

Titan King 231

Chapter 231 Arch lord

That night, Stormrage City rang with the thunder of battle cries, mingled with endless sobs and pleas. Meanwhile, Orion, accompanied by Lilith, had already entered the palace of Stormrage City.

"Keep Lord Ariel's corpse intact," Orion ordered Lilith. "I've got plans for it."

Once Lilith closed the door, Orion finally had a moment to examine his own body. Obviously, using sacrificed power to force a surge in strength had triggered intense backlash, leaving him badly injured. For the time being, he was in no shape to fight.

Not only was his body weakened, but the stats on his personal status panel had been cut in half. Originally, each attribute was just about maxed out—he only needed transcendent power to step into the Legendary level. Who could've guessed that one use of Blood Sacrifice would slash his attributes by half?

Worse still, Orion could sense that his remaining lifespan had been cut in half. Fortunately, giants already live for centuries, and as an Alpha-level fighter, he could likely scrape by for another three hundred years.

He glanced at the Curse of a Hundred Blossoms symbol on his chest. At that moment, it looked dim, almost as if it had been frightened by the power he'd just unleashed—too terrified to cause trouble for now.

That took a weight off Orion's shoulders. At least the Curse of a Hundred Blossoms hadn't tried blooming further in response to the life he had lost. The half of his lifespan burned away by Blood Sacrifice must have been his original portion, which was a small mercy. He'd been worried that channeling Blood Sacrifice might cause half the blossoms in the curse pattern to burst into bloom. Good thing that hadn't happened.

This was a side hint, too, that the curse maybe wasn't as terrifying as he'd feared, compared to the might of the Titans.

Next, Orion fished a ring out of his pouch—the one he had taken from Lord Ariel's body. Looting her had produced just two items: this ring and a special survivor's chest.

"Ariel had nothing else on her, so there's a good chance this ring is some kind of storage ring."

Orion held it, experimenting a few different ways to activate it. Before long, once he channeled energy into the band, he finally found the right method to open it.

The ring contained a space of around 500 cubic meters, which was far bigger than the capacity of Bagbird's stomach pouch. Orion had always wanted a storage ring, though he had no clue where Lord Ariel had acquired one. Given the world's size and its countless races, the existence of storage rings wasn't that surprising.

Inside this ring, Orion discovered a huge stash of items, including multiple stores' worth of high-tier magical plants that made his eyes widen in excitement. With those plants, he was sure he could recover the stats he had lost, and his battered body desperately needed their nourishing energy.

Without a second thought, Orion pulled out a stalk of some unknown magical herb and popped it into his mouth. Rich magical power spread through his entire body, and the sensation was downright blissful. There were way too many other items to count at the moment, so after a quick glance at the ring's contents, Orion shifted his attention away.

He wanted to see what might come out of the survivor's chest dropped by a Legendary-level being. Soon, he was holding a black-colored survivor's chest in his hands. Skipping any ritual or prayer, Orion flipped the lid open, and after some ashy residue scattered, he was left holding a gemstone that gleamed like a star.

"What is this? Could it be a Lord's Stone?"

Yes—what Orion had pulled from the survivor's chest was indeed a genuine Transcendent Item: a Lord's Stone. He eyed it carefully, frowning a bit. Only now, taking a closer look, did he notice the stone's description mentioned "territory building" and "power advancement."

That sparked a question in his mind: "Could it be that the territory-building feature and the power-advancement feature are separate?"

The more he thought about it, the more likely it seemed. He stashed the Lord's Stone away, then opened the Survivor's Platform and messaged Arthas.

"Hey bro, tell me again—how does a Lord's Stone work?"

Arthas got back to him quickly, implying there wasn't much going on at his end and he was probably just hanging around the platform.

"What's up, still haven't figured out how to communicate with it?"

"Nope, not a clue."

"Well, nothing I can do to help there!"

Not discouraged, Orion kept typing, airing his confusion directly.

"Bro, a Lord's Stone can elevate your realm of power, and it can also help you build a territory, right?"

"Sure can. Why, is something bugging you?"

"After you use it to level up, how do you then build a territory with it?"

After that question went out, Arthas fell silent for a second. Evidently, he realized what Orion was asking.

"The Lord's Stone has two core functions: one is to help you ascend in rank, the other is to build a territory," he wrote.

"If you pick the power-up option, you can't build a territory."

"In other words, one Lord's Stone can only help you ascend one time."

"If you want to build a territory, you'd need another Lord's Stone."

Reading Arthas's reply, Orion finally got a more complete understanding of the Lord's Stone. But it wasn't done yet—Arthas sent more text:

"Reaching the Legendary level is just the entry point to becoming a 'lord.' You're only a real lord once you can build a territory."

"That's the difference between an ordinary 'lord' and a 'arch lord.' A Legendary fighter doesn't necessarily have a territory, but once someone reaches 'arch lord' status, they definitely can build one—and it always ends up thriving."

Arthas's extra info not only cleared Orion's doubts but also gave him a glimpse of the next realm beyond Legendary level—a "arch lord."

"Thanks for all your help, bro!" Orion replied.

"No worries. It's best to focus on hitting Legendary first. Surviving is your biggest priority. Don't overreach!"

Arthas's advice showed he thought well of Orion, regarding him as a future ally.

Logging out of the Survivor's Platform, Orion realized how important the Lord's Stone he got from slaying Lord Ariel really was. If he only had one, and he used it to break through in power, he'd have no way to build a territory. That would push back all his earlier plans indefinitely.

He kept trying to bolster his own confidence: Keep calm, figure out how to communicate with the Lord's Stone, and achieve that breakthrough ASAP. But just then, the very Lord's Stone he'd taken from Ariel began to melt into his palm, slowly moving up to rest against the center of his forehead.

Chapter 232 Bluffing

Szzzch!

Tiny arcs of lightning flickered across Orion's forehead, crackling with otherworldly power. The Lord's Stone he held had just fused into his body, catching him completely off guard. Everything happened so fast, he barely had time to react.

In truth, during the previous battle, Orion had devoured Lord Ariel's lightning form as the Dark Titan. That rampant energy had raged inside him, yet his body had adapted to Ariel's power. This was the fundamental reason the Lord's Stone merged with him so smoothly.

"Well, talk about a freebie," Orion muttered, still in disbelief.

Now that the Lord's Stone was a part of him, all he had to do was restore his attributes to their old peak. Then he could tap into transcendent power and attempt the Legendary level breakthrough.

By the next morning, fighting in Stormrage City had finally subsided. When Orion stepped into the palace's main hall, four Alpha-level fighters—Lilith, Onyx, Thundar, and Slagor—were already waiting for him.

"Chieftain!"

"My dear Orion!"

He nodded, motioning for them to take their seats before he assumed the head of the table.

Truth be told, none of them had slept last night; they were too keyed up. Everyone had watched Orion slay Lord Ariel with their own eyes, and even now, they wondered if it was all just some fever dream.

Battles with alpha-grade beasts used to feel epic, but last night's clash with Lord Ariel ended in a heartbeat—way too sudden, far beyond anything they had ever imagined. In their minds, Orion still loomed like a roaring Titan god.

For Slagor especially, last night was a roller coaster. He'd gone from planning to flee to utter disbelief when Lord Ariel fell—like he'd lived a lifetime in one evening.

"Slagor," Orion said, "I'm giving you two choices. The first is surrender. The second is death."

His words came abruptly but didn't exactly surprise anyone. Slagor lifted his gaze, meeting Orion's eyes. What he saw was utter confidence... and icy detachment.

"So... do I really have a choice?" Slagor answered with a wry grin, his expression full of bitter resignation. As a sharp-witted lizardman, he knew he had to pick between Orion and Lord Gareth. Given the current situation, there was really no choice at all.

"I, Slagor, Chieftain of the Lizardmen of Poison Dragon Swamp, pledge my allegiance to Orion!"

Orion stood from his seat, condensing a droplet-shaped slave contract in his right hand. He approached Slagor, who did nothing to resist. Moments later, the pact was sealed and Slagor became one of Orion's own.

Returning to his place at the head of the table, Orion shifted focus to his wife, Lilith, and asked the question he cared about most:

"How's Thunderhawk Rayden?"

Thunderhawk Rayden had taken a direct hit from Lord Ariel, leaving its feathers scorched beyond recognition. At the time, Orion wasn't even sure the creature would survive.

"With help from the shamans, plus some dark source crystals, it's alive," Lilith replied softly. "But we have no idea when—or if—it'll regain the strength to fight or even fly."

In other words, Rayden's injuries were severe. For now, the thunderhawk might as well be grounded; it wouldn't be taking part in any battles anytime soon.

"Have the shamans look after it," Orion said with a sigh. "We'll take it back when we leave. Eventually, I'll figure out a way to get Rayden back in fighting shape."

"Understood." Lilith nodded, then signaled a succubus bloodline warrior to carry out the task.

"Next," Orion continued, "we'll hole up in Stormrage City and wait for Lord Gareth to arrive."

All eyes lit up at these words: Lilith, Onyx, Thundar, and Slagor leaned forward as if expecting more. Then Thundar asked the question on everyone's mind:

"Chieftain, shouldn't we seize the opportunity to swiftly return to Blackstone City?"

Struck by confusion, he couldn't understand why they wouldn't just steer clear of Gareth. If Orion had taken any injuries in that showdown with Ariel, now was not the time to butt heads with yet another Legendary-level foe.

Orion looked around at the apprehensive faces. Slagor, Lilith, and Onyx shared the same concern—they were all hoping to steer clear of Gareth, at least for the moment.

"No," Orion said, shaking his head. "If I were Lord Gareth, I'd march straight into Black Forest if need be, just to confirm whether Ariel really was killed. We can't run. The only way is to meet her head-on and let her see we're not shaking in our boots."

As an Alpha-level giant capable of taking down a Legendary-level being like Ariel, Orion knew Gareth would never believe it without proof. Besides, she would also be aware of the existence of the Lord's Stone—otherwise, she wouldn't have reached Legendary-level status herself.

"Before Gareth shows up, I want you all to strip Stormrage City of every resource you can lay your hands on," he ordered. "And stay on high alert. If it comes to a fight, make sure you're not caught off guard."

At that, Slagor, Lilith, Onyx, and Thundar practically glowed with excitement. Orion's demeanor radiated a powerful message: even against Lord Gareth, he wouldn't flinch.

Of course, in truth, it was all part of the same bluff Orion himself was trying to believe. His body was still weak, and his fighting capacity was nowhere near ready to brawl with another Legendary. But if you can fool yourself, you can fool everyone else.

"The Thunderstorm Bearmen who remain in the city—apart from the elderly and children—will be integrated into the cannon fodder troops," he went on. "Let Dirtclaw handle it. Make sure those bearmen cooperate."

Thunderstorm Bearmen were outstanding frontline warriors. Adding them to the cannon fodder troops would give Orion's forces a serious boost.

"Also, Stormrage City is rich in Blood Mushrooms. Keep an eye out and gather them all up. Don't leave a single one behind."

They were conquerors here, so they might as well act like it.

"Chieftain, what about us?" Slagor ventured timidly. In truth, he was itching to know how Orion planned to handle the lizardmen now that he'd sworn fealty.

"You?" Orion replied. "Just carry on like normal."

Slagor frowned at that. He couldn't quite parse what Orion meant by "carry on like normal."

"Is Orion sending me back under Gareth's command—to be a spy?" The thought alone made him shiver. He couldn't suppress a deep sense of dread.

Chapter 233 Another win

Thunderwood Forest, somewhere deep in the woods.

Arden, riding on the Storm Vulture, landed among the trees, looking frantic and utterly stunned.

"My lord, the scouts hidden at Thunderpeak Mountain have reported—Lord Ariel has been killed!"

Silence!

The entire forest went deathly quiet.

A gentle breeze slipped among the trees, brushing through the leaves and drifting away through the gaps, its faint rustling unexpectedly clear and soothing.

Lord Gareth slowly opened her eyes, wondering if she'd just misheard. Lord Ariel was a lord even stronger than she was—how could Ariel possibly have been slain? The lords in the surrounding regions were all relatively equal in power, so the odds of any one of them dying in battle were practically nil.

So Gareth gave Arden a frosty stare, frightening him so much that he started trembling from head to toe.

"M-My lord, there's no mistake about the news—our spy among the harpies confirmed it."

"Lord Ariel was struck down by the giant Orion in Stormrage City, and plenty of harpies witnessed it. Lord Ariel's two daughters were at the scene when it happened."

Arden's voice quivered as he delivered the fresh intelligence he had just received. Honestly, when he first saw this report, he couldn't believe it either. But after verifying its authenticity, he was so terrified he wet his pants.

"Lord Ariel was killed?"

"Killed by the giant chieftain, Orion?"

Lord Gareth murmured to herself, recalling the look in Orion's eyes—so cold and self-assured—when he destroyed her will projection. That gaze kept replaying in her mind.

"Does he really have the power to slay Ariel?"

"He wasn't lying to me?"

The news of Lord Ariel's death shook Lord Gareth to her core. Of course, it also frightened her. If the mighty Ariel could be cut down, it was impossible not to feel concerned for her own safety. Worry and dread often come as a pair, and such was the case with Orion and Lord Gareth.

Still, a mere hint of fear wasn't enough to deter Lord Gareth. She gave the order for her forces to march toward Stormrage City. She had to see for herself whether Lord Ariel was truly dead.

It wasn't just her life at stake—her interests were on the line as well.

So yes, Chieftain Orion and Lord Gareth simply had to meet.

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Half a month later, at Stormrage City:

Roar!

Roar!

Two Abyssal dragons met, bellowing threateningly at each other, each regarding the other as an invader.

"Chieftain!"

"Orion!"

Orion raised a hand, cutting off Lilith, Onyx, and the others before they could say anything further.

"Wait here."

He leaped onto the back of the Abyssal dragon and headed off into the distance. From the opposite side, Lord Gareth rode her own Abyssal dragon forward.

Boom... boom... boom... The two Abyssal dragons stomped heavily across the ground, each circling the other warily.

Meanwhile, Orion and Gareth, perched on their respective dragons, studied each other closely.

"You look weak," Lord Gareth finally said, as though she had already spotted Orion's vulnerability.

"I just killed a Legendary-level being. If that had been your job, do you think you'd walk away without a scratch?" Orion's voice brimmed with confidence, the kind of cockiness you hear from someone fresh off a great victory.

At that moment, Orion was just putting on a show—he had to. He was faking that bravado so hard he almost believed it himself. And he was certain that if Lord Gareth tried anything, he could cut her down right then and there.

Lord Gareth's pupils narrowed, turning vertical in preparation for combat.

"You sure sound confident."

Her tone grew colder, and the breathing of the Abyssal dragon beneath her quickened in turn.

"I just want to survive. After all, I'm not at the Legendary level yet."

As he spoke, Orion pulled Lord Ariel's corpse out of his storage ring and tossed it toward Gareth.

"My esteemed Gareth, I assume you traveled here to find out if she was truly dead."

Although Orion used polite words, flinging Lord Ariel's body was a clear threat.

Roar!

Roar!

The two Abyssal dragons, still stalking each other, roared low and menacing, making the tension grow even thicker in the air.

Lord Gareth caught Ariel's body and sensed the traces of Ariel's power lingering within it. She felt shaken to her core—along with an undercurrent of fear.

Szzz... szzz...!

Just then, Orion took out another negotiation card he had prepared. Electricity flickered across his forehead—he was deliberately calling forth a faint spark of lightning energy.

"You've fused with the Lord's Stone?" Gareth's voice trembled. "For God's sake, how did you do it so fast?"

Orion laughed. Lord Gareth blurted out two questions in a row, which meant he'd unsettled her. On the invisible chessboard of this confrontation, he'd just seized the upper hand.

"Lord Gareth, nothing's impossible," he said. "Lord Ariel believed she couldn't die, yet here we are."

It was clearly both a reminder and a threat.

To be fair, Gareth was absolutely thrown—seeing Ariel's corpse hadn't rattled her half as much as seeing that lightning on Orion's brow did.

Only now did she fully grasp that Lord Ariel had truly been killed, because the lightning between Orion's eyebrows was transcendent power, a signature trait exclusive to beings at the Legendary level. And the Lord's Stone had already merged with Orion, meaning he was on the verge of becoming a warrior on par with—and possibly mightier than—Gareth herself: a genuine Legendary-level force.

What's more, Orion had managed to strike down a Legendary-level opponent while he was still at the Alpha level. If he reached Legendary level, just how powerful would he become?

The irony was, the moment this realization sank in, Lord Gareth's fear triggered a fierce urge to kill him. Her gaze remained locked on Orion; her pupils dilated and contracted as she wavered, clearly on the fence about what to do.

Orion stared right back, his expression cold, his demeanor stoic. At this moment, the only thing filling both their ears was the ragged, throaty snarling of the two Abyssal dragons.

Would they fight or talk it out? It almost felt like the dragons' growling might decide their next move.

"What do you want?" Lord Gareth finally asked, her pupils still at last.

Orion's expression lit up with a smile when he heard that. Another win for him.

Chapter 234 Your demands are acceptable

"What do you want?"

That simple question meant they could sit down and talk things through, avoid fighting, and keep their relationship from turning sour.

"Poison Dragon Swamp, Slagor, the Half-Moon Lake area of Thunderwood Forest, plus a route to keep heading south afterward."

Orion's smile faded, replaced by a look of utter seriousness.

Lord Gareth regarded Orion carefully while the Abyssal dragon beneath her kept roaring and snarling.

"You're not asking for much."

Lord Gareth didn't say yes or no. She was probing Orion.

"With the Stoneheart Horde's current capabilities, that's all we can manage," he answered. "Besides, Lord Gareth, even if we have our differences, we should be closer to each other than to the other lords in these parts, shouldn't we?"

The point was clear—Orion was promising not to invade Gareth's territory further down the line. Instead, they could stand together and move south as allies. After all, they'd been on the same side before.

Lord Gareth frowned. Orion's words reminded her that Lord Jorik wasn't their only potential enemy around the Four Domains. Now that a sizeable chunk of Thunderwood Forest might become her territory, she'd have to deal with even more threats. That insight made her expression soften somewhat when she looked at Orion.

"Your demands are acceptable," she finally said, "but your current southern invasion has to stop. Right now."

That was Gareth's condition: letting Orion invade any farther would practically be an invasion of her own lands. Orion sighed, disappointed to lose the chance to grab the rest of Thunderwood Forest's goodies.

"Fine," he said, pretending to agree reluctantly. The crestfallen look on his face was obvious.

"I want you to swear on your honor that you will never invade my territory," Gareth continued, "and likewise, I'll swear not to invade yours. We'll mind our own business—no attacks on either side."

Orion gazed steadily at Lord Gareth. He didn't actually buy into the idea of a vow with no real safeguards—it could be broken anytime. Still, under Gareth's stare, he gave a slow nod, accepting her terms.

Then, under the watchful eyes of the two Abyssal dragons, Orion and Gareth pledged their oaths to each other.

"Stormrage City is part of my territory now," Gareth said coldly. "You need to clear out."

Orion studied Gareth for a moment. Then, in a forthright tone, he responded, "Very well."

He raised his right hand, signaling a retreat. Instantly, Slagor, Lilith, Onyx, Thundar, and the others on Stormrage City's walls breathed a collective sigh of relief. A brutal battle had just been averted.

Roar! Roar!

Following two piercing snarls from the Abyssal dragons, Orion and Gareth pulled away from each other.

"Pack your things. We're leaving Stormrage City and heading toward Half-Moon Lake," Orion ordered. Slagor, Onyx, and the rest didn't dare question him; they simply followed orders, organizing their people and withdrawing from the city.

Three days later, somewhere deep in Thunderwood Forest:

"Orion, the broadskull ravens we released came back with reports—no sign of Gareth's forces tracking us!" Lilith said excitedly, practically buzzing with energy. With Gareth's troops nowhere in sight, they were safe for the time being.

"Master, so Half-Moon Lake and Poison Dragon Swamp really are part of your territory now?" Slagor still hadn't quite come to terms with all this. In just a few days, his Poison Dragon Swamp had been used as a bargaining chip and changed hands. In Gareth's eyes, Slagor apparently held no value whatsoever.

"Not just that," Orion replied. "Gareth will also give us a route to head south. That's another reason I targeted the Half-Moon Lake region—moving south through that area will help us avoid friction with Lord Gareth."

All things considered, Orion hadn't demanded much compared to the size of Thunderwood Forest—but his hand was forced by circumstances.

The Stoneheart Horde didn't have the population yet to hold down a huge territory. Running Black Forest, Poison Dragon Swamp, and Half-Moon Lake together was already pushing it. Especially in Half-Moon Lake, they might only manage a half-baked system of control. Orion would likely have to leave it to the swamp tribes under Slagor, since the Black Forest troops wouldn't be a great fit for that environment.

"Chieftain, so we really are splitting the land with Gareth, each of us ruling our own realm?" Onyx asked in disbelief. He never imagined Orion would reach such a point so quickly—it was all surreal to him.

Honestly, Orion himself had plenty of mixed feelings about it. That day, brazenly bluffing in front of Gareth... he still wasn't sure where he'd found the nerve. Thinking it over now, the memory still made his heart pound.

"Chieftain, you're the greatest leader our giant race has ever had!" Thundar declared fervently. As a fellow giant, he saw Orion carving out this massive domain for their people—it was a source of incredible pride. Thundar's eyes blazed with passion; if he were a female giant, he would've thrown himself at Orion without hesitation.

"Let's pick up the pace!" Orion urged. "We'll hurry back to the Black Forest and put all the resources we seized to good use—that's what really matters."

He pulled a magical plant from his storage ring and ate it, relishing the flood of rich energy coursing through his body. Gradually, the tension he'd been carrying began to fade.

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Meanwhile, at Thunderpeak Mountain in Thunderwood Forest, news of Lord Ariel's death had spread like wildfire. The harpy race was the first to feel the blow. Other tribes long oppressed by the harpies immediately lashed back, turning on them.

Even before Lord Gareth could reach Thunderpeak Mountain, chaos had broken out. Emma and Ella, taking some of the harpies' prized resources and loyal bloodline kin, didn't stick around; they flew directly south in escape. Flight was a natural advantage for the harpies, making their getaway quick and fortuitous, saving them from further losses.

Emma and Ella's abrupt departure was one of the reasons Thunderwood Forest finally erupted into total turmoil. The Fireraven Tribe was also in a pinch, and so was Rowena, who was trapped there.

The Fireraven Tribe served as the harpies' vassals, living right in the harpies' established territory, and they too were hammered by the onslaught from other races.

As the chaos wore on, Rowena changed rapidly. Plenty of men had slept with her; she had slept with plenty of them, too. By exploiting her body and vagin, she managed—thanks to help from those men—to form a contract with a hero-level thunderhawk.

Right now, Rowena kicked the Fireraven Tribe's young chieftain, Seth, out of her way, grabbed his personal stash, and fled south.

Rowena knew quite well that her brother was the one Orion had killed. And with Orion powerful enough to take down even Lord Ariel, she had no choice but to flee Thunderwood Forest—putting as much distance between them as possible.

Chapter 235 Whatever you're thinking, just tell me

Thunderwood Forest, Half-Moon Lake Region.

Crack!

Dirtclaw lashed a whip across a Bearman's back. The next second, the unfortunate Bearman's skin tore open, blood oozing out.

"All of you, stay in line. Anyone who doesn't behave, I'll starve 'em for a whole damn month!"

Dirtclaw spat on the ground and then handed his whip to Gronthar.

"Gronthar, you're strong. Keep an eye on them. If they step out of line, whip 'em as hard as you can!"

Dirtclaw treated Gronthar pretty well, mainly because the commander of the cannon fodder troops, Onyx, had asked him to look out for these trolls. Since the troll race bowed to the Stoneheart Horde, Gronthar had stayed with Onyx, getting to know the Horde more day by day. After Orion restructured the Horde's factions and promoted Onyx to commander of the cannon fodder troops, Gronthar and some of his people became part of that unit's leadership.

"Elder Dirtclaw, do we really have to starve these Thunderstorm Bearmen for a month?" Gronthar asked.

"Don't go soft," Dirtclaw snapped. "These bears can survive three months without eatin' or drinkin'—a single month of hunger is nothing!"

Even though Dirtclaw was small, he brimmed with a power that matched Gronthar's brute strength. Gronthar knew better than to underestimate him; he'd heard stories of Dirtclaw's ruthless rise to power. The gnoll looked mild enough, but he was brutal and savage, willing to do anything to grow stronger.

"Gronthar," Dirtclaw went on, "things aren't the same as before. Being accepted into our Stoneheart Horde as cannon fodder troops is an honor for them. Those who survive in the end will be grateful to me, and thankful for our mighty chieftain. Hail the great Chieftain Orion!"

Just saying Orion's name got Dirtclaw worked up. He had personally witnessed Orion kill Lord Ariel, and he had been on the front lines, not far from where it happened. Seeing Orion take the form of a dark titan, like a god of destruction incarnate, made a lasting impression on him.

Gronthar had been shaken too—he still felt it was surreal. A giant from the Black Forest took down a Legendary-level being... Who in their right mind would believe that? But the proof was right there in front of him; he'd seen it with his own eyes and had no choice but to believe.

"Maybe, under Orion's protection, our can once again rise to glory, like our ancestors did..."

Crack!

That thought hardened Gronthar's resolve, and he lifted his whip again to drive a few Thunderstorm Bearmen who had stopped working back into line.

At that moment, Orion and Lilith—riding on an Abyssal dragon—spotted what was happening.

"Orion, that gnoll's a total fanatic for you," Lilith observed. Her dark eyes gleamed with amusement, her voice soft and melodious.

"Dirtclaw's well suited for the cannon fodder troops. He's doing a decent job as a deputy commander," Orion replied. He'd personally witnessed Dirtclaw's rise and was the one who promoted him to the council of elders.

Dirtclaw revered Orion because he found a real sense of purpose in the Stoneheart Horde's cannon fodder unit—a path to hold on to hope. And Dirtclaw, in turn, had become that same beacon of hope for freshly joined bloodline warriors like Gronthar.

The same was likely true for many swamp-dwelling races once Slagor submitted. In the end, everyone would need to find where they fit best in the Horde.

"Chieftain, managing this area looks like it could be a real headache," Onyx remarked, walking close behind as he looked up at Orion.

Orion nodded. Half-Moon Lake might be his on paper, but without anyone to hold things down, it was basically empty talk.

"Slagor," Orion said, turning to the swamp leader. "What's your take on this?"

Slagor shook his head. "Chieftain, I really don't wanna garrison here. It's too damn close to Lord Gareth's territory—way too dangerous."

Orion wasn't surprised. Slagor had a point: any Alpha-level guard stationed at Half-Moon Lake would be in a risky position. In the past, a lizard-like beast had overseen the region, but Orion didn't have anyone fit for the job right now.

As Orion narrowed his eyes, pondering how to handle Poison Dragon Swamp and Half-Moon Lake, he considered their layout. Poison Dragon Swamp was right next to the Black Forest, and Half-Moon Lake sat next to the Swamp, so the three territories formed a weird hooked shape.

"Speak your mind, Slagor," Orion prompted. "Whatever you're thinking, just tell me."

With Orion looking serious, Slagor didn't dare stall. He quickly shared his thoughts:

"Chieftain, I suggest we avoid directly managing Half-Moon Lake for the time being. Lord Ariel's death has left Thunderwood Forest in chaos, and when Gareth comes around to take it, things'll get even messier.

If we don't actively control Half-Moon Lake, different fleeing tribes might settle there, and we can just drop by to hunt and rake in tribute here and there. That way, we keep them under our umbrella without taking too much risk. And by the time you actually reach Legendary level, we can do whatever we want without worrying about what anyone else thinks."

Orion gave Slagor a measured look. The guy was slippery and sharp.

"Fine. We'll do it your way," Orion said. "You'll be responsible for coming here regularly to hunt and collect resources. Remember, if you value your own life, keep yourself limited to these plans—don't cross the line."

The color drained from Slagor's cheeks.

"Oh, and from now on," Orion added, "call me 'chieftain' like Prophet and Thundar do."

Truth be told, Orion felt uncomfortable whenever Slagor called him "master." He was used to hearing Lysinthia and Violet call him that, but having Slagor do it felt off.

Mentioning Lysinthia made Orion glance around. She was nowhere to be seen.

"Where is Lysinthia?" he asked Lilith, since the two were almost always together.

"She's been busy escorting a few hundred serpentfolk we picked up as slaves in Stormrage City."

"Serpentfolk?" Orion raised an eyebrow. "All right. I haven't seen any other serpentfolk since we wiped out the group in the Black Forest. Never thought we'd bump into another batch in Stormrage City."

Lilith shrugged. "She didn't say much. She's been going out early and getting back late, acting all secretive."

Orion frowned, but in the end, he only let out a sigh. "Let her be. She finally found something that interests her."

"Aww, Orion, that's so sweet of you," Lilith teased, smiling mischievously. She wrapped her legs around Orion's waist and leaned forward, her panties rubbing against Orion's abdomen.

"Hey, not now," Orion admonished, trying not to laugh. "We'll talk about it tonight."

Chapter 236 Lord Gareth's plan

The Bottomless Abyss—a true burial ground.

Boom!

Clymene gripped her warhammer, her body shrouded in deathly energy. With a mighty swing, she crushed an Alpha-level beetle, finishing it off in one clean hit.

"Clymene, what should we do now?"

Giant Elder Grendel stepped forward, battle axe in hand. A large chunk of flesh had been torn off his arm, but no blood leaked from the wound. Rather, in the dense swirl of deathly energy surrounding them, the wound was slowly mending itself.

They were Skeletal Knights. This death energy was the source of their strength. You could say this place was paradise for beings like them.

"Let's find somewhere around here to set up a few tents," Clymene said. "We'll make this our starting point for a new journey."

She dug a crystal core out of the beast's carcass, dropping it into a leather pouch.

"Okay, little ones, it's all yours!"

Obedying her command, a group of Death Spiders skittered in from the surrounding area, crawling over each other to devour the beast.

"Once our temporary camp is set up and the next batch of hatchling spiders arrives, we'll send a few Death Spiders back up. We've been out of contact so long, Orion must be losing his mind waiting for news."

Clymene was already impressively built, and ever since entering the Bottomless Abyss, she had absorbed plenty of deathly energy. This energy formed a black cloak billowing behind her, moving even without wind, making her look every bit like a warrior goddess.

"This place suits us way better than the surface, Clymene!"

The other four Giant Elders—Vargrum, Mordak, Zorn, and Balgor—walked over, clearly fired up. They'd just fought an Alpha-level beast together and found it exhilarating.

Through the heat of that battle, they finally understood what Orion had turned them into. As long as deathly energy was present, they were essentially undying.

"It sure does," Clymene agreed. "But we've still got a tough job ahead."

She lifted her gaze to the pitch-black opening above, looking solemn. The reason she chose to set up a temporary base here was to guard that dark gap. As long as the powerful subterranean creatures couldn't crawl up, the Stoneheart Horde—Clymene's loved ones, her fellow giants—would stay safe.

"This is the responsibility we carry."

Vargrum, Mordak, Zorn, Balgor, and Grendel also gazed upward. They all suddenly realized exactly what Clymene intended.

"Don't worry. With us and these little spiders standing guard, nothing gets through!"

"Yeah, and Orion will keep sending more spiders our way, so we're not fighting alone."

"For the Horde!"

"..."

—————

Blackstone City, South Gate Wall.

Ever since Orion left to head south, Rendall and Delilah had been alternating shifts to protect this place.

"You're telling me those fiend serpents just turned around for no reason and went back to the Abyssal Chasm?"

"That's correct, Arch Elder."

Rendall and Delilah were chatting. Some time ago, Lilith had tamed a swarm of broadskull ravens and handed them over to the Sentinel Corps.

Now that Delilah was in charge of the Sentinel Corps, she relied on these ravens to keep an eye on the entire Black Forest. Which meant she knew, practically to the hour, when Orion left the Black Forest. In other words, her surveillance of the forest was rock solid.

The fiend serpent horde, originally swarming south with overwhelming force toward Blackstone City, had inexplicably turned around halfway and returned to the Abyssal Chasm.

It was actually part of Lord Gareth's plan. Originally, she'd hoped Orion would be killed under the guise of "invading" Stormrage City. With that, the Black Forest under her rule would erupt in chaos, leading to Gareth "quelling" the unrest and then seizing Blackstone City. That had been Gareth's initial blueprint.

But once Orion slaughtered Ariel, everything had to change. Arden, riding the Storm Vulture, had rushed home ahead of everyone and driven the fiend serpents back, sparing Blackstone City from getting overrun by five hundred thousand of those monsters. Gareth had clearly been willing to throw massive resources at wiping out the remaining factions in Blackstone City.

"Doesn't matter why they turned back," Rendall said. "We need to stay alert, keep tabs on them, and be ready for a fight."

He wasn't dumb; when the survival of the Horde was at stake, he knew how to stay on his toes.

"I get it. We haven't eased off our surveillance at all," Delilah assured him, staring into the thick woods beyond the walls. Still, she felt a heavy weight on her chest. Without Orion around, she worried she might crack under the pressure at any moment.

"Any word from the chieftain?" she asked.

"Not yet," Rendall replied. "I've got a recon squad posted on the southern frontier. If there's news, it'll get back to us right away."

"Let's hope the chieftain triumphs," Delilah murmured.

"..."

—————

At that very moment, Orion was having sex in a secluded spot near Half-Moon Lake.

In a makeshift tent, Lysintha finally showed up before nightfall. The moment she entered, Orion scooped her up in his arms. After a frenzy of passion, Orion pulled her close and softly asked:

"I heard you ran into some of your clan?"

"Mm-hmm," she murmured.

"Anyone you recognize?" he pressed.

"No. They're from a different branch than I used to be."

Lysinthia's voice was timid, drained. She was exhausted from their intense lovemaking.

"So what's got you so tight with them?" he asked. "If you want more servants, I can have them all assigned to you."

Orion gave Lilith's firm backside a quick smack—she'd been teasing his balls with her hair, and the tickling sensation was getting to him.

Lysinthia didn't respond. She lay on his chest as if asleep. A while later, once she'd gathered her strength, she spoke in a soft, delicate voice.

"Master... I want to change them into Gorgons. Both they and I will need a little time."

Orion's eyes narrowed instantly. The more diverse the Horde's troop types, the better their adaptability in different battles and environments. Fielding multiple specialized units was definitely essential.

"You plan on transforming all of them?"

"Yes."

"Are you sure you can pull that off?"

"Somewhat sure," she answered.

Orion fell silent, thinking for quite a while before pulling a few items from his storage ring and tossing them onto the ground.

"Here's a pair of crystals—one dark source crystal, one crystal core—both Alpha-level. Use the dark source crystal yourself to be safe, and give the crystal core to Twilight Viper. And that other box has four Blood Mushrooms. That's all the help I can offer."

Chapter 237 Learn to keep your head down

Right now, Lysinthia and Twilight Viper were both at the peak of Hero level, ready to break through to Alpha level.

For a long time, Lysinthia hadn't been given any special resources. In truth, most of the cultivation resources for her and Twilight Viper had come from their own battles on the front lines.

It wasn't that Orion didn't care about Lysinthia; she'd just had fewer chances to join major wars, and her position in the Horde was a little awkward. When Lysinthia saw the three wooden boxes in front of her, she froze.

Her eyes were huge and unblinking as she stared at Orion, dumbfounded. He reached out and brushed a hand over her lush eyelashes.

"Our good times are only just beginning," he said.

Shock? Gratitude? Maybe there was even a bit of love mixed in there. Either way, Lysinthia was overwhelmed with excitement—Alpha-level resources were laid out right before her, something she'd only dreamed of.

Orion didn't say anything more. He just laced his hands behind his head and shut his eyes, feigning a nap. Truth be told, he'd just given away his last two sets of Alpha-level resources—these were also the very last Alpha-level materials the Horde had on hand.

"Lysinthia," Lilith teased with a slight laugh, "you'd best stash these things away now. If the other elders see them, they're gonna go nuts."

Lilith picked up the wooden box with the Blood Mushrooms and inspected it carefully. She'd spent a good amount of time tending those mushrooms, so she felt they were partly her accomplishment.

Hearing Lilith's warning, Lysinthia gave Orion a quick kiss on the lips, then reached out for the boxes holding the cultivation resources. Orion, meanwhile, still lay there with his eyes closed.

He'd weighed the pros and cons before gifting these two Alpha-level items. For one thing, Lysinthia was his woman; there'd be no objections among the elders if she got an Alpha-level resource set.

As for Twilight Viper—if it failed to ascend, Orion's "investment" would be a bust and the resources wasted. But if it succeeded, then the responsibility of guarding Half-Moon Lake in Thunderwood Forest would rest on Twilight Viper's shoulders.

While thinking all this over, Orion kept an eye on his status panel, a slight smile on his face. Thanks to a steady intake of high-tier magical plants, his attributes were continuously recovering without pause. His ascension to Legendary level drew ever closer.

It had to be said: the buildup required to reach Legendary level was far beyond that needed for Alpha-level. Besides those heaps of high-tier magical plants in his storage ring, Orion had also been rummaging through the ring's other contents over the past few days. And in the process, he found a few discoveries.

For example, he'd stumbled on a mini-building shaped like an arrow tower, along with some Hero-level gear. That's right—an arrow tower and some Hero-level equipment.

When Orion first saw these items, he was stunned. These pieces were exclusive to survivors and could only come from Survivor's Chests.

Orion was positive the deceased Lord Ariel hadn't been a survivor, which meant there'd once been a survivor—someone who never had the chance to grow—who died in Ariel's hands, leaving their possessions to be collected by Ariel as trophies.

Orion sank his consciousness into the Survivor's Platform, looking for answers. He found Arthas and sent him a message.

"Bro, I need some help clearing something up."

"Spit it out," Arthas replied with his usual bluntness.

Orion didn't hold back. He laid it all out:

"I killed a powerful enemy and found some items that only come from Survivor's Chests. Is it possible for someone else out there to have equipment just like ours?"

Necro Realm, Bone Throne.

With no enemies to fight lately—everyone had gone to ground—Arthas was bored out of his mind. He'd spent over a year browsing the Survivor's Platform, snagging lots of goodies from the newbies at minimal cost.

Many newcomers didn't realize they could occasionally pull territory buildings from their Survivor's Chests. These territory buildings were incredibly rare. For an Arch Lord like Arthas, they were pure gold—he could always use more.

A mini-arrow tower like the one Orion had was exactly that kind of territory structure, extremely valuable. Of course, anyone below Legendary level couldn't properly harness it.

Anyway, plenty of rookies, desperate for immediate survival, would offload such items on the cheap. Strong survivors like Arthas kept their eyes glued to the Platform, jokingly calling those deals "poverty relief."

Arthas was in a decent mood today—he'd just snagged another sweet find—when Orion's message arrived. After reading it, Arthas fell silent.

"This kid's getting more curious," he muttered to himself. Weighing his words for a few moments, he typed out a response:

"How was our original world destroyed? And what kind of world is this one? We were all reborn from the ashes—why couldn't there be other people with their own 'cheat codes'?"

Remember this: never underestimate any enemy. They might be just like you—another awakened soul from some other world. I guarantee the Survivor's Platform isn't the only cheat in this world, nor is it the strongest. So yeah, what you described is totally normal. Plenty of awakened survivors exist, but not many manage to stay alive.

"Hulk, think about your ultimate goal—keep your path clear. Staying alive is what really counts!"

Having written that, Arthas shook his head at how chatty he'd been. It wasn't exactly dignified behavior for an Arch Lord. Still, he couldn't help thinking back to some of his old memories.

Many years ago, Arthas had a friend—an enthusiastic, peace-loving sort. The guy lucked out and awakened in a human civilization.

But turns out he tried to implement equality and push the rule of law in a place still stuck in slavery. People labeled him a heretic and burned him at the stake. Everything ended in tragedy.

And that wasn't even the worst story. There was another awakened one, similar to Orion, someone else Arthas had believed in. That fellow was even luckier—he woke up as a dragon, which was practically the perfect start. It was a race that grew stronger by sleeping.

But he soared out of his lair to show off—and wound up getting killed by a bunch of goblins, making some random goblin into a "dragonslayer." The memory made Arthas feel a little mournful.

"Hulk, learn to keep your head down," he added. "In this world, if you manage to hide and hang on until the end, you win."

Chapter 238 Troll Gronthar

Poison Dragon Swamp blended seamlessly into a marshy jungle, marking the boundary between the swamp and Half-Moon Lake. It was here that Orion and Slagor were about to part ways.

"I'm giving you one month," Orion said. "You can move your family and some of your young folk to Blackstone City. From now on, Poison Dragon Swamp will be a hunting ground—just a temporary base."

He gazed at the marsh before him. It was his territory. Slagor's first task upon returning to the swamp would be a full-scale migration, and his second task would be taking stock of their resources.

"As for the neighbors to the east, ignore them for now," Orion continued. "Once I reach Legendary level—and if they try invading my territory—then I'll pay them a visit."

He looked toward the east, where, beyond the endless marshes, lived a tribe of centaurs long at odds with Slagor's lizardfolk.

Slagor, being the cautious sort, had set his home in the swamp's center to avoid direct clashes with the centaurs, who disliked venturing too deep into the marsh.

"Don't worry," said Slagor. "I've got experience moving people to the Black Forest."

Orion rolled his eyes, at a loss for how to respond. With a quick wave, he dismissed Slagor.

"Have those little ravens sent out a return signal yet?" Orion asked, turning to Lilith, who happened to be talking to one of the broadskull ravens.

"The birds have already passed along our message," Lilith replied. "My sister's scouting team over on the southern edge of the Black Forest won't expect us to come back via Poison Dragon Swamp and the Barren Mountains."

Orion nodded. After quite a journey, they'd arrived at the junction of Poison Dragon Swamp, Half-Moon Lake, and the Barren Mountains. Once they crossed the Barren Mountains, they'd be back in the Black Forest.

"Where's Gronthar?" Orion asked. "Barren Mountains are his turf—tell him to guide us through."

Lilith merely smiled, then turned to Onyx. The trolls always stuck with Onyx, and Gronthar worked under him.

"Ha!" Onyx boomed. "Chieftain, I already sent Gronthar on ahead to scout. He'll have a quick route back to the Black Forest figured out in no time."

Orion nodded approvingly. "Good thinking. Besides guiding us, I also want to talk with him about the mineral deposits in the Barren Mountains. Our territory's expanded more than threefold by now, and if we want to keep growing, we need to raise both our population and our technology. We need to get a real start on smelting and forging so our weapons can be sharper and our armies ready for stronger enemies."

Due to the Black Forest's lack of sunlight, the Stoneheart Horde couldn't really develop agriculture—that was a natural limitation Orion couldn't change.

On the bright side, the Black Forest, Barren Mountains, and Half-Moon Lake were rich in minerals. Smelting ores and forging gear was now entirely feasible, and Orion wasn't about to let that chance slip by.

Not only that, the Horde already had ready-made spells—like petrification and enchanter's magic—that would be wasted if they didn't expand their metalworking capabilities. In fact, they had a lot of untapped potential, such as the obsidian golems' stone-crafting skills.

"All right," Onyx offered. "I can have Gronthar come back to talk, and let Brakthul guide us?"

"That works," Orion replied, satisfied with Onyx's suggestion.

Half an hour later, Gronthar—formerly the trolls' chieftain—came to see Orion. After two big siege battles at Thunderhawk City and Stormrage City, Gronthar's gaze had grown much steadier.

"Chieftain, you wanted to see me?"

Orion nodded and pointed toward the distant Barren Mountains. "Your people have lived in that area for many years. How well do you know the mineral distribution there?"

"Minerals, you say? Which ones exactly?"

"Iron, silver, gold—any rare ores, too."

Gronthar caught on quickly. "My tribe's been in these mountains for hundreds of years, so we know 'em like the back of our hand. In the northwest, where the Barren Mountains border the Black Forest and Poison Dragon Swamp, there're a few iron deposits. We used to grab exposed iron ore there and heat it up to make weapons. As for gold or silver, there are some veins in the east, too, but their hardness is too poor for forging, so we never bothered with them."

Gronthar grew more excited the more he talked. At one point, he even gestured toward a nearby spot. "Chieftain, there's a red copper mine ahead. That ore's also good for weapons."

Orion beckoned to a guard. "Dace, take a few giants and some trolls. Head to that mine and bring back some copper."

"Right away, sir!"

The rest of the trip through the Barren Mountains, Gronthar guided them. Whenever they passed somewhere important, he'd point out any nearby mineral deposits, and Orion mentally logged each location.

Ordering a quick stop before leaving the Barren Mountains, Orion turned to the tusked Gronthar. "Gronthar, I'm planning to form a weapons department within the Stoneheart Horde—our Military Forge, basically. Are you interested?"

Gronthar's face lit up. He knew Orion was assigning him a bigger role. "Chieftain, what exactly does this 'weapons department' do?"

"In simple terms," Orion said, "you'd be in charge of forging arms and armor for the Horde."

To Orion's surprise, Gronthar looked stunned. "Chieftain, does this mean you're not satisfied with our trolls' performance in the last invasion?"

Orion frowned. "Why would you think that?"

"Because trolls are all fierce warriors. We don't fear death! If you're telling us to make weapons instead of fighting, well, it sounds like you're putting us on the sidelines," Gronthar explained, puffing out his chest as if his tribe's honor were on the line.

Onyx came forward to clear the awkward silence. "Chieftain, trolls are a warrior race, and Gronthar thinks you looked down on them by shifting him to a forging position. They'd rather fight as soldiers than labor as blacksmiths."

Orion sighed in relief, finally understanding the issue. "In that case, Gronthar, you can stay with the cannon fodder troops. Just remember not to refuse when the Horde needs your tribe's help in finding ore."

Gronthar nodded eagerly, seeming much more at ease after that.

Chapter 239 King of Giants

Blackstone City, South Gate Wall.

After so many days, Elder of Stewardship Delilah was finally smiling for the first time. Her smile bloomed like a crimson rose: fragrant, striking, and undeniably captivating.

"Got news?"

Seeing the glow on Delilah's face, Rendall broke into a grin as well.

"Mm-hmm. There's word from the chieftain. Orion isn't returning via the original route; instead, he cut across the Half-Moon Lake region, skirted the Poison Dragon Swamp, and then crossed the Barren Mountains. By now, he should already be in our Black Forest territory."

As she spoke, Delilah handed Rendall a sealed note that the broadskull ravens had delivered. Rendall took it, scanning the contents carefully. A moment later, his face twisted in shock and disbelief. The message slipped from his grip, drifting outside the city walls.

Delilah reacted with lightning speed, extending her right hand. The air seemed to ripple strangely, and the note was shredded into fine ash, scattering in the breeze.

"Tell me I'm not seeing things, Elder of Stewardship."

Rendall's voice was unfamiliar even to himself. He locked his gaze on Delilah.

"I didn't believe it at first either. But I'm certain I wasn't mistaken; I saw the same words you did."

Rendall, still unsettled, gradually calmed himself. In the end, he knelt down and assumed a peculiar stance of prayer.

"Praise be to the Titan God. At long last, our race has its king—a magnificent King of Giants!"

When Delilah heard that title, "King of Giants," her mind reeled. Only a moment later did her expression turn... a little odd.

"He is indeed the King of Giants—and he's our king... my king."

Delilah's gaze in that instant was both brazenly lustful and unmistakably proud.

...

Meanwhile, the so-called Giant King Orion was perched on the back of an Abyssal dragon, his head resting comfortably in Lilith's arms, eyes half-shut as if dozing. In reality, he was fully focused on the Survivor's Platform, haggling with another survivor over a bottle of healing medicine.

"You just admitted it yourself—it only works for external wounds, no help for internal damage. Twenty B-grade crystal cores is the highest I'll go."

"Hey, I told you it's top-notch for treating open wounds, and the vial's got enough for multiple uses. Thirty B-grade crystal cores is rock bottom."

"Okay, fine, I'll bump it up a bit... twenty-one. That's final."

After they went back and forth, Orion finally purchased the so-called "Miracle Ointment" for external injuries at the price of twenty-four B-grade crystal cores from a total stranger. Orion usually wasn't into haggling—just this once, he was bored and decided to banter with the seller, knocking off six measly cores after a fair amount of arguing.

...

"Awake?"

Lilith immediately noticed Orion opening his eyes.

"Yeah. I just remembered something: I found a bottle of healing meds in Lord Ariel's storage ring. I want to try it on Thunderhawk Rayden."

Speaking, Orion sprang off the Abyssal dragon's back. At the rear of their traveling column was a makeshift wooden corral, pulled along by a dozen or so swamp crocodiles. Inside it was a bird that looked like a featherless turkey, lying there nearly lifeless.

Orion nodded at the folk tending the swamp crocodiles, then flipped over the corral's edge in one swift move.

"Rayden, how're you holding up?"

He reached out and gave the slumped bird a pat. At the same time, he pulled out three bottles of Pet Pills.

"Master, I thought you'd ditched me!"

Thunderhawk Rayden lifted its utterly bald head from the folds of its fleshy body, speaking in a feeble voice.

Noticing Rayden's woeful glare, Orion felt a bit sheepish. Truth was, he hadn't come by often since the big fight—mostly because Lord Gareth's threat loomed, and because Orion hadn't figured out how to heal Rayden's wounds.

"Don't worry," Orion explained. "If I wanted to dump you, I'd have done it back at Stormrage City."

He uncorked a bottle, tossing a few Pet Pills into Thunderhawk Rayden's mouth. After it swallowed them, the big bird brightened up a bit and started talking more.

"Master, I honestly thought you were just gonna drag me back, kill me, and eat the meat... maybe even yank out my crystal core to feed your other beasts."

Rayden truly was freaking out, spilling all the stuff it'd been stewing over. Of course, all anyone else heard were "caws" and "squawks," but Orion got the message clearly. He felt both amused and a little guilty.

"All right, settle down. I haven't forgotten about you. I'm here to treat your wounds."

Orion took out the pricey Miracle Ointment he'd just bought on the Survivor's Platform. Using half of its contents, he poured it into Rayden's beak.

"Drink up—and trust me, in three days, you'll be back on your feet at full power."

"Master, really?"

"You'll find out in three days," Orion said, flipping back over the corral. He didn't want to stare too long at that goofy bird, or he'd feel even more remorseful.

The miracle ointment indeed lived up to its name. It wasn't even three days later—by dawn of the very next day, Thunderhawk Rayden was standing on its own. In doing so, it also managed to blow Orion's mind. Completely bald, the bird looked no different than a giant walking chicken. Worse, now and then it'd flap its stubby wings, letting out squawks as if trying to show off its Alpha-level dominance.

"When do you think Rayden will fully recover?" Lilith asked. Leaning against Orion's chest, she watched Rayden herd the swamp crocodiles from behind and couldn't help but pity the poor bird.

In the past, Thunderhawk Rayden positively lorded it over everyone, out of reach to most. No way would you ever ride on its back if Orion didn't pull some strings. And now, that proud eagle—burned clean of all its feathers—was stuck bossing around a flock of swamp crocodiles to prove it still had some mojo left.

"I'm not sure," Orion admitted. "The miracle ointment I'm giving it only heal its external wounds. But the internal damage from Lord Ariel's lightning strikes... that's up to the bird itself. No telling when it'll recover, regrow its feathers, and take flight again."

Orion spoke in a hushed tone. Thunderhawk Rayden's injuries reached to the core, courtesy of a Legendary-level transcendent power. If Rayden hadn't already been so in tune with lightning energy, it wouldn't have survived that final blast in Stormrage City.

Chapter 240 I am the Giant King and the Lord of Black Forest

Summer in the Black Forest was lively—full of noise and excitement. It was both the season of mating and the season of the hunt.

Orion woke from his slumber to the sounds of Rolan grunting and huffing outside his tent. He'd been back in Blackstone City for nearly a month now, and ever since his return, the city seemed to have been injected with new life—changing day by day.

"What was it Arch Elder mentioned last night, about wanting to activate something?"

Orion was still a bit groggy. Reaching over to the animal skins beside him, he noticed Lilith and Lysinthia were gone.

"Where'd they run off to so early?" he mumbled, yawning as he tried to stand up.

All of a sudden, a chill flickered across his forehead, and a spark of lightning burst from right between his eyebrows.

Orion froze in surprise—then chaos broke out.

Boom!

Boom! Boom! Boom!

A massive bolt of lightning shot up from Blackstone City itself, illuminating the entire Black Forest. Over on a ridge in the west, Thunderhawk Rayden was sprawled out on a stone slab, sunbathing in the nude—no feathers, no shame—when he sprang up as though terrified.

"Enemy... enemy... run for it!"

Rayden looked skyward, eyes brimming with dread and despair. He remembered all too well that exact kind of lightning that once scorched his feathers off, nearly ending his life.

Rumble... Rumble...

But just as quickly as it came, the lightning soared off at high speed. It tore open the clouds and raced through the northern reaches of the Black Forest. Everywhere it passed, beasts cowered and trembled, bowing to the ground.

At the forest's northern edge, the lightning swerved, jumping toward Poison Dragon Swamp. Inside that swamp, serpents thrashed in the water, moose bounded through thick mud, and rats peeked nervously from the undergrowth. It all flashed before Orion's eyes like a series of rapid-cut scenes.

Rumble... The lightning pressed on eastward, and Orion got a glimpse of the centaurs Slagor had spoken of. They were a strange clan: the males had human torsos and horse bodies, while the females looked fully human from head to toe.

Shocked by the sudden storm on an otherwise clear day, the tribe's wise-folk peered skyward, sensing something amiss.

The lightning changed direction yet again, barreling toward the south. Orion saw even more tribes there—refugees from Thunderwood Forest, all converging on Half-Moon Lake. The place had become a temporary haven for anyone trying to escape chaos.

A streak of lightning tore the sky, bouncing steadily back toward the Black Forest. Orion sensed an odd clarity: everywhere the lightning traveled was part of his territory now.

Continuing its wild path, the lightning passed over the southern border of the Black Forest, then the eastern edge by the desert, before finally arcing back and returning to Blackstone City.

When Orion landed atop Blackstone City's walls, cloaked in arcs of lightning and radiating a godlike presence, a full day and night had passed since he'd first become one with the lightning.

"It's our lord!" someone cried. "He's got the power—he's truly the lord of the Black Forest!"

Orion made no attempt to hide his Legendary-level energy or the crackling aura of his lightning-based transcendent power.

The first to react wasn't Lilith or Delilah or even Onyx or Rendall—it was Dirtclaw from the cannon fodder troops. He raised his whip overhead and gazed up at Orion, eyes filled with awe and excitement.

"It's the revered master! WAAAGH, WAAAGH!"

"All hail our lord, the glory of the Horde!"

"Giant King!"

"Giant King!"

"..."

Spurred on by Dirtclaw's cries, everyone else started chanting, "Giant King!"

Standing tall, Orion looked every inch a titan.

"From this day on," his voice boomed with thunder's crackle, "the Black Forest shall no longer submit to the Four Domains. I am Orion Stoneheart—I am the Giant King and the lord of black forest!"

His declaration, echoing on the crack of thunder, carried a majestic and electrifying hiss that swept through Blackstone City. The city erupted with cheers like an explosion of joy.

On the southern wall, Rendall dropped to his knees and bowed low. The giants followed suit, performing the highest gesture of respect among their people—an official homage, welcoming their new king.

At the entrance of one stone hall, Delilah beamed as she watched Orion stand clad in lightning.

"He's our king," she murmured, "my king."

Elsewhere, at the mouth of an underground fissure, the Spider Queen Lorelia, Rockwell, and Onyx also looked on.

"He's Lorelia's master," Lorelia said happily, "my mighty giant lord!"

To show her excitement, she raised her bow and cheered, even launching into a strange little dance with her eight spindly legs—a bizarre sight, but she didn't care.

"How about that?" Onyx said with a chuckle. "Wasn't it the smartest move we ever made to follow him?"

He lifted his stone axe in a warrior's salute to Orion in the distance.

"Prophet, your decision was wise, and your foresight runs deep. Compared to Orion, Rockwell is dust indeed."

Rockwell, too, raised his stone axe, mimicking Onyx's salute.

"Ha, well," Onyx said, "you becoming our obsidian golems' second Alpha-level fighter—surpassing your father—is already quite the accomplishment."

Rockwell beamed with pride at the compliment.

From the western ridge of Moonshadow Valley came a series of eagle shrieks. Thunderhawk Rayden, overwhelmed with excitement, wanted desperately to soar around Orion in the sky but couldn't yet fly. So the bald bird just kept squawking, hoping Orion would know he was celebrating, too.

Orion surveyed Blackstone City, looking at each face fixed upon him. After a while, he transformed into a streak of lightning again and returned to his tent. The Legendary-level pressure engulfing the city dissipated simultaneously.

Waiting at the tent's entrance were Lilith and Lysinthia, standing side by side. Orion looked at Lysinthia with surprise—while he'd been out, living lightning for the last day and night, she had advanced to Alpha level.

"What about Twilight Viper? Did it succeed too?" Orion asked.

"Master," Lysinthia replied, "Twilight Viper is still asleep. I'm not sure yet if the transformation worked."

Orion nodded. Wrapping an arm around Lilith and an arm around Lysinthia, he led them into his tent. He was in a fantastic mood—tonight, he planned to celebrate this historic milestone by making love all night long.