

Titan King 321

Chapter 321: Am I seeing things?

As Orion was speaking, a squad of Thunderstorm Bearmen followed a sturdy Pandaren, heading straight for Orion and Bao.

Seeing that Orion was a giant made the Pandaren uneasy—everyone knew giants were typically very powerful, and they ruled this stretch of forest.

"Bao, is this guest someone you invited?"

The Pandaren who strode over spoke in a deep, resonant voice, clearly at the peak of the hero level. And the Thunderstorm Bearmen that accompanied him were mostly hero level too.

This village is more than meets the eye, Orion thought to himself. Looking at the mature and collected Pandaren, Orion gave a faint smile.

"What's your name?"

Orion, ever direct, didn't bother introducing himself first; he merely asked the Pandaren outright.

"Honorable giant warrior, I am Taran, the chieftain of this village!"

"Has my tribesman offended you in any way? If so, I apologize on his behalf."

While he spoke, Taran bent his strong body in a respectful bow.

"You've got it wrong," Orion replied. "Bao actually invited me to visit, and I'm quite curious about you Pandaren."

He gave this explanation but still didn't introduce himself by name.

"Honorable giant warrior, you're most welcome as our guest," Taran said. "I've just brewed a fresh batch of fruit wine. Would you be willing to come by and give it a try?"

Orion silently nodded. Taran felt a wave of relief—at least for now, this giant didn't seem hostile.

Taran dismissed the rest of the tribe, then led Orion and Bao to his own home. It was a bamboo building, beautifully crafted, with telltale signs of mortise and tenon work in many spots.

He ushered Orion to a seat at a wooden table, then quickly brought out a dozen or so jars of fruit wine. Not long after, Bao emerged from the back of the bamboo house, struggling under the weight of several large slabs of crispy roast meat, still dripping with sizzling oil.

"Honorable giant warrior, our tribe only recently moved here, and our supplies aren't too abundant. Please forgive us if all we can offer is some wine and roast meat."

Orion sized up Taran. It was the first time he'd encountered such polite Bearmen (Pandaren). Over in Blackstone City, the Thunderstorm Bearmen in the cannon-fodder troops were hot-tempered and blunt.

"Did you migrate here from Thunderwood Forest?" Orion asked, after taking a gulp of fruit wine. It tasted pretty good—tangy, sweet, and with a nice alcoholic bite.

Taran himself was a hero-level peak fighter, yet he couldn't gauge Orion's strength at all, so he remained exceedingly courteous. Taran realized that if he couldn't read the warrior's power, then this unknown giant almost certainly had to be Alpha-level.

He wondered privately, So the rumored Alpha-level giant living in these woods... could it be him?

Taran grew even more cautious. The last thing he wanted was to offend this giant, risking tragedy for his tribe.

"Yes, honorable warrior. We did indeed come from Thunderwood Forest."

"And why did you leave?" Orion pressed.

"Lord Ariel fell in battle, and all the races broke out in chaos. Our tribe was once part of Stormrage City, so we got caught in the crossfire. Many other races tried to slaughter us, drive us away," Taran said sorrowfully, continuing his explanation to try earning some sympathy for the Pandaren's plight.

"The truth is, we separated from the Bearmen in Stormrage City a long time ago. Three hundred years back, my grandfather's generation was driven out. Plenty of Thunderstorm Bearmen refuse to acknowledge us Pandaren, saying we've 'tainted' their bloodline..."

Taran kept going for quite a while, from the earliest days of their history all the way to the difficulties they faced on their long migration. Orion, for his part, listened carefully without interruption.

By the time Taran finished his story, Orion had polished off all the wine and roast meat on the table.

"That's quite the story," Orion said with a nod. Taran felt a chill along his spine—he sensed that the giant warrior clearly saw through his attempts to play for sympathy.

"According to the rules of the lord who governs this forest, as long as you pay your tribute, no one—even a giant—can just barge in and harass you unprovoked." Orion paused. "So you can rest easy. I don't mean you any harm. I've just never seen Pandaren in the black forest, so I was curious."

Rising to his feet, Orion delivered those words to put Taran at ease. Without them, Taran expected his entire village would be tossing and turning all night in fear.

"Bao, keep taking me around this area."

Orion's tone was firm, leaving no room for argument.

Bao looked first at Orion, then at his chieftain. Only when Taran gave a quick nod did Bao grin hesitantly and say, "Honorable warrior, right this way. Let me show you around."

Thus began Orion's three-day stay in the Pandaren village.

On the first day, everyone stayed on their best behavior, politely avoiding Orion as much as possible. That uneasy mood stuck around until the third day, when, after a hearty meal with plenty of wine, Orion announced he was leaving.

It wasn't until that very moment that Taran was absolutely certain Orion bore no ill will toward them.

"Honorable giant warrior, you're welcome to stay longer," Taran said earnestly. "We'd love to share our wine and roast meat with you."

After all, befriending an Alpha-level giant who had no hostility toward the Pandaren was a huge advantage in this territory.

"If you ever want to move to Blackstone City, I'd be glad to have you," Orion replied, seemingly out of nowhere.

Bao and the Thunderstorm Bearmen behind him looked puzzled, unable to grasp what he meant. Taran alone seemed to understand, his eyes suddenly glowing with excitement.

Orion said no more. He let out a sharp, eagle-like call, and moments later, a far-off screech thundered in reply, echoing deafeningly across the sky.

Boom! With a flash of lightning, Orion vanished, leaving the Pandaren staring in utter astonishment.

"H-he... he... t-transformed into lightning? That means he's the lord!"

Taran felt his heart pounding so hard he could barely stand upright. Every inch of him was trembling uncontrollably. He could hardly believe that the giant warrior they had cautiously entertained for the past three days turned out to be the forest's lord.

"C-Chief... am I seeing things?" Bao's jaw was quivering, impossible to speak clearly as he tried in vain to hold himself together.

Taran gave no answer. At that moment, he himself couldn't find any words to say.

Chapter 322: I'm sure

Half-Moon Lake lay along the border region of Thunderwood Forest. On the bank of a small river, Gareth stood alone, watching the slow flow of water in the creek.

"Lord Gareth, you've certainly got a taste for the finer things."

Orion emerged at a leisurely pace from the forest depths, catching Gareth's attention. She focused on him carefully; some time ago, this giant's presence had suddenly vanished from the black forest, and she'd had no idea where he went.

"You're punctual—and pretty respectful, too," Gareth remarked.

Orion just smiled without saying anything. Respect goes both ways; if you give someone respect, they tend to treat you the same.

"I lost my fight," Gareth said plainly, skipping any small talk.

"Is Lokiviria really that strong?"

The smile faded from Orion's face, replaced by a more serious look. He was eager to learn whatever he could about Lokiviria.

"Yes, he's powerful. Probably mid-Legendary in strength."

That confirmed Orion's suspicions. In short, the lords down south did tend to be stronger.

"How does Lokiviria fight?" Orion asked, hoping Gareth would share that info.

Gareth stared intently at him without speaking, and the two fell silent. The creek's gentle current made soft splashing sounds against the stones further downstream.

"His raw power is immense, and he's incredibly fast. He mostly fights with his fists, and he attacks with brutal force," Gareth finally said, seeming to have convinced herself to speak up. "He likely wields a wind-type transcendent power."

Orion narrowed his eyes. Enhanced by wind-based transcendent power, that kind of enemy was naturally going to be lightning-fast. If you couldn't keep up, you were bound to take a beating or lose outright.

"Thanks," he said quietly. Gareth just nodded, not particularly bothered by it.

"Next year, are you sure you want to head south?" she asked.

Orion nodded firmly. "I'm sure."

Relief washed over Gareth. Lokiviria had beaten her badly and mocked her relentlessly, leaving her feeling resentful. Even Lord Ariel, who had injured her multiple times in the past, had never been so nasty.

"Next year, I'll send my messenger to visit Thunderpeak Mountain," Orion said coolly, turning to leave with that final remark. He could tell Gareth wanted to team up with him for payback against Lokiviria.

Next year, Orion's going to be playing the role of the muscle—some very formidable muscle at that.

Meanwhile, in the far north—the extreme-cold domain—a massive glacier towered against the icy landscape. At that moment, runes covered the glacier's surface. Lord Jorik stood upon it, while the colossal shape of the Glacial Dragon appeared shrunken and withered.

Spatter!

Another mouthful of vital blood was coughed up, splashing across the glacier. As the dragon's blood seeped in, the runes grew fainter, one after another.

"The millennial promise is upon us. Arise from your slumber, my ancestor!" Lord Jorik cried with excitement. "Our clan's glory should light up this continent!"

He could see it clearly now—the ancestor sealed inside the ice had opened one eye, an ancient, rage-filled dragon's gaze. Anyone flying overhead would realize the entire glacier was actually the body of a dragon.

Its two massive wings had yet to unfold, yet the sheer size of its form defied description. The chain of "mountain peaks" stretching away from the glacier was really its winding tail, and through the thick layer of ice, one could glimpse its jagged spines jutting along its back. This glacier was, in truth, a dragon—a real one.

Half a month later, back at Blackstone City, Orion hopped off the thunderhawk's back and landed in the western ridge.

This area housed the Horde's magical plant gardens. Strangely, Lilith and Lysinthia were nowhere in sight.

"Greetings, my lord!"

A crowd of attractive, curvaceous women in the garden all fell prostrate at the sight of Orion, not daring to make a sound.

"Where's Lilith?" Orion asked one of them, Lady Jasmine.

Lady Jasmine was the guardian elder of Violet. Though she was a bit older, she still radiated charm. Many of the Garland Tribe members captured from Half-Moon Lake now served under Lady Jasmine.

"Lilith and Warden Lysinthia have already returned to the Horde Hall," she answered.

Orion cast a glance at Lady Jasmine and Ivy next to her. They both had unwavering loyalty to Violet—so much so that even without any binding contract, they'd sacrifice themselves for her. Orion had to admit he didn't fully understand that kind of bond.

"Take good care of the magical plant gardens and keep your tribe in line. Make sure they know the rules."

"As you wish, my lord!"

Lady Jasmine's manners were humble and deferential, a far cry from how she treated Orion before he became lord. Orion nodded and left without further delay, heading straight for the Horde Hall.

Inside the Horde Hall's inner keep, Orion couldn't help but marvel at the mysteries of creation. Unless he contacted the territory core, he couldn't sense anything within the Hall from outside its walls. But the moment he walked in, he could tell Lilith and Lysinthia were soaking in the hot springs.

A grin spread over his face. He strolled toward the hot springs, a mischievous glint in his eyes.

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Early the next morning, as soon as Orion woke, a succubus maid informed him that Delilah, Rendall, and Thundar had been waiting just outside the inner keep for quite a while. The three senior elders arriving together probably meant something big was happening in the Horde.

Orion got dressed and headed for the outer fortress.

"My lord," Thundar complained the second Orion showed up, "Arch Elder Rendall's bullying me! He snatched all those Thunderstorm Bearmen we pulled from the cannon-fodder troops and put them in the Hunting Party. Now all the bloodline warriors sent to my cavalry regiment are gnolls or geckos—this just won't do!"

Before Orion could respond, Rendall retorted in his booming voice, "Thundar, be reasonable. The cavalry regiment doesn't even have enough mounts. What do you even want the Bearmen for? And can your cave spiders even carry those Thunderstorm Bearmen around? They're big guys!"

Thundar sputtered incoherently at that.

"Lord! You decide who's right here!" Thundar pleaded, since Orion had tasked him with expanding the cavalry regiment to over ten thousand soldiers.

Orion merely smiled, choosing not to jump into the internal power struggles between elders. Then he turned to Lilith.

"And you?" he asked. Lilith's gaze was warm and alluring enough to captivate anyone.

"The Sentinel Corps could use a few Thunderstorm Bearmen, but not many. No need to fight over them," Lilith said with a shake of her head. "Actually, geckos and satyrs are better at infiltration and more suited to scouting."

She knew exactly how the Sentinel Corps should operate.

"Lord Orion," Lilith went on, "we've released three new races from the cannon-fodder troops, and it's really messing up the outer city. It's about time we subdivided that area properly."

Orion nodded—he'd nearly forgotten about that. Previously, when the cannon-fodder troops were still locked up, the outer city was pretty underdeveloped.

The captured crowd of various races—men, women, children, and elders—had mostly been crammed into shelters. Conditions were indeed atrocious.

"All right. Handle it however you see fit. I'll send Slagor to assist you; he needs to reorganize some of his clan members too. Once you have a solid plan, just let me know."

Lilith acknowledged his instructions, planting a kiss on Orion's arm with a bright smile before leaving the Horde Hall. Rendall and Thundar, however, were still bickering over who got the Thunderstorm Bearmen.

"All right, listen up," Orion cut in, causing Rendall and Thundar to fall silent and look his way.

"I've got big plans for those Thunderstorm Bearmen. Let's keep them in the Hunting Party for now. Thundar, as for the cavalry regiment's wolves, cave spiders, and crows, you should pick your warriors based on body size and fighting style. Don't just cram everyone into the cavalry, and don't focus solely on combat power, either!

"Giants, succubi, buffalofolk, gnolls, geckos, lizardmen—you have to consider each race's body type and match them to whichever mounts they can handle best."

A shadow of disappointment and embarrassment crossed Thundar's face. Orion thought for a moment, then continued, "Here's what I'll do—I'm giving you a direct order: you can choose cavalry recruits first from those particular races."

At that, Thundar visibly brightened, looking more and more excited. Orion simply shook his head and walked out of the Horde Hall.

"Do you know where the prophet is?" he asked a guard named Dace.

Dace nodded, pointing to the eastern ridge.

"For the past couple of weeks, prophet has been meditating over there," he said.

Orion ascended the city wall, heading toward the eastern ridge. After a long walk, he finally spotted Onyx perched on a huge boulder.

"My lord!"

Onyx stood up, moving aside so Orion could take his spot. Climbing onto the rock, Orion took in the sweeping view of Moonshadow Valley and Blackstone City.

"Prophet, the scenery around Blackstone City isn't half bad, is it?"

Onyx nodded earnestly.

"Prophet, do you want to break into an even higher realm?"

Orion could guess Onyx's mindset. Their recent venture to the Godforsaken Land was still fresh, after all. From all the powerful creatures Onyx had seen, he now had a renewed drive to grow stronger.

"Before meeting my lord Orion," Onyx said, "my biggest dream was just reaching Alpha-level and leading my tribe out of the black forest. But now, under Lord Orion's guidance, that dream feels way too small—and way too easy!"

Orion burst out laughing. It was a pretty flattering thing to say, and Orion enjoyed it.

"Prophet, I promise you this: if you ascend to the Alpha-level peak, I can grant you a shot—one shot—at achieving the Legendary level."

Orion wanted Legendary-level followers of his own. Arthas had raised someone like Rumbold to Legendary—there was no reason Orion couldn't do the same.

Thump. Thump. Thump.

Onyx could practically hear his own heartbeat echo in his ears.

Orion had personally offered him an opportunity at Legendary level. He felt like fate had singled him out for a special gift.

After all, in the Godforsaken Land, Onyx had seen Orion slay a Legendary-level fighter with his own eyes, seizing the Lord's Stone.

"My lord, I, Prophet Onyx, will forever follow you, fight for you, and forge a brighter future for the Horde!"

Orion nodded and turned to renew their contract. Since Legendary level was on the table—even if it was just a possibility—Onyx needed to sign again. He did so willingly.

Once it was done, Orion pulled out a piece of beast hide covered in intricate markings.

"Prophet, this is a set of blueprints for a special structure: a building that provides a Shield Warrior class transition, straight from the Godforsaken Land. I want it built in Moonshadow Valley.

"I don't trust anyone else with this. You'll supervise construction yourself. I'll have Lorelia team up with you and use her little spiders as builders."

Onyx examined the hide for a few moments, looking absolutely stunned. He seemed almost unable to believe such an item existed.

"Prophet, there's a lot in this world we don't know or understand," Orion remarked, speaking from the heart. Back before he'd met Arthas or joined the Champions Alliance, he hadn't really seen it that way. But ever since joining, Orion often felt he was both weak and clueless in the grand scheme of things.

Onyx said nothing, simply following Orion's gaze as they both looked out across Blackstone City—the very place they had built with their own hands.

Time flew by. One day, Orion leaned against the window of the inner keep, immersing his consciousness in the Survivor's Platform.

With enough crystal cores and materials on hand, he was on a buying spree—snapping up anything that might benefit the Horde so long as it wasn't outrageously priced. And amidst all that trading, Orion ended up meeting a decent number of weaker survivors.

"Sir, can you tell me what you plan to do with the stuff you just bought?" asked someone named Julius Caesar, sending Orion a private message.

"I could tell you," Orion replied, "but it'll cost you a hundred C-grade crystal cores."

Incidentally, Orion had just bought an arrow tower from Caesar with a hundred C-grade crystal cores—an incredibly low price for such a thing.

Orion was thrilled with the bargain, and he finally understood why Arthas stayed on the Survivor's Platform day in and day out. There was a unique thrill and satisfaction in finding such deals that just couldn't be found anywhere else.

Chapter 323: The dragon's roar

Roar!

A low, muffled roar suddenly caught Orion's attention.

The dragon's cry was faint but lasted for a long moment. It came from the north; Orion was sure of that. And that very call made the Abyssal dragon—resting deep inside his heart—thrash with unease.

"Did you hear that?" he asked.

"Huh?"

Lilith, who had been leaning her head against Orion's back, lifted her eyes in confusion.

"That dragon's roar—I just heard it. Didn't you?"

"A dragon's roar? I didn't catch anything," Lilith replied.

Orion frowned. For her to be an Alpha-level fighter yet fail to hear it was strange indeed.

"Go tell the four senior elders I'm heading out to see what's going on."

And with that, lightning crackled around him, and he gave a sharp whistle. Moments later, Thunderhawk Rayden soared into the air, carrying Orion north at full speed.

Three days later, before Orion had even reached the northern edge of the black forest, he already sensed the presence of a Legendary-level aura. He recognized it well: it belonged to Ironhoof, Khan of the Desolate Plains Centaurs.

"Rayden, veer east," he called.

"Understood!"

Two days after that, high in the sky, Orion spotted a massive blur charging northward on the ground—like a speeding freight train. Orion flickered and landed on the ground in an instant.

Ironhoof, the centaur khan, had sensed Orion's energy too, and he came to a stop.

"What are you doing here?" Ironhoof asked first.

Orion paused, then said, "The dragon's roar."

Ironhoof opened his mouth as if to speak but stayed silent, though shock played plainly on his face.

"You heard it as well?" he finally managed.

Orion merely nodded, looking northward.

"A few days ago," Ironhoof went on, "I was in my tent having sex with my woman when I heard this long, drawn-out dragon roar. It rattled me so much I couldn't concentrate. That's why I came this way, to find out what's going on."

Orion studied Ironhoof, about to suggest they head north together, when suddenly he felt another presence—Gareth's.

"Hold on—Gareth's on her way here," Orion said.

Truthfully, he was a bit surprised. Logic said Gareth should still be in Thunderwood Forest, so how did she get here so quickly? Then again, Ironhoof was even more stunned by how Orion's perception evidently far outstripped his own.

A few more days passed before Gareth finally touched down beside Orion and Ironhoof.

"I take it you both heard that dragon's roar?" she asked.

Orion and Ironhoof nodded, seeing Gareth's expression darken.

"I carry partial dragon blood in my veins, so I can feel the terrifying power in that roar more strongly," she explained. "It might have come from an old and powerful Legendary-level fighter."

The possibility left Orion and Ironhoof both startled.

"You two can't hear it anymore, but I still do," Gareth continued. "It's coming from the far north."

Orion lowered his head in thought. Ironhoof's four hooves stamped nervously at the ground; he was obviously on edge and unsure how to handle it.

After a moment, Orion spoke in a steady voice: "I can't sense Lord Jorik anywhere. Could this be his doing?"

"What did you say? Lord Jorik ascended to arch lord?!" Ironhoof roared, unable to contain himself.

Orion shook his head without giving a definitive yes or no.

"It can't be Jorik," Gareth broke in. "From what I know of his bloodline, he's not capable of unleashing something like this."

That oppressive dragon roar had been potent enough to unnerve even Gareth, so it was unlikely Jorik could manage it.

"Shall we keep heading north to check it out?" Orion asked. He truly was curious about that roar.

Ironhoof and Gareth fell silent. In reality, both had only planned to come up to the boundary of their own territories to see if they could detect anything. Venturing into Lord Jorik's domain to probe a possible ancient Legendary-level dragon was way more risk than they cared to take.

"I'm heading back," Ironhoof decided at last, turning decisively and galloping off toward the Desolate Plains.

"That roar is way up in the extreme north, too far for us," Gareth said quietly. "Besides, Orion, we'll be deep into winter two months from now."

She shook her head, sprouted a pair of fleshy wings from under her ribs, and flew off toward the Abyssal Chasm. Orion felt a bit of regret—if those two lords backed off, he certainly wasn't about to go alone.

Calling for his thunderhawk again, Orion turned back to the black forest.

The dragon's roar had kept Orion busy for nearly half a month, and in that time Julius Caesar on the Survivor's Platform had been waiting just as long to hear from him.

While perched on Thunderhawk Rayden, Orion once again immersed his mind in the Platform—and saw a string of messages from Julius Caesar:

"Hey big guy, accept the deal! I've changed my mind!"

"Big guy? You there?"

"Big guy, I'll throw in a few more B-grade crystal cores. Just tell me what that item you bought is used for!"

"..."

"Big guy, guess what—I found another one just like it!"

At that final message, Orion immediately initiated a trade request with Julius Caesar.

Caesar accepted, placing another arrow tower in the window, and confirmed the trade. With a faint smile, Orion finalized it, then explained the item's function and limitations.

"So that's the story!" Julius Caesar said. "Big guy, I bet it's super useful. Well, no worries—right now I'm only hero level, so it doesn't really matter."

To tell the truth, Caesar's clingy, incessant plotting was a bit annoying, like dealing with stubborn glue that wouldn't brush off. But since Orion was now firmly at the Legendary level, he felt he could be patient.

After trading some additional weapons and equipment with Julius Caesar, Orion ended their conversation.

"He's a little pushy," Orion mused, "but he's clever."

From their exchanges, Orion could see Caesar specifically sold stuff he couldn't use, trading it for hero-level weaponry and elite gear Orion offered.

"When I was just starting out, if I'd had that kind of nerve and persistence, maybe I would've built up quicker too," Orion murmured, shaking his head in amusement. Then he added Julius Caesar to his friend list, hoping to do more business with him in the future.

Chapter 324: I want you inside me

Moonshadow Valley, Underworld.

"I never expected that underneath Moonshadow Valley, there'd be a whole other world."

Desdemona, a succubus elder, was still stunned. Two days ago, she'd come here with a group of cave spiders, following Orion's orders to wait near the arrow tower until someone arrived to escort them. But it had already been two days since she'd arrived, and she hadn't seen another soul.

All that greeted her was the tall bone tower looming ahead, which gave her a strange sense of familiarity—like the arrow towers on the walls of Blackstone City.

Just then, a disturbance rippled through the boulder-strewn distance. Several massive death spiders came scuttling toward them.

"Hahaha... All that way off, I sensed kinfolk nearby. Looks like our lord sent more of his people underground!"

Desdemona looked up at the incoming cave spiders. Friends traveling with cave spiders meant they were definitely on the same side, and she relaxed a bit.

"I'm Desdemona," she said, moving forward with several Skeletal Knights in tow. She greeted them politely. She could feel that one of the newcomers was an Alpha-level fighter.

"Desdemona... You're the succubus Desdemona? Surprised to see you down here, too. So you must've died in battle as well."

The voice implied the speaker recognized her, though the tone sounded foreign and unfamiliar.

"Desdemona, I'm Grendel. We crossed paths when we were younger."

"In the black forest, I slaughtered a few members of your clan(tribe)."

Desdemona's eyes widened. "You're...Grendel? Didn't you fall in battle along with the former chieftain of the giants?"

"Yes, we all died once," someone else responded—not Grendel, but Clymene, who stepped forward.

"Desdemona, welcome to our ranks. I'm Clymene Stoneheart."

"Clymene Stoneheart, you're Orion's sister?"

"That's right. And you shouldn't be so shocked at seeing us like this, right?"

Desdemona suddenly understood. She herself had been resurrected; naturally Orion's sister could be, too.

"Are you really Clymene? You look even prettier than before, and more refined. I can hardly believe you'd already died once."

"Clymene, it's me—York!"

"Ah...I'm Hornbrow!"

"..."

The next while turned into a reunion of Skeletal Knights reintroducing themselves and catching up on old times. With Clymene there to receive them, they felt like they had a place to belong. The underworld was no longer some strange domain, but a brand-new home.

Blackstone City. On the city wall.

Orion, Onyx, and Gort walked in single file, inspecting the nearly completed outer walls.

"Have Delilah bring over the women of the Garland Tribe. Let's try to get the wall enchantments finished before the dark beast tides hit.

"Prophet, Gort—during this time, build up the main roads in the outer city and put up some key structures. Use whatever leftover material we have from wall construction. With winter coming, if there aren't sturdy shelters, the elderly and kids are gonna suffer."

Onyx and Gort both agreed. All these tasks were already on their list. As long as it all went step by step, it'd be done in time.

"We've fused arrow towers into the western and eastern sections, and for now, there aren't any obvious weak points in Blackstone City."

Lately, counting the arrow towers from the Godforsaken Land and the ones Orion snagged off the Survivor's Platform, he'd gathered a total of six. Four were now integrated into the walls, while two were kept in reserve.

Whoosh!

A chilly wind blew in, sending a shiver through them.

"Let's pick up the pace. If you don't have enough hands, ask Lorelia for help."

"Got it, my lord!"

Orion descended the stairs from the wall. Halfway back to the Horde Hall, Delilah intercepted him.

"Orion, aren't you going to check up on my work?"

She called him by his name this time—a little coded hint for something more. Orion hesitated for a second, and Delilah seized the moment to pull him into a nearby stone house.

He barely had time to react before she was kissing him passionately, tugging at his clothes as she went.

"This is your place?" Orion murmured, turning the tables and pulling Delilah in by the hips, returning her kiss just as fervently.

"Sure is, dear Orion!" she answered between hot kisses, her words muffled by quick, shallow breaths.

"How many houses do you have in Blackstone City, anyway?" he teased, running his hands over her breasts and tracing his fingers over her clit. In an instant, Delilah was on fire with lust.

"Plenty...mmph..."

"Baby, I want you inside me. I need your cock!"

...

Time flew by, and another week slipped away.

Inside the Horde Hall, at the council meeting.

"Elders, with this year's dark beast tides coming soon, as usual, we need everyone working together to get through it."

Seated on the throne, Orion opened their council session with a rallying speech, preparing the Horde for the dark beasts' arrival.

"Work together and weather the storm!"

"Work together and weather the storm!"

"..."

All at once, the elders cheered in unison. No one could say exactly when, but at some point, dark beast tides stopped being synonymous with death and panic. Many of them now saw the coming tides as a golden chance for certain elders to push themselves to Alpha-level.

Every year for the last few years, someone always managed to ascend to Alpha-level in the aftermath of the dark beast tides. So for them, this wasn't just a disaster—it was an opportunity.

Sure, it was risky, but with those towering walls and the ridiculous firepower of the arrow towers, the danger didn't look so dire.

Orion gazed over the elders, feeling a surge of gratitude and pride. He could plainly see the confidence and fervor in their eyes. This was real change.

In the old days, the mention of dark beast tides would send everyone shaking in terror. Now it was practically a party.

This time, Orion didn't bother assigning battle formations. Everyone had already found their place in the Horde, and aside from Orion himself, the elders were used to organizing their work around the four senior elders and eight council elders.

Plus, with the Hunting Party, the cavalry regiment, the cannon-fodder troops, the Sentinel Corps, and the cave spider armies, Blackstone City was fortified like never before.

Orion didn't even have to say much—things ran smoothly on their own.

Chapter 325: King of the Voidcrawlers

Three days after the council ended, the sun sank below the horizon...and never came back up.

A biting wind arrived; the long night descended; and from the north, the roar of a dragon echoed for miles on end.

Orion transformed into lightning and shot up into the sky, staring off in that northern direction. Suddenly, a towering dragon—pure white, shimmering softly—raced overhead from north to south.

"Heading south, to invade. Join or die!"

Alongside the dragon's roar came a faint, emotionless voice in Orion's ears. Orion had no doubt the beast had noticed him—and was issuing an invitation for all to head south.

Orion merely nodded, an acknowledgment that he'd comply. At this point, he basically had to. The dragon was very obviously an ancient Legendary-level creature, and a mighty one at that.

Besides, heading south was already on Orion's agenda for next year, and their interests didn't conflict in the slightest.

Around the same time, Ironhoof in the Desolate Plains and Gareth in Thunderwood Forest both received that same "invitation" and, likewise, complied.

"So it really was an ancient Legendary-level white dragon in the far north," Orion mused, relieved he hadn't gone running there out of curiosity before. He'd have been rushing straight to his own funeral.

Just as Orion was dwelling on the dragon, that mysterious power suddenly plucked him away again, transporting him back to the void passage.

"Heh heh heh...fresh meat from the Titanion Realm. Time to cower before the mighty army of darkness!"

That mocking cackle came from the other side of the void passage—a humanoid monster with multiple eyes and limbs sprouting from its ribs, throwing threats at Orion.

Orion gazed at the creature for a moment but didn't move to stop it, letting it continue sending dark creatures his way.

"Giant, you're just a weak lord—why aren't you trying to stop me?"

The Legendary-level fighter on the other side of the passage—very sure of himself because he was upper Legendary—sounded intrigued by Orion's indifference. Though even if he did cross the void passage himself, Orion would probably blast him out of existence.

"You summon them, loot whatever you want," Orion said mildly. "Meanwhile, I let you do it, and grab what I want out of it."

As he spoke, the other side unleashed six Alpha-level creatures and hordes of dark beasts, but Orion didn't pay them any mind. The Stoneheart Horde could handle six Alpha-level enemies without an issue.

"Hmm, so you're pretty confident in your territory, you Titanion sheep!" the lord on the far side of the passage scoffed, though a flicker of bad premonition crossed his face. Then again, remembering how resourceful and powerful his underlings were, he calmed down.

"We're both Legendary-level, yet obviously at different grades," the monster continued, "but the void passage between us puts us on equal ground."

"You call all same-level lords 'sheep.' So what does that make you—maybe a plumper sheep?" Orion's grin hinted at scorn. He'd encountered the aggressive, slaughter-happy types from the Emerald Dream Realm before, and this guy made Orion nostalgically recall how "cute" Sophia had been compared to him.

"Tsk, so you can talk a good game, you sly big oaf of a giant," the monster sneered. "We'll see how you weep when the passage closes and your people are gone."

Orion didn't bother replying. With a swirl of supernatural power, lightning flared around his trident, enveloping the entrance to the void passage. One part of Orion's mind stood guard there, the other half dove straight into the Champions Alliance chat.

Hulk: "Hey bros, that ancient Legendary-level white dragon. Any intel on how strong it might be?"

Orion's query sat for a bit with no responses, until about fifteen minutes later...

Arthas: "You sure it's a white dragon?"

Hulk: "Certain."

Arthas: "Any idea how long it is?"

Hulk's brows furrowed. He didn't really know any exact measurements, so he just described what he'd seen.

Hulk: "Dunno the length. All I can say is that from a distance it looked as huge as a glacier."

Arthas: "If you're seriously thinking about fighting it, then you might want to consider surrendering. Based on your description, that's probably a Legendary-level peak dragon."

The chat grew heavy, and Arthas went quiet.

Leonidas: "Hahah... Boney McBoneface, quit stressing out our buddy!"

Leonidas joined in, trying to ease Orion's mind.

Hulk: "I'm not trying to fight it; just want to know what that level of power looks like."

Arthas: "Then don't even think about it. A creature like that is on par with Leonidas and me."

Leonidas: "Hulk, Boney McBoneface isn't lying. An ancient Legendary-level white dragon is probably well over ten thousand years old, and with dragons, the bigger the body, the greater their power."

Leonidas: "A being like that, with centuries of wisdom and experience, won't be fooled by trivial tricks."

Leonidas: "If you come across it as an enemy, stay far away or else straight-up serve under it."

Hulk: "Got it. Appreciate the help, guys."

With that, Orion closed out the Survivor's Platform again. The entity on the other side of the void passage was making more moves: a Voidcrawler conjured from transcendent power, slithering out like a huge centipede. It broke through Orion's transcendent lightning net, freeing more dark creatures to pour in from the portal.

Orion snorted briefly. Another surge of lightning erupted, obliterating most of those monsters in a flash. As for two of the Alpha-level dark creatures, Orion deliberately spared them so his Horde underlings could take them out.

"All right, eight Alpha-level dark creatures total—looks about right," Orion muttered.

He waved his trident, conjuring large clusters of crackling electricity around the void passage. Then he cast an Eightfold Spear Barrage that fully covered the portal's entrance. With that in place, any dark creature crossing over would be instantly wiped out.

"Hmph, so you do pack a punch," the voice observed from the other side. "So what's your name?"

Orion's show of strength prompted grudging respect from the other Legendary-level being. True power commands attention, no matter where you are.

"My name is Orion Stoneheart, King of the Giants. You?"

"I am Lucien, King of the Voidcrawlers!"

"All right then, Voidcrawler King Lucien," Orion said with a casual smile, "how about we make a deal? You grab what you want, and I grab what I want."

As he spoke, Orion eyed the King of the Voidcrawlers, already thinking of ways to handle Lucien in the not-so-distant future.

Chapter 326: Thanks so much for your generous offering

"Ha! You think I'm one of those chumps who fell for that scam already?"

Voidcrawler King Lucien burst into loud laughter, then his voice seethed with anger. The many eyes covering his body glowered at Orion with clear hostility.

"Lucien, my intentions are genuine."

"To show my sincerity, I can let you bring in even more dark creatures. Alpha-level monsters too, if you want."

Orion stared at Lucien with an intentional cold indifference in his eyes.

"Heh... You think I'm an idiot?"

"... .."

Just as Orion and Lucien were bickering, Arthas and Leonidas had slipped into a private conversation on the Survivor's Platform.

"Boney McBoneface, what's your take on Hulk's last question?"

Since returning from the Godforsaken Land, Leonidas had no battles on his territory. He was bored stiff.

"What take? Hulk only told us half the story, then bailed. Either something came up, or the situation's not critical yet. If Orion isn't sweating it, why should you?"

Leonidas and Arthas were old friends who spoke freely with each other.

"I just don't want us losing a brand-new ally. Wouldn't it kill our rep if a Champions Alliance member got whacked?"

Arthas didn't respond—he knew Orion possessed a teleportation array Arthas himself had given him. If things got truly dire, Orion would contact him. The fact Orion hadn't done so meant there was still room to maneuver.

Arthas was just a bit hesitant because Orion's world was in the midst of a divine war.

If Arthas suddenly dropped in there, it might draw a demigod's attention. He was still mulling over whether or not to warn Orion in advance.

Moonshadow Valley, Blackstone City.

Alarms blared atop the city walls. Warriors from every clan(tribe) army rushed up to the battlements, staring out at the dark creatures advancing in the distance.

"Eight Alpha-level dark creatures in total. Everyone, be ready to respond if needed."

Lorelia had sacrificed a handful of small spiders to bring back this intel. Delilah, Lilith, Earthshaker, and Slagor—the four Alpha-level defenders at the south gate—were busy analyzing this info and planning how to reinforce their troops.

Meanwhile, Onyx, Rendall, Thundar, Twilight Viper, Lysinthia, Thunderhawk, the Four-Winged Blood Bat, and the Abyssal dragon were all posted around the walls, waiting to repel any dark creature incursions.

Orion had released the Abyssal dragon right before the long night began.

Counting everyone except Lorelia and Rockwell stationed in the underground fissure, the Stoneheart Horde boasted twelve Alpha-level combatants total—mounts included. That's a serious lineup for any Legendary-level lord's territory.

"Eight Alpha-level dark creatures? We can swallow all of them at once," Earthshaker boomed. With Blood Sharing on his side, he craved a big battle.

"Sure, I'm not worried about these eight monsters. But has it occurred to you they might be packing a Legendary-level will projection?" Delilah cautioned. "If we drop our guard and walk into that trap, there's a good chance one of us won't make it out alive."

This kind of thing had happened before. With Orion absent, all the Alpha-level dark creatures in the territory would converge on Blackstone City.

Delilah was dead certain at least one of them would carry a hidden will projection from a Legendary-level lord. If that will projection cut loose, even though Orion had left his own will projection behind, there was no guarantee he could save anyone in time.

"Let Rendall and the others know: stay sharp, and be prepared for a possible will projection."

"Understood!"

A succubus scout from the Sentinel Corps took off to deliver that order.

"Same drill as always: if I jump in the fight myself, Lilith's second in command, Slagor's third."

Lilith and Slagor both nodded. Defending the Horde was their undeniable duty.

"Also, we've got Voidcrawlers and Night Stalkers in this wave. Pass the word: get more crossbows and catapults out of storage."

Voidcrawlers, capable of flying at low altitude, would pose a serious threat if the Horde didn't have arrow towers. As for Night Stalkers, they were little more than cannon fodder among dark creatures, and Delilah wasn't worried about them.

She glanced up at those arrow towers lining the walls and felt an unexpected surge of relief.

All around the wall, each Horde army readied themselves for battle.

"Archers, crossbowmen, catapult crews—check your gear once over! When the fighting starts, there's no slacking off," bellowed Dirtclaw, rousing the cannon-fodder troops. "If anybody chickens out or bolts, you disrespect me—and that means the whip for you!"

Dirtclaw couldn't hide his excitement. According to Orion's rules, he just needed a little more merit, and he could earn Alpha-level resources. He intended to grab that chance during these dark beast tides. If all went well, he'd receive his share.

His first attempt to advance still hadn't gotten Dirtclaw to Alpha-level, but it didn't dampen his drive. He knew his aptitude wasn't the greatest, but the Horde gave him hope.

The Horde's rules and resources were clear. Dirtclaw believed if he kept putting in the effort, he'd eventually reach Alpha-level. He had no doubt in his mind.

"Elder Dirtclaw, I've double-checked all the catapults. The Elder of Stewardship also sent over some more crossbows—those have been inspected, too."

Gort spoke up. Though he was one of the eight council elders, Onyx had sent him to help out with the cannon-fodder troops under Dirtclaw's command.

Gort knew Onyx was trying to let him see how things really worked under the surface, so he'd better learn the ropes. And, as a bonus, Gort might get a piece of the glory for himself.

"Elder Gort, keep at it. Once this fight's done, I'll split some of the war spoils with you!" Dirtclaw promised.

Void passage. The Eightfold Spear Barrage suddenly activated, wiping out every dark creature Lucien had sent through.

With a casual sweep of his hand, Orion drew three Alpha-level dark source crystals toward him. Right in front of Lucien, he swallowed them one by one, closing his eyes to refine the energy.

"Lord Lucien," he taunted, "thanks so much for your generous offering."

Naturally, Orion's goal was to provoke Lucien, hoping the Voidcrawler king would send even more dark creatures for him to slaughter.

"Hmph! Don't gloat. You'll be the one crying soon enough!"

Lucien snorted, his face twisted in anger, multiple eyes glaring murderously at Orion. But Orion paid no mind; a stare alone wouldn't kill him.

Meanwhile, the battle had already broken out in Blackstone City, and Orion was busy linking his will projection there to monitor the fight.

Over at Blackstone City, countless Voidcrawlers (centipede-like creatures) were gliding in massive swarms, just above the ground. It was a terrifying sight.

Boom!

The arrow towers began firing as soon as the Voidcrawlers crossed into range. Volley after volley of arrows rained down without pause.

"Ready, hold steady!"

"Fire in three ranks—keep the rhythm!"

"Don't panic, don't go flailing around—stay focused!"

Dirtclaw's booming voice rose along the battlements as Gort stood by his side. Watching the dark horde approach just above the ground, everyone held their breath.

Fwhoosh! Fwhoosh! Fwhoosh!

Arrows, javelins, and stones from catapults ripped through the air again and again.

Then, from deep in the darkness ahead, eight enormous Alpha-level dark creatures suddenly leapt into view—each one a gigantic Voidcrawler. Before anyone could process it, these eight Voidcrawlers coiled together, heads meeting tails, merging into one giant, huddled sphere.

A moment later, the orb slammed into the ground with a thunderous crash, rolling straight for Blackstone City.

"Shit!"

"Look out!"

Debris screeched under the crushing weight, alerting everyone in Blackstone City—especially the Alpha-level fighters. Lilith, Delilah, Earthshaker, and others leaped to their feet, watching in alarm as the unstoppable sphere barreled toward them.

Onyx and Rendall reacted first, jumping down from the walls—Onyx swinging his stone axe, Rendall wielding his spiked club—and both struck the orb.

But the impact sent them flying, leaving them slightly wounded. Then came a thunderous crash as part of Blackstone City's wall collapsed, ripped open by a gaping breach.

"You three—get over there and break them apart! Don't let that sphere keep rolling!"

Delilah's urgent shout betrayed her agitation. Immediately, Lilith, Thunderhawk, Onyx, Rendall, Thundar, Earthshaker, Slagor, Twilight Viper, Lysinthia, and the Abyssal dragon all converged on the breach.

Countless bloodline warriors of the Stoneheart Horde and dark creatures were already killing each other in droves, and chaos raged around that broken wall segment.

...

Back at the void passage, Orion's expression grew heavier.

"Lord Orion, didn't expect that, did you? The walls of your city are already crumbling!"

"Hahaha..."

Lucien's mocking cackle echoed across from the other side.

Orion spared him a glance, speaking dispassionately:

"The battle isn't over yet. You might be celebrating way too soon."

Lucien cut the laughter, turning serious as he studied Orion. He'd been hoping to see panic, but nothing in Orion's eyes suggested alarm. That unnerved him.

Lucien was also impressed that Orion, a fellow Legendary-level lord, had territory defenses in place. Those arrow towers along the walls shouted loud proof.

However, they seemed somewhat one-dimensional in raw firepower, which told Lucien that Orion's realm was still under construction—much like his own.

So Lucien just let out another laugh that sounded mostly forced. He had a will projection in Blackstone City, so he knew exactly how the battle was unfolding. He also knew Orion likely had his own will projection there, which was why Lucien hadn't sent his in person to clash.

...

Within Blackstone City, under everyone's combined attacks, the massive Voidcrawler sphere was finally blasted apart.

Onyx, Thundar, and Lysinthia quickly led their mounts to isolate three of the gigantic Voidcrawlers, while Thunderhawk coupled with the Four-Winged Blood Bat to cut off two more. The last three found themselves under siege from Lilith, Earthshaker, Slagor, and the Abyssal dragon.

Meanwhile, hordes of other dark creatures seized the momentary confusion to swarm onto the walls, and the battle erupted in all corners.

...

Orion hovered above the void passage, focusing on three fronts at once—monitoring the horde's fighting via will projection, staying alert for any moves from Lucien, and seeking advice in the Champions Alliance chat.

Hulk: "Is there a way to attack someone on the far side of a void passage?"

Leonidas: "Whoa, that's nuts, man!"

Arthas: "Not unless you're a demigod. Even if you were an arch lord, your attacks would be heavily weakened passing through the void passage. Unless you're using certain techniques like illusions or curses, don't even bother."

Orion felt let down seeing their answers. "Guess I'm still too weak..." he thought.

Then the Alliance's Deputy Commander, Edward, chimed in with something startling:

Edward: "If you're willing, tear open the scroll I gave you. That should kill whoever's on the other side of the void passage—and destroy the passage itself. But you'd very likely attract a demigod or god's attention. Maybe you'd get wiped out, or maybe you'd catch someone's eye and zoom straight to the top."

Edward's suggestion made Orion hesitate.

He did carry the blood of an ancient Titan, but facing demigods or gods at his current level would leave him with zero control. No way. He dismissed Edward's idea immediately—he wasn't suicidal.

Still, Orion wanted to see if he could at least try attacking Lucien with his own power. Something about the Voidcrawler King's methods rankled him, and Orion felt compelled to give Lucien a taste of real trouble.

Chapter 327 You get what you want, I get what I want

While Orion was still mulling over how to deal with Voidcrawler King Lucien, Deputy Commander Edward's message in the Champions Alliance channel had already stunned Leonidas, Alexander, and Arthas.

Necro Realm. Bone Throne.

Arthas rose from his Bone Throne, twin points of red light in his eye sockets suddenly blazing bright.

"Edward...he did it. He's reached demigod level!"

It wasn't a question so much as a statement of fact. In Arthas's mind, Edward's words to Orion had all but announced his new status to everyone.

"If Edward pulled it off, what about me? How much longer till I become a demigod...?"

Those questions unanswered, Arthas stood there in thought.

An unknown realm, at Giant Beast Mountain.

Roar!

In a shrunken form, Leonidas stood on a cliff edge, bellowing his frustration into the wind. His voice rumbled for miles, and every beast that heard it dropped to its belly in submission.

"It's not fair! That big-bearded Edward can make it to demigod? That's not fair!"

"What am I missing? What have I overlooked?"

"Rooooar..."

Compared to Arthas, Leonidas's reaction was pure venting.

Another unknown realm, inside a palace adrift in the void.

"So Edward's stepped into the demigod realm now...? Then what about me?"

Seated in the center of this palace was Alexander—his hideout and headquarters. Unlike Leonidas and Arthas, Alexander didn't make a big scene. He merely mumbled to himself.

Blackstone City, where the battle raged on.

Rendall had rushed over from the inner city. The moment he arrived, he joined forces with Lilith, Earthshaker, Slagor, and the Abyssal dragon to continue besieging another Voidcrawler.

"Lilith, back off a bit—use illusions to help!" Rendall took point as the main attacker, and Slagor shifted to a support role.

Lilith agreed, pulling herself out of the melee. The moment she began reciting incantations, illusions unfurled around them.

On the other side of the fight, Onyx, Thundar, and Lysinthia—each with a mount or guardian beast—were still holding their own, though they struggled to pin down the flying Voidcrawlers in a short time.

Thunderhawk and the Four-Winged Blood Bat, on the other hand, proved a perfect counter. They scored the first kills.

A thunderclap erupted as Thunderhawk unleashed a lightning bolt, leaving one Voidcrawler disoriented. Swooping in a split second later, Thunderhawk clutched the creature's head in his talons. With a vicious snap of his hooked beak, he tore free its Alpha-level dark source crystal. The Voidcrawler shuddered and collapsed, finally dead.

Having finished off that foe, Thunderhawk soared back into the sky to help the Four-Winged Blood Bat.

Orion hadn't expected Thunderhawk Rayden to be the one who'd tip the scales this time.

At the void passage, Orion suddenly stood up, pulling out a throwing-style trident. He then activated Titan Form, boosting his stats across the board.

Crackle!

Lightning danced across the blood-red trident as Orion hurled it into the void passage. Of course, Lord Lucien immediately noticed. By the time the trident appeared before him, a good chunk of its power had been sapped by the passage itself.

"Crush!"

Lucien thrust out a hand, shattering Orion's thrown weapon with ease.

"Lord Orion, your attempts to go on the offensive are pathetic!"

Though he spoke dismissively, Lucien was shocked inside. He realized that, at full force, Orion's trident would've been devastating if not for the void passage weakening it.

"That giant actually has the strength to fight above his level. No wonder he's setting up a territory as a mere lower-tier Legendary lord. If some of the lower- or mid-tier Legendary lords aren't careful, he'll kill them. This one's dangerous."

Lucien's eyes darkened, not just because Orion was formidable but also because his legions of dark creatures were losing ground at Blackstone City.

On the battlefield, Thunderhawk and the Four-Winged Blood Bat finished off the two Voidcrawlers they had isolated, then split up to aid Onyx, Thundar, and Lysinthia.

Meanwhile, near the breach in the wall, Rendall, Earthshaker, Slagor, and the Abyssal dragon took down another Voidcrawler. Slagor, chanting a large-scale spell at the time, delivered the finishing blow.

But just then, one of the Voidcrawlers began emitting an inky black fog. A dark, phantom-like shape peeled away from its body—a Voidcrawler wreathed in darkness with glowing green eyes—heading straight for Slagor.

"That's a will projection! Fall back!"

Lilith happened to be closest, assisting with illusions. She shouted her warning too late.

Boom!

A streak of lightning flared at the center of Lilith's forehead, morphing into a trident that shattered the will projection in an instant.

"Curse you, Giant! I won't forget this!"

The will projection managed to spit this threat before dissolving. Orion's own will projection didn't even bother responding, transforming back into lightning and returning to Lilith's brow.

Slagor was left gasping for air, his heart nearly skipping a beat.

"That was a life-or-death moment... Long live Orion! Lord Orion is unbeatable!"

"Man, it's true—staying close to Orion's women is the safest place in the Horde..."

The moment Lucien's will projection vanished, the tide of battle turned firmly in the Stoneheart Horde's favor. The remaining Alpha-level dark creatures were just wounded beasts, bound to fall sooner or later.

At the void passage, Orion let a smile tug at his lips. He'd been watching the entire fight in Blackstone City while keeping an eye out for Lucien's will projection.

Orion lifted his gaze to King Lucien on the other side.

"Lord Lucien, looks like I came out on top in this round."

"How about reconsidering my proposal? You get what you want, I get what I want. Deal?"

Voidcrawler King Lucien was enraged, practically seething. This attempt at a dark incursion had cost him eleven Alpha-level subordinates. Even as a lord capable of building his own territory, such massive losses were not something he could brush aside.

Gnashing his teeth, Lucien glared hatefully at Orion.

"Giant, just you wait—if the day ever comes when a passage opens fully between our worlds, I'll make sure you regret it!"

Orion made no reply. Instead, he just broke into wild laughter. And Lucien, standing there with murder in his eyes, now looked like nothing but a clown.

Chapter 328 Sir Arthur

In the world where Orion lives, there are many continents. On the continent where the Black Forest is located, in the far south near the sea, lies a kingdom called Utessar.

Ten thousand years ago, the Utessar people crossed over from another continent and arrived here. They opened a teleportation array, defeated the dragon Frostsire that inhabited these lands, and took possession of the most fertile region.

From that moment on, this continent was renamed "Utessar Continent," in honor of their arrival.

Now, within the royal palace of the Utessar Kingdom, a high-level secret meeting was underway. Only three people were present: King Harold, Grand Duke Richard, and Grand Duke William.

"Your Graces," King Harold began slowly, as if recounting a piece of history—or perhaps rallying them to war. "According to what our forefathers instructed, the seal in the far north has already been lifted. Our Utessar Kingdom is about to face a full-scale war.

"Based on the old pact, no demigods will interfere in this conflict. Until the war ends, the dark beast tides will stay away. Ten thousand years ago, our ancestors drove the white dragon Frostsire to the far north. I believe we can do the same now."

"Your Majesty, I understand that war is unavoidable," Grand Duke Richard replied. "But we should first clarify who our enemies really are. I doubt Frostsire is our only threat. The various races living up north have probably formed alliances by now. And what about the neighboring dwarves, the half-dragons, the

merfolk, and the blood elves, with whom we've signed peace treaties? Will they end up among our enemies too?"

Those were the very tribes that, back then, allied themselves with the humans and helped the ancestors of the Utessar Kingdom seize these lush southern lands. But now that Dragon Frostsire was on the rise again, all existing relations were at risk, and old pacts could turn to dust.

"Your Majesty, no offense intended," Grand Duke William added, "but I believe Richard is right. Before the fighting starts, we should secure the allegiance of those friendly races. After all, they'll make excellent allies...and excellent cannon fodder, wouldn't you agree?"

Uniting with other species—using one nonhuman race to fight another—was the wisest plan. Even with the Utessar Kingdom's population in the hundreds of millions, the fewer of their own soldiers who died, the stronger the kingdom remained.

"I understand you both," Harold said. "I will, in the name of the crown, work to win over the other races with promises of certain benefits. However, some...special measures remain necessary. I trust you know what I mean?"

Richard and William both nodded. Their own territories shared a destiny with the kingdom, making separation impossible.

"Rest assured, Your Majesty," said Grand Duke Richard. "The Golden Apple Merchant Alliance will deliver desirable goods to the other races—and bring back the individuals crucial to your interests."

"As for the Holy Sword Mercenary Corps," Grand Duke William added, "we'll spread the relevant missions and mobilize mercenaries, unifying them to carry out our will."

These three—King Harold, Grand Duke Richard (head of the kingdom's largest merchant alliance), and Grand Duke William (head of the main mercenary guild)—stood at the pinnacle of Utessar Kingdom's power.

"Then let's get started," the king said, "before the dark beast tides have fully receded."

...

Utopía, the capital of Utessar Kingdom.

In a bustling tavern filled with lively chatter, a knight in plain, unadorned attire stepped through the entrance. One could tell he was a knight only because of the sword on his belt and a suit of armor draped over him—armor so black it looked like coal.

Compared to the fashionable silver-white armor on the market these days, his coal-colored gear seemed ancient and drab.

"Look, our coal knight's back again!"

"Haha, him? Some knight he is!"

"Yeah, real knights take vows and receive a proper blessing, right?"

"Stop teasing him; you can see he's already embarrassed!"

"..."

His name was Galahad. Intent on ignoring the gossip, he walked straight to the bar counter.

"What can I get you, Sir?" asked a pretty barmaid, Isabella. Her tawny hair was half-pinned, revealing a subtle allure.

"I'm meeting someone upstairs. Room number five."

Isabella froze for a second. She knew that the esteemed knight in Room Five was none other than the famous Sir Arthur.

"Galahad, you sure about that?" she asked. They clearly knew each other and seemed to be on good terms.

"Yes. Sir Arthur is waiting for me."

Isabella's expression showed a twinge of doubt, but she instinctively pointed Galahad to the stairs. Nodding his thanks, he offered a knightly salute, then made his way up to the second floor.

A minute later, in Room Five, Galahad slipped in and locked the door behind him. Inside was a long table heaped with dishes. At the table sat a knight in elegant garb, an apron-like napkin pinned over his chest. Clearly, he had removed most of his armor to sit and dine.

Seeing Galahad enter, the knight—Arthur—gave a welcoming gesture, then continued eating without pause.

Galahad didn't stand on ceremony. Having just finished a job, he was starved. It wasn't until half an hour later that both of them set down their utensils.

"My sword is in my heart," Arthur said, staring at Galahad. "I pledge allegiance to my sword...and my armor."

"I shall devote my soul and life to these," Galahad responded, meeting Arthur's gaze. "My will, like my blade, will never break."

They locked eyes for a tiny moment before Arthur abruptly let out a hearty laugh.

"Humility, honor, sacrifice, valor, compassion, faith, honesty, and justice—the eight ancient chivalric virtues. You're the only one I've found so far.

"My ancestor gave me a sign: the kingdom's doom grows near, and we must unite again."

Galahad said nothing. He had no ancestral guidance—his father and grandfather had already died in battle, leaving him only the old knight's swordsmanship and code. He hadn't inherited any of the honors or glory.

"Maybe the others will come, maybe not," Arthur continued. "But I'll abide by the knight code. I'll help the people who need me—and you, Galahad."

Galahad shook his head, then nodded.

"Why don't you tell me about that 'kingdom's doom'? Now that's something I'm interested in."

Arthur showed no displeasure. He simply sat at the table, speaking calmly, unhurriedly:

"Well, it all started with eight brave souls who dreamed of slaying a dragon..."

Chapter 329 Tower of Truth

Black Forest—ever since Stoneheart Horde fought off that fiercest wave of dark creatures, the entire horde has been hard at work repairing the city walls.

Fortunately, in the outer city area, they had set aside plenty of stone for wall construction back in the summer. That stockpile makes the repair work extremely fast and convenient.

"Onyx and Rendall have already gone down there in person to supervise. I bet the wall will be fully repaired within three days."

"Lorelia sent out a ton of little spiders to hunt down those dark creatures who got away. I figure the horde won't face any immediate threats now."

Lilith is the one speaking. She stands beside Delilah, both gazing into the darkness in the distance.

"Any message from our lord?" Delilah asks.

Lilith simply shakes her head.

Orion's will projection hasn't contacted them, which means nothing big is going on. Besides, every time they communicate with the will projection, it burns its energy, so they don't do it unless they have to.

"I picked up some tips on getting pregnant from the gnoll tribe. Want to give them a shot?" Delilah abruptly changes topics, shifting the conversation to pregnancy and children.

Lilith stays quiet, a bit downcast. She's the one who's had sex with Orion the most, and almost every time he finishes inside her—but still, no pregnancy.

"Don't worry, just keep at it," Delilah comforts her gently. Both sisters regret not carrying Orion's child yet.

"With most of these dark creatures wiped out and every Alpha-level one slain, I can't imagine there'll be any big trouble from this dark beast tide now," Delilah continues. "When it's time to head south next year, will you go, or should I?"

Lilith's answer is firm this time. "You go. Out there in the field, you're more valuable to Orion than I am."

Delilah glances at Lilith in surprise, then offers her a seductive smile.

...

The void passage offers temptations at every turn. But this time, the temptation comes from Orion.

Orion knows that since all the Alpha-level dark creatures personally sent by Lucien, King of the Voidcrawlers, have been slain, Blackstone City is basically safe. Now, Orion's plan is to entice Lucien to make a rash decision and send over more dark creatures, so his own subordinates can farm them for more power.

"Lord Lucien, have you thought it over?" Orion speaks as he withdraws the lightning barriers and the Eightfold Spear Barrage that had encircled the void passage.

"To prove my sincerity, I won't stop you from sending your minions through anymore," he says. "Lord Lucien, bring in as many as you want—I honestly don't mind."

Lucien, King of the Voidcrawlers, is furious. He definitely won't fall for Orion's trick. Besides, he's down to hardly any Alpha-level subordinates. Sending more would just be feeding the enemy free world essence—and might even get Lucien accused of treachery by his own kind.

"Giant Orion, I won't forget this. When the battlefield between our two worlds opens, I swear I'll kill you," Lucien growls, then leaves through the far end of the void passage.

Orion feels slightly disappointed. The horde has already reaped a big haul. If Lucien had kept sending more, Orion's crew would be even stronger for the southward invasion next year.

With little else to do, Orion shifts his attention to the Survivor's Platform. Lately, Julius Caesar is still the one messaging him the most:

"Big boss, I got my hands on some great stuff again—things on that list you gave me!"

"Big boss, check it out: these items are from your wish list!"

"Big boss, are you there?"

"Big boss, if you're online, hit me up!"

Julius Caesar's shameless flattery makes Orion feel a bit self-conscious. Still, he keeps his replies short and cool, taking a page out of Arthas's book back then.

"What is it?" Orion asks, keeping it brief.

"Wow, boss, you're here! I got you these magic crystals!"

Caesar sends over some transparent mineral rocks—magic crystals, material for crafting special enchanted weapons.

"How many magic crystals do you have?" Orion asks. "And what do you want in return?"

Without missing a beat, Caesar promptly offers all his magic crystals. "Big boss, I'd love a hero-level weapon!"

A hero-level weapon only drops at Alpha-level combat. Given Caesar's likely hero-level rank, Orion figures he needs it for some pivotal fight or maybe to take down a boss.

"Sure," Orion says. "But these crystals alone aren't enough."

As if on cue, Caesar initiates another trade, tossing in a tower structure. Orion's eyes narrow with interest.

He accepts the trade and takes out a hero-level sword from his treasure trove, sending it over. The deal goes through, and Caesar cheers on his end, showering Orion with gratitude.

Ignoring Caesar's excitement, Orion takes out the tower to study it closely. It's quite a peculiar item: it has no offensive power, but it boasts an ability similar to "True Sight," called "Tower of Truth."

Once built, it can detect stealth or invisibility within a certain range—and can even spot bodiless spirits.

"This is a good deal," Orion remarks, satisfied. He's learned something important by now: for trades like this, there's no "profit or loss" in the usual sense. As long as each side gets what they want, it's a fair exchange. Some items will never shine in one person's hands, and that's exactly why trading them can unlock hidden value.

After wrapping up business with Caesar, Orion also makes a round of trades with Scarecrow. Scarecrow's vacation is nearly over, so he's unloading not only a large amount of ordinary grain but also a bag of magically enhanced grain that radiates elemental energy.

This special bag of grain costs a hundred times more than regular grain, but Orion snaps it up without hesitating. Then he returns to checking the Survivor's Platform for more deals, biding his time until he's sent back to Blackstone City.

Still, his thoughts inevitably circle back to that white dragon, leaving him anxious.

Orion knows nothing about the white dragon's temperament, and he worries that traveling south with it might provoke some even more terrifying disaster.

He's full of questions.

For instance, was the white dragon really just asleep, or had it been sealed away? And does it have its own personal force under its command? If it has nothing, then obviously Orion, Gareth, Ironhoof, and the horde's bloodline warriors will all be the white dragon's cannon fodder.

Cannon fodder generally isn't treated with much care, and that's Orion's biggest fear.

Chapter 330 Don't let our lord down

Time flew by, and over half a month slipped past.

Near the void passage, Orion finally sensed that awe-inspiring sacred power again. In a brief moment of disorientation, he was pulled back to his own Blackstone City.

At the same time, a light rain began to fall. It was the first rain of spring, and its arrival signaled the end of the dark beast tides.

Boom, rumble!

Feeling the raindrops pattering against him, Orion transformed into lightning and thundered across the skies over Blackstone City. The sight and sound of swirling lightning and thunder announced Orion's return.

All of the Alpha-level warriors in the Horde looked up with broad smiles, staring at Orion's silhouette overhead, eyes blazing with fervor.

"Council meeting in half a day!"

Orion's voice resonated far and wide, reaching every corner of the city—filling all his people with a sense of reassurance.

"Yes, my lord!"

"Got it!"

"..."

These responses echoed throughout Blackstone City.

Half a day later, the elders had all gathered. Even Spider Queen Lorelia crawled out of her underground fissure to attend the council meeting.

Orion swept his gaze across the group, then looked to the table at the center of the hall. Resting on top were eight wooden boxes.

Inside each wooden box lay an Alpha-level dark source crystal. Every elder in attendance—council elders included—stared at them with burning anticipation.

Orion reached out, and two of the boxes lifted into his hands.

"We have eight Alpha-level resources total. I'm taking two for my own cultivation."

Having said that, he waved his hand, sending another two boxes floating toward Delilah.

"Store these two in our treasury. Whichever warriors earn enough merit can come and exchange for them."

"As for the remaining four, our four senior elders will distribute them according to our resource ranking."

In an instant, excitement flared among the gathered crowd. All eyes turned to Delilah, Onyx, Rendall, and Thundar. The four made no attempt to conceal anything, taking out a record book for all to see and cross-checking the results.

After a short pause, Rendall announced the names.

"This round's four elders receiving Alpha-level resources are: Volthun, Gronthar, Ursa, and Hammerhoof."

Volthun is the Horde's shaman, with expertise not only in bloodline healing spells but also in forging. Even though he hadn't personally fought in recent battles, he'd accomplished a great deal for the Horde in other ways.

With a quick gesture from Orion's hand, one of the wooden boxes zipped over to Elder Volthun.

"I don't need to explain Elder Volthun's contributions. Most of you here have been treated by him at some point, and the leather armor and plate you're wearing now—plenty were made by him."

Next came Gronthar. Though he served in the cannon fodder troops, he had racked up quite a few notable achievements. Ever since Gronthar joined the Horde, his strength had technically met the requirement to rank up; he'd simply lacked the merits. After numerous fights, however, he had proven himself in battle time and again.

Ursa's case hardly needs an introduction: she'd lost an arm and only regained it thanks to a special healing potion that Arch Elder (Rendall) procured from Orion. Once healed, Ursa joined the counterattack against the dark beast tides without hesitation.

Hammerhoof was less famous, but he'd been drifting between the cannon fodder troops and the Hunting Party for ages. Whenever there was fighting, he was close by, ready to charge in.

No one could dispute the merits these four elders had earned.

"Elders, I want more of you in the running for Alpha-level resources, because that's how our Horde grows stronger.

"It's a shame that out of the last three resources we handed out, none of the elders who received them made a successful breakthrough.

"Keep training. Keep fighting. Don't let our lord down!"

Unfortunately, those three elders—Slate, Samson, and Vespera—had all failed in their recent attempts to advance, which even Orion hadn't anticipated.

Next, the meeting moved on to the distribution of supplies and assigning of duties. Half a day later, all the elders below Alpha-level automatically took their leave from the council hall.

Orion glanced around at those who remained: Lilith, Delilah, Lysinthia, Onyx, Rendall, Rockwell, Thundar, Earthshaker, Slagor, and Lorelia were all present.

"We won't have to wait many days..."

Roar!

Before Orion could finish, an ancient-sounding voice boomed across Blackstone City.

"Orion, Giant King—I am Frostsire, the white dragon. I hereby invite you: in half a month's time, join me in heading south to claim richer lands for your people."

Rumble...

Orion shot into the sky in a flash of lightning, staring into the heavens. But that mighty dragon roar was already fading, traveling off to the south.

Onyx, Rendall, and the others hurried out of the hall, looking skyward.

"That dragon's roar was terrifying! For a second, I thought my heart stopped beating!"

"A lord from the north, maybe?"

"That aura sure felt stronger than most lords I've heard of!"

"..."

Moments later, Orion returned in a crackle of lightning.

"All right, back inside—let's carry on."

Once again seated in the council room, Orion wore a more somber expression.

"As you saw, we'll be heading south to invade—under the leadership of the white dragon Frostsire."

There was a respectful note in Orion's tone, as Frostsire held the rank of arch lord and was owed due deference. And that dragon had shown no sign of causing Orion trouble, not even slowing down. Clearly, Frostsire held a certain esteem for Legendary level beings.

"Orion, may I ask what level that white dragon is?"

It was Rendall speaking—he was the only one who could address Orion so directly.

"He's an arch lord, right at the peak."

"You heard that dragon roar. He's a white dragon who's lived for thousands of years."

"Once we march south, I have a feeling we'll go pretty far. Any lord in this region who isn't an idiot will likely choose to follow him. And his interests don't conflict with ours."

Some in the room grasped Orion's final point, while others didn't. An arch lord definitely has a territory of his own. If Frostsire wants to invade the south, it can only mean one thing: his territory lies somewhere down there. Exactly where, nobody knew.

"My lord, so this is like our last invasion of the Godforsaken Land—we'll just be one among many forces heading south?"

This was Onyx, recalling that big campaign into the Godforsaken Land.