

Titan King 311

Chapter 311 Stick together and watch each other's backs

In the distant sky, lightning flashed while black mist swirled around, radiating a dark glow.

Terrifying blasts boomed across the battlefield, and the suffocating pressure rolled forward, sweeping everything in its path.

Rayden, who excelled at aerial combat, suddenly didn't dare to fly too high.

Even staying close to the ground felt dangerous. Hovering over his own army in low airspace, Thunderhawk Rayden assisted Lilith and Lysinthia in taking down enemies who had broken into the inner circle.

His eagle-like screeches seemed so thin against the endless clamor of battle.

"Prophet, don't break formation!"

Lilith used her mind-voice to pull Onyx, Thundar, and the others out of their slaughter-fueled trance.

Riding powerful mounts, they had far more mobility and attack power than most—already drifting away from their defensive line.

Why? Because everyone on the battlefield had gone berserk.

Worse, some night elf spellcasters were casting illusions, dragging countless warriors into a killing frenzy where they lost themselves.

Onyx and Thundar halted in time. Gazing at the front lines, where the fighting had turned into a grisly meat grinder, their hearts couldn't help but quake.

"Thanks..."

"..."

All the Stoneheart Horde fighters regrouped and returned to their defensive positions, re-forming their ranks carefully.

"Slagor, Lysinthia, protect the succubi!"

"All succubi, chant the Illusion-Breaking Spell with me! We've gotta stave off their illusions!"

Following Lilith's command, Slagor and Lysinthia led a squad to her side, shielding Lilith and her succubus bloodline warriors.

At the same time, a blood-red chain shot out from Earthshaker's body, linking every Alpha-level champion of the Stoneheart Horde together. It was Blood Sharing, an ability Earthshaker had inherited from the Heroic Altar!

As he grew more familiar with Blood Sharing, he'd gone from being able to link only one person to linking up to ten.

"This place is crawling with deadly threats—everyone, stay sharp!"

Even as he rejoined the team, Onyx still felt his heart pounding.

He'd thought his mind was tough enough, but he was shocked to see how the bloodlust of this battlefield had almost gotten to him.

"The prophet's right—this place is weird. Too many races, and all kinds of bizarre powers. If we let our guard down for even a second, we'll get duped. Keep your eyes peeled."

Thundar completely agreed. Moments earlier, he and Onyx had charged too far ahead, fueled by confidence in their mounts. They never expected these Godforsaken Land enemies to pack such a punch.

"Stick together and watch each other's backs. Yes, they're mostly allies all around us, but some abilities don't distinguish friend from foe!"

Slagor chimed in. He was one of the few who stayed levelheaded, mostly because he'd lingered near Lilith.

He figured Orion must've left some will projection on Lilith, along with a few life-saving tricks. So, being eager to survive, Slagor stayed close, hoping to both seek shelter and earn Orion's favor by saving the day if needed.

Swish, swish, swish...

All of a sudden, another wave of corrupted humans and goblins charged in, and the atmosphere tensed before fresh shouts and battle cries filled the air.

Up in the sky, the fight among the lords was actually going fairly smoothly—at least, that was Orion's take on things.

Crack!

In Titan Form, Orion effortlessly impaled a human Corruptor with his trident. With a vigorous twist of his right hand, he ripped and destroyed the human lord's heart.

The human Corruptor, already heavily wounded by Rumbold's death ripple, was absolutely no match for Orion's fierce assault and died on the spot.

Orion casually tossed the corrupted Lord's Stone to Rumbold, who caught it without hesitation.

Back in the eastern sector, Orion had picked up three Lord's Stones with Rumbold's help. This was just friends sharing loot, that's all.

"Don't pause here—let's split up and help the other allied lords!"

"We've gotta finish off the remaining lords fast. If we drag this out, the troops we brought won't last much longer!"

Orion felt a jolt. He'd gotten too carried away killing enemies and hadn't been paying attention to the larger battle.

Sensing the flow of combat again, he was stunned.

The three arch lords of Godforsaken Land had joined forces, bringing not only all the warriors under their command but also hordes of corrupted beasts and strange creatures native to Godforsaken Land.

Leonidas, Arthas, and Orion had around two million troops altogether, but under the relentless attacks of goblins, corrupted human fighters, and night elves, their defensive circle was shrinking fast.

"I'll head down and back them up. You go summon more undead!"

Rumbold shook his head at Orion's suggestion.

"Once I start summoning, they'll all swarm me. The summoning array will get interrupted, and I'll be done for."

"Even worse, the fight would shift toward our defensive perimeter, which would spell trouble for our ordinary soldiers."

"If we knock out these remaining lords fast, the entire crisis ends."

Orion nodded. After killing that one lord, he and Rumbold parted ways to assist the other nearby allies.

Crack!

Lightning crackled as Orion's trident tore through the air, skewering a night elf right through the chest.

Roar!

Originally, that night elf had been fighting a lion with both water and fire attributes—a member of Leonidas's kin. Opening its jaws wide, the water-fire lion spewed a jet of flame, blasting through the wounded night elf again.

Seizing the moment, Orion unleashed his Eightfold Spear Barrage. Countless blood-red spears rained down on the night elf lord for three full minutes before finally putting the enemy down for good.

At last, a Lord's Stone fell into Orion's hand.

"Thanks for the assist!"

The water-fire lion didn't even glance at the Lord's Stone in Orion's hand; it just tore off to help its own race.

Orion tucked the Lord's Stone away. He was about to help other allies when he noticed that all the Godforsaken Land lords were being swarmed already.

He took one look at the broader fight and decided not to join another dogpile, transforming into lightning instead and sweeping across the battlefield.

Wherever he streaked by in lightning form, countless goblins, corrupted humans, and night elves crumbled into dust.

Even some Alpha-level chieftans went down in a single blow from him.

Once Titan Form was active, Orion was basically a nightmare for all regular troops—no one came close to matching him.

Not long after that, Orion noticed the bodies of the fallen warriors and beasts slowly standing up, lurching toward the Godforsaken Land side. His eyes drifted toward the rear of the defensive circle.

There, he spotted Rumbold and another undead casting spells together.

They'd already begun summoning the walking dead.

Chapter 312: Returned to Moonshadow Valley

With a huge influx of walking dead on the field, the pressure on the defensive line dropped sharply, and the situation stabilized.

Little by little, more and more walking dead joined in, and the tide began to turn for the better.

Orion stopped fighting and returned to the section defended by the Stoneheart Horde, landing right next to Lilith.

"Orion!"

"Respectable Lord!"

"...!"

Orion nodded, giving a small grunt in greeting to his gathered subordinates.

"The tide's shifting in our favor. Onyx, Thundar, Earthshaker, Slagor—take your cavalry and the cave spider armies and pursue the fleeing enemies!"

As soon as Orion finished speaking, the four men's eyes lit up. They gave a resounding confirmation, then charged off with the little spiders in tow.

"Orion, are we not defending this spot anymore?"

Lilith and Lysinthia stepped up behind him, gazing into the distance at the battlefield.

"When it comes to the Legendary-level fights, we have the numbers. Godforsaken Land had six lords—five are dead, and one got away. The outcome is pretty much decided."

With his hands behind his back, Orion gazed across the battlefield with satisfaction at how both he and his horde had shone in such a massive war.

"Master, there's still one lord who hasn't been killed... Prophet and the others..."

Lysinthia left the final words unsaid—it was bad luck to voice such thoughts in a place like this.

"Any lord who ran off is not gonna get far. Three of our guys are chasing him down, so he's basically screwed."

Orion had no doubt that the cavalry and spider armies would grow stronger after this brutal bloodbath.

Retracting his gaze, Orion strode over to Rumbold.

"Lord Orion, do you still want your sacrifices?"

"Those who are still alive... take as many as you want!"

Rumbold paused his summoning of walking dead, leaving the remainder to another Legendary-level caster. Motioning with his weapon, he pointed to the scattering armies of Godforsaken Land fleeing off in the distance.

"I'll take some, and after all is said and done, I'd appreciate it if you could send a small batch my way," Orion replied.

"Haha, they're slated to die anyway. Doesn't matter how they go out!"

Rumbold nodded, promising the sacrifices Orion requested.

"How are Leonidas and the others?"

Orion looked upward at the realm Leonidas had sealed.

Rumbold raised his head as well, narrowing his eyes with a worried look.

Godforsaken Land had three arch lords. Though Rumbold was confident in his master, Arthas, he couldn't help being a bit uneasy.

"To be honest, the real result of this war hasn't come in yet. If my master win, that's our victory."

Orion got the gist. If Leonidas and Arthas lost, those three arch lords would stroll out from inside that sealed realm, and nobody who remained here would stand a chance.

"Lord Orion, you'd better carry out your sacrificial ritual soon. Once my master leaves that sealed space, Godforsaken Land itself will vanish."

Orion understood perfectly. If the central Source Siphon Array were activated, Godforsaken Land would face total annihilation.

Not only would any ritual be interrupted, but every lifeform here would be wiped out.

Seven days later, Onyx, Thundar, Earthshaker, and Slagor returned thoroughly spent—the riders and their mounts utterly exhausted.

Meanwhile, the sacrifices Rumbold had agreed to send also arrived, delivered by an Alpha-level skeleton warrior.

Orion found a mountain valley and set up the sacrificial ritual there. In less than half a day, he acquired thirty thousand low-level goblin skeleton warriors. The strongest of them barely reached hero level; the weakest were ordinary rank.

Orion had learned the skeleton conversion technique from Rumbold. Compared to Skeletal Knights, these skeleton warriors were practically pushovers.

Still, Orion's plan was never to use them as frontline troops—he intended them more as miners or builders.

The key thing was, if they couldn't absorb ambient death energy, they'd eventually disappear on their own. In other words, they had a limited lifespan.

But Orion recalled there was a patch of dead lands beneath Blackstone City. He'd had that in mind from the moment he began converting them.

When the skeleton warriors could no longer serve him, Orion would send them underground to join up with his sister Clymene. This way, the skeleton army would become another reserve force for the Stoneheart Horde.

Once the numbers of skeleton warriors grew large enough—or the Underworld used up its supply of death energy—Orion believed he'd be strong and confident enough to open that cross-realm teleportation array down there.

At that point, these skeleton warriors would make the perfect first-wave explorers for new worlds.

...

Three more days passed.

That Legendary-level lord who'd managed to escape Godforsaken Land was finally taken out.

All the Legendary-level fighters under Leonidas and Arthas gathered, staring up at the same sealed realm.

Orion and Rumbold were among them, looking into the sky.

Because at that very moment, fluctuations shook the area around the sealed realm like ripples in the air.

That patch of void was murky, chaos-gray, swirling with transcendent power and warped spatial laws, giving off a jumbled mess of energy.

Another half-day went by. Suddenly, there was a deafening boom in that sealed place, and Leonidas and Arthas emerged, faces unreadable.

As soon as they landed, Orion witnessed a sight that took his breath away:

That space collapsed in on itself, obliterating everything within. A black hole about the size of a basketball billowed there, turning slowly.

"Roar!" "Roar!" "Roar!"

Leonidas and Arthas's appearance triggered waves of jubilation among their people.

In an instant, tens of thousands of beasts were roaring, and the skeleton troops bowed in reverence. Orion couldn't find words for that scene—he would remember it forever.

Behind him, the Stoneheart Horde members looked on at this spectacle from a distance, as if they were seeing gods.

In the hearts of Onyx, Thundar, Earthshaker, and the others, Leonidas and Arthas were basically on par with gods now.

Moments later, on an arrow tower overlooking the area, Leonidas, Arthas, and Orion stood side by side.

"Orion, the mission's now officially complete. We're about to activate the Source Siphon Array."

"You need to teleport out of here. Once Godforsaken Land collapses, there's gonna be nowhere left to hide."

Orion nodded, suspecting Leonidas and Arthas were keeping secrets from him. But if they weren't keen on sharing, he wasn't going to pry.

He'd already gained a ton on this trip, and Leonidas had just used the general comm channel to tell Kraken to pull out first. Even that veteran lord hadn't gotten the full story, so Orion figured he didn't deserve to know it, either.

After exchanging parting words with Leonidas and Arthas, Orion rallied his forces, tore open a teleportation scroll, and returned to Moonshadow Valley.

Chapter 313: Void blade

On top of the tower, sensing that Orion had just teleported away, Leonidas finally spoke up.

"Damn it. We got played this time!"

Arthas said nothing; he simply looked up at that Black Sun hovering in the sky.

"From the moment we entered this Godforsaken Land, I felt something was off. Turns out it was that thing."

Leonidas also raised his gaze, staring at the Black Sun.

"So, what do we do now? That Black Sun is definitely up to no good—there's gotta be an evil being behind it on par with a demigod. I'd bet my hide that it's just waiting for us to forge the world's core so it can swoop in and snag it."

The more Leonidas spoke, the more worked up he got. His grumbling wouldn't stop. Inside that sealed space, they'd not only slain three arch lords but also obliterated a will projection of that unseen evil entity.

That sliver of will projection had taken root in Mia, the night elf arch lord. Evidently, the sexy, enchanting Mia had long since become a plaything in that dark being's hands.

"Before the fight kicked off, I kept wondering why those three arch lords showed zero fear about us invading them. Turns out they were actually planning to ambush us."

"Woof... Dammit, I should've known a huge Godforsaken Land like this wouldn't just fall into my lap for free!"

Leonidas vented loudly, practically roaring in frustration as if his beastly nature had overcome his reason.

"Leonidas," Arthas cut in quietly, "complaining now won't fix anything. We need to pull our people out first to minimize losses."

Arthas's words were cold and calm. He was calling for everyone to withdraw, yet he never once said he himself intended to leave Godforsaken Land.

"I already passed the order. One more quarter hour, and all my subordinates will be outta here."

Leonidas let loose another roar, his voice rolling across the battlefield.

Moments later, back in the central zone, a burst of spatial fluctuation flared, and all the subordinates of Leonidas and Arthas returned to their own worlds.

"If that will projection was destroyed and it hasn't fought back by now, there are only two possibilities," Arthas said.

"One: that evil being, like a demigod or a god, is in a deep slumber.

"Two: that evil being might be sealed away."

Arthas drew a huge greatsword from behind him and pointed it toward the Black Sun overhead.

"Demigods are hard to come by, and we've been stuck at this level forever. Might as well see what that evil being's got to offer."

Standing on the tower, sword aimed skyward, Arthas looked rigidly upright, cloak billowing behind him.

"Sure. That's exactly what I was thinking!

"Woof..."

Half a day later, Leonidas and Arthas reached the deepest part of the underground, stopping beside the shriveled World Tree.

"Let's begin."

Arthas's voice held no emotion as it rumbled coldly through the cavern, tinged with a contempt for all living creatures.

Leonidas didn't answer. He reached out with his right claw and pressed it into the magic array inscribed on the floor.

In an instant, the void trembled, and runes lit up the air around them. A blinding beam of light shot straight upward, piercing rock and sky until it stood face to face with the Black Sun above.

Moments later, the beam vanished, and the entire Godforsaken Land began to shudder. In the span of a heartbeat, the world convulsed—cracks riddled the ground, lava boiled up from below, and palaces and houses everywhere collapsed into rubble.

Every creature still alive in Godforsaken Land was either obliterated in the natural disasters or buried deep beneath the earth. Even the seas around the continent seethed with monstrous waves and constant tsunamis.

It was as if some terrifying power at the heart of Godforsaken Land was sucking in all matter. Even the Black Sun overhead began sinking lower bit by bit.

This chaos continued for half a month. No one could say exactly when, but eventually not a trace of living things could be found.

Swish... swish...

It was a strange, indescribable sound. At some unremarkable moment, all matter in Godforsaken Land suddenly broke down, dissolving into dust that floated in the void.

At the same time, within the source siphoning array, Leonidas held a world's core about the size of an apple in his palm.

As that core took shape, the Black Sun in the void quivered, flaring with a bright yet not blinding radiance.

Leonidas carefully stowed away the world's core. Together, he and Arthas hovered in the air, gazing impassively at the Black Sun.

Suddenly, a fissure appeared in the center of the Black Sun, splitting it right down the middle. As the crack widened, it seemed to devour everything, the Black Sun included.

When the Black Sun was gone, what remained in that patch of sky was a gigantic eye. It had no pupil—only swirling stars glistening inside.

Leonidas and Arthas recognized it as an eye because they could feel the presence behind it, watching them from the shadows.

Hss... hss...

A black beam fired out, crushing the surrounding space. Its faint hiss hiss echoed in the air before slamming into Leonidas and Arthas.

But both of them had relics that sprang forth and formed protective barriers, holding back the beam's crushing force.

"Boney McBoneface, this is getting tough. The beam's pressure is piling up—we can't hold out for long!"

Arthas didn't speak. A moment later, a formless knife, a blade of pure nothingness, appeared in his grip.

With a single swish, it vanished.

"Hand over what I guard... I shall let you—"

The being's will sounded from that massive eye, but it never finished speaking.

Slash!

Silence fell. The Black Sun turned dark and collapsed. Fine, radiant cracks splintered across that eye's inky surface.

Boom!

That giant eye was shredded by the void blade, scattering to darkness. In that blink, the void itself zipped closed and vanished into nothingness.

The second Arthas summoned the void blade, he and Leonidas had used some unknown items to teleport away to safety.

...

Somewhere in the unknown reaches of the void, an evil entity jolted awake. Slowly touching its left eye, it felt a blade-scar.

"So, someone destroyed the Perpetual Night Continent?"

Sensing the cut across its eye, the being muttered in a low voice,

"That was power of a different law... A demigod who wields a blade, perhaps?

"I won't forget this. Once I fully awaken, we'll settle the score."

...

Elsewhere in the void, another mysterious realm.

Here slumbered Champions Alliance Commander Thresh, seated cross-legged, enveloped in a river of countless blades.

"So it was Arthas who used the gift I gave him. He must've gone up against a demigod-level opponent."

Commander Thresh still did not open his eyes, nor did he truly awaken, though his low murmur traveled unimpeded through this space.

That void blade Arthas had used was the life-saving ace given to him by Commander Thresh—a blade that, beneath the level of god, could cut through anything.

Chapter 314: You're pretty talented at blowjobs too

Black Forest, Moonshadow Valley.

With a ripple of spatial energy, Orion and all the subordinates he had taken to Godforsaken Land returned.

Orion glanced back at his group. All the Alpha-level warriors—Onyx, Thundar, Earthshaker, Slagor, Lilith, and Lysinthia—were back safely, none of them killed or even injured.

They all radiated an intense, battle-hardened aura, their expressions fierce and cold. Clearly, the trip to Godforsaken Land had honed both their minds and their power.

Orion was pleased with their performance. After all, like Rumbold—Arthas's Legendary-level subordinate—had been nurtured bit by bit.

In this cross-realm invasion, none of the three mounts—Thunderhawk, the Armored Beast, and the Dark Fiend—had been lost either, which was something to celebrate.

But when he looked at the four council elders he'd taken with him, Orion let out a sigh.

Desdemona had fallen in battle; together with the fighters who had died, she had been converted into a Skeletal Knight. A layer of cloth was wrapped over Gronthar's head—he had lost an eye.

Rendall's daughter Ursa had lost an arm; although it was reattached, there was no telling if she would fully recover.

Dirtclaw, on the other hand, had been unbelievably vicious and cold-blooded on the battlefield and walked away without a scratch.

As for Thundar's cavalry regiment, one-third of them were wiped out. Fortunately, both the knights and their icefield snow wolves had been converted together into Skeletal Knights.

On the upside, this trial by fire had helped the cavalry truly grow. Once they added new members, the presence of experienced veterans would help them expand quickly.

By contrast, the Sentinel Corps didn't suffer many losses—only a few scouts perished.

Lastly, of the four hundred thousand little spiders, only a hundred twenty thousand made it back with Orion.

After surveying his subordinates, Orion saw Delilah and Rendall hurrying over to the Moonshadow Valley plaza, having heard the news.

"Talk later," Orion said, stopping Delilah, who'd been about to speak, and gave out instructions:

"Lilith, take the little spiders and those skeleton warriors to the underground fissure. Ask Lorelia to clear some space for them."

"Understood!" Lilith answered. Leading the spiders and the thirty thousand skeleton warriors, she headed for the dark passage leading to the underground fissure. The Skeletal Knights created from Desdemona and other tribe members also followed them underground.

"Thundar, pull your force together and start expanding the cavalry regiment. I want you to form wolf-mounted cavalry, spider cavalry, and raven cavalry. For the raven cavalry, I'll give you some time—start selecting from the younger fighters in the horde."

Raising his weapon in acknowledgment, Thundar responded firmly, then turned to carry out his orders.

"Everyone else, you're dismissed."

There were still tasks to arrange, but Orion planned to leave those details for Delilah. He walked away from the group, making his way to the Horde Hall.

In the depths of the inner keep at Horde Hall, there was now a hot spring.

Lilith invited Orion to have a soak in this newly built hot spring inside the keep.

She wore a very revealing swimsuit, her ample breasts squeezed into two perfect spheres with a smooth, flat belly and long legs on full display. This outfit left no doubt about her figure—Lilith certainly had the curves for it.

Orion sat there in the hot spring, openly reaching out to squeeze her breasts. They felt warm, sleek, and springy in his hands.

"Mmm... The feel is amazing."

With that whispered praise, Orion let his hand glide down from Lilith's abdomen, slowly tracing to the top of her thighs. Lilith's body reacted immediately—her long, graceful legs trembled slightly beneath the warmth of his touch.

Orion's hand moved back upward, sliding between her thighs to her private area. She was wearing an almost see-through pair of panties that, once soaked in the water, revealed tantalizing glimpses of her beneath. It was extremely enticing.

Sensing Orion's gaze, Lilith used magic to make her underwear vanish. In that instant, she was completely nude.

With her clothes gone, Lilith stepped closer to Orion and gently pulled down his underwear. A stiff cock instantly sprang up before her eyes.

Almost by instinct, she took it into her mouth, Orion's cock quickly filling her entire mouth while she looked utterly enraptured.

When her slippery tongue touched his tip, Orion let out a low groan of pleasure.

"Slurp... slurp..." Lilith wasn't nearly as practiced as Lysinthia when it came to oral, but she tried her best. Whenever Orion moaned appreciatively, she showed an equally pleased expression. As her tongue licked its way upward from the underside of the tip, she wrapped it around the cock's head and started tracing small circles.

"Hmm? You're pretty talented at blowjobs too! That's it... keep going. Don't stop!" Orion felt his desire growing hotter and hotter, so he half-closed his eyes and savored the moment.

"As you wish, my love." Feeling Orion's approval, Lilith glanced up at him with a triumphant smile, then resumed licking his cockhead, her tongue working around the edge of the tip.

"Yes, that spot... use your tongue. Licking alone isn't enough—suck it, like you're kissing."

Lilith followed his instructions to the letter, gently clamping her lips around the head and sucking with a soft "slurp" sound.

Stimulated by her, Orion was even more aroused. He leaned forward a bit and grabbed Lilith's breasts in both hands.

"In terms of size, you've got Lysinthia beat..." he teased as he fondled her full, supple tits.

But with Orion shifting position, Lilith had to pull the cock out of her mouth, lest it push too deeply into her throat. Once she let go, she continued her attentions by bending farther in and licking the pair of balls hanging beneath his cock.

"Damn... ohh... that feels so good... Lilith, you're a natural at this!" Orion praised. "Not to mention, your boobs feel incredible... no matter how I play with them, it's thrilling..."

"Mmph... mm..." Lilith let out a faint moan, her breath catching at the touch on her sensitive nipples.

"All right, that's plenty for foreplay. I can't wait to take you..." Orion smiled. "Time to slip it in, yeah? You're looking forward to it too, right? Now turn around, lift your ass in the air."

Lilith didn't hesitate, turning around and bracing her hands against her knees. Then she slowly bent forward, pushing her inviting backside right in front of Orion, arching her naked butt so he could admire her exposed sex.

"Like this?"

"Perfect. Keep your hips up. Plant your feet firmly! Good..." As Orion spoke, he was fully lit up by Lilith's seductive posture. He positioned his cock at the entrance to her vagina.

"Ah... yes..." Lilith tilted her head back, letting out a blissful murmur. "Baby, I can feel your cock slipping into me! Ohhh..."

It only took a moment for Lilith to get used to this position. She squeezed her thighs tight, urging Orion's cock to thrust fiercely within her.

"That's it... keep going!" Anytime they had sex, Lilith was all about pleasing Orion, and he had no intention of leaving his wife unfulfilled.

Driven by his powerful rhythm, Lilith moaned in wave after wave of pleasure, each time taken to the brink of ecstasy again and again.

Lilith quickly lost herself, tossing her hair wildly while vigorously rocking her hips. She cried out in ragged tones, "Aah... oh... I feel like I'm flying! Ah... baby, fuck me hard... I love you so much!"

Overwhelmed by Lilith's rising pleasure, Orion finally reached his climax, releasing semen into the deepest part of her vagina.

Chapter 315: I just want to focus everything on getting stronger

Underground Fissure.

Onyx shared some pleasantries with Lorelia and gave her a few little gifts from another realm, which made her so happy that she promptly opened a path for him.

Onyx had come here to speak with Rockwell.

His journey through Godforsaken Land had completely reshaped his worldview—he now had new plans for his future. Of course, he was more than willing to share everything he'd learned with his kin, and with Rockwell in particular.

After all, Onyx hoped that more young powerhouses like Rockwell would emerge among the obsidian golems.

"Hey, join me for a drink."

Onyx offered some malt ale, a specialty of the Stoneheart Horde, and boldly took the first swig.

"I won't lie—I had a moment out there when I thought maybe I'd never make it back. But in the end, Lord Orion brought us home."

Rockwell didn't say much. He sipped his ale and listened quietly while Onyx told story after story of Godforsaken Land: the cowardly goblins, the sexy night elves, and human warriors Rockwell had never encountered before. Everything sounded thrilling and new to him.

When Onyx described those chaotic battles involving more than ten Legendary-level beings, Rockwell's breathing rose and fell with every word he said.

Encounters like Onyx and Rockwell's were happening all over Blackstone City.

On the north side of Blackstone City, in a tent:

Rendall and his daughter Ursa sat facing each other. Staring at the newly re-bandaged arm of his daughter, Rendall let out a sigh.

"They managed to reattach your arm, so you can use it normally. But according to the shaman who treated you, there might be lingering complications. If you want to fight with that arm, you have to rest up for a while."

Ursa just shook her head. Her expression was determined—clearly, she'd grown a lot and was no longer the timid child she had been.

"Daddy, it's no big deal. Compared to those who died in battle, I'm already very lucky."

Rendall went silent. Ursa was the most promising of his offspring and the one with the best chance of breaking through to Alpha-level.

"I'll go talk to Orion. He must have a way! You've got too much potential for your future to end here."

Ursa didn't reply, although she clearly wasn't ready to give up either. In Godforsaken Land, she'd witnessed far too many Hero-level and Alpha-level fighters—and had seen, even from a distance, the power of arch lords.

Having been exposed to such vast horizons, Ursa yearned more than ever to ascend to a higher rank and reach Alpha-level.

After you've laid eyes on the ocean, you can't settle for a pond.

Blackstone City, at the southern walls.

Gronthar and Brakthul were not on top of the wall but had hopped down and were leaning against it side by side, sharing a jug of booze.

"Brakthul, as of now, you're the new chieftain of the trolls. I'm making it official."

"Tomorrow, I'll spread the word to every tribe member. You'd better be ready for any challenges that come your way."

Brakthul took a swig, eyeing his older brother, who had lost an eye. It felt like a weight on his chest.

He knew Gronthar's personality all too well—whatever had happened to him was big enough not only to change him but also to make him hand over the chieftain's position.

"Don't overthink it. I just want to focus everything on getting stronger."

"Brakthul, you'd better put in the effort too."

After he finished having sex with Lilith, Lysinthia jumped in as well. She was just as enthusiastic, using her body to please her master and letting Orion release all his pent-up desire with her.

When Orion was finally spent, he fell sound asleep, finding the luxurious rest he hadn't experienced in a long time.

But Orion couldn't stay buried in pleasure forever; he still had big ambitions and dreams.

When Orion stepped out of the inner keep, young giant Rolan was doing drills in the small courtyard, grunting as he practiced.

"Lord! You're awake!"

Because they'd returned to Blackstone City, the rotation for guard duty was down to two—only Dace and Otho stood posted at the moment.

Orion nodded to them, then took out a vial of Pet Pills. He personally fed both Frost Wolves, patting their heads before walking over to his disciple, Rolan.

"Mentor!"

Orion nodded and assumed the same stance Rolan was practicing, standing side by side with him.

"Rolan, I have a task for you. Thundar is about to select some top-notch young fighters from our many clans and put them into daily training for the cavalry regiment. You should join in, aim to get the best results you can."

"Mentor, can I really do that? I'm still so young." Rolan sounded excited but unsure.

"Sure you can. The regiment's split into different units, so you'd be placed in the youth division. You'll be fine."

Hearing Orion's firm answer, Rolan's eyes sparkled as they darted back and forth with excitement.

Once Orion was done with Rolan's practice, he led his guards up onto the city walls. Making a habit of patrolling Blackstone City whenever he had a free moment had become second nature to him.

Their cross-realm invasion had lasted four whole months. During that time, the leftover cannon fodder troops in Blackstone City had kept raising the outer walls.

An obsidian golem named Gort was overseeing the work from atop the walls. Orion remembered Gort well—he was one of the few members of the obsidian golems who'd joined the council.

With the succubus elder Desdemona now dead, there was a vacant seat among the eight council elders. Gort was in the running—he had endorsements from Onyx, Thundar, and Earthshaker. Part of why Orion had come out to inspect the city was to see Gort in person, a sort of "interview," if you will.

"So, fill me in."

Hands behind his back, Orion walked along the wall, Gort trailing behind him.

"Lord, according to the building schedule laid out by our Elder of Stewardship, we can definitely finish construction before winter sets in."

Orion said nothing, continuing forward.

Gort grew more nervous. Even though he'd seen Orion many times, he always felt like he had to tread lightly around him. After all, the figure in front of him was not only the lord of the Stoneheart Horde but also a powerful Legendary-level being.

Steadying himself, Gort launched into a rundown of how the black marble was quarried and stacked for the walls:

"My Lord, the black marble deposits near Blackstone City will be exhausted soon. Still, for now, we have enough for the wall. If we want more black marble in the future, we'll have to prospect farther out."

Hearing this, Orion was somewhat taken aback. When he'd first built the city, Onyx had shown him that marble pit personally, claiming it would be more than enough for the city's needs. Obviously, Onyx hadn't expected Blackstone City to expand so much beyond its original design.

"Got it. I'll suggest to the Elder of Stewardship that you be in charge of scouting out another deposit," Orion said.

Gort felt a rush of excitement. A job like that was practically a guaranteed way to earn recognition.

"My Lord, Gort will definitely find more and better quarries for the Horde."

Orion gave a faint grunt of acknowledgment, his voice drifting from ahead:

"What about the cannon fodder troops are they behaving?"

During Orion's absence in Godforsaken Land, the cannon fodder troops remained the main workforce for building the fortifications. Though the little spiders had helped, most of them weren't that smart, so the cannon fodder troops were crucial.

"They're cooperative. The Thunderstorm Bearmen might have a hot temper, but as long as they're fed enough, they fall in line."

Orion said nothing. The Thunderstorm Bearmen had been in Blackstone City for a while already, originally subjugated by Dirtclaw's heavy hand. He'd wanted to grind down their spirit.

Besides the labor group among the cannon fodder troops, the outskirts of the outer city housed the women and children of the Thunderstorm Bearmen tribe(clan)—spoils from Orion's southern campaigns.

Orion had specifically kept them around in hopes of subduing the entire tribe. Having their families around was one big reason these Bearmen were so docile.

"What about the satyrs and geckos?"

This question from Orion left Gort a bit unsure how to answer.

"Speak your mind," Orion said. He didn't stop walking but slowed his pace.

"Lord, among the cannon fodder troops, the Thunderstorm Bearmen are definitely the dominant force now. I don't mean they're lawless—they actually adhere to every assignment we give them, whether it's building the wall or fighting on the front lines. So, naturally, among the higher-ranked slave soldiers, almost all are Thunderstorm Bearmen."

Orion halted, turned, and looked Gort in the eyes.

"All right, get back to overseeing the work," he said flatly, offering no comment on Gort's performance.

By this time, Orion had stepped over to the eastern ridge, near the underground fissure that served as the cave spiders' domain. Gort excused himself, leaving Orion deep in thought.

"Maybe it's time to give the Thunderstorm Bearmen a little more freedom."

After pondering for a moment, Orion turned and entered the fissure.

"Master, Lorelia's missed you! I haven't seen you in so long!"

Lorelia leaned her head forward, trying to rest it on Orion's shoulder.

Orion reached out and ruffled her hair, gently keeping her from using all eight of her spider legs to hug his entire body at once.

"Enough messing around—take me to see them."

By "them," he meant Desdemona and the others who had been converted—the new batch of Skeletal Knights.

"Master, do you not like Lorelia anymore?"

With her power growing along with the population of her brood, Lorelia was no longer the naive "little spider girl" she once was. She'd become a savvy Spider Queen who knew how to navigate social dynamics.

Orion lightly patted Lorelia's shoulder, then continued down the passage toward the Bottomless Abyss. There, two hundred or so Skeletal Knights were sitting cross-legged, absorbing the deathly energy that drifted upward from the Underworld.

"Lord, you've arrived!"

"It's the honorable Orion!"

"..."

At Orion's presence, the group stirred. Desdemona, leading the Stoneheart Horde members, followed quickly to greet him.

Chapter 316: Vital question

"Get yourselves ready—you'll be heading down with the little spiders!"

After a quick greeting, Orion skipped small talk and cut straight to business. This time, he wasn't just sending over two hundred-plus Skeletal Knights to the Underworld; he'd also decided to dispatch ten thousand goblin skeleton warriors.

With such a sizable force, his sister Clymene would have a strong starting point to build her undead armies, and adding ten thousand goblin skeleton warriors to the mix would greatly accelerate the expansion of Underworld territory.

"Send a few Death Spiders along to guide them, and deliver my letter too," Orion said, directing his words at Lorelia.

Lorelia nodded. A strange pheromone emanated from her body, and in no time, ten Death Spiders skittered in response. Once they arrived, Orion turned to address the succubus elder, Desdemona.

"Desdemona, until you actually reach the Underworld, you're in charge of the group. Once you're down there, don't go wandering—just wait near the arrow tower. Someone will come take you the rest of the way. There are some hidden Alpha-level creatures lurking in the Underworld, and at your current power, stepping away from that tower's safety could be dangerous."

Elder Desdemona dropped to one knee, accepting Orion's orders. Right behind her, the two hundred-some newly made Skeletal Knights knelt as well.

Orion sighed softly. Among these skeletal warriors were giants, succubi, gnolls, buffalofolk, and obsidian golems—all once living members of his Horde.

"Rise, everyone. Take care."

He offered them a few words of comfort, then turned and left the underground fissure.

The next day in Horde Hall's council chamber, every elder fixed their eyes on Gort the obsidian golem, who had just been formally appointed to one of the eight council seats. Even Rockwell emerged from his duty guarding the underground fissure to attend the meeting.

"Looks like the obsidian golems have a promising future," Rockwell thought as he sat in the Warden's seat, mulling over the path that lay ahead. "Maybe I should carry on the Prophet's legacy. I should aim higher, look farther."

At that moment, Rockwell made up his mind to give up his role as chieftain. He planned to retreat to the depths of the underground fissure and devote himself to training.

Seated upon the throne, Orion looked down at the gathered elders, noting the various expressions playing across their faces—envy, elation, disappointment, the gamut of emotions.

Half a day later, the council meeting wound down. Only the Alpha-level beings stayed behind in the hall.

"Lilith," Orion said finally, "tell everyone what we gained from Godforsaken Land."

At these words, Onyx, Rendall, and the others perked up.

Lilith pulled a small notebook from her pocket and beamed.

"Honored elders, here's an overview of our haul from Godforsaken Land. First up: one million two hundred thousand sets of basic armor in good enough shape—and countless more that are busted."

The moment Lilith announced the first figure, a chorus of wonder filled the room.

"Wow, that's awesome!"

The Stoneheart Horde was short on gear and on skilled smiths who knew how to forge it. To bolster the Bureau of Weapons, they'd already gathered every single person in the Horde, from the cannon fodder troops to all other tribes, who knew the slightest bit about metalwork.

Kraken had previously gifted Orion with ten thousand sets of finely crafted standard armor, and during the long process of trying to replicate that gear, the Bureau of Weapons' forging skills had steadily improved. But a general shortage of raw materials meant they hadn't really been able to push their limits.

The armor they'd seized in Godforsaken Land—mainly off goblins and corrupted humans—was crude and undersized.

Orion certainly wasn't going to issue it as-is; he planned to melt it all down and reforge it. That way, they could boost both the Horde's overall amount of gear and their forging know-how.

"After we melt these down, based on the average build of an adult giant, we can probably cast about two hundred thousand complete suits of armor," Lilith added.

Onyx, Rendall, and Thundar exchanged excited looks. Equipping two hundred thousand suits of armor meant the Hunting Party, cavalry regiment, and even parts of the cannon fodder troops were about to get a huge boost.

"Lord, might it be a little shortsighted to turn all that material into armor?"

The speaker was Onyx, the commander of the cannon fodder troops. Drawing on real-world experience, he had some suggestions of his own.

Lilith fell silent, waiting for Orion's reaction. Orion merely gave Onyx a look, prompting him to keep talking.

"My lord," Onyx continued, "I propose that we use part of the supply for forging fine-quality armor and higher-grade weapons, so we can fully outfit the Horde's cavalry regiment and Hunting Party—from shields to helmets, the works. That'll give our core armies a tangible spike in combat strength. Then, with the leftover metal, we can craft a range of weapons to arm the cannon fodder troops."

He lifted his gaze to meet Orion's, saw no visible expression or disagreement, and pressed on.

"Take the Thunderstorm Bearmen, for example. Most are still fighting with bare hands. Last year, they were fending off dark creatures using wooden clubs and bone clubs. Don't you think now might be a perfect time to boost their arsenal? That would help the Horde's combat power as a whole. After all, we have a hundred thousand cannon fodder troops, but only around sixty thousand in our combined Hunting Party and cavalry regiment. Think about that."

Orion let out an audible sigh that caught the attention of everyone in the hall.

The truth was, he'd known about this dilemma for a while. Right now, Stoneheart Horde's various armies were riddled with structural issues—completely lopsided in terms of manpower.

So far, it hadn't caused problems only because Orion himself, a mighty lord, along with tens of thousands of cave spiders, had tightly controlled the situation.

Looking purely at numbers, the Horde's four main forces—in order of size—were the cannon fodder troops, the Hunting Party, the Sentinel Corps, and the Cavalry Regiment.

Cannon fodder alone topped a hundred thousand heads, most of them Thunderstorm Bearmen, then gnolls, followed by satyrs and geckos, plus a handful of smaller groups. And every single slave soldier in the cannon fodder troops was at least "elite" class or better.

Meanwhile, the Hunting Party, Sentinel Corps, and cavalry combined barely made up seventy thousand warriors. If you excluded all the Alpha-level elites and the cave spider armies, a cannon fodder uprising would be disastrous.

In Blackstone City, Orion was certain it wouldn't happen—but out on a campaign, if there were no real "big shots" around, or if Orion's Alpha-level fighters had been wiped out, would the cannon fodder troops turn traitor?

It was a vital question that needed careful thought.

Chapter 317: Loyalty is key

At that thought, Orion swept his gaze around the room and spoke calmly:

"The prophet makes a good point. After we melt down this batch of materials, eighty percent of it goes toward arming the Horde's Hunting Party, cavalry regiment, and the management tier of the cannon fodder troops. The remaining twenty percent, combined with some specialized wood and bone, will be used to make weapons for everybody else in the cannon fodder ranks."

Having settled the matter of materials, he continued:

"Over the past couple of days, I've asked around, and everyone's got a pretty positive view of the Thunderstorm Bearmen. So, I've decided to draw thirty thousand people out of the cannon fodder troops and officially make them our Horde's ninth major race."

The atmosphere in the chamber grew noticeably uncertain for a moment, as most of those present frowned and tried to puzzle out the implications.

Allowing the Thunderstorm Bearmen to join the Horde meant shifting the balance of power. It might not happen immediately, but it surely would in the future.

In the Stoneheart Horde, the largest group was unquestionably the giants—Orion's own people—whose ancestral homeland included both Moonshadow Valley and Blackstone City. Next in line were the succubi, buffalofolk, obsidian golems, and cave spiders.

Over the years, the succubi, buffalofolk, and giants had intermarried heavily. These four races basically formed the Horde's main pillars. Only then came gnolls, lizardmen, and trolls, later additions whose power—and standing—lagged behind.

Certain smaller communities, like the Garland Tribe and serpentfolk, were too few in number to count as a full-fledged "major race."

"Out of those thirty thousand, twenty thousand spots go to the Thunderstorm Bearmen. I only want the best of the best. The remaining ten thousand will be divided: eighty percent for the gnolls, and the last twenty percent for geckos and satyrs."

Orion had put a lot of thought into these ratios.

"The thirty thousand we pull from the cannon fodder troops need to be absorbed by the Hunting Party, cavalry regiment, and Sentinel Corps, scattering them so they can fully integrate into the Stoneheart Horde."

In truth, ever since the cave spider armies had come into being, the role of cannon fodder troops overlapped a lot with the spiders. But Orion had continued using the cannon fodder forces as a population inflow method—ensuring a steady stream of potential new blood for the Horde.

Whenever they took captives, those individuals were put through the furnace of the cannon fodder troops, and whoever made it through was the real deal. Even if they weren't super smart, they definitely had enough sense to recognize a shot at a better life—so they'd cling to it in a heartbeat.

Orion's gaze landed on Thundar. Though his tone stayed casual, the pressure in his voice was clear.

"Thundar, with this cavalry expansion, I want at least ten thousand active cavalry ready for real combat. If you end up short on mounts, go talk to Lorelia—she can get you some sturdy juvenile spiders."

Thundar stood, pressing his right hand against his chest.

"My lord, I'll get it done. I've admired those Bearmen's fighting prowess for a while now."

Orion nodded, then turned to Delilah and Onyx.

"From now on, every three years, we pick some elite troops out of the cannon fodder ranks and incorporate them into the Horde. That's how we'll gradually strengthen ourselves. But remember: loyalty is key."

Delilah and Onyx were quick on the uptake—they understood exactly what Orion was implying.

After all, the real question was, "Who can we be sure is loyal?" And the best guarantee was to have them bound by a formal contract, akin to magical pacts.

As people like to say, "only magic can beat magic, and only slaves can truly control slaves."

Orion's plan was to give more fodder troops that glimmer of hope, so they'd fight harder for a shot at freedom and a better life.

Once that topic was done, Orion fell silent. Lilith picked up where he left off:

"In this campaign, we secured fifteen hundred rare magical plants. Those that were mature have gone into Horde stock; those still growing have been transplanted into our magical plant nursery.

We also picked up thirteen types of rare ores—a total of seven hundred fifty-six pieces—and stored them in the warehouse."

Orion looked at Lilith but did not speak. He knew that technically they'd found fourteen distinct types—plus a dozen Rebirth Stones he'd set aside for himself, unlisted in the official tally.

"We also obtained sixteen casks of mutated poison blood from Alpha-level fighters, which we've added to the stock. ..."

Lilith named off the items one by one, and everyone else hung on her words. Much of it was directly useful to them.

Finally, Lilith tucked away her little booklet and glanced around the room.

"Our last big gain is the weapon transcendence technique."

She pulled out a scroll laden with diagrams and text, laying it flat on the table in the center.

"This is a method of forging weapons that any Alpha-level being can use. It's designed to produce a weapon that fuses with the unique traits of its owner, allowing a fighter and their weapon to meld and boost their battle power."

Onyx, Thundar, Earthshaker, Slagor, and the rest immediately picked up on what she meant.

In Godforsaken Land, they'd encountered plenty of Alpha fighters who could morph themselves into a weapon-like form to ramp up their destructive might.

Some Legendary-level opponents had done the same—like that night elf lord in the eastern sector, who could transform into an arrow for additional firepower.

"But," Lilith continued, "it demands some extremely unusual ores—like magic crystals or cursed blood..."

"As for cursed blood, the Horde's actually collected a fair amount during our invasion. But for the rest of the materials, we'll have to keep an eye open. You elders should be on the lookout."

Lilith's words were pointed. If these transformable weapons were to be crafted, they'd ultimately go to those gathered here in the council. So the job of hunting down those exotic ingredients fell on them, too.

When she was finished, Lilith returned to her seat.

"Delilah," Orion spoke up, "once the meeting's over, organize a list of these rare materials and make sure everyone here gets a copy."

Delilah nodded. As Elder of Stewardship, she was the go-to person for that kind of task.

"All right, let's hear about the southern front," Orion said, shifting the discussion to the Myriad Races Invasion down south, now that they'd covered all things Godforsaken Land.

Delilah mulled over her words for a moment before replying:

"Because Half-Moon Lake hosts a whole bunch of different races, we brought quite a few of them under our banner as scouts. Some have already infiltrated various parts of Thunderwood Forest—though it's been tough, we've gotten a foothold."

There was a hint of pride in her tone—at least, until she got to the next part, where her mood dropped.

"However, the region near Lokiviria is a problem. Besides scattered beasts, it's basically crawling with these two-horned cockroach people—and our scouts can't blend in at all."

Chapter 318: It's me

Orion kept silent, listening intently. Rendall and the others also listened with rapt attention.

News from the south mattered a great deal to everyone gathered here. That was because, as Orion had revealed, next year they intended to push south and launch the Myriad Races Invasion—targeting territory occupied by insectfolk.

"Our scouts have sent word that the forces from Thunderwood Forest attempting a southern invasion have been completely routed. We don't know the exact scale of their losses—just that they were huge.

In other words, Gareth lost. Rumor has it Gareth was badly injured. No idea if that's true."

That was undoubtedly bad news: if Gareth had truly been defeated, it meant the insectfolk were more formidable than anyone expected. The council hall fell silent; nobody dared speak. Even Orion narrowed his eyes, deep in thought.

"So, maybe Lokiviria's a mid-tier Legendary-level fighter?" Orion mused. That was the most plausible explanation for how he'd so easily manage to seriously injure Gareth.

The fact that the Thunderwood forces were not just beaten but wiped out showed there was a big gulf between their strength and the insectfolk's—otherwise, the conflict would've ended in mutual destruction.

"Oh, right, Lord—about a month ago, Gareth sent a messenger. But since you weren't here, the messenger said nothing and promptly left."

Orion just nodded, making no comment. If he wanted the real story, he'd need to head south and talk with Gareth directly.

Before long, the meeting wrapped up. This time, Orion didn't leave with the others but leaned back against his throne, gazing through the council hall doors at the city beyond, mind sinking into the Survivor's Platform.

"Elven girl, time to trade."

First, he messaged Aerin. They hadn't traded in quite a while, so Aerin was probably sitting on a stockpile of goods.

"Hulk, can't you keep your word and come online for trades on schedule?"

Aerin grumbled a bit and then quickly sent Orion a trade request. Orion didn't bother replying, merely offered up some crystal cores.

But Aerin didn't confirm the deal right away, and Orion chuckled to himself—he guessed she was angling for a higher price.

"Quit stalling. We've known each other for ages. Don't tell me you're turning into an unscrupulous merchant who rips off old friends? Besides, where would you be if not for me? Elven girl, you oughta show some gratitude. Even a tiny favor deserves a big return—let alone—"

Before Orion could continue typing and guilt-trip her further, Aerin confirmed the trade.

"Gratitude, my eye—YOU'RE the unscrupulous merchant. Scram!"

That was Aerin's fuming reply, full of anger and annoyance.

Orion just smirked. He was sure he'd paid a fair price; Aerin still turned a decent profit, just not the overnight fortune she might have fancied.

Forest of Nature, in a Treehouse.

Aerin clenched her small fist and crushed a freshly made Pet Pill.

"Damn it, Hulk! I'm a dignified elf, how can you treat me this way? I'm gonna find new buyers—I'm done with you after this. Ugh... my poor Pet Pills. It's all Hulk's fault!"

Truth be told, Aerin's natural environment and awakened race were both pretty good.

Wood elves stayed far from the world's endless strife, avoiding bloodshed and violence; most of them had calm, gentle temperaments.

Even though Aerin was a survivor from Earth who understood plenty of trickery and had gotten scammed on the Survivor's Platform in the past, she still kept a relatively innocent mindset.

Black Forest, Horde Hall.

Orion fired off another message to Scarecrow, asking to stockpile more grain. With cross-realm invasions on his horizon, Orion was hoarding key resources—food, gear, weapons, and manpower.

Luckily, Scarecrow remained fairly loyal, always willing to "hold" some grain for Orion while he was away.

After that, Orion opened the Champions Alliance ally channel:

Hulk: "Hey bros, you two make it back safely?"

No answer from Leonidas or Arthas.

Kraken: "Hulk, there's no guarantee they returned at the same time we did. Give 'em some time."

Hulk: "Got it. Kraken, how'd things go on your end?"

Kraken: "Lost about half my people. Considering how big our haul was, though, it's totally worth it."

Orion nodded to himself. He'd taken a lot of losses, too—he'd left with four hundred thousand little spiders and came back with only one hundred twenty thousand. But given the massive gains, those casualties felt acceptable.

He waited around in the council hall for most of the day, but still no response from Leonidas or Arthas.

Feeling a twinge of disappointment, Orion exited the Survivor's Platform entirely and drifted back to the inner keep.

Blackstone City, in the outer slums.

"Big Bro, according to the deputy commander's directions, it should be here!"

"Looks about right."

The voices belonged to two hulking Thunderstorm Bearmen, Brontes and Steropes, who were cousins by blood.

"Steropes, go ahead and knock. Our sister-in-law and nephew should be in there!"

Steropes prodded Brontes, but Brontes froze, breath quickening, looking nervous.

He hadn't seen his wife or child since he was captured—he'd once believed he'd never see them again. Deep down, he was terrified that if he knocked on the door, the ones who came out wouldn't be them.

Steropes seemed to understand. Placing a reassuring hand on his cousin's shoulder, he said, "It's all over now. We're free. We live in a city with a real lord, and it's safe here. Your wife and kid are right inside. So knock already!"

Taking a steadying breath, Steropes worked up the nerve. He and Brontes had recently been promoted. The first thing they did after that was track down Deputy Commander Dirtclaw to find out where their wives and children had ended up.

Steropes raised his fist and started pounding on the rickety door—bam, bam, bam. The knocking got louder and louder, probably just like Steropes's own racing heartbeat.

"Who's there?"

"This is the outer slum area—someone's already livin' here. If you want to stake out land, go someplace else."

It was a woman's voice, sounding husky and not entirely feminine. But to Steropes, it might as well have been heavenly music. While stuck as a cannon fodder soldier, he'd dreamed of the day he'd hear that voice again.

"Open... up, it's me!"

Steropes's voice trembled; he struggled to get out even those simple words. Yet he seemed dead certain about the "it's me."

Inside, there was a loud clang as something crashed to the ground.

"Mom... you dropped it..."

A small bear cub peered up from where he lay on the bed, wide-eyed. His tone was innocent and babyish.

No one answered him. A brief silence followed. At last, the door gave a creak, and the muzzle of a shaggy head emerged from the crack, eyeing Steropes with a look that was equal parts fearful and anxious.

"By the spirits... sweetheart, it is you!"

The female bearman's voice first registered as pure joy, then abruptly dissolved into sobs.

She wept louder and louder, tears as big as pearls rolling down her cheeks. It was obvious she'd endured a lot. The sound of her grief—burly and resonant—seemed to cut right to the heart.

"It's all right now, everything's fine."

Steropes pulled his wife into his arms, hugging her, gently patting her back and speaking soothing words. "Where's our son, Vulkan?"

Hearing that name, the weeping bearman woman woke from her sorrow. She dashed back inside, grabbed a small bear cub by the back of his clothing, and lifted him up.

"Here he is!"

Steropes saw his son—quite a bit bigger than the last time he'd laid eyes on him—and a beaming smile finally broke across his face.

Scenes like this were happening all over the outer slums that day. Sometimes, nothing beats a good long cry in a loved one's arms to make all the yearning and worry fade away.

As the lord and absolute ruler of Blackstone City, Orion could sense every bit of it, if he chose to.

"My own power, and that of the Horde, is all so our families don't have to suffer like this," he murmured.

"And our Stoneheart Horde will never see that day—unless I'm dead!"

Everyone in Blackstone City was chattering about Orion's plan to select thirty thousand slaves out of the cannon fodder troops. Especially in the outer city, the growing presence of Thunderstorm Bearmen was impossible to miss.

At that moment, Orion was standing just outside the entrance to an abyss in the rear mountains, there at Rendall's request to kick off the giants' rite of passage.

Plus, he'd left a spider pet—Shadow Spinner—in the first level of the abyss specifically to measure the challengers' strength. That spider wasn't going to kill anyone; more like it served as a guard and a filter system to sort out which giants truly had potential.

Orion watched the entrance to the deep pit for a while. Then, once all the giants who intended to test themselves had gone in, he turned away and left Moonshadow Valley altogether.

Horde Hall, inner keep.

Around this time, the Horde was welcoming a batch of newborn broadskull ravens. Lilith was swamped taming them, running back and forth so much that she barely had a moment to rest. Lysinthia had

become her helper, tagging along to the magical plant nursery and the raven nests in the rear mountains, busy as could be.

In all of Blackstone City, it seemed Orion was the only one with any free time left. After soaking in the hot spring, he decided to open all of the survivor's chests he'd accumulated in Godforsaken Land.

Thanks to killing so many enemies—two Legendary-level targets and five Alpha-level, plus countless others—he'd ended up with almost five hundred chests in total, more than he'd ever scored before.

He started with the five hundred or so normal survivor's chests. Ninety-nine percent of the items inside were weapons or equipment of elite and standard tiers.

Orion simply added them to his personal stash, planning to distribute them as rewards during important celebrations or gatherings. Beyond that, the biggest prize from these five hundred chests was three arrow towers.

"Out of five hundred boxes, only three arrow towers. That's some pretty low odds," Orion remarked, quietly pleased, and carefully tucked them away.

Next came the five boxes dropped by Alpha-level fighters. Opening them, he discovered a warhammer, two battleaxes, a two-handed sword, and a bow, all of which turned out to be Hero-level weapons.

Orion felt a bit disappointed—Hero-level gear wasn't particularly meaningful to him anymore. Still, they'd be solid gifts for his Alpha subordinates.

For Onyx, Rendall, Thundar, Earthshaker, Slagor, and the others, Hero-level weapons were a real luxury that would definitely boost their fighting power.

Finally, Orion's attention fell on the last two boxes, dropped by Legendary-level opponents. Wasting no time, he pried them open.

The first chest yielded a special building. What's more, it was a military-base-type structure that allowed class specialization, precisely the kind of thing Stoneheart Horde badly needed.

[Shield Warrior Training Camp]

Type: Special Building

Quality: Alpha

Description: Activate this structure to convert eligible territory residents into shield warriors. Shield warriors focus on defense rather than raw offense, and when facing danger, they'll stand at the front without fear.

A slight smile tugged at Orion's lips as he set the building aside with great care. Compared to the previously constructed Military Fortress, the shield warrior camp had a narrower function. The Military Fortress was more of a rest, recovery, and general training site for all troop types, whereas this new building specialized in creating shield warriors.

Opening the second Legendary-level chest, Orion found himself holding a gold belt etched with intricate patterns—an Alpha-level piece of gear called "Curse of Sorrow." It was incredibly rare equipment that resisted most curses.

Orion squinted thoughtfully. Moments later, he stripped off his shirt and strapped the gold belt around his waist. At the same time, his gaze slid to his chest, where the Curse of a Hundred Blossoms mark lay.

The instant he buckled the belt, the Curse of a Hundred Blossoms flared with a faint white glow, as if struggling to surface. But a surge of dark light flickered across the belt, smothering that glow. Gradually, the curse's mark faded away until it completely vanished.

Orion ran a hand over his chest; the Curse of a Hundred Blossoms was nowhere to be found. Thinking it over, he slipped off the belt. Right away, the curse mark reappeared on his skin.

"So, the Curse of a Hundred Blossoms hasn't been removed—it's just being suppressed."

"The belt's suppression might help, but there's no way to tell for sure how effective it really is."

Muttering to himself, Orion buckled the belt again. Just like that, the mark vanished once more.

Chapter 319: Power was power

Orion had long since gotten a way to handle the Curse of a Hundred Blossoms from Arthas. The reason he had never used faith energy and transcendent power to wipe the curse clean was because he understood it might not necessarily be a bad thing for him.

A few years ago, when he killed Lord Ariel's will projection, the Curse of a Hundred Blossoms had actually served as a kind of protection.

His instincts told him now wasn't the right moment to remove the curse. Besides, Violet hadn't returned yet, so Orion had left the curse alone.

The belt—Curse of Sorrow—he'd just drawn from the survivor's chest was a pleasant surprise, since it could keep the Curse of a Hundred Blossoms in check. At least for a good while, Orion no longer needed to fret about it.

"Well, that's actually for the best," he thought. "I can focus on growing my strength."

Leisurely days passed quickly, and two weeks went by almost in a flash. That day, while Orion was browsing the Survivor's Platform for deals, he noticed new messages from Leonidas and Arthas in the public channel.

Leonidas: "Squiddy, Hulk, we're back!"

Kraken: "Hey, big guy—did everything go smoothly?"

Leonidas: "Very smooth. We're still divvying up the world essence, so you'll have to wait a bit before getting your share."

Kraken: "All good. We'll follow your lead."

Reading back and forth, Orion saw that Kraken was much more deferential compared to Leonidas, addressing him with great courtesy. Orion knew, however, no lord ever rose through the ranks without facing countless crises. It was highly unlikely Kraken was really so mild all the way through.

Still, Orion guessed that Kraken genuinely respected the senior members of the Champions Alliance—power was power.

Even Orion himself showed a polite face to Deputy Commanders Edward and Alexander, whom he didn't know well.

Hulk: "Leonidas, thank you for taking me along on that invasion. I cleaned up quite a lot of loot for my Horde. If there's ever another chance, I'd love to join in again—and hopefully be more of a help to you next time!"

Orion kept his tone just as courteous as Kraken did. He wasn't above showing humility; after all, if an arch lord invited him to journey together, why not?

Leonidas: "Hahaha... Hulk, don't you go acting all meek like Squiddy. We're allies, so let's just keep it real."

Orion smirked at that. Leonidas sure knew how to flatter—no wonder he got along with Arthas, whose air of mystery tended to intimidate others.

Hulk: "Haha... guess I'll be counting on you to watch my back, then!"

In the public channel, Leonidas briefly filled them in on what went down after Orion and Kraken left. Hearing about the Black Sun in the sky finally opening its eye only confirmed Orion's gut feelings.

Leaving the public channel, Orion reached out directly to Arthas.

"Hey, bro, I need a favor."

Arthas replied back almost instantly, in his usual compact style.

"Speak."

Orion didn't waste time either.

"Purification Tower—your territory probably has one, right?"

He sounded slightly tentative, but Arthas didn't give a verbal response, instead sending Orion a trade request. Yet Arthas didn't place anything in the trade window.

Orion immediately took the hint, offering up four tainted Lord's Stones.

"Come back for them in three months," was all Arthas wrote next. Sometimes that aloof manner made him seem downright cold, but Orion was used to it and got along just fine with him.

After a little thought, Orion sent Arthas another message.

"By the way, are you interested in Rebirth Stones?"

He initiated another trade, putting up three Rebirth Stones. Arthas didn't refuse; the undead race coveted any object brimming with vitality or strange powers.

"That'll be payment for Arthas purifying the Lord's Stones," Orion decided with a smile, reading Arthas's response. That was simply how Arthas did things.

"Hey, bro, what exactly is a Purification Tower? How do you get it?" Orion asked, curious.

"It's a special building that, just like other ones, can drop from survivor's chests. In some highly developed magical territories, you can also craft it. But keep in mind, whether you get it from a chest or build it yourself, you'll need at least one Lord's Stone."

Orion was stunned by that. Up to now, aside from the Horde Hall, he hadn't heard of another special building requiring a Lord's Stone to activate. Just as he was about to press for details, Arthas seemed to read his mind.

"If you take the time to read the Lord's Stone's description, you'll see it's not only for upgrading to Legendary-level. It also has a role in territory construction."

Every special building can be fused with a Lord's Stone—especially a territory's core. The more Lord's Stones you slot in, the stronger the building's defensive and offensive attributes become."

That left Orion speechless—and equally blown away.

Necro Realm, upon the Bone Throne.

Arthas eyed a baseball-sized Rebirth Stone for a moment. Then, to no one's surprise, he popped it into his mouth and chewed.

"From death back into life'... it's just a pipe dream," he said quietly. "If it were that easy, after all the Rebirth Stones I've devoured, I should've been reborn a long time ago."

Rebirth Stones were extremely precious to most undead skeletons, but Arthas had never been short on them. In his early days, by invading alien worlds, he'd occasionally come away with a few.

Plus, his Champions Alliance allies—Edward, Leonidas, Alexander—often gave him some whenever they happened upon any.

After consuming so many, Arthas was crystal clear about one thing: a Rebirth Stone was hope, nothing more.

"Still," he muttered, "that raw lifeforce is a tasty flavor."

Once he'd finished chewing, Arthas quietly sighed.

"Is it too soon to tell Hulk the difference between a lord and an arch lord?"

"Ah, never mind. I've already said it."

"For someone like Hulk, who's all about growing stronger, maybe it'll do some good."

Arthas had only explained to Orion that the Horde Hall and other special buildings could be fused with Lord's Stones. Once fused, the buildings' innate defensive and offensive powers would level up greatly.

In fact, that was one of the key differences between an arch lord and a regular lord.

Chapter 320: Pandaren

Of course, there are plenty of other differences between an arch lord and a regular lord. Orion never asked, and Arthas didn't bring it up himself.

At Blackstone City's Horde Hall, Orion leaned against a windowsill, watching the thunderhawk and the Four-Winged Blood Bat zip past high above in pursuit. His initial shock had already faded.

"Turns out there's a ton of stuff I still don't know!"

After saying this, Orion turned and headed toward the reception hall in the outer fortress. Within his own territory, he could sense that someone from outside had arrived. That brief aerial chase between the thunderhawk and the Four-Winged Blood Bat was obviously to welcome the newcomer.

About 2 miles (3 kilometers) outside Blackstone City, Arden—faced with two Alpha-level flying beasts—was practically groaning on the inside. The thunderhawk and the Four-Winged Blood Bat circled overhead, watching him like hawks, their vicious, piercing cries echoing nonstop.

Fully aware of the situation, Arden landed on the ground and continued toward Blackstone City on foot.

By the city gates, Slagor came out to greet him. They were old acquaintances.

"Master Arden, right this way!"

When Arden saw Slagor, he breathed a sigh of relief. They had always gotten along pretty well.

"Slagor, please don't call me 'Master' anymore. If Orion hears it, it might cause trouble."

Arden let out a rueful laugh, shook his head, and gave Slagor the hint.

Realization dawned on Slagor. Times weren't what they used to be, and certain titles meant something different now.

"Lord Orion sent me to welcome you. Please follow me."

Slagor gestured in thanks and then led Arden toward the Horde Hall.

A quarter of an hour later, in the reception hall, Arden knelt low and explained why he had come.

"Honorable Lord Orion, my lord wants you to meet her at the old spot in half a month."

The old spot, huh? For some reason, Orion felt a hint of awkward intimacy when he heard that.

"I see. You're dismissed."

Following Orion's words, Arden left the Horde Hall under Slagor's guidance and took a quick tour around Blackstone City.

"Dace, let Lilith and Delilah know I'm off to inspect Half-Moon Lake territory."

Orion sent that mental message to the guard Dace, then flashed like lightning into the sky and landed on the thunderhawk's back.

"Rayden, let's go. We're heading to Half-Moon Lake!"

Thunderhawk Rayden let out an excited screech then wheeled around and sped south toward Half-Moon Lake. Its full-speed flight was incredibly fast. The forests and rivers of the black woodlands shrank behind them, disappearing from sight in no time.

A few days later, Orion arrived at Half-Moon Lake. Since he still had a few days before his scheduled meeting with Gareth, he hopped off the thunderhawk's back and continued on foot through the forest.

Even though Half-Moon Lake was part of Orion's territory, he hadn't taken a thorough look around before. The two times he'd come here, he had left in a hurry.

The area around Half-Moon Lake, near Poison Dragon Swamp, was thickly forested. If you continued straight south until you got to Thunderwood Forest, that's when you'd hit a large swath of wetlands.

Orion strolled through the forest, examining the surroundings. It reminded him of the old days when he was at the elite level, heading out to hunt.

"Halt! You're entering our Pandaren's territory. Don't go any farther."

Bao was a young elder of the Pandaren, a tribe closely related to the Thunderstorm Bearmen. Supposedly one of the Thunderstorm Bearmen's ancestors was actually from the Pandaren.

When Orion captured Stormrage City back in the day, not all Thunderstorm Bearmen were taken prisoner. A secret forest outside Stormrage City remained home to a mixed group of Pandaren and thunderstorm bearmen.

Bao was among the few in that tribe who showed an ancestral throwback—one of the rare Pandaren there.

"Pandaren?" Orion blurted out the term the moment he caught sight of Bao, who stood upright on two legs, his fur marked in black and white patches.

"You've heard of us?" Bao looked a bit dopey, but he was wary too. He spoke without stepping closer. He knew this was the territory of a giant lord, and among giants, rank is everything. So, from start to finish, Bao stayed polite.

"What's your name?"

"I'm Bao!"

With a slight smile, Orion kept walking forward. He didn't come to a stop.

"So, Bao of the Pandaren, you do realize this is giant territory, right? Do you know what it means when you tell me to stop?"

Bao grew flustered, fumbling for words. Raising both hands, he blocked Orion's way.

"Bec—because...there's a trap up ahead!"

Once Orion finally paused, Bao confessed the truth. Every time Bao went out hunting, his chieftain Taran warned him not to provoke conflict with the giants.

Bao was a good kid—he listened carefully. He didn't bear Orion any hostility. The only reason he tried to stop him was that there really were traps ahead. After all, the Pandaren paid a hefty tribute to lay claim to this land, and they treasured it.

"Is your tribe around here?" Orion asked.

"Yes, this spot is part of the great Lord Orion's granted land!"

Bao nodded, speaking earnestly.

Orion gave a slight nod in return. After all, Thundar, Slagor, and Lysinthia had come by this place before, seizing resources and allocating living areas to different groups at the same time.

"Bao of the Pandaren, I'm not here to cause you trouble," Orion said. "I've heard you Pandaren are quite hospitable. Aren't you going to invite me over to your settlement?"

Orion's tone was calm, his words gentle, easing the tension between them.

Bao hesitated. Though Orion seemed courteous and unarmed, he was huge and looked seriously strong.

"Or is that just a rumor?" Orion teased, amused at Bao's uncertainty.

"It's no lie. We really are quite hospitable," Bao muttered.

"Then, Bao, lead the way."

Unable to ward off Orion's friendly insistence, Bao finally sighed and turned to guide him.

"Bao!" "Bao!" A few Thunderstorm Bearmen shouted behind him, trying to get his attention, but Bao didn't reply. He led Orion on a zigzag route through the nearby forest.

Those Thunderstorm Bearmen fanned out behind them, maintaining a guarded posture. Orion paid them no mind, simply following Bao.

Half a day later, they emerged near a small lake. Orion spotted a freshly built settlement. It was obvious it hadn't been there long because it was all constructed with bamboo that was still green.

Clusters of wild bamboo grew around the lake, so it made sense the Pandaren would settle here.

"This Pandaren settlement looks pretty good," Orion remarked.