

## **Titan King 541**

### Chapter 541: Back in the Valkorath Realm

Orion felt a sudden urgency; any vague feeling of superiority he once had vanished in an instant.

"Geniuses...everyone who can join the Champions Alliance is a fucking genius!"

He couldn't help muttering inwardly. Kraken's rapid progress gave him a sense of pressure.

He was glad his ally was growing stronger, yet he also felt that pressing weight in his chest, the longing to become an arch lord, and the eagerness to explore new lands to boost his followers' faith.

For a moment, Orion's thoughts were in disarray.

He had no idea Kraken had Leonidas's backing—just as Orion had Arthas's.

Especially after Leonidas dispatched his navy into the Valkorath Realm, Kraken felt more empowered. Hunting the slime molds mutants became easier and easier.

"Have I grown too complacent lately? I need to take action."

After the panic subsided, Orion reflected on himself, intensifying his desire for even greater power.

"I will become an arch lord!"

Giving himself a mental pep talk, Orion began to speak in the public channel.

Hulk: "Bro Leonidas, I'm back in the Valkorath Realm!"

Leonidas: "Hahaha...Hulk, welcome back! You've probably noticed that Kraken also reached the peak of Legendary level. Now you two are at the same starting line! Surprised?"

Hulk: "I'm perfectly fine with this friendly competition!"

Kraken: "So am I!"

Leonidas: "Squiddy, you shouldn't be so nice about it. Now's the time to mock him—shake Hulk's confidence so you have a shot."

Kraken: "Big boss, Hulk's my friend too!"

Hulk: "Bro Leonidas, that joke wasn't funny at all."

Orion and Kraken exchanged polite words, making Leonidas feel that his attempt at stirring up trouble was a bit too obvious. He changed the subject right away.

Leonidas: "Hulk, when are you coming over to my area?"

Leonidas: "If you don't show up soon, all the fungal creatures will have fled to the sea, and Squiddy will get all those resources."

Hulk: "Bro, I'll teleport over tomorrow!"

Leonidas: "Hahaha, great! Then I'll send you a wave of beast troops so you can feast your eyes on them—just wait till you see the sky and earth swarming with beasts!"

...

After chatting more with Leonidas and Kraken, Orion had a thorough grasp of the Valkorath Realm's current situation.

"Vexis is clearing the north. I'll lead our forces to clear the south—and we have to move quickly.

"After that, we can handle the west and east, so we can make the most of this chance."

With that decided, Orion promptly put his plans in motion.

He sent word outside, and soon Gustalon led Rendall, Grulbane, Dace, Otho, Beyn, Torba, Thundar, Ursa, and the others into the palace.

"Gustalon, give the elders an overview of the Valkorath Realm and share your experiences."

"When I'm not around, you'll oversee our armies."

"At daybreak tomorrow, you'll teleport with me to the south so we can clear out the fungal creatures there."

A whirlwind swept through the palace as Gustalon moved to the center, accepting Orion's command.

"As you wish, My lord!"

Gustalon was an Alpha-level peak fighter, and he too held territory. He also possessed a portion of Legendary-level life essence.

Time, place, and support had all aligned for Gustalon—he only needed that final spark to break through to Legendary level.

Staying in one place wouldn't necessarily increase his chances of a breakthrough, so Orion decided Gustalon should lead the troops.

That way, Orion could free himself up to focus on hunting Legendary-level fungal creatures.

Early the next morning, the teleportation array in Soraya City pulsed again and again, and Orion led his beastfolk armies southward to the region guarded by Leonidas.

"When they return, their strength will have improved a lot!"

Inside Dusk Castle, Lilith and Soraya stood together at a windowsill, watching Orion leave.

Last night, in this very bedroom, they had all slept together—Orion had sex with both Lilith and Soraya at the same time.

After what happened that night, Lilith and Soraya grew a bit closer and felt more comfortable talking openly.

"The resources here are so plentiful!"

Soraya couldn't help noting that the life essence dropped by fungal creatures was the best kind of tonic.

"Perhaps it won't be long before the Stoneheart Horde gains another Warden."

"You mean that wind elemental being?"

"Mm-hmm."

Soraya frowned. She knew very well that reaching Legendary level was extremely difficult.

In her own case, she had been backed into a corner—stalked by Orion and several other powerful individuals—and only through near-constant pressure to push her limits had she managed to break into Legendary level.

She'd never confided in anyone about that sense of helplessness and despair under such suffocating stress.

So Soraya was deeply aware of how tough it was to advance to Legendary level—so tough that it easily crushed people's hopes.

"Lumi has already advanced to Legendary level."

"Lumi? That ice elemental being?"

"That's right."

All of a sudden, Soraya's face grew unpleasant, and her mood sank.

Among Orion's women, Soraya was happy to get along with Lilith and Delilah. But she couldn't remain calm where Lumi was concerned.

Long ago, Lumi alone had swept across the desert region of the scorpion tribe. Soraya had suffered at Lumi's hands many times.

Now, both were Orion's women, and in terms of both power and intimacy, Soraya was determined to surpass Lumi.

Yet Lilith's revelation of Lumi's breakthrough instantly erased any hidden sense of superiority Soraya might still have had.

"Are elemental beings really so powerful and talented?"

It was because she'd advanced to Legendary that Soraya understood how many hardships stood in the way. But Lumi's independent ascension to Legendary status dealt her a serious blow.

In truth, it wasn't just Soraya—Lilith and Delilah felt it too.

As for Kitsune Sylvana, everyone simply regarded her as Orion's "sex plaything."

And indeed, lacking real strength left Sylvana with that status.

"They're extremely powerful."

"But with Orion's support, I'm sure Gustalon will soon rise to Legendary level."

"For elemental beings, advancing to Legendary might not be as impossible as we think."

Lilith stroked her belly. In terms of power, she was lagging far behind now, but she led the way in bearing Orion's child.

"I'm quite envious of you."

Soraya cast a glance at Lilith's stomach, sensing a small life within—Orion's offspring.

Soraya also wanted to bear Orion's child. Yet even though she'd let him finish inside her many times, she still hadn't managed to conceive.

Chapter 542: Beast armies

"Hahaha... Bro Hulk, if you'd shown up any later, you might not have been able to see me at all in a few days."

Leonidas, who had shrunk to the size of a teddy bear dog, was half-squatting on a raised platform in the plaza of Giant Beast Mountain. The moment Orion arrived via teleportation, Leonidas leaped onto Orion's shoulder.

Orion ignored the strange looks from his subordinates behind him, turned his head, and looked at Leonidas. It seemed Leonidas had a small quirk of enjoying sitting on other people's shoulders, but that didn't really matter.

"Bro, are you leaving Valkorath Realm?"

Leonidas nodded. With a slime molds broodmother of the same level gone, the crisis in Valkorath Realm had been resolved. There were still large numbers of slime molds mutants left that looked troublesome, but they posed no real threat to a Valkorath Realm guarded by demigod-level powerhouses.

Leonidas, Alexander, and Arthas had already gained plenty of resources during the previous conflict. As for the remaining fungal creatures, they would be left for the two new members of the Champions Alliance.

Of course, they couldn't completely wipe out the fungal creatures. The plan was to drive part of them toward the ocean, domesticate them, and make them useful in the end.

"Everyone's busy. I'd better find something to do, right?"

Leonidas, stuck at arch lord peak, desired nothing more than to advance to demigod level—but that wasn't something that could simply be achieved by wishing.

"Come on. Before I leave, I'll show you the beast armies I'm giving you."

Roar!

Leonidas tilted his head back and roared, his voice echoing far into the distance. That roar conveyed his might and also seemed to serve as a signal.

Soon, from a cave in Giant Beast Mountain, waves of intermingling bestial roars sounded. The ground trembled as dinosaur-like beasts—roughly similar to triceratops—charged out and raced toward the distant plains.

"There are two hundred thousand Tail-Swing Behemoths here. I'm handing over their command to you."

Following Leonidas's roar, two figures flew out of the beast herd and landed in front of him.

"From now on, they'll all take your orders."

Two individuals appeared before Orion: a skeleton general and a werewolf draped in animal hide.

The skeleton general was Rumbold, someone Orion recognized. They had a strong connection—Rumbold had once assisted Orion in the invasion of Godforsaken Land.

"Lupin greets the Beast King and the Giant King here!"

The werewolf—Lupin—bowed toward Leonidas and Orion.

Leonidas nodded, adopting a regal bearing. Orion responded with a giant's gesture of respect, confirming their acquaintance.

"I was planning to support you with an additional two hundred thousand flying beasts, but since I'm leaving Valkorath Realm, I'll be taking them back with me."

"So this is all I can do for you now."

Leonidas shot Orion an apologetic look. Orion responded with a wry smile.

Truth be told, two hundred thousand Tail-Swing Behemoths were already a formidable reinforcement force. These behemoths resembled a combination of rhinoceros and triceratops, each with a sharp horn atop its head and a massive swinging tail at the back.

As a result, their charge was incredibly fast. Even in the slime molds layer, they could charge in and wreak havoc a few times.

"Rendall, Dace, Otho, Beyn, Torba, Ursa—take your forces and get familiar with these Tail-Swing Behemoths. We'll be riding them to the front lines soon."

At Orion's command, several of his subordinates set off with the werewolf Lupin to get acquainted with the behemoths. Only Rumbold remained by Leonidas and Orion's side, quietly listening in on their conversation.

"Sigh, Arthas has fallen into a deep slumber. Who knows when he'll wake up!"

Having taken care of business, Leonidas led Orion toward the peak of Giant Beast Mountain. At the thought of his old friend Arthas, Leonidas's steps on the mountaintop grew noticeably more solemn.

"Is Arthas going to be okay?"

Orion glanced at the skeleton general, Rumbold, who just shook his head, indicating his own lack of knowledge.

"Arthas is doing fine. According to the Deputy Commander, once he wakes up, he might already be at demigod level!"

"Demigod... Are you serious?"

"I'm not sure if it's certain, but the Deputy Commander has never been one to boast or lie."

Orion fell silent, but a spark of excitement flickered in his eyes. If Arthas truly became a demigod, that meant Orion could rely on an exceptionally powerful ally in the future.

"As for me, I still have no clue how to touch that threshold of demigod level."

By the time he finished speaking, Leonidas had led Orion to the summit of the mountain.

"Even though the fungal creatures have been retreating south, remember that the number of slime molds mutants hasn't decreased much."

"Driving them out requires that you have a solid plan in mind. If you get ambushed by multiple Legendary-level beings at once, you could still wind up in danger."

Leonidas's advice was similar to what he had told Kraken earlier.

Orion nodded quietly. If he hadn't fought a broodmother counterpart before, he would have heeded Leonidas's warning without hesitation, because at that time, his strength wasn't enough to crush every Legendary creature in his path.

But now, Orion's power had soared. He had also obtained the Legendary gear "Titan Emblem." Confident and well-prepared, he believed that as long as there was no slime molds broodmother or broodmother counterpart present, he could roam freely in the slime molds layer on his own. Such was the pride that came from his newfound might.

"Don't worry, I'll be careful."

"Yes, better safe than sorry! My situation here is different from Arthas's. There happen to be more Rotting Flowers and Vine Splitters among the slime molds mutants on this side."

Orion frowned at the mention.

Individually, Rotting Flowers and Vine Splitters weren't too strong, but their group combat and support abilities could be terrifying. Supposedly, they had been capable of suppressing even Leonidas's beast armies, so they were definitely not pushovers.

"But don't worry too much. The fungal creatures have lost the broodmother's leadership, so their organizational ability and efficiency in forming encirclements have taken a big hit."

"You'll find them easier to deal with now than I did back then."

Heeding Leonidas's reminder, Orion now had a clearer understanding of the situation in the southern war zone.

Half an hour later, Orion headed down from the peak alone, leading Rumbold toward the distant battlefield.

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Stoneheart City, Outer District.

With the arrival of the dwarves and dragon envoys, the mysterious tavern was seeing more foot traffic than before.

On the tavern's first floor, it was no longer just a few customers scattered in the corners. Now, with a succubus dancer twisting her hips on the stage, the air inside was filled with cheers and the clinking of glasses.

In contrast, the second floor of the tavern was much quieter. At the moment, no customers were upstairs, and Delilah had simply turned it into her temporary office.

"Your Majesty, that important figure from the dwarven clan left Stoneheart City with two attendants. They departed in the direction of the blood elves' territory."

A Sentinel Corps warrior with succubus blood stood in the shadow behind the curtain, reporting the latest information to Delilah.

Chapter 543: Human merchant

"Blood elf territory?"

"The Dwarves and the blood elves' territory are quite far apart. Do we know their purpose this time?"

There was a long silence from behind the curtain, indicating that no one had that information—or at least no one dared to investigate too openly. After all, that dwarven envoy was a Legendary-level being.

"Never mind. Pull back the scouts who are following the dwarven envoy. I'm certain they've already been discovered."

"As you command, Your Majesty."

Delilah pondered for a while before issuing further orders.

"Anything else to report?"

"The human lord you asked us to keep an eye on left Stoneheart City after purchasing a large quantity of goods."

"What goods did he buy?"

"Minerals, young beasts, magical plants... and some powders that can enhance libido."

With those words, a small list drifted silently onto the table in front of Delilah, detailing everything Torin had bought in Stoneheart City—items and amounts.

"Send undercover agents to Soaring Bird City. Gather whatever information you can there, and keep an eye on that human lord. Remember, I don't want a single tie between Soaring Bird City's affairs and our Stoneheart Horde."

Delilah's tone was cold and ruthless.

"Understood."

"Anything else?"

"Yes."

"Go on."

"Our statistics from the Colosseum challenges are out. The biggest winner is a human merchant named Nico."

"A human merchant?"

"He's also one of the people offering to purchase those unused shop lots in the busiest part of the outer district."

At that, Delilah's eyes immediately lit up. Those empty shops in the bustling area of the outer district were no ordinary storefronts; they were bait Orion had specifically chosen. Anyone who recognized their value was certainly perceptive.

In other words, they were talents.

Right now, what Stoneheart Horde needed most were comprehensive managerial talents with sharp insight. Without them, the fallback plan was to lure, if not simply seize and capture them.

That was Orion's idea. After all, it wasn't very realistic for the Stoneheart Horde to cultivate an entire generation of high-level talents in a short period of time.

The human merchant Nico had caught the eye of the Sentinel Corps because of his performance in the Colosseum, as well as his bid to purchase those shops.

"Keep a close watch on him. Give me every piece of information about him as quickly as possible."

Delilah's voice now carried a trace of pleasure. She suddenly realized just how important Orion's advice—words he would whisper to her after they had sex—truly was.

"Always remember: Stoneheart City belongs not only to the giants, but to all the races within the Horde. Military defense, managerial authority, and the city's prosperity must all be firmly in our hands. Make sure we have eyes and ears in every corner of Stoneheart City."

Orion's words echoed in Delilah's mind. In particular, that last remark had prompted her to establish an entirely new department in the Sentinel Corps—dedicated to recruiting and managing informants throughout Stoneheart City. Only now, having seen how valuable this new department was, did Delilah realize that intelligence work is anything but simple.

"Anything else?"

The shadow behind the curtain did not leave, which meant there was more to report.

"Your Majesty, small detachments from the Sea Race have been spotted frequently in the coastal region to the west. Several times, some of them even came ashore and attacked our outposts along the coastline." (\*Sea Tribe → Sea Race\*)

Delilah froze at this news. She straightened from her relaxed posture and asked solemnly, "Were our warriors harmed?"

"Yes. Seven guards stationed on the coast were killed, and more than a hundred were wounded."

"Keep monitoring the Sea Race. Report to me the instant you have any updates."

"Yes, Your Majesty!"

"Pass my order along: Have Elder Dirtclaw lead his gnoll armies to guard the western territory."

Once she issued that command, the figure hidden behind the curtain finally faded away. Delilah herself furrowed her brows.

Truth be told, she didn't have the courage to make any drastic moves against the Sea Race. This wasn't because she lacked strategy; she just understood that she herself was no Legendary being, and her status and power didn't allow her to learn the deeper secrets behind the Sea Race.

Even Orion had taken a careful, watchful stance when it came to the Sea Race. Keeping his attitude in mind, all Delilah chose to do for now was reinforce defenses near the coastline.

"What does the Sea Race want? Did they learn about the arrival of the dragon envoy and decide to spark a war?"

Delilah guessed at the Sea Race's motives, sinking into deep contemplation.

Meanwhile, also in the outer district, inside a small inn, Nico and Kadir stood by a bedroom window, gazing out at Stoneheart City.

"Kadir, we should make up our minds soon. We need to find a place and a business of our own in Stoneheart City. Do you realize I'm spending two Blackstone coins a day just to stay in this inn?"

Though Nico sounded like he was complaining, Kadir could tell his friend was actually brimming with excitement and anticipation for the future.

"You made a tidy sum of Blackstone coins at the Colosseum. Are you really that upset about spending a couple of Blackstone coins a day?"

Kadir raised an eyebrow at Nico, then shifted his gaze to the city outside. It was surprising that such a prosperous place existed in a Horde formed by giants, succubi, beastfolk, orcs—and more.

Racial integration was nothing new; Dwarven, Human, blood elf, and Draconic territories all boasted multiple races as well. But, in most places, these other races were slaves, whereas Stoneheart City was dominated by a variety of non-human peoples.

"Let's hold out a bit longer. You've got plenty of Blackstone coins, so for the moment, we're not exactly short on funds."

Snapping out of his thoughts, Kadir offered his assessment.

"Wait longer?" Nico asked. "You think the Stoneheart Horde will stumble into war, get wiped out by another faction, and all this prosperity is just an illusion?"

Nico knew Kadir well—otherwise, they wouldn't have journeyed together or become friends in the first place.

Kadir was extremely cautious. He was still evaluating Stoneheart City. Though he was satisfied with the living environment and business climate here, he remained unsure about its security.

And security isn't something you can simply sum up with a few words; it takes time to gauge.

"If you don't want everything you've built to go up in smoke when war comes knocking, then you should listen to me and stay patient."

"All right. For now, we'll treat it like we're just traveling and settling here temporarily."

Nico relented, trusting Kadir's judgment.

Kadir had always had a much broader vision when it came to the big picture, a gift that allowed this once fallen noble—along with Nico—to flee the human kingdom and dodge the pursuit of more powerful nobles.

Chapter 544: How terrifyingly powerful

"What a pity it is to watch my hard-earned Blackstone coins trickle away one by one. Do you have any idea how painful that is to witness?"

Kadir ignored Nico's complaint. At the moment, his thoughts weren't focused on making money, but rather on how to truly take root in Stoneheart City—and whether he and Nico should fully bind their fates to the Stoneheart Horde.

Clearly, these decisions would affect his and Nico's futures.

...

Valkorath Realm, front lines.

Suddenly, a massive explosion erupted in the slime molds layer.

A lone figure shot skyward. In his left hand, Orion held a cluster of Legendary-level life essence, and on the trident in his right hand was a skewered slime molds parasitic creature. He rose like a god before everyone's eyes.

In that moment, not only the Stoneheart Horde armies but even the charging Tail-Swing Behemoths lifted their heads to behold Orion.

The battle had ended far too quickly. A Legendary-level fungal creature's presence had just appeared in the slime molds layer—and within three breaths, an explosion sounded, and the Legendary-level fungal creature was slain.

"How terrifyingly powerful..."

The werewolf Lupin stood next to Rumbold; his job was to keep Rumbold safe.

"Indeed, it's frightening,"

Rumbold muttered, staring intently at Orion. The shock in his heart was far beyond what Lupin could imagine. He still remembered their time in Godforsaken Land, back when Orion, at mid-Legendary strength, was already challenging and defeating powerful upper-Legendary foes.

And now? Orion had effortlessly killed a slime molds parasitic creature at upper-Legendary level.

"So this is the man my master calls a friend, huh? His strength must be enough to rival an arch lord, right?"

Unlike Rumbold or Lupin, the bloodline warriors from the various Stoneheart Horde armies grew deliriously excited seeing Orion rampage across the battlefield. They cheered and shouted, and their morale soared.

This time, accompanying Orion—besides Rendall's Hunting Party—were the guard armies led by Dace, Otho, Beyn, and Torba, plus Thundar's cavalry regiment, as well as the Beastfolk armies and Orc armies.

Altogether, they numbered over three hundred thousand, nearly two hundred thousand of whom were Beastfolk.

Orion had already decided not to take those Beastfolk back. Many in their ranks were halfhearted or undisciplined fighters, and Orion intended to use this slime molds trial to weed out the dregs.

His plan was for the Beastfolk to settle here in the Valkorath Realm, on the Moonveil Plains, and grow into his fervent supporters and loyal followers.

Naturally, after the trial, Orion also planned to bring over a number of Beastfolk women and children. At that point, Valkorath Realm could vigorously expand its population and agriculture, while Titanion Realm would develop commerce and outside relations.

Meanwhile, war efforts would be opened up in Emerald Dream Realm. In accumulating believers, they would also continually strengthen and refine the Stoneheart Horde's military power.

This was Orion's blueprint, and it was being implemented step by step.

"This time, whoever achieves the most battle merits in this trial shall be rewarded with a cluster of Legendary-level life essence."

"This is a path leading toward Legendary level—do you want it?"

Standing tall, Orion raised his trident high and promised every bloodline warrior on the battlefield. The response was immediate:

"WAAAGH..."

"All hail My Lord!"

"The Giant King's glory shines upon the Stoneheart Horde!"

"..."

Further down the line, Rendall swung his spiked club and smashed in the skull of a slime molds mutant. He glanced at his daughter, Ursa, who fought just as boldly by his side. She had already grown to Alpha level, very nearly catching up to him.

"Am I really going to be surpassed over and over again by the younger generation in the Giant Tribe?"

"No—that's not what I want!"

"How could the Arch Elder of the Stoneheart Horde become a laughing stock?"

With a furious roar, Rendall unleashed all his pent-up frustration. Another layer of blood shield manifested around him. Shielded by that blood shield, Rendall ignored the swarming fungal creatures, swung his spiked club with ruthless power, and anything in its path was smashed to pieces.

"I can still fight; I can still swing my club; I can still charge forward for the Horde..."

Rendall tore through the slime molds mutant horde like a madman, a living engine of slaughter. From his vantage point in midair, Orion watched it happen.

His eyes misted over with memories—he recalled the very first time he had stood atop the stone walls at the entrance of Moonshadow Valley and seen Rendall leap over those walls, fearlessly charging the dark creatures.

"I don't know where my mother and father have gone, and my older sister chose a different path in life—nothing I could do about that. "

"But Elder Rendall, I can't bear for you to vanish from my sight someday, too. The Giant Tribe needs you, and so does the Stoneheart Horde."

Orion gazed at Rendall, silent yet hopeful in his heart.

"Mr. Rumbold, Mr. Lupin, please pay special attention to these subordinates of mine."

After telepathically directing Rumbold and Lupin to watch over the Arch Elder, Dace, and the others, Orion darted into the depths of the slime molds layer. He was already at a level that could stand against an arch lord, so simply holding the line here didn't suit him.

Going it alone and hunting down Legendary-level fungal creatures was exactly what he should be doing—both as a personal quest for power and to gather crucial resources for the Stoneheart Horde.

"Rest assured; Lupin and I will remain on the front line. We'll make sure they're never in real danger,"

Rumbold and Lupin both promised, settling Orion's mind.

Back on the battlefield, the wolves howled ceaselessly. Axes and greatswords ripped and cleaved through the air. With the support of the Frost Wolf, Dace and Otho leapt and dodged nimbly among the fungal creatures, slaying them one after another side by side.

"I knew it! So that's why the prophet and Dirtclaw advanced so quickly and became so powerful."

Dace fed a lump of life essence to the Frost Wolf beneath him, and his companion grew fiercer and stronger by the moment.

Ever since the Frost Wolf reached hero level peak, it had been stuck there, not able to advance any further. Naturally, for the Frost Wolf to mature and reach its peak strength would normally take decades—if not a century—under natural conditions.

But thanks to a steady diet of dark source crystals, crystal cores, Pet Pills, and magical plants, the Frost Wolf had reached hero level peak in just a few short years. Even so, hoping to push it on to Alpha level any time soon wasn't realistic.

Nevertheless, upon arriving in Valkorath Realm, Dace, Otho, Beyn, and Torba each found their hopes renewed. The life essence here could boost not only the Frost Wolf, but themselves as well.

"As the Giant King's guards, we can't afford to lag behind the others!"

Otho shouted in response, echoing Dace's resolve.

Fighting fungal creatures was dangerous, but it was also rich with opportunity, granting them access to valuable resources time and again.

Chapter 545: Something's off

After venturing deep into the slime molds sea, Orion was greeted by a heaving mass of densely packed fungal creatures.

This sight took his breath away.

Following the aura he had sensed, Orion burrowed into the slime molds layer, only to be slowed by countless creeping vines. It soon became evident that the Legendary-level fungal creature he was tracking was a Vine Splitter.

Orion's figure flickered rapidly as he unleashed Instant Impact; the vines blocking his trident were sliced apart, scattering everywhere.

Moments later, about 10 miles away, Orion broke through the slime molds layer and dragged the Vine Splitter out alive.

The Vine Splitter looked rather bizarre, much like a gigantic cabbage. Its enormous cabbage-like form was made up of masses of intertwined vines.

With a swift shake of his trident, Orion let loose a surge of transcendent power, delivering a fatal blow to the Vine Splitter and extracting its life essence.

"Something's off!"

He had killed the Vine Splitter and retrieved its life essence, yet Orion couldn't shake the feeling that something was amiss.

Though it closely resembled the aura he had detected earlier, there were slight, subtle differences.

"Where exactly did it go wrong?"

Orion eyed the Vine Splitter's corpse as it fell, flashing forward to pick it up again. Expanding his senses, he examined the Vine Splitter's remains inch by inch.

Half an hour later, Orion fixated on a particular branch on the Vine Splitter's body, where he sensed that familiar aura. Under normal circumstances, the Vine Splitter's roots would be gray-green, but this spot was a deep crimson, as if infected.

"This aura... could it be..."

Orion's expression became increasingly grim as he studied the root. He recognized it: it was the aura of a broodmother counterpart. Orion had battled one before, so he knew it well.

"Are these fungal creatures trying to cultivate a new slime molds broodmother or broodmother counterpart?"

The mere possibility made his heart pound. A slime molds broodmother or broodmother counterpart meant an arch lord-level threat.

"Could these fungal creatures be planning a comeback?"

That thought alone made Orion realize this place was far from secure. He flew upward, summoned his Triple Mirror Image for protection, then immersed his mind in the Survivor's Platform and opened the public channel of the Champions Alliance.

Hulk: "Deputy Commander Edward, Bro Leonidas, I've detected the presence of what might be a slime molds broodmother or broodmother counterpart here in the slime molds sea."

Leonidas: "A slime molds broodmother—an arch lord?"

Edward: "Don't be alarmed. The slime molds layer houses countless fungal creatures. After losing their broodmother, it's natural for them to select and nurture a new one—like a beehive replacing its queen."

Hearing Orion's account, Leonidas and Edward quickly took notice.

Leonidas: "Deputy Commander, you're telling me a new slime molds broodmother has shown up? But I'm not sensing an arch lord-level aura at all."

Leonidas knew that Orion was currently operating in the southern region under his watch, and there was no sign of an arch lord-class presence there.

Edward: "It's not an actual slime molds broodmother yet—just a parasitic slime molds creature at the peak of Legendary power, evolving in that direction. It's still far from a true broodmother's level, likely only approaching a lower arch lord in strength."

While a lower arch lord-level foe was child's play for Leonidas and Edward, it posed a real danger to Orion and Kraken.

Edward: "Let's do this: Hulk and Kraken, since you're both at the peak of Legendary rank, whoever kills that broodmother in its evolving form first will receive a piece of Legendary equipment from me."

Leonidas: "Hahaha... I like it! That's much more fair—and we won't have to wait years for it to conclude."

Kraken: "I'll do as the Deputy Commander commands!"

Hulk: "Me too!"

No one took issue with Deputy Commander Edward's new rules; after all, he was offering the prize at no cost.

Leonidas: "Better step on it! If that broodmother evolution hits arch lord status, you'll force our Deputy Commander to handle it himself."

Orion and Kraken stayed silent in the face of Leonidas's banter.

Exiting the Survivor's Platform, Orion gazed at the colorful horizon ahead, brimming with confidence.

"A broodmother on the verge of arch lord powers, is it?"

"Compared to me, which of us is stronger?"

Muttering under his breath, Orion took off into the distance.

...

Titanion Realm, City of Lysinthia.

With the dark beast tides receding, the construction of Lysinthia was back in full swing. Unlike other cities, Lysinthia not only needed to rebuild its urban core behind fortified walls, but also required the construction of a large harbor outside the city limits.

According to Orion's plans, the port had to include at least a large wharf, a breakwater, a seawall, a slipway, and a dockyard. The first four structures simply demanded materials and manpower to complete, while the dockyard required meticulous planning, serving as the foundation for a future shipyard.

However, an unexpected incident arose while the wharf was under construction: Mist Bay welcomed a wave of Merfolk arriving on small whales.

"My lord, the bay's entrance has fallen!"

The speaker was Clawpincher, an Alpha-level Tidecrab Shield Warrior. Losing such a key defensive point felt deeply shameful to him, and he hung his head.

Hiss, hiss, hiss!

That was the sound of a snake's tongue. Next to Clawpincher stood a Twilight Viper, now noticeably larger and covered in wounds; a steel harpoon was still lodged in its back.

Saying nothing, Lysinthia leapt onto the Twilight Viper's back and pulled out the harpoon. After sprinkling a special medicinal powder over the serpent's wounds, she dismounted and stared into the depths of Mist Bay.

From far away, there came a series of faint "yi-yi-yi" calls—whale calls.

"Moonlit Reef is Skalnir's homeland. It belongs to the Tidefang Clan."

A hoarse, waterlogged male voice reached Lysinthia's ears. Although that common tongue sounded slightly awkward, Lysinthia easily understood the meaning: Mist Bay already had a name—Moonlit Reef.

"This place belongs to the Merfolk!"

"Serpentfolk, go back to your island!"

Chapter 546: My giant friend

"This is the domain of the Stoneheart Horde—belonging to the Giant King."

Lysinthia's voice carried a chill. She knew full well that even Twilight Viper and Clawpincher combined had failed to hold back the intruders; adding her own power wouldn't improve their odds by much. Thus, she resorted to invoking the Giant King's name.

On this continent, a "King" was synonymous with great might—and great might induces fear. Sure enough, the Merfolk in the water fell silent after Lysinthia spoke.

Moments later, that hoarse voice sounded again.

"Serpentfolk, this entire sea belongs to the Tidefang Clan. Even the Giant King has no right to occupy it."

"I'll say it again, leave this area."

This time, the Merfolk's voice carried a tangible pressure, edged with anger. The waves began to swell in response.

"This is Lysinthia City of the Giant King, and Mist Bay is our territory."

Lysinthia's tone turned just as frosty, taking a hard line against the Merfolk speaker.

"In that case, the only fate awaiting you is destruction."

The Merfolk's voice vanished, as did the whalesong. Mist Bay fell silent, yet Lysinthia understood danger was imminent.

"Come with me. We need to prepare to defend the city."

Lysinthia turned away, her cold command echoing in Twilight Viper and Clawpincher's ears.

...

Farther south, near the border between ogre and giant territory, the ogre Aldous loitered at the frontier, uncertain whether to advance or retreat. He hadn't sensed the aura of his giant friend, Orion, which worried him as much as it pained him.

"You have no friends!"

"Now you listen to me!"

"We'll ride back and smash them!"

The larger head of the two-headed ogre was practically roaring, spittle flying everywhere.

"Go back? You think you can beat the enemy?"

"Don't act like I don't know—you've nearly burned through all our transcendent power."

"My giant friend must be in the north; he maintains another territory there."

Aldous stared northward. It hadn't occurred to him that Orion wouldn't be in his southern domain.

"The ogres were ambushed—this is humiliation, absolute shame!"

The bigger head kept bellowing. In Bluehide's world, no one escaped the ogre's club; their foes should all have their heads smashed in.

"Let's go. Pack some goods for trade, and we'll head to Stoneheart City. As soon as word spreads that I'm in giant territory, it'll reach my friend's ears."

After contemplating for a moment, Aldous made up his mind. The instant he showed his face in Stoneheart City, he trusted that Orion would get wind of it and come meet him. Then Aldous would ask his friend for help and reclaim his lost pride.

...

In the ogre territory, there was a passage leading from the human kingdom to the giant lands.

Roars—angry, resonating—echoed repeatedly, like the last cries of life from dragon beasts.

"Keep your distance—don't kill them!"

"They're worth more alive, these lizardfolk."

"They're gold mines. Some of them can shift into giant lizards—don't you want a mount?"

In the distance, over a hundred guards had surrounded three lizardfolk, the entire security force of a human merchant caravan. On the outskirts of this group stood a human mage, already initiating a contract sigil.

"Never thought the ogre territory would have lizardfolk."

"Master, what do we do now?"

The speaker was Wyatt; standing beside him were Torin and Mike. Behind them was a Stoneheart Horde giant squad of about twenty warriors. Torin had hired these giants in Stoneheart City at great cost to protect them.

"What else can we do? We have to wait for them to deal with the lizardfolk before we can move on."

Torin seemed grim. He and his small party had been trailing this merchant group of a few hundred people in hopes of hitching a safer ride back to Soaring Bird City.

The scattered lizardfolk attacking the merchants only made Torin envious—he knew all too well that some powerful lizardfolk could shift into beast form, becoming formidable land mounts, every bit as capable as the Raptor mounts employed by the giant tribe.

"Those three lizard mounts—if they really manage to tame them, they'd fetch at least three hundred thousand gold coins."

Mike watched the caravan guards wrangling the lizardfolk with undisguised envy. Mounts and gold were deeply tantalizing for Torin, who was chronically short on funds.

Torin glanced at the twenty curious giant bloodline warriors behind him, seeing their eagerness. But in the end, he swallowed his own greed.

"Let's back away. Once they've finished sealing their contracts, we'll continue traveling with them."

In such a tense situation, any group coming too close to the merchant caravan could be mistaken for bandits. Torin was determined to avoid misunderstandings that might compromise his safe return to Soaring Bird City.

He motioned for Mike and Wyatt to fall back; both exchanged a glance of mutual desire before following Torin's order.

As they withdrew, Torin patted the sword at his hip, wrapped carefully in animal hide—Arthur's old weapon. But it was his now.

With his new knight inheritance, Torin was confident he'd reach Alpha level soon. Together with the Survivor's Platform and the knight legacy, he was sure he would turn his fortunes around—if he could just buy enough time to grow.

...

Valkorath Realm, southern battlefield.

Pursuing that broodmother in its evolving form all the way south, Orion found himself near the sea but ultimately lost the trail. Along the chase, he had slain two more Legendary-level slime molds mutants, each one a decoy for the broodmother evolution.

"The slime molds layer extends deep below the waves. I can't sense it anymore."

Orion was frustrated. He had nearly seized the chance at Legendary equipment, only to watch the opportunity slip away.

After a moment's thought, he ascended into the skies, preparing to inform Kraken of the broodmother evolution's trail as a goodwill gesture.

"Kraken, the broodmother evolution slipped into the sea. I lost it. Feel like giving it a try?"

Kraken was quick to reply:

"It's already reached the ocean?"

"Yeah, the broodmother evolution is cunning. I've killed three of its decoys in a row."

Orion didn't hide his efforts to hunt it down, giving Kraken a brief account of his pursuit and providing his current coordinates.

It wasn't pure benevolence—once the broodmother evolution dove into the sea, Orion's ability to track it dropped sharply. Without Kraken's help, locating that creature would be nearly impossible.

"Thank you for the heads-up. I'll head your way now!"

Chapter 547: Will you help me?

At the same time, Orion also laid out new terms for Kraken.

If Kraken failed to kill that broodmother in its evolving form, he would then have to help Orion keep tracking it, granting Orion the next opportunity to strike.

Kraken agreed without hesitation.

Currently at the peak of Legendary rank, if he couldn't manage to defeat the broodmother evolution now, it would be a long time before he could—so letting Orion have the next shot was a smart choice.

After all, so long as the broodmother evolution lingered in the sea, Kraken's ability to gather resources and build up his faction would be severely hampered.

...

Stoneheart City, mysterious tavern.

On the third floor, there was only one guest: Aldous.

He sat on the floor. Beside him stood a wooden table laden with food and drink that Delilah had prepared especially for him. Since he was Orion's friend, Delilah was treating him with utmost care.

"Lord Aldous—and Lord Bluehide—can I be of any further service?" Delilah asked with a slight bow. She dared not be careless around a Legendary-level being.

"I want to see Orion. I'll wait right here."

"Also, half of the trinkets I brought are a gift for Orion; the other half, I'd like to trade for grain."

It was quite a sight: one of Aldous's hands held a hunk of roasted meat, which he was using to feed the larger of his two heads, while the other hand clutched a huge mug from which he kept guzzling alcohol.

"As you wish. I'll gather the grain you need right away."

Delilah turned and left the third floor. She'd never expected this powerful ogre lord to show up in Stoneheart City without any prior notice.

With Orion away, she couldn't place Aldous in the castle, so the best she could do was have him stay on the third floor of the mysterious tavern.

Thankfully, Aldous's only request was to see Orion; as long as there were food and drink, he seemed content enough.

Returning to a secret location in the inner city, Delilah made sure to shoo her subordinates away. Then, pressing her hands together, she activated the will projection residing between her eyebrows.

"What's going on?"

Orion sounded half-asleep. Ordinarily, unless there was something pressing, this sliver of his will projection remained dormant to conserve mental energy.

"The ogre chieftain just arrived in Stoneheart City, asking to see you."

Delilah kept it brief to avoid wasting too much of the projection's energy—sometimes, that energy could be a life-saving trump card.

"Do you know why he's here?"

"No. He won't say, and I can't glean anything."

Delilah was curious. People generally assumed ogres were brutish and reckless, but this ogre lord hanging around the mysterious tavern didn't come across as mindlessly violent at all.

"I see... Go back to the mysterious tavern. I'll ask him myself."

Moments later, Delilah reappeared on the third floor of the mysterious tavern.

"My friend, welcome to Stoneheart City—to the giants' territory."

No sooner had she stepped onto the third floor than the will projection at her brow took the form of a blurred silhouette, drifting toward Aldous. After a moment's pause, Delilah stopped walking. She chose to wait by the staircase and let Orion and Aldous finish their conversation in private.

"My friend, Aldous brought you a gift—he gave it to your succubus subordinate."

Orion's will projection gestured to Delilah at the stairway. She took a large jar of aromatic wine from her storage ring.

Leonidas had once given Orion a generous amount of this vintage, and Orion had handed a few casks to Delilah to enrich the mysterious tavern's stock.

The wine's strong bouquet instantly caught Aldous's attention, prompting him to set his goblet aside and sniff eagerly with his broad nose. Even the second, larger ogre head stopped gnawing its roast and stared intently at the wine jar drifting toward them.

"Try some. This was home-brewed by a top-tier powerhouse."

With a pop, the clay seal came off, intensifying the rich aroma. Aldous's eyes lit up as he took a heavy swig.

Urgh!

He hiccuped, his face swiftly reddening. Even Bluehide, the bigger head beside him, lapsed into a tipsy daze. After a few moments, the flush on Aldous's face began to fade, and he looked immensely satisfied, whereas the larger head was still drifting in blissful drunkenness.

"He's never tasted anything this good, so let's leave him be. My friend, Aldous loves this return gift."

Orion's will projection nodded. As Aldous drank another mouthful of the fine liquor and savored it, Orion began:

"Trouble in your territory?"

It was a guess, an easy way to steer the conversation toward the main issue.

"My friend, Aldous has been bullied!"

Hearing Aldous's complaint, Orion's will projection stayed silent, sensing there was more to come.

"That damned insect betrayed us—said we're no longer allies."

"Lokiviria?"

"Yes, that wretched insect."

The will projection waited, listening.

"For some reason, Lokiviria has teamed up with a lizardfolk chieftain from the central region."

"Together, they invaded my domain, demanding I cede the eastern side of my territory."

"I refused—we fought."

Aldous started the story still somewhat drunk, but at the mention of battle, he sobered quickly as though recalling a deep humiliation. His inebriation vanished at once.

"The lizardfolk chieftain is also of middle Legendary rank, stronger in combat than that cursed insect. Aldous was no match for them."

"My friend, Aldous needs your help. Aldous wants to smash that lizardfolk's head."

He waved his fists enthusiastically, sloshing a good bit of liquor onto the floor. The room was once again awash in the potent fragrance.

Realizing he'd wasted quite a bit, Aldous sighed and simply chugged down what was left in the jar, letting out several hearty belches.

A moment later, he shook off the lingering buzz.

"So, my Giant friend, will you help me?"

Orion's will projection nodded. At the sight of Aldous's delighted expression, Orion spoke calmly:

"But right now, I'm tied up with other matters. You'll have to wait a while if you want revenge. It's spring; at the earliest, I won't be able to help until autumn."

Aldous froze at Orion's words, then quickly composed himself.

"Don't worry. Aldous has learned to wait a long time ago. So long as I can get my revenge and wipe out this shame to the ogres, it doesn't matter how long it takes."

With that, Aldous picked up the roast Bluehide had dropped, not minding that it had hit the floor, and tore into it unabashedly.

"All right. If you have nowhere to go, feel free to wait in Stoneheart City."

"Mmm..."

Chapter 548 548: I'm the real danger to watch out for

Aldous let out a grunt of acknowledgment, still gnawing on his roast without looking up.

Orion's will projection took the form of a spark of electricity, darting back into the space between Delilah's eyebrows in a flash.

"Make sure he's well-fed and comfortable until I get back!"

That was Orion's message to Delilah. For the ogre Aldous to come all the way to Stoneheart City in search of aid, he must have been truly enraged. Typically, Aldous never asked anyone for help. But this time, he had.

Orion had readily agreed to assist, without demanding anything in return.

Across this continent, the only equal who got along with Orion was this ogre chieftain. Aldous was one of Orion's few friends, and Orion treasured that.

As for Lokiviria and that lizardfolk lord, well, they'd simply be out of luck.

Moreover, uniting ogres and giants was the only real way to intimidate the nearby blood elf race. Stoneheart Horde, having initially secured a foothold in the south, needed allies and a stable environment around their territory—an environment where they could develop without disturbance.

From the perspective of the Horde's future plans alone, Orion had every reason to help. Bringing the ogres into the Stoneheart Horde's circle of influence was an essential move to maintain stability in the territory and its surroundings.

...

Valkorath Realm, deep-sea region.

In the waters muddied by blood and slime molds, a massive octopus darted forward, stirring wave after wave in its wake.

Run for it!

That was Kraken's first and only thought. At the moment, most of his rear tentacles had been severed. His huge eyes were shot with blood, and a flicker of fear shone within them.

Luckily, the broodmother evolution behind him had decided not to pursue. Kraken was absolutely certain that creature already possessed arch lord-level power—otherwise, he wouldn't have been so thoroughly outmatched.

Kraken had tracked down the broodmother evolution in the slime molds sea, triggering a fierce battle. But it lasted less than half an hour before Kraken fled in disarray.

Half a day later, on the Champions Alliance public channel.

Kraken: "I failed in my hunt! I can confirm that broodmother evolution has truly become an arch lord being."

Kraken shared the results and details of his attempted pursuit, asserting that the broodmother evolution had ascended to arch lord status.

Leonidas: "The moment you started fighting it, I got a lock on its position!"

Leonidas: "Hulk, shall I take it out myself, or do you want a crack at that broodmother evolution?"

Leonidas's words carried a teasing tone; it was hardly surprising Kraken couldn't kill an arch lord-level broodmother evolution.

The gap between an arch lord and a mere Legendary lord was huge. Clearly, when the slime molds demigod took the slime molds broodmother away, she left behind certain fail-safes. Not necessarily because she wanted to keep invading Valkorath Realm, but to give the fungal creatures some chance of survival.

Hulk: "I came here specifically to hunt it—how could I miss this opportunity?"

Orion sounded confident. He knew Kraken's strength at Legendary level was formidable. Yet the broodmother evolution, having entered the deeper sea, had apparently gained even more raw power.

Even so, Orion considered himself stronger still.

Leonidas: "Fine, I'd like to see which of you, you or Squiddy, can last the longest. Heh heh heh!"

Kraken: "I may have lost, but I placed a special marker on it. Finding it again will be much easier."

Kraken: "Hulk, are you sure you want to go after it? That thing is genuinely dangerous!"

Hulk: "Relax. I'm the real danger to watch out for!"

Leonidas: "I like your confidence—I'm starting to warm up to you!"

Kraken: "..."

Since Orion had made his decision, Kraken gave up on talking him out of it.

In private, Kraken messaged Orion:

"This is the ocean region where that broodmother evolution last appeared."

He passed Orion coordinates of the spot where he had clashed with the broodmother evolution. Then Kraken initiated a trade, sending over a small piece of octopus tentacle.

"This is one of my tentacles. Keep it with you; within a certain range, it'll resonate with the special marker I left behind, letting you track down the broodmother evolution. Also, it'll allow you to move freely underwater—think of it as a water-repelling charm."

The tentacle was tiny, about the size of Orion's pinky.

"Thank you!"

Orion stashed away the tentacle, then, with a quick word of thanks, burst into motion and headed straight into the depths of the sea.

...

Titanion Realm, City of Lysinthia.

On the third day after the Tidefang Clan's first appearance, Mist Bay was suddenly packed with all sorts of marine life from the Sea Race. Every Merfolk warrior arrived bearing harpoons or anchors, their gills flaring in and out as they breathed and cried out, a strange sight indeed.

Lysinthia stood atop the city wall, watching Merfolk warriors slowly surface below. Though she kept a calm expression, she was quietly relieved.

No Legendary-level threat had shown up—this was the best news possible.

Lysinthia City had merged with Orion's Lord's Stone, along with a fair number of arrow towers. Coupled with the tidecrab shield warriors, swamp water pythons, swamp crocodiles, and other units stationed here, she was confident in her ability to defend Lysinthia.

"This is Lord Vorluk's territory!"

"For the honor of the Tidefang Clan, drive out the invaders!"

"Destroy their city!"

"..."

As an Alpha-level Merfolk shrieked those words, waves gathered, and a tidal surge of Tidefang Clan Merfolk rushed Mist Bay, charging toward Lysinthia City.

Whoosh!

Whoosh! Whoosh!

The arrow towers along the wall launched their first wave of bolts, and the battle began.

Standing on the ramparts with her hair whipping about, Gorgon Lysinthia let her tresses twist and writhe, morphing into huge black serpents that slithered down the walls into the water, colliding head-on with the oncoming Merfolk warriors.

Her hair seemed limitless, growing back again and again like some otherworldly plant, each wave thicker and more vicious than the last. Soon, churning currents brought seawater right up to Lysinthia's walls.

Raising her sword, Lysinthia let out a piercing cry. At once, all the gorgons, plague crows, and a few land-based troops atop the ramparts leapt into action. Bows, crossbows, spears, and even giant stones smeared with plague-ridden dung all rained down. The all-out battle had begun.

...

Human kingdom, Soaring Bird City.

In last year's dark beast tides, the freshly built walls of Soaring Bird City suffered partial destruction.

However, Alpha-level powers Henrik and Mateo stepped up, stabilizing the situation and promptly taking control of Soaring Bird City themselves. With the dark beast tides having abated, the city plunged back into intense reconstruction.

A few months later, the walls had been fully rebuilt, and the beginnings of new fortresses and structures could be seen sprouting here and there within the city limits.

Chapter 549 549: Exchange of interests

Staring at Soaring Bird City, Torin was seething with anger and envy.

This place was supposed to be his city—his territory.

Yet there was more to his fury than that alone.

"Master, the guards at the city gate want us to pay an entrance tax before letting us through."

"What did you say?"

Torin ground his teeth; his voice and expression had turned almost demonic.

"Master, they want us to pay a tax to get inside!" Mike spoke quietly, his tone full of bitterness.

But that single, humiliating statement was enough to further inflame Torin.

"Fuck!"

"What do they think they're doing?"

"Who's the real lord of this place?!"

To be forced to pay a tax in his own territory, his own city—what an outrage! How utterly humiliating!

Torin reached for the sword at his waist, ready to slaughter the nearby guards. But the instant his hand touched the hilt, he suddenly regained his composure.

"If I can't keep my temper in check over something small, I'll wreck the bigger plan. I must stay calm—I have to hold back.

"It took me so long to establish ties with the Stoneheart Horde; if I lose my head before I gain any real power, those damned nobles will kill me."

"I need to reach Alpha level first. Only then can I assert any real authority here in Soaring Bird City."

Torin took a long, deep breath and exhaled slowly. Regaining his cool, he turned to Mike and Wyatt, his tone icy.

"Follow me."

He rode his beast-blood mount to the Soaring Bird City gate, flung a bag of coins to the guard, and said, "Is this enough?"

"If you think it's not, go report to your commander. Tell him to come talk to me."

"Tell him he can come ask the lord of Soaring Bird City for... an entrance tax!"

Torin's voice was cold, enunciating each word slowly and distinctly. The guards, taken aback, dared neither speak nor stand in his way. With a derisive snort, Torin urged his mount forward into Soaring Bird City.

Mike, Wyatt, and a squad of tall giant bloodline warriors followed him through the gates.

...

Inside the city, in a makeshift tent, Henrik and Mateo sat facing each other, each with a drink in hand. Moments earlier, a guard had reported everything that happened at the gate.

"He's still a noble, after all—he's got some backbone and pride left," Henrik said. Standing behind him was the Earl of Sebastian, and behind that earl stood Grand Duke William of the empire. Opposite them was Mateo, flanked by the Earl of Oliver and Grand Duke Richard.

This powerful backing was exactly why they dared to seize overt control of Soaring Bird City. As for Torin, had it not been for his ties to Princess Ava, he would have been assassinated long ago.

"He must've come back from giant territory with a ton of valuable items," Mateo mused. "Should we take it from him?"

Mateo set down his goblet, letting out a low, rasping chuckle.

"This is Soaring Bird City, and at least nominally he's still the lord here," Henrik replied. "A human lord, robbed in his own territory—do you want Soaring Bird City's reputation in the kingdom to be left in tatters?"

Henrik shook his head, shooting down Mateo's idea. "You're well aware how much these two earldoms prize Soaring Bird City, how huge its future profits will be. Besides, Torin is still Princess Ava's subordinate, isn't he?"

Henrik, being older, conveyed a steadier, wiser aura.

"And what difference does that make?" Mateo snorted.

"That Rose Knight Regiment was wiped out; among the kingdom's nobles, it's a complete joke. Word is Princess Ava's been hiding in Rose Manor ever since—too embarrassed to see anyone!"

Henrik's words only fueled Mateo's contempt. In the human kingdom, while the royal family and the two Grand Dukes stood firmly united on major policies, they still vied with one another internally.

The throne had a deeper foundation than the two Grand Dukes, and those Grand Dukes, joined together, formed a tangled network with the royal family. Few outsiders knew the extent of it; those who did simply chose their sides in silence.

"Mateo, watch your mouth!" Henrik warned. "This isn't your home—it's Soaring Bird City!"

He refused to continue, glaring daggers at Mateo, ready to kill at any moment. "If the King or the Prince heard what you just said, not even the Grand Duke could protect you. If you have a death wish, go somewhere else. Don't interfere with my duties to His Grace."

Under Henrik's menacing stare, Mateo realized he'd gone too far. Still, he was too proud to admit fault, so he merely lowered his head and kept drinking.

"I hope Torin's wise enough not to stir up trouble. As long as he keeps his head down, we can leave him alone," Henrik said. "With two earldoms and the Grand Dukes in play, not even Princess Ava herself can turn the tide here."

Henrik refilled his goblet, adopting the smug expression of a man who controlled the situation.

Meanwhile, Torin had returned to his temporary camp.

...

Once inside, Torin issued two orders.

"Mike, here's a letter to Princess Ava. You must deliver it to Rose Manor in person."

"Let Her Highness know we've gained our first profits from our dealings in giant territory. We'll send her share soon."

"Use this chance to explain what's happened in Soaring Bird City—the difficulties we've run into. Ask for her aid."

It was a straightforward exchange of interests.

Torin didn't believe Princess Ava would do nothing after receiving her cut. Even the smallest move on her part could make life in Soaring Bird City more manageable for him.

"Yes, Master. I'll do it right away!"

Torin nodded. After Mike left to carry out his errand, Torin addressed Wyatt. "Taking our goods to the kingdom's capital would bring bigger profits, but it's more trouble than we can handle. The costs are too high."

"We'll stay here in Soaring Bird City, find a suitable buyer, and trade everything off."

"Trade it, not sell?" Wyatt asked.

"Exactly. Gold is useless to us right now. Holding on to the supplies and resources the Stoneheart Horde needs is a far better choice."

"So, Master, what exactly do we need in exchange?"

"Food, weapons, slaves, equipment—anything the Stoneheart Horde can use."

"But won't that draw a lot of attention?"

"Go ahead. This is Soaring Bird City, the kingdom's farthest fringe. If you name it, they'll be up for a deal."

"I understand!"

Chapter 550 550: killing you will also help me advance

Valkorath Realm, deep-sea region.

Orion followed the coordinates provided by Kraken, searching along the way.

"This is the place, but the broodmother evolution has already vanished!"

Hovering over the site of Kraken's battle with the broodmother evolution, Orion stared at the slime molds layer floating on the surface of the water, a slight frown creasing his brow.

"The tentacle isn't reacting at all. It looks like the broodmother evolution fled this area!"

Orion pondered this. He had already scouted one direction on his way here. If the broodmother evolution had escaped in the direction Kraken took, it probably wouldn't still be chasing after him. That left two remaining possibilities, each covering a large area.

"Never mind. It'll just take a bit more time to search."

Choosing a path, Orion shot off at high speed.

Meanwhile, on land, under the leadership of the Skeleton Rumbold and the Werewolf Lupin, Gustalon, Rendall, and the others were relentlessly pursuing the retreating fungal creatures.

Amid a stormy gust, Gustalon surged forth like an invisible wind blade, slicing down an Alpha slime molds parasitic creature attempting to ambush Thundar from behind.

Screeech!

Thundar pulled his longsword free from the body of a fungal creature and glanced up at the wind blade streaking away.

"Thank you!"

Gustalon was an Alpha level peak elemental lifeform, and Thundar felt incredibly lucky that Gustalon was on their side in the Stoneheart Horde. If he had been an enemy, this stealthy wind elemental would have been everyone's worst nightmare.

"He's stronger—and even more ferocious—than before."

Thundar was awestruck. Upon learning that Onyx, Earthshaker, Gronthar, Dirtclaw, Drakthul... all grew immensely powerful in the other world, many council members, including Thundar himself, were envious.

Still, when they realized they too would eventually rotate into the Valkorath Realm, they were filled with excitement and anticipation.

However, Thundar didn't grasp the brutal reality until he truly faced off against the fungal creatures. Onyx and Dirtclaw, and all the others, had earned their strength through sheer courage and fighting for their lives.

Here, charging into battle too recklessly could lead to getting devoured by the slime molds layer in a split second. The likely outcome? Death, or having your body parasitized by the slime molds.

"Prophet and the others managed to survive. I can do it too!"

Thundar gripped his greatsword tighter, patted his dark fiend mount, and once again charged at an Alpha-level slime molds parasitic creature.

"Orion's subordinates aren't bad at all. Their formation is orderly, they advance and retreat at the right moments, and their coordination is excellent."

The speaker was the Werewolf Lupin. It was his first time working alongside Orion, and he had a favorable impression of the subordinates Orion had specifically asked him to look after.

"You mean those younger ones from a moment ago?"

"This isn't my first time seeing them. Compared to before, they really have grown a lot."

"That just goes to show Orion's faction is getting stronger."

Rumbold had aided Orion before in the Godforsaken Land and had met Rendall, Thundar, and the others. They knew him in return and treated him with respect, often greeting him warmly.

"That wind elemental creature—he's definitely approaching some sort of bottleneck."

Lupin cast his gaze toward Gustalon. Among Orion's subordinates, Gustalon clearly stood out as the most formidable.

With no legendary-level powerhouses currently on the field, the wind-blade-like Gustalon was practically a reaper on the battlefield. Wherever he went, the slime molds creatures were cut down.

"Yes, it looks like Orion will soon have one more Legendary-level subordinate."

Rumbold's voice carried a hint of significance. Having once assisted Orion and now able to exchange information with Vexis and others, Rumbold was well aware of just how rapidly Orion's Stoneheart Horde had been growing.

Back in the Godforsaken Land, only Orion himself was at Legendary level. His subordinates were mostly ordinary Alpha-level individuals.

But now, there was talk of a Legendary-level broodmother holding down Soraya City in the Moonveil Plains. And if this elemental lifeform broke through as well, Orion's faction would be even more formidable.

"Next time we meet, Orion might not need our help at all."

Rumbold spoke with genuine emotion. He felt a profound respect toward anyone with such astonishing talent, like Arthas and Orion.

Elsewhere, out at sea, Orion's expression lit up with delight as the tentacle in his hand began to twitch nonstop. That meant the broodmother evolution was close by—he had chosen the right direction.

Clang... hiss...

It sounded like a blade being unsheathed, its edge tearing through seawater and air, splitting the void. The broodmother evolution had made the first move.

With a muffled pop, Orion reacted instantly, raising his trident to block the blow with its barbed tip.

In the next moment, Orion flew downward like a cannonball, then vanished from sight in an instant.

Clang!

The sound of metal crashing against metal rang out. Both Orion and the broodmother evolution were knocked back, landing on the surface of the sea. As Orion steadied himself, he finally got a clear look at the broodmother evolution.

It was a Bone Blade Fiend.

Originally a bone monster hailing from the Necro Realm, the Bone Blade Fiend's entire body was covered in bone plating that resembled countless blades.

Orion fixed his gaze on this Bone Blade Fiend. Standing on the water's surface, it spread its many bladed bone wings, exuding a fearsome, awe-inspiring aura.

Only moments ago, it had wrapped itself in its bone wings to withstand Orion's Instant Impact. Judging by its terrifying strength, this broodmother evolution had to be arch lord level.

No wonder Kraken had been at a disadvantage against it.

"Devouring you will push me even further."

Its hoarse voice carried a metallic rasp. From not too far away, the broodmother evolution clearly had plans for Orion.

"What a coincidence—killing you will also help me advance."

Orion wouldn't let it escape again. Besides, the fact that this broodmother evolution could speak indicated it possessed quite a high level of intelligence.

Boom!

They clashed once more. As Orion replied, both sides launched sneak attacks simultaneously.

However, this time, the broodmother evolution was hurled backward, sending up towering waves.

In his normal state, Orion was already able to wield arch lord–level power at full force. Gaining the upper hand, he had no intention of letting up on his assault.

In a flash, Orion unleashed Instant Impact again, locking onto the broodmother evolution and charging forward.

Crack!

Splash!

Amid the sounds of bones shattering and seawater churning, Orion zeroed in on the swirling fragments of bone filling the air. He realized with a grim expression that he had just blasted the broodmother evolution to pieces.

But in the next heartbeat, Orion's pupils constricted, every muscle in his body snapping taut. Those scattered bone shards began to reassemble in midair, transforming into innumerable blades of varying sizes that slashed at Orion from every angle.

This was precisely the same move the broodmother evolution had used to deal Kraken a severe blow—through this technique, it had severed countless of Kraken's tentacles.