-level.

From Dirtclaw to Earthshaker and Desdemona, Orion was beginning to realize that advancing to Alpha-level required more than just resources—it also demanded innate talent. Every Alpha-level warrior in the horde was exceptionally gifted. For most bloodline warriors, even those at the peak of hero level, this was likely their limit.

"The dark beast tides could descend at any moment. Everyone must be prepared."

"From this moment on, Blackstone City is in a state of war readiness."

"Sentinel Corps, Hunting Party, Cavalry Corps, and Cannon Fodder Troops are all to be on standby, rotating in three shifts for patrols."

Orion issued a series of commands, covering every aspect of the horde's preparations.

Half a day later, the council meeting concluded.

Aside from the four senior elders, everyone else left the chieftain's tent to carry out their assignments. Orion, however, remained seated, deep in thought. After a long silence, he decided to share a critical piece of information with Onyx, Rendall, Delilah, and Thundar.

Some things, he realized, they needed to know in advance to better prepare.

"During the last beast tide, Rockwell, Lorelia, the Prophet, and Lilith performed exceptionally well. They secured two Alpha-level resources for the horde."

Orion began by revisiting past events, leaving the four senior elders unsure of his intentions. But then, his tone shifted, and what he said next left them utterly stunned.

"However, behind the last beast tide, there was an Alpha-level orchestrator."

"It was Ridi, a trusted subordinate of Lord Gareth. He drove the fiend serpent swarm, consolidating the beast tide into a supermassive wave."

"He was killed outside Blackstone City by me and Thunderhawk."

The revelation hit like a bombshell. Onyx, Rendall, Delilah, and Thundar all shot to their feet, their faces pale with shock.

Ridi wasn't just any Alpha-level warrior—he was one of Lord Gareth's closest confidants. And Lord Gareth herself was a Legendary-level powerhouse.

"Chieftain, why did you..." Onyx began, his voice hoarse, but he couldn't finish the sentence.

Orion didn't explain. Instead, he continued calmly.

"Afterward, Lord Gareth's will projection appeared. I killed that too."

If Ridi's death was a bombshell, then the destruction of Gareth's will projection was a nuclear explosion. The four senior elders were so stunned that they nearly fainted.

Orion said nothing more, simply watching the four elders he had personally nurtured.

After what felt like an eternity, Onyx finally broke the silence, his voice trembling.

"Chieftain... does the Stoneheart Horde have any way out?"

"There is no way out," Orion replied, his tone resolute.

Chapter 223 We are our own way out

Silence. A deathly silence.

Onyx, Rendall, Delilah, and Thundar sat frozen, their minds reeling from the revelation. None of them had expected that the beast tide two months ago had such a shocking secret behind it. And now, they were only learning the truth.

Even now, as the weight of the revelation settled over them, their hearts were filled with confusion and fear. Yet their chieftain, the giant Orion, sat there as calm as ever, his expression as cold and unyielding as the eternal ice of the northern tundra.

"Dear Orion, where is our way out?" Delilah's voice trembled as she spoke, her fear evident. But as her eyes met Orion's, the calmness in his gaze seemed to steady her, bringing a measure of peace to her heart.

It was the first time Orion had heard Delilah speak with such nervousness and fear. Her vulnerability stirred a deep protective instinct within him.

"I am the way out for stoneheart horde. We are our own way out," Orion declared, his voice steady and resolute. His expression remained composed, his tone unwavering.

"Orion, you are our chieftain. We will support you without reservation!" Rendall was the first to speak up, as he always was. Though the thought of offending a Legendary-level powerhouse like Lord Gareth filled him with dread, Rendall believed that as a council elder of the Stoneheart Horde, his duty was to stand by Orion unconditionally.

To Rendall, Orion's actions—whether right or wrong—were something the horde had to follow. At least, that was how the giants saw it.

"Orion, whatever you decide, we will follow your lead," Delilah said, her earlier panic now replaced with composure. The situation was already beyond their control, and from her perspective, there was no reason to betray Orion.

"Chieftain, Thundar swears to follow you to the death!" Thundar, another giant, echoed Rendall's sentiment, pledging his loyalty without hesitation.

The three of them then turned their gazes toward Onyx, as if waiting for him to make his stance clear.

"Don't look at me like that," Onyx said, raising his hands slightly. "From the day the Stoneheart Horde was founded, we've been bound together. The fates of our tribes are intertwined."

"I, and the obsidian golem clan (tribe), will of course support the chieftain."

"But the question is, what do we do next? How do we deal with Lord Gareth?"

Onyx's words shifted the focus back to Orion. All eyes were now on him.

Orion reached for the mug of ale in front of him and drained it in one gulp.

"Lord Gareth isn't as terrifying as she seems. I'll handle her. What you need to do is focus on strengthening yourselves and safeguarding the Stoneheart Horde."

"Besides, things haven't reached the point of no return yet."

Orion paused for a moment, organizing his thoughts before continuing.

"First, Ridi had no business appearing in the beast tide that attacked Blackstone City. His death was justified, and we hold the moral high ground."

"Second, Gareth used her will projection to attack her own subordinate. If word of that gets out, it'll be a laughingstock."

"Even if Gareth doesn't care about reason, she won't openly target us. If she does, she's a fool and unworthy of being called the Lord of the Four Domains."

These were the conclusions Orion had reached after much contemplation, his attempt to predict Gareth's actions.

"That said, we must still be prepared."

Orion's words left Onyx, Rendall, Delilah, and Thundar deep in thought. After a moment of silence, Orion stood and left the chieftain's tent. He had said all he needed to say. The four senior elders would know what to do with this information.

Besides, someone of Lord Gareth's caliber was beyond their ability to confront. That responsibility fell solely on Orion.

After leaving the tent, Orion made his way to the southern city wall. Standing atop the wall, he gazed into the snowy distance for a long while before heading toward the underground fissure.

In Orion's contingency plans, the underground fissure was a potential escape route. If the situation ever escalated to the point where he had to face Lord Gareth in battle, and even his trump cards failed to kill her, the bottomless abyss would be the last refuge for the Stoneheart Horde.

The appearance of the black-armored salamander and millipede centipedes had proven that there was a habitable environment beneath the abyss, though it was likely harsh and unforgiving. But no matter how harsh, it was better than total annihilation.

That night, the four senior elders remained in the chieftain's tent, discussing plans until dawn. It wasn't until Dirtclaw, one of the council elders, came to seek Delilah's guidance that they finally ended their meeting.

"Master, my subordinates sent me to ask—should we start setting up traps and bait now?" Dirtclaw asked cautiously.

Delilah didn't respond immediately. She kept walking, her head bowed, until she reached the city wall. Snowflakes fell onto her hair, melting into cold droplets that trickled down her face. The icy sensation brought her back to her senses.

"I never thought it would come to this," she murmured softly. Dirtclaw, standing beside her, didn't understand her words and didn't dare to ask.

"Tell Onyx to send out the cannon fodder troops' scouts. I want every movement of the dark creatures near Blackstone City monitored."

"Also, have a team of bloodline warriors inspect the traps outside the city. Repair any that are damaged."

"Once the traps are fully inspected, begin setting the bait."

"This year, we'll use ten times the amount of bait as last year."

Dirtclaw's heart skipped a beat at the mention of ten times the bait. But when he thought about the horde's numerous Alpha-level warriors, cannon fodder troops, and the cave spider clan, he felt reassured. No matter how many dark creatures came, they would only be delivering resources to the horde.

"As you command, I'll see to it immediately!" Dirtclaw said before hurrying off.

Not long after, Onyx joined Delilah on the city wall. Standing amidst the swirling snow, he too gazed into the distance.

"I've long suspected this day would come, but I didn't think it would arrive so soon," Onyx said with a sigh. Ever since Orion had slain the will projection of a Legendary-level powerhouse, Onyx had found it increasingly difficult to understand their giant chieftain.

Orion's actions had grown more enigmatic, his decisions more decisive and unpredictable. Even during council meetings, Onyx could sense the terrifying power hidden within Orion's body.

"Whether we succeed or fail, I will stand behind Orion," Onyx declared firmly. "If anyone dares to stand in Orion's way, I will ensure they and their tribe are utterly destroyed."

Delilah turned to look at Onyx, her expression cold and resolute. "If anyone betrays Orion, they will meet the same fate."

Her words were a warning, and Onyx understood their meaning clearly. To betray Orion was to invite ruin.

Chapter 224 I trust you

As the snow thickened and the icy winds howled, the dark beast tides descended without warning.

"This is the second wave of dark creatures, isn't it?" Orion asked, his voice calm as he stood atop the southern city wall, draped in a heavy fur cloak. His gaze was fixed on the bloodline warriors battling the dark creatures outside the city.

"Yes, the second wave. Their numbers are around five hundred," Delilah replied, standing close behind him. Though she wasn't directly involved in the fighting, she was well-informed about the situation.

"Stay vigilant. Last year, that Dark Butterfly left us with a threat. Who knows if it'll return to attack us again?" Orion's mention of the Dark Butterfly made Delilah's brows furrow slightly.

"The first batch of broadskull ravens that Lilith helped the tribe tame has already been sent out to monitor the surrounding areas. If there's any movement, we should get an early warning," Delilah said, though even she didn't sound entirely confident. While the broadskull ravens were flying beasts, the dark beast tides were known to include plenty of flying creatures as well.

"Don't forget, creatures like the Dark Butterfly are masters of illusions," Orion reminded her as he turned his gaze back to the battlefield. The fight outside the city had already ended. Under Thundar's leadership, the horde's warriors had swiftly annihilated the five hundred dark creatures.

"Come, walk with me," Orion said, inviting Delilah to join him as he began patrolling the city wall.

The guards, Dace and Otho, immediately understood the unspoken command and fell back, giving Orion and Delilah some space. Orion walked slowly, his hands clasped behind his back. Delilah followed silently, neither of them speaking a word as they made their way toward the underground fissure.

When they reached the edge of the bottomless abyss, Orion stopped and stared into its depths before finally breaking the silence.

"This is the escape route I've prepared for the horde. You're the first to know about it."

"Escape route?" Delilah asked, her voice tinged with disbelief.

"Yes. There's a habitable space beneath the bottomless abyss," Orion explained.

"This..." Delilah was stunned. She stared into the abyss, a place she had always regarded as a realm of danger and death. To think that it was actually Orion's contingency plan for the horde's survival left her speechless.

She turned to Orion, wanting to ask more, but he was already speaking with Lorelia.

"Have any of the little spiders returned recently?" Orion asked.

"Master, still none," Lorelia replied with a sigh, her tone heavy with disappointment. It had been a long time since any of her spiders had returned from the bottomless abyss with information—a troubling sign. Normally, Lorelia would send batches of spiders into the abyss at regular intervals, and at least a few would make it back. But recently, not a single one had returned.

"Keep sending them. It's impossible for none to come back," Orion ordered.

"As you command," Lorelia replied, though her voice carried a hint of unease.

After a long pause, Orion turned to Delilah, who was still processing what she had just learned. "Some of the spiders have successfully returned from the bottomless abyss before. If we ever face a catastrophic crisis, you'll lead the horde here."

"Orion, I..." Delilah began, but Orion shook his head, cutting her off. Without another word, he led her out of the underground fissure.

Once they were outside, Orion didn't bring up the topic again. Delilah, as the Elder of Stewardship, was intimately familiar with the horde's inner workings and was capable of managing its survival. She was the best candidate to lead the tribe to safety if the worst came to pass.

That was why Orion had brought her to the underground fissure—to prepare her for what might come.

The next few days passed peacefully for the Stoneheart Horde. No Alpha-level dark creatures appeared, and the monsters outside the city became little more than opportunities for the warriors to earn merit. Orion himself enjoyed this period of calm.

When he wasn't spending time with Lilith and Lysinthia in his tent, he would occasionally seek out Delilah for more intimate encounters. For instance, at this very moment, Orion was in Delilah's stone chamber, enjoying her oral service.

"Why do you trust me so much?" Delilah asked softly after they had finished making love. She kissed Orion's cock tenderly, her voice filled with curiosity.

Orion knew exactly what she was referring to. Stroking her back gently, he replied in a calm tone, "Because you're the most suitable, and I trust you."

Delilah chuckled, her laughter light and joyful.

Their moment was interrupted by a voice from outside the stone chamber. "Your Majesty, we've received intelligence from the field!"

A succubus bloodline warrior's voice echoed through the stone door, cutting through the intimate atmosphere. Delilah frowned. For someone to interrupt her while she was with Orion, the matter had to be urgent.

"Wait outside," Delilah commanded.

Moments later, both Orion and Delilah, now fully dressed, stood in the chamber, ready to hear the report.

"Speak," Delilah said.

"Your Majesty, the forward scouts have reported that a large number of dark creatures are gathering near Blackstone City. Additionally, several of our broadskull ravens have been lost. I suspect there are flying monsters among the incoming dark creatures."

"Their numbers are estimated to be around thirty to forty thousand," the succubus warrior reported.

Hearing this, Orion remained calm, his expression unchanging. He even poured himself a glass of the succubi's special wine and took a sip.

Delilah, on the other hand, looked deeply concerned. Her brows furrowed as she considered the situation. After a moment of thought, she issued her orders.

"Recall half of the broadskull ravens. Have the remaining ones tighten their patrol radius to within a thousand meters of Blackstone City."

"As you command!" the warrior replied before leaving.

Once they were alone again, Delilah leaned against Orion, pressing her body against his back. "What do you think, my dear?"

Orion, enjoying the sensation of her soft breasts against him, smiled with satisfaction. "There's nothing to be alarmed about."

"A large group of dark creatures means there's likely an Alpha-level dark creature among them. This is an opportunity for the horde. It's what the elders have been waiting for—a chance to prove themselves. This is a good thing."

Delilah's body shifted against him, her movements teasing. Orion's desire flared once more, and he tore her clothes off without hesitation.

Delilah let out a startled cry, but before she could say anything, Orion silenced her with his cock. The chamber was soon filled with the sounds of their passionate lovemaking once again.

The next day at noon.

The southern city wall was ablaze with activity, torches lighting up the snowy landscape. Outside the city, shadows stretched across the horizon as the dark creatures approached in droves.

Orion sat at the highest point of the city wall, watching as Onyx, Rendall, and Thundar led the cannon fodder troops, hunting party, and cavalry corps into battle against the incoming dark creatures.

Among the horde of dark creatures was a massive tentacle monster, its size dwarfing the others. It was an Alpha-level monster and the leader of this wave.

Onyx was the first to engage the tentacle monster. Thundar wasn't far behind. Though he hadn't yet tamed an Alpha-level mount, he had managed to capture an icefield snow wolf using enchanted bells. Riding the wolf, Thundar quickly flanked the tentacle monster, joining Onyx in a pincer attack.

Chapter 225 Are you threatening me?

As the dark creatures continued to fall, the Stoneheart Horde's warriors pressed their advantage.

Rendall, leading the hunting party, focused on eliminating the ordinary dark creatures. Unlike the Alpha-level battle happening elsewhere, his task was straightforward: ensure no dark creature escaped. For the horde, these creatures weren't just enemies—they were resources. Every kill meant more materials, more power, and more opportunities for growth.

The horde's strength had grown so much that the 30,000–40,000 dark creatures outside Blackstone City posed no real threat. They didn't even need to breach the city walls—Rendall and his warriors had already taken the fight to them, determined to leave no dark creature alive.

Suddenly, a piercing eagle cry echoed through the darkened sky. It was the unmistakable call of the thunderhawk.

Orion, seated atop the city wall, looked up, his eyes narrowing slightly. Moments later, the sky was illuminated by flashes of lightning, thunder rumbling across the battlefield. In the brief bursts of light, the silhouette of a Four-Winged Blood Bat appeared, its massive wings cutting through the stormy sky.

"I know this monster," Orion muttered, recognizing the creature immediately. He had encountered this type of dark creature before, and now another had appeared.

Orion stood, ready to grab a throwing weapon to assist in the aerial battle. But after observing the thunderhawk's dominance in the skies, he slowly sat back down. The thunderhawk had the upper hand, and Orion trusted it to handle the situation.

The aerial battle, however, did not go unnoticed. The thunderhawk's cries and the flashes of lightning drew the attention of everyone in Blackstone City.

"Mom, look! That's our great chieftain's thunderhawk!" a young boy exclaimed, peeking out from the corner of his family's tent. His face was filled with pride, as if the thunderhawk were his own.

In the chieftain's tent, Lilith and Lysinthia, who had just woken up, stepped outside to see what was happening. The sound of thunder had drawn their curiosity.

"Master's thunderhawk is fighting a dark creature!" Lysinthia said, her gaze fixed on the sky. Her eyes sparkled with longing—the longing for Alpha-level power.

Though Lysinthia rarely voiced her thoughts, her mind was often filled with insecurities. She felt that her strength was becoming increasingly irrelevant. Once, her petrification spell had been a crucial tool in aiding the horde's warriors. But as the bloodline warriors grew stronger, the spell's effectiveness diminished, and so did Lysinthia's presence within the horde.

If not for her Twilight Viper, which still gave her some standing, Lysinthia feared she might have already been forgotten. This was why she desperately yearned to ascend to Alpha-level. Reaching that level would not only secure her position but also allow her to contribute more meaningfully to Orion and the horde.

The battle on the ground ended quickly. With three Alpha-level warriors surrounding the massive tentacle monster, its defeat was inevitable. The aerial battle, however, lasted much longer—nearly two hours.

In the end, the thunderhawk emerged victorious, killing the Four-Winged Blood Bat. With a triumphant cry, it dropped the bat's corpse onto the city wall, its screeches echoing across the battlefield.

"Alright, enough showing off," Orion said with a chuckle. "Everyone already knows how strong you are."

The thunderhawk's dramatic display amused Orion. The skies were its domain, and it had been frustrated by its inability to single-handedly drive off last year's Dark Butterfly or this year's broadskull ravens. The intrusion of the Four-Winged Blood Bat into its territory had clearly pushed it to its limits, and it had fought with everything it had to reclaim its dominance.

Dropping the bat's corpse on the wall was the thunderhawk's way of declaring its prowess to everyone.

Orion waved over a team of shamans to tend to the thunderhawk's injuries. Though it had only sustained minor wounds, he wanted to ensure it was fully healed.

Half an hour later, two dark source crystals—pure and brimming with energy—were placed on the table in front of Orion. He couldn't help but smile at the sight.

"This is what it feels like to have resources delivered to you without lifting a finger," he thought to himself.

Orion decided to keep one crystal for himself and reserve the other for the horde. This was part of a new policy he had recently implemented: from now on, half of all Alpha-level resources acquired by the horde would be used by him, while the other half would be saved for emergencies.

After storing the dark source crystals, Orion reflected on the past two years. His efforts to strengthen the horde were finally paying off, and the rewards were beginning to flow in.

At night, Orion sat in his tent and consumed one of the dark source crystals. The surge of power coursing through his body was intoxicating, filling him with a sense of exhilaration.

By the time morning came, the energy within him had finally settled. Orion opened his eyes and immediately checked his data panel.

- Strength: 5000/5000 (Maxed)

- Agility: 5000/5000 (Maxed)

- Constitution: 5000/5000 (Maxed)

- Intelligence: 4801/5000

With three attributes now at their maximum, Orion clenched his right fist, feeling the raw power coursing through him. He knew that the numbers displayed on his data panel didn't represent his true limits. The panel itself hadn't advanced yet, which likely meant it couldn't display his full potential.

Taking a deep breath, Orion didn't leave his tent. Instead, he entered the Survivor's Platform, eager to uncover the method for advancing to Legendary level.

"How do I ascend to Legendary level?" Orion sent the question to Arthas, keeping it simple and direct. He was confident that Arthas would understand what he was asking.

The response came quickly:

"Your data panel is already maxed out?"

Orion didn't reply, waiting instead for Arthas to provide a proper explanation.

"Legendary level... the power you'll wield will be supernatural," Arthas finally responded. "The Lord's Stone is the key. It contains a fragment of transcendent power."

"Communicate with it. Master it. That's how you ascend to Legendary level."

Orion stared at the message, reading it over and over until his eyes began to ache.

"How do I communicate with the Lord's Stone?" he asked. This was the most critical question.

Arthas took a long time to reply.

"The exact method? I don't know."

"What I do know is that every lord's method is different. Some wear it as a necklace. Some crush it. Some swallow it. And... some shove it up their ass."

Arthas's response left Orion momentarily stunned.

Orion stared at the Lord's Stone in his hand, contemplating whether he should just swallow it whole. The methods for communicating with supernatural power were, to say the least, bizarre.

"Is this a joke?" he muttered to himself.

Ultimately, Orion tucked the Lord's Stone away and sent a message back to Arthas.

"Do you think I'm joking?" came Arthas's reply, almost as if mocking Orion's hesitation.

"How did you do it?" Orion asked, genuinely curious.

"I bit down and swallowed it," Arthas replied bluntly.

"This..." Orion was at a loss for words.

"Hard to imagine, isn't it?" Arthas added, clearly amused.

So, Arthas himself had been one of those who simply ate the Lord's Stone. Compared to that, Orion was now far more curious about the person who had... shoved it somewhere far less conventional.

"Bro, you've got a strong stomach!" Orion replied, throwing in a bit of flattery in the hopes of coaxing more advice out of Arthas.

"You should try it too. Crunchy, and it might even taste good!" Arthas quipped.

At that point, Orion lost all interest in continuing the conversation. He exited the Survivor's Platform, his expression growing more serious.

Advancing to Legendary level wasn't as straightforward as Orion had initially thought. It wasn't just about gathering the necessary items—it required finding a personal method to communicate with the Lord's Stone and unlocking its transcendent power.

Orion sighed, temporarily setting aside his thoughts on the matter. His data panel wasn't fully maxed out yet, so he still had work to do before he could focus on advancing.

Orion stepped out of his tent, where his four guards—Dace, Otho, Beyn, and Torba—stood at attention.

"Anything happening on the walls?" Orion asked.

"Nothing for now, respected chieftain," Dace replied.

Orion nodded and began walking toward the chieftain's tent. The tent was empty, its silence almost eerie. Most of the horde's elders were stationed on the walls, leading their warriors and trying to gather as many dark source crystals as possible. Even the four senior elders were busy.

For the first time in a long while, Orion found himself with nothing to do. This strange calm persisted until the dark beast tides finally ended.

After the defeat of the two Alpha-level dark creatures, no more appeared. The real beneficiaries of the beast tides were the horde's ordinary bloodline warriors, who had gained valuable experience and resources.

Inside the chieftain's tent, Orion listened to the rhythmic sound of rain pattering against the fabric. The spring rain had arrived—a signal that the dark beast tides were over. But it could also be a harbinger of the myriad races invasion.

The rain brought a sense of relief to the horde's warriors. Their tense nerves relaxed, and for the first time in weeks, they could sleep soundly.

Three days later, the peace was shattered.

"By the order of Lord Gareth, Orion of the Black Forest is summoned to lead his forces south in three days to participate in the myriad races invasion. Refusal is not an option!"

The messenger was Arden, riding his storm vulture. His expression was uneasy as he delivered the message.

This time, no one from the Stoneheart Horde came out to greet him. The lack of reception made Arden feel slighted, but Orion's reputation kept him from voicing his displeasure. After delivering the message, Arden quickly turned west to continue his rounds.

Orion sat in the chieftain's tent, his eyes half-closed as if deep in thought. Arden's demeanor made it clear that he was unaware of the destruction of Lord Gareth's will projection. This confirmed Orion's suspicion: Gareth was playing a dangerous game.

"Chieftain, the myriad races invasion is upon us again. Are we heading south this time?" Onyx asked cautiously.

Orion didn't respond immediately. He was waiting for the others to arrive.

Before long, the three Wardens—Lilith, Rockwell, and Lorelia—entered the tent, followed by the eight council elders: Earthshaker, Desdemona, Vespera, Hammerhoof, Dirtclaw, Slate, Samson, and Ursa.

Once everyone was present, Orion opened his eyes and scanned the room. His voice was low and commanding as he spoke.

"Of the four senior elders, Rendall and Elder of Stewardship Delilah will remain to guard the horde."

"Of the three Wardens, Rockwell and Spider Queen Lorelia will stay behind."

"Of the eight council elders, Desdemona, Hammerhoof, Dirtclaw, and Rendall will accompany me. The rest will remain under Delilah's command."

Orion's tone left no room for argument. His words carried a rare weight of authority, and no one dared to object.

"This time, the Sentinel Corps, hunting party, and cavalry corps will stay behind to defend the horde. The cannon fodder troops and half of the cave spiders will march south with me."

"Go and prepare. We leave in three days."

Orion's decisiveness and dominance were on full display. He didn't consult the elders or seek their opinions—he simply made the decisions himself.

The council elders exchanged glances, their eyes filled with confusion and doubt. But none of them dared to question Orion. Silently, they left the tent to carry out his orders.

Once the council elders were gone, only the horde's Alpha-level warriors remained in the tent.

"This march south will be fraught with danger," Orion said, his tone grave. "Not only will those of us leaving face peril, but those staying behind must also remain vigilant."

"In my absence, Delilah will have full authority over the horde's affairs. Rendall will oversee and support her."

The room fell silent. Even Rockwell, who was usually outspoken, chose to remain quiet. He glanced at Onyx, then at Orion, his face filled with concern.

There were some things Orion kept hidden from the council elders but shared with his most trusted warriors. This march south was likely to bring him into direct conflict with Lord Gareth. The mere thought of it made Rockwell's heart race with unease.

Thunderwood Forest

Near Thunderpeak Mountain, a bolt of lightning split the sky, chasing a shadowy figure as it fled northward. The figure didn't stop until it had escaped the mountain's range.

"Gareth, what do you want?" the figure demanded, its voice sharp and filled with irritation.

In the flickering light of the storm, the figure's features became visible—it bore a striking resemblance to Lord Gareth.

"Ariel, I'm marching south for the invasion. Clear a path for me, or this ends in mutual destruction," Gareth replied coldly.

"Hahaha... Gareth, are you threatening me?" Ariel sneered.

"Take it however you want," Gareth said, her tone unwavering.

"Then let's fight! I'd love to see who runs out of transcendent power first."

"What will it take for you to give me a path?" Gareth asked, her voice laced with frustration.

"It's not impossible... but only if..." Ariel trailed off, a sly smile spreading across her face.

Chapter 226 Merge forces

The southern border of the Black Forest.

As Orion prepared to leave his territory, a swirl of emotions churned within him—excitement, unease, fear, and a strange eagerness to face the unknown. It was a complex mix, difficult to put into words.

"Dear Orion, the scouts report that we're approaching Thunderwood Forest!" Lilith called out, her voice carrying a hint of excitement. With Delilah staying behind to oversee the horde, Lilith had taken over intelligence and logistics. For someone stepping out of the Black Forest for the first time, every piece of information was a novelty.

"Pass the order: we're heading to the Gathering Grounds," Orion instructed.

Lilith nodded and summoned a succubus bloodline warrior to relay the command. Behind Orion, Onyx and Thundar followed closely. Like Lilith, Thundar was also leaving the Black Forest for the first time, and he had many questions for Onyx.

"Prophet, how do we fight an invasion war like this?" Thundar asked, his voice low as he glanced at Orion's back.

"Invasions are about one thing: resources. Use any means necessary to seize them," Onyx replied, his tone calm but firm. "Remember—any means necessary."

Onyx's bluntness struck a chord with Thundar, who suddenly understood why Orion had insisted on training the cannon fodder troops and the cave spider units. Everything was about maximizing resource acquisition.

"Ah..." Thundar sighed, his thoughts heavy. Onyx seemed like he wanted to say more but ultimately chose to remain silent.

Half a Month Later

Orion led his bloodline warriors through forests and across rivers, encountering no significant obstacles. Eventually, they arrived at the Gathering Grounds, where two other factions had already assembled.

To the west stood Slagor of the Poison Dragon Swamp, his forces exuding a toxic, oppressive aura. To the east was Soraya, the Scorpion Queen of the Desert Oasis, her troops disciplined and radiating a deadly elegance. The two factions clearly didn't get along, as they avoided any interaction with each other.

Orion's arrival immediately drew their attention. Soraya, in particular, seemed intrigued. She had heard of the Stoneheart Horde's victory over the elemental beings Lumi and Gustalon and was curious about how Orion had managed it.

After exchanging a glance with her High Priestess, Soraya dismounted from her giant scorpion and began walking toward Orion's forces alone.

Orion, however, was surprised by something else: Lord Gareth's faction was nowhere to be seen.

He had deliberately delayed his march by two days, hoping to observe Gareth's forces and gauge her attitude toward him. Yet, Gareth's main forces were absent. The only sign of her presence was her messenger, Arden, circling above on his Storm Vulture.

When Arden saw that all three factions had gathered, he descended and delivered Gareth's orders.

"By the command of Lord Gareth, Orion, Soraya, and Slagor, your invasion routes remain unchanged. Lord Gareth expects you to swiftly conquer Stormrage City and Thunder Beast City, then rendezvous with her forces at Thunderpeak Mountain."

Orion, Soraya, and Slagor all nodded silently, none of them bothering to respond. Arden's brow twitched in irritation, but he held his tongue. After a brief exchange of whispers with Slagor, Arden mounted his Storm Vulture and flew south.

"Chieftain Orion, let's form an alliance," Soraya said suddenly, stepping closer to Orion. Her request was abrupt, but her tone was calm and confident.

Soraya's gaze was fixed on Orion, her curiosity evident. She was determined to learn how this giant had managed to repel the icy northern invaders. Her unique, intoxicating scent wafted toward Orion, who couldn't help but take a deep breath, savoring it.

From his experience, Orion could tell that Soraya was likely a virgin—she had never been with a man before.

"Oh, Your Majesty, what kind of alliance are you proposing?" Orion asked, his tone playful as he continued to enjoy her scent.

Soraya smiled seductively, unfazed by Orion's behavior. "Let's stand together against future invasions from the Icefields. What do you think?"

Her large, expressive eyes locked onto Orion's, waiting for his response.

"Not interested," Orion replied bluntly, catching Soraya off guard.

"Your Majesty, your people's inaction during the last Icefield invasion cost the Black Forest dearly. I have no interest in allying with someone who abandons their supposed allies," Orion said, his tone cold.

Soraya opened her mouth to explain, but when her eyes met Orion's, she realized he didn't trust her. Any attempt to justify her actions would be futile.

"Chieftain Orion, please reconsider. My people had their reasons for staying out of the last conflict," Soraya said, her voice softening.

Orion shook his head and turned his attention to Slagor, who was approaching. Soraya sighed and walked away, her chance to negotiate slipping through her fingers.

"Orion, let's merge our forces," Slagor suggested as he approached, his tone casual but his eyes cautious.

Orion smirked. "Merge our forces? What's in it for me?"

"You can take most of the spoils, just leave me a small portion of what you don't need," Slagor replied with a placating grin, quickly adding, "Of course, we'll share the burden of the fighting."

Orion's smirk deepened. He saw through Slagor's ploy—this was a man who was both clever and cowardly. Orion decided it was time to fully bring Slagor under his control.

"Fine. Last time we worked together, it went well. Let's do it again," Orion said. "But this time, your troops will be integrated into my command. They'll follow my orders."

"Agreed!" Slagor said without hesitation. His forces had been absorbed into the Stoneheart Horde before, so his warriors were already accustomed to following Orion's lead.

Over the next half-day, Slagor's troops were seamlessly integrated into Orion's cannon fodder troops. Once the preparations were complete, the combined forces began their march toward Thunderhawk City.

As they traveled, Slagor sidled up to Orion, his expression thoughtful.

"Chieftain Orion, don't you think this invasion feels... off?" Slagor asked cautiously.

Orion glanced at him. "Go on."

Slagor looked around to ensure no one was listening before lowering his voice. "Think about it. We were just invaded last year. Logically, we should be focusing on recovery, not launching another invasion."

"Doesn't it feel like we're being set up to fail?"

Slagor's words struck a chord. Even someone as cautious as Slagor could see the flaws in this campaign. There was no way Lord Gareth hadn't noticed them as well.

So why had she initiated the invasion? The answer was simple: Gareth had her own agenda. She was either pursuing something urgent or trying to eliminate someone.

And Orion was an obvious target.

Orion shook his head, offering no response. His silence left Slagor puzzled and uneasy.

Chapter 227 Stay alert

Thunderwood Forest, somewhere deep in the southern region.

The Storm Vulture circled overhead before descending, and Arden dismounted, prostrating himself before Lord Gareth, who was seated on the Abyssal dragon.

"Milord, your orders have been delivered!"

Lord Gareth opened her eyes, and a golden light flickered within them.

"How many troops did they bring?"

Arden kept his head lowered, not daring to meet Lord Gareth's gaze. His manner was humble and deferential to the extreme.

"Slagor brought eighty thousand bloodline warriors and ten thousand swamp crocodiles.

"Soraya of the scorpion tribe came with the High Priestess and one giant scorpion warrior. I'm not sure exactly how many scorpions she brought, but it's quite a lot.

"The giant chieftain, Orion, led fifty thousand cave spiders, forty thousand bloodline warriors, and three Alpha-level powerhouses."

When Orion's name was mentioned, Lord Gareth's pupils contracted briefly.

"All right, that's enough. You may leave."

Lifting her eyes, Lord Gareth gazed toward Stormrage City. That place would be the epicenter of this latest invasion—and the site where Orion and the others would meet their end.

Prior to the first invasion, Gareth had held Orion in high regard and intended to cultivate him.

However, during that first invasion, Orion had offended her at the assembly point, and she had let it slide. But after her subordinate, Ridi, was killed and her will projection destroyed, Lord Gareth realized Orion truly felt no fear toward her.

A subordinate who doesn't fear you can do anything, can't he? So Orion had to die.

Moreover, Orion's death couldn't be pinned on Gareth; if she acted rashly, it would dishearten the other Alpha-level powerhouses, making them unwilling to follow her in the future.

But Lord Gareth wasn't the only person who wanted Orion dead. Lord Ariel did, too. Not long ago, Gareth and Ariel had conspired, and after a series of compromises and concessions, both saw their chance.

"Orion, I'm dying to see if you can really kill a Legendary-level fighter."

Another reason Gareth didn't want to end Orion personally was that she didn't want to risk it. Orion once claimed he could take her down, and she'd never believed it—at least, not until her will projection had been destroyed. From that point on, she had no choice but to believe him.

...

A month flew by in the blink of an eye.

One day, Orion was riding his thunderhawk, soaring high above the battlefield, watching Onyx, Slagor, and the Abyssal dragon assault a city.

Thunderhawk City, a place Orion had once burned to the ground, had been rebuilt thoroughly over the course of more than a year.

"Orion, that harpy's trying to flee!"

Thunderhawk Rayden, who had yet to make a move, was keeping a close eye on the Alpha-level defender of Thunderhawk City—a harpy named Talora.

"Don't let her get away!"

"Got it!"

On the ground, the Abyssal dragon launched an Abyssal Flame Bomb, blasting the city walls of Thunderhawk City to rubble once again.

Onyx and Slagor immediately led their forces—one from the front, one from the rear—storming into the city.

Moments later, a figure took flight in a desperate attempt to escape south.

Boom!

Crackle!

A bolt of lightning shot forth, followed closely by a three-pronged spear. Harpy Talora didn't even last two rounds before she was annihilated.

With an Alpha-level fighter killed, the gnolls, satyrs, harpies and geckos in Thunderhawk City promptly surrendered and were absorbed into Orion's cannon fodder troops.

As for other resources, Lilith and Thundar had already led teams to loot the place.

Among them, Dirtclaw was the most enthusiastic; he was intimately familiar with Thunderhawk City, knowing exactly where the valuable items were stashed. He led a squad from the cannon fodder troops to ransack every last corner of the city.

The calmest of all was Onyx.

Once the city was taken, he returned to Orion's side. Orion didn't seem to mind. He knew what Onyx was worried about, but there was no need to speak of it.

"Lilith and Thundar are venturing out for the first time. Getting an initial victory like this, they're bound to give in to temptation," Orion murmured to himself. He sounded both regretful and as if he were trying to reassure himself.

"Chieftain, is our next target Stormrage City?"

"Yes."

"The Thunderstorm Bearmen in Stormrage City are pretty stubborn, and they've got Darkbolt and Silvershock—both Alpha-level. There's a chance more harpy reinforcements could show up."

"I know. As long as no Legendary-level combatant shows up, we'll be fine."

Orion was confident. Lord Gareth was keeping her distance, leaving Orion both cautious and a little freewheeling at the same time.

"Prophet, you think Thunderhawk City might surprise us somehow?" Onyx's question struck a somber note, and Orion deliberately changed the subject. Capturing Thunderhawk City was a victory, after all, something worth celebrating.

Onyx stayed silent. By now, no matter what spoils they found, it wouldn't change his mindset.

By late afternoon, the looting in Thunderhawk City finally ceased, along with the violence, burning, and pillaging.

Of course, the same was true for all the indulgent acts—those acts of raiding, raping, and plundering. Orion's cannon fodder troops and Slagor's forces had let themselves enjoy the moment. It was customary, after all, and Orion had no intention of putting a stop to it.

"Orion, our haul is huge!"

Night was falling as Lilith and Thundar finally emerged from Thunderhawk City, beaming with joy. Orion nodded, not paying it much heed.

After waiting a whole day, no one had delivered any truly shocking finds. It seemed that despite a year of rebuilding, Thunderhawk City's reserves still weren't all that impressive.

"Orion, when do we head to the next target?"

Before long, Slagor also strode out of Thunderhawk City, looking quite satisfied with himself. Orion shot him a glance; he had obviously been indulging in sex with the surrendering harpies and satyrs.

"You can have the geckos. Everything else belongs to me. Any objections?"

Slagor's eyes lit up at that. He nodded without the slightest complaint. He'd counted the geckos back in the city; there were at least thirty thousand of them if you included the elderly and children, which was a pretty substantial gain.

"We'll rest for two days, then head for our next mark—Stormrage City."

Having said that, Orion wrapped an arm around Lilith and walked back toward Thunderhawk City.

"Slagor," Onyx called out, "even though we've already taken Thunderhawk City, don't let your guard down. We must keep up patrols and stay alert."

Slagor, always afraid of dying, didn't need Onyx's words to remind him to stay vigilant. Still, he found something off about Orion's people. Some of them seemed anxious, while others were treading carefully.

"That's strange. Are they really that worried about heading south for this invasion? I don't get it."

Slagor genuinely didn't understand. As far as he was concerned, Orion was scary strong. With Lord Gareth keeping Lord Ariel busy, Slagor saw no reason why Orion shouldn't be raising hell without restraint.

Chapter 228 Pretext

Thunderwood Forest, Stormrage City.

Darkbolt and Silvershock led a squad of their tribe members to the central plaza, where they met a harpy unit that had arrived to reinforce Stormrage City.

"Greetings, Princess Emma, Princess Ella!" Darkbolt and Silvershock both lowered their heads in salute. Standing before them were two Alpha-level powerhouses—Lord Ariel's daughters.

"Brave Darkbolt and mighty Silvershock, our mother sent us to help defend your city. We've also brought a large contingent of harpy warriors," Emma said.

Darkbolt and Silvershock exchanged a glance, each seeing surprise in the other's eyes. They had expected Lord Ariel to send ordinary reinforcements, but they never imagined she'd send both of her daughters—along with ten thousand flying harpies. In a single stroke, Stormrage City's defenses had shot up dramatically.

"Your Highnesses, please come with us. We've prepared a welcome feast in your honor," Darkbolt offered.

Emma nodded and led her sister, Ella, plus a few personal guards off toward the banquet.

"Hey, Sis," Ella whispered, "why are you being so polite to these two bear-men? Shouldn't we just take over and assume command?"

"Did you forget what Mother told us before we left?" Emma shot Ella an icy, stern look.

Ella shrank back at her sister's glare and quickly fell silent.

Out in front, Darkbolt and Silvershock guided the way, exchanging uneasy looks. It wasn't easy to decide on their next move.

A short while later, halfway through the feast, Darkbolt—speaking on behalf of Stormrage City—rose to proclaim his loyalty.

"Princess Emma, my brother and I are only good at fighting. We're not cut out to manage a city, and we can't keep the big picture under control.

"We hope you'll take charge and help us protect Stormrage City. We Thunderstorm Bearmen will follow your orders and defend these walls—and you and your sister—with our lives."

Emma was a bit taken aback that Darkbolt and Silvershock would willingly hand over command so quickly. After a moment's thought, though, she realized it made sense. Given her status, she supposed it wasn't that surprising.

"Chieftains, I'm here under my mother's orders to assist this city. The command is only yours to lend; once the fighting is over, whatever belongs to you still belongs to you."

With that one line, Emma managed to win over Darkbolt and Silvershock. And for their part, the two brothers were quite satisfied with this arrangement. Stormrage City might not be much to harpies, but to the Thunderstorm Bearmen, it was home.

"Your Highness, we've got scouts reporting that the northern invaders will likely reach Stormrage City in three days at most," Darkbolt said. The feast had been going for over an hour, the transfer of command was settled, and he clearly didn't want to waste time on pointless talk.

Directness was a trait of the Thunderstorm Bearmen, and Darkbolt and Silvershock were no exception.

"Both of you, please stay calm," Emma replied. "Before I arrived at Stormrage City, I already sent some of our people to scout. I'm sure we'll get solid intel back soon."

Darkbolt and Silvershock traded a quick look, each now holding Emma in higher regard.

"All right then, Princess—we'll leave everything up to your plans," Silvershock said with a nod.

"Good!" Emma answered.

...

Thunderwood Forest, somewhere in the depths of the woods.

"Orion, we'll likely reach Stormrage City in three days. How are we planning to breach their defenses this time?"

Slagor still felt some apprehension about Stormrage City. Last time he and Orion attacked it together, they'd failed to take it, proof enough of how formidable the Thunderstorm Bearmen were.

"If they have no reinforcements, you, Onyx, Thundar, and the Abyssal dragon will just gang up on Darkbolt and Silvershock—simple as that," Orion said.

"And if reinforcements do show?"

"Then we each hold them off until I can step in."

In truth, launching an invasion can be pretty risky, especially when the enemy chooses to defend from behind solid walls. The attacker often has no choice but to bite the bullet and charge. Orion glanced at Slagor, knowing the man was nervous and a bit cowardly.

"And besides," Orion went on, "if the fight goes south, we can always retreat. Nobody told you to throw your life away. Why so paranoid?"

Slagor gave an awkward chuckle. Faced with any powerful enemy, he always made sure to plan an escape route. This time was no different.

Just then, a shrill hawk cry echoed across the sky. Orion looked up, his expression turning cold.

Moments later, Thunderhawk Rayden swooped back, dropping off a battered, near-unconscious harpy at Orion's feet.

"Master," Rayden said, "this shady thing was circling around our area for a while. Thought something wasn't right."

Orion tossed a few Pet Pills to Thunderhawk Rayden as a reward. Rayden's eagerness was mostly driven by the desire to snag those treats.

"A harpy scout. Care to tell me what brought you here?" Orion asked, stepping closer.

Unfortunately, the harpy wasn't cooperative. She refused to speak a single word.

"Lilith, she's all yours," Orion ordered.

Lilith nodded, hauled the harpy into a makeshift tent, and emerged a short while later, with the prisoner nowhere to be found.

"Any big revelations?" Orion asked.

"Yes," Lilith answered.

Onyx, Thundar, and Slagor immediately drew nearer, eager to hear more.

"Lord Ariel dispatched two Alpha-level harpy powerhouses to help defend Stormrage City—apparently with ten thousand harpy bloodline warriors in tow. And those two Alpha-level fighters have a special status.

"They're Lord Ariel's daughters, named Emma and Ella."

Lilith's intel plunged the group into deep thought—even Orion fell silent, a furrow etched into his brow.

"So, Lord Ariel sent her own kids to help. Not worried I might kill them all?" Orion muttered. "Wait, I've already destroyed two of Lord Ariel's will projections, so she definitely knows my capability.

"She wouldn't send her daughters to die unless..."

"Unless, in her calculations, this is a guaranteed win. She's betting that you're as good as dead," Lilith said quietly, picking up on Orion's line of thought.

"Which means... Lord Ariel is highly likely to show up in person," Orion concluded.

He was no stranger to battle, and experience told him a few uncomfortable truths.

"If that's really how it is," he continued, "then what's Lord Gareth up to? Isn't Lord Ariel supposed to be her enemy?

Or maybe this is all a trap... aimed at me."

Realizing that possibility, a faint tremor ran through Orion's body. He hid it quickly enough that no one seemed to notice.

"In that light, it makes sense why Lord Gareth never appeared at the Gathering Grounds," he mused.

Now it was clear: the southern invasion was just a pretext. The real plan was to lure Orion in and eliminate him. And Soraya from the Desert Oasis, plus Slagor from the Poison Dragon Swamp, were simply pawns in this scheme—expendable extras dragged along for the ride.

Chapter 229 Lord Ariel

Three days later, beneath a bewitching night sky, everything looked simply mesmerizing.

Under cover of the enchanting darkness, Orion drove forward his cannon fodder troops and cave spider squads, seizing the opportunity to launch a surprise attack on Stormrage City.

Outside Stormrage City, the earth had been dyed crimson by blood. Bloodline warriors from every race were locked in a fierce, blazing battle.

Screeech!

Orion rode his thunderhawk in a high-altitude circle, gripping a trident in hand, appearing every bit like a primordial Titan god.

"Big Sis, what now?"

Ella glanced up, staring at the thunderhawk and Orion, her expression grim. As a harpy, the sky was supposed to be their domain—and their battlefield. But with Orion astride his thunderhawk, wielding that devastating trident-throwing skill, it felt like going up against a bomber: simply unstoppable.

Emma and Ella had both tried taking on Orion in the air for a few moments earlier. They lost miserably. If not for their quick reflexes and the desperation of their bodyguards, they'd have been killed then and there.

"He's way too strong. I've never seen an Alpha-level fighter with power like that!"

"Ella, don't rush in. We're no match for him," Emma said, eyes still locked on Orion. Earlier, she'd tried slaying the thunderhawk from above, thinking brute force would win the day. She was almost skewered on the spot by a thrown trident for her trouble.

"So what do we do now?" Ella asked. "They've started the siege, and there are Alpha-level foes out there who seem even stronger than us!"

Boom!

Just as Ella was talking, an explosion rocked Stormrage City. An abyss dragon spat out an Abyssal Flame Bomb that blasted a section of the city wall into rubble.

"Fight back!"

With a resolute cry, Emma raised her longsword. Behind her, countless harpies and Thunderstorm Bearmen surged forward, crashing into the Stoneheart Horde's cannon fodder troops and cave spiders head-on.

Chaos erupted. Orion narrowed his eyes, senses on high alert. He focused on Emma and Ella, briefly pondering before tightening his grip on the trident, an idea forming in his mind.

"Rayden, dive now. Target those two harpies on the wall!"

Thunderhawk Rayden cried out, a piercing scream that split the night. Orion's plan was straightforward: use Emma and Ella to see if Lord Ariel was really watching, perhaps even already here.

In the next instant, Thunderhawk Rayden went into a steep dive. Orion seized the moment and hurled a trident.

Szzzch!

Trailing a blinding tail, the trident streaked down from the sky like a meteor.

"Ella, watch out!"

Sensing death closing in, Emma kicked her sister aside, then shoved another clanmate into the projectile's path as a sacrificial shield.

Boom!

The trident's force was monstrous, obliterating the poor stand-in. It wasn't over yet—Orion had already drawn his trident Flame of Will, aiming to finish Emma off for good.

Rumble!

Suddenly, a bolt of lightning flashed from the sky, far more intense than the thunderhawk's own lightning. It descended like a divine judgment, slamming into Orion and the thunderhawk in one resounding crash.

Boom!

Screeech!

The thunderhawk let out a terrible cry as it was blasted backward. Orion and Thunderhawk Rayden plummeted together, struck down in midair.

Whump!

The thunderhawk hit the ground first. Its entire body was charred, feathers practically turned to ash. Its breathing was shallow, its life hanging by a thread. Orion fared little better—his bone armor and ice armor were blasted to bits, even his clothes were shredded.

"It's Lord Ariel!"

"Our mother has arrived!"

Outside the fallen city walls, Darkbolt and Silvershock—locked in combat with Slagor, Onyx, Thundar, and the abyss dragon—as well as Emma and Ella, all turned their gazes skyward in excitement. Standing in the sky was the harpy chieftain herself, ruler of Thunderwood Forest: Ariel.

Lord Ariel was wreathed in crackling lightning. She gazed down at Orion slowly picking himself up.

"Did you ever imagine a day like this, giant?"

Her voice was cold and imperious, laced with scorn. The memory of having two of her will projections destroyed by this giant made her burn with humiliation. But that hardly mattered—her prey was before her now, courtesy of Lord Gareth's designs.

"Wondering how I got here?" she asked. "Well, I hate to spill the secret, but this was Lord Gareth's plan all along. Surprised?"

The ones truly shocked were the defenders of Stormrage City—Darkbolt, Silvershock, Emma, Ella, and the rest. As for Lilith, Onyx, and Thundar, they had already suspected something like this. Still, to see it all unfold made their expressions grow dark.

The most clueless of the bunch was probably Slagor, who'd come from the Poison Dragon Swamp. His face was deathly pale—he was the only one who seemed to have no idea what was happening, and worse, it involved a Legendary-level being.

"Damn you, Orion. What the hell have you done?" Slagor muttered. "Now Lord Ariel has shown up at Stormrage City. What now... what do we do now..."

He was spinning in circles, torn between fleeing and fearing that any sudden move would draw Ariel's wrath and a swift death.

While Slagor stood there panicking, Lilith, Onyx, and Thundar focused on Orion. They pinned all their hopes on him. If Orion failed, it was sure death for them all. They'd realized that much the day they were chosen to leave Blackstone City.

But Orion wasn't about to let that happen. In his mind, he was still aiming to kill a Legendary-level lord and increase his own power. Initially, he had expected Lord Gareth, but it turned out to be Lord Ariel instead.

"So, this is transcendent power," Orion thought. "Definitely on a whole different level than any old bloodline strength."

He rose to his feet, ignoring the injured thunderhawk at his side. Naked from head to toe, his muscled body was covered in blood. On his chest, the Curse of a Hundred Blossoms emblem glowed with a strange, crystalline radiance, giving him a wild, violent aura touched by a faint sense of the divine.

"Praise the Titan gods. I offer up half of my own life energy, in exchange for the might of the ancient titan giants!"

Chapter 230 Dark Titan

Roar!

It was a roar echoing from some ancient temple. The moment that sound rang out, everything nearby seemed to freeze—even Lord Ariel, still hovering in midair, looked utterly shocked.

Then the roar faded, replaced by a whisper, like a Titan god murmuring, or perhaps responding to a prayer.

In the next heartbeat, a startling change took place.

Standing on the ground, Orion began to grow—his height soared upward without limit, his body ballooning in size. Countless black runes surfaced across his skin, flooding him with unimaginable power, completely overwhelming the markings of the Curse of a Hundred Blossoms.

Crackle!

All of a sudden, huge arcs of lightning flared around Orion, as though some otherworldly presence had descended. At the same time, his hair lengthened dramatically, and his dark eyes churned with boundless energy.

A swirl of ancient darkness engulfed him, and his towering body now resembled a genuine mountain. He had become a Dark Titan. Though still standing on the ground, he now loomed taller than Lord Ariel, who remained floating in the air.

A moment later, Orion stretched out both hands, ready to swat Lord Ariel like a mere fly.

In that life-or-death instant, Lord Ariel finally snapped out of her daze. She transformed into bolts of lightning, trying to harness that power against Orion.

Lightning danced across the sky, battering the newly formed Dark Titan. But Orion just swept his enormous hands through the thunderclouds, snuffing out every flash of lightning in his path, rendering everything silent and still.

Even so, Lord Ariel's lightning form darted about in the air, and Orion couldn't corner her.

He decided on a different approach. Planting both feet firmly on the ground, he formed an arcane gesture with his hands, opened his mouth wide, and inhaled. Instantly, within a radius of 6 miles, air and electricity alike were sucked into his body—Lord Ariel included. She couldn't escape that tremendous pull, and her lightning manifestation was drawn right in.

Once she was inside, streaks of lightning kept erupting from Orion's body, illuminating his abdomen in a wild display. The sight was beyond belief.

All around Stormrage City, the battle had come to a complete halt. Bloodline warriors from both sides looked up at Orion in his Dark Titan form. Especially the giants—they stared at Orion as though beholding a primordial Titan god, dropping to their knees in reverent worship.

After about ten minutes, Orion's body began to shrink, returning to a normal size. When the violent energy settled, Orion stood there with a harpy grasped tightly in his hand.

He lifted the harpy high and roared in a booming, triumphant voice, "Lord Ariel is dead! Slaughter the city!"

Not a single response. Total silence consumed the battlefield.

"Lord Ariel is dead! Slaughter the city!" Orion repeated. Still no one moved, everyone's gaze was fixed on him—and on the harpy he held.

"Lord Ariel is dead! Slaughter the city!"

It wasn't until the third time that anyone snapped out of their stupor. Thundar the giant let out a trembling breath, hauled out a horn from his belt, and gave it a mighty blast.

Roar!

Then came the abyss dragon's own furious howl as it charged forward to carry out Orion's command.

"Kill them all!"

"Slaughter the city!"

"..."

Dirtclaw felt like he'd lost his mind. He honestly doubted if all this could be real—but it didn't matter anymore. Even if this was some dream, it was a glorious one. Because Thunderwood Forest's Legendary-level being, Ariel, had just been brought down by his master.

"Cannon fodder troops, charge!" Dirtclaw hollered, his voice raw. "Kill all the men in Stormrage City, rape the women, and loot every last resource!"

Rage, bloodshed, women, plunder—he shouted every word he knew that could drive these troops wild. This time, true disaster descended upon Stormrage City.

"That's impossible... impossible... Our mother was a Legendary-level being—there's no way an Alpha-level giant could kill her. No way..." Ella, Lord Ariel's youngest daughter, looked like she'd lost her soul, slumping to the ground, muttering again and again in denial.

"Mother... is gone?"

"No... that can't be true... it just can't!"

Emma, Ariel's older daughter, was holding herself together a bit better, using her longsword to stay on her feet. She refused to believe her mother could have just fallen like that. But when she looked over and saw Orion standing there like an ancient Titan, her mother's corpse under his foot... she couldn't deny the truth anymore.

"She's gone. Mother is gone!"

"How... how could this happen?"

Still feeling like she was stuck in some nightmare, Emma forced herself to glance at Orion once more—and what stared back at her was a chilling killing intent, an almost arrogant confidence. That cold, lethal aura jolted her out of her shock. She grabbed hold of Ella and took to the air.

"Run! We're heading back to Thunderpeak Mountain!" Emma's urgent cry finally stirred the other harpies from their stupor as they all shot skyward in retreat. Orion looked up at them fleeing, frustrated that he had no way to pursue; he lacked air support now.

Within Stormrage City, fighting continued. Thunderstorm Bearmen Darkbolt and Silvershock still held firm, unshaken in their resolve to defend the city—even after Lord Ariel's death. But they ended up surrounded by Slagor, Lilith, Onyx, Thundar, and the abyss dragon, and both brothers eventually fell near Stormrage City's walls.

Half an hour later, Orion, who had slain Lord Ariel, finally felt some relief as his body began to recover. The special skill "Blood Sacrifice" demanded half of his life energy in exchange for a surge of ancient Titan power. That borrowed might was more than enough to slay a Legendary-level being, but the cost had been steep—far more than what showed on the surface.

"Honor to Orion!"

"All hail the great chieftain!"

"..."

With Darkbolt and Silvershock both gone, Slagor, Lilith, Onyx, and Thundar rushed over to Orion, ready to hail him as a hero. Orion stopped them from celebrating.

"Keep your cheers for later. First, we finish taking Stormrage City."

He ordered them inside, telling them to seize full control of the city. Right now he desperately needed a place to rest. That transformation into an ancient Dark Titan had exacted a savage toll, far deeper than anyone knew.

And the danger wasn't over yet. Even if Ariel was dead, Gareth was still out there somewhere, unseen.