

Titan King 771

Chapter 771: To Kill an Archlord

“So, this is the Shadow Army,” Orion murmured, his gaze sweeping across the battlefield below.

Countless dark forms flickered in and out of existence, weaving through the chaos. They would materialize only when an enemy was exhausted or had overextended, their attacks sudden and lethal.

“They have their weaknesses,” Alexander stated, his tone as flat as the barren plains around them. “They cannot hold a line. To send them into a direct melee is to misuse their strength.”

He spoke as if assessing a shipment of grain rather than his own elite soldiers.

“But for flanking, for assassinations, for running down a broken foe... they are peerless.”

“Don’t sell them short, my friend,” Orion countered, shaking his head. He saw more than just assassins. He saw a force whose true strength was masked by its unorthodox nature. They were not meant to be fodder for the grinder.

“Every shadow is a survivor, born from slaughter and death. I have every confidence in them. But they are not legionaries; they have not learned the shield wall or the phalanx. The heart of the battle does not belong to them.”

Orion conceded the point with a nod. In the crush of a pitched battle, the will of the individual warrior was often sublimated to the unified strength of the cohort. Singular prowess could be blunted by sheer mass and discipline.

“Have you faced their kind before?” Alexander asked, his gaze also fixed on the unfolding carnage below.

At the very front, clashing with the vanguard of undead, were the true denizens of this corrupted land: Shadow Banshees whose wails could turn a warrior's mind to jelly, Night Stalkers that moved with an unnatural fluidity, and hulking, nameless things of grasping tentacles.

The banshees and stalkers were alien, creatures from a different reality, and they did not fear the undead in the way a mortal man would.

Some banshees unleashed psychic assaults, seizing control of the very skeletons sent against them. Some stalkers seemed to know the nature of the unliving, sidestepping the mindless first charge with contemptuous ease.

"We have, but not in such numbers," Orion admitted, his eyes narrowed on the fight. "The infernal spawn we fought on the Dusk Continent had their own ways. Their hellfire could scour a wraith from existence in a single blast."

"And the Ashenveil Sprites... skeletons that drew too near them would simply crumble, their necromantic bindings dissolving into nothing."

"But we held the advantage. Once we slew their lords, our own champions broke them. Few survived."

Alexander's expression remained grim. "The situation is not as we predicted. If we are to survive, we must first seize a place where we can make a stand. That means the southern coast. With the sea at our backs, we can halve the pressure on our forces."

"The Sea Folk might raid," Orion noted.

"A small risk," Alexander replied with a dismissive flick of his wrist. "The sea is its own cauldron of war. The great houses of the deep have no time to trouble themselves with the squabbles of land-dwellers."

As he spoke, a profound gravity settled over him.

“Protect our necromancers. They are the key. Without the undead legions, our armies would be broken and sent fleeing back to their home realms. Queen Lolth’s spider-brood... they are not enough to turn this tide.”

Isabella’s cavalry and Lolth’s spiders were being ground down. The Banshees fought a brutal, retreating battle, their numbers dwindling, their territory shrinking with every passing hour.

“Their losses are heavy,” Orion observed. “Why does their Archlord not show herself? Does she feel no pain for her people?”

“You mistake their nature,” Alexander said, his voice devoid of emotion. “To the dark races, followers are tools, not kin. Their own life is paramount.”

“She will not appear until the other two Archlords arrive to support her. These creatures value their wretched lives above all else.”

He wasn’t sneering; he was stating a fact of the cosmos. In the endless wars he had witnessed, this was the common thread. Power sought self-preservation above all.

Even Leonidas, even the Deputy Commander himself, had been that way for a long time. It was not a judgment, merely an observation.

Orion fell silent. He had fought his share of Archlords, and their temperament was much as Alexander described.

On Titanion, the white dragon Frostsire and the Seadragon King’s avatars, upon discovering Orion was a Transcendent warrior, had not escalated the conflict. They had chosen to parley, to seek a resolution that benefited both sides.

A resolution that benefited both sides.

The thought struck Orion with the force of a physical blow. He was learning something new, something vital.

The gulf between a Lord and an Archlord was not merely one of power, but of perspective. Their view of the world, their very calculus of action, was different.

He had to learn this. The future of the Stoneheart Horde depended on it—half on stable growth, the other half on inter-realm war.

War was simple: you fought to win, by any means necessary. But creating the stability needed for growth? That required something more. It required diplomacy.

And diplomacy, he was beginning to understand, was an art form—a delicate dance of politics, economics, history, and culture, all employed through negotiation, maneuvering, and sometimes, the threat of annihilation, simply to carve out a space of peace.

“We push forward,” Alexander declared, his eyes pulling back from the battlefield. The blood and violence below could no longer touch him. He had learned long ago to encase his heart in ice.

“We force her out.”

“Deeper into their territory?” Orion questioned, a flicker of doubt crossing his face. “That’s a risk, my friend. If they turn the tables, we’ll be caught in a pincer.”

“The shadows I cast ahead have returned. The armies of the two Archlords to the north are already in pursuit.”

“We are out of time. We must crush the southern host before they arrive.”

Orion took a deep breath, the foul air of the battlefield filling his lungs. He nodded.

Pincered from the north and south. Compared to this, his and Leonidas’s campaign on the Dusk Continent had been a simple conquest. There, they had Onyx’s fortress at Red Moon Valley, a stable anchor with a teleportation array that allowed for constant reinforcement. They had a secure rear from which to launch their expansion. Here, there was no safety.

“Alexander,” Orion began, his voice low and intense. “You and the Deputy Commander... do you have a way to pinpoint her? The Shadow Banshee Archlord?”

He leaned forward, his eyes gleaming with a hunter’s light. “If we can find her, perhaps we can kill her before the others arrive.”

Alexander didn’t answer immediately. He neither confirmed nor denied it, but the subtle shift in his posture was enough.

“You do, don’t you?”

A thrill shot through Orion. He had spoken on a whim, but he saw now that Alexander, the master strategist, might already possess the means.

“Let’s go,” Alexander said, a chillingly calm smile touching his lips.

“Perhaps we can try.”

Chapter 772: Burn Her Out

In the unknown territories of the north, a voice like stones grinding in the deep earth boomed.

“These damned insects from another world. What is their endgame?”

The speaker was Mokka, an Abyssal Devil Ray, whose words resonated from deep within his gut with a thick, benthic tremor. In this form, his body was perhaps only thirty feet long, a far cry from the colossal beast Alexander had described. Clearly, Mokka possessed the power to alter his size.

“They are shifting their forces south,” came a rich, throaty reply. “Towards the coast. They seek defensible ground.”

A pause, laden with contemptuous amusement. "Or perhaps they have dealings with the creatures of the deep and seek the protection of the Sea Folk."

The speaker was Sphinx, a Dark Sphinx and, more remarkably, a she-lion among Archlords. She was a vision of wild regality. Her powerful torso was crisscrossed by a harness of black leather and dull gold, leaving her muscled shoulders and midriff bare.

A battle-kilt of hardened leather plates was cinched at her narrow waist, and from behind it, a long black tail ending in a tuft of coarse hair twitched and swayed with predatory impatience. Her gaze was fixed on the southern horizon, as if her eyes could pierce the very clouds and look into the abyssal trenches of the sea.

"The Sea Folk can barely protect themselves," Mokka rumbled, dismissing her second theory. He had his own quiet contacts with a certain power in the Trident Sea Region and knew the truth of it. The great houses(tribe) of the ocean were mired in their own endless wars. "They have no charity to spare for these land-crawling pests."

"Then it's territory they want," Sphinx mused, a cruel smile playing on her lips. "A foothold by the sea, to drag this out until the great feast begins. Heh heh heh... one must admit, their mysterious Archlord has a certain cunning."

She chuckled, a low, dangerous sound. Mokka, whose tastes were as alien as his form, was utterly unmoved by her feral charm.

"Did you call me all the way out here just to make haste to rescue that little strumpet, Selinda?" Sphinx purred, her eyes narrowing. Selinda was the name of the Shadow Banshee Archlord, and when two rival queens were brought into proximity, sparks were bound to fly.

"We act on the Master's command," Mokka stated flatly, his great body turning towards the south. "We are to unite. We are to take this continent. We will give the outsiders no quarter."

He was not driven by any affection for Selinda, but by the cold calculus of command. To ignore this threat was to invite disaster.

“Oh, relax, old long-tail. The banshee queen won’t die so quickly,” Sphinx drawled. “Besides, consider this: if we rush in and save her from this otherworldly Archlord, what’s to stop him from turning his army on our lands next? A little pressure on Selinda, the loss of a little territory... might that not be beneficial for her neighbors?”

Her laughter echoed, sharp as broken glass.

The continent was only so large. The arrival of a new Archlord with a formidable army meant a new power would carve out its own domain. That was inevitable. The will of the mighty being they both served was to unite and drive out all enemies. That will was absolute.

However, there was always room to maneuver in the execution. One could, for instance, slow the pace of reinforcement. Delay, just a little.

Let the Shadow Banshees bleed the enemy forces dry. Or one could, in the chaos, quietly seize a few parcels of the banshees’ land. Such were the thoughts swirling in Sphinx’s treacherous heart—to profit from a neighbor’s misfortune without overtly breaking the rules.

“Sphinx. Do you mean to defy the Master’s will?” Mokka’s voice dropped, losing its tremor and gaining a deadly edge. “The south cannot be lost. Selinda cannot be allowed to fall. If you delay, I will report your insubordination to the Master myself.”

Mokka was a true believer. He would not countenance treason. He would go to Selinda’s aid, and Sphinx would go with him.

“This is an opportunity, Sphinx,” he pressed, his tone shifting. “We cannot miss it. The three of us... united... we can crush this Archlord’s avatar and devour his army.”

Sphinx’s mocking smile finally faded. Mokka was right. It was an opportunity. A rare one.

After a long, tense silence, she stretched like a great cat. “Very well, Mokka,” she sighed dramatically. “Have it your way. Let us go and rescue that little witch from her troubles.”

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Deep within the Shadow Banshee's territory, the arrival of Orion and Alexander had not drawn out Archlord Selinda. She remained hidden.

"If she will not come out," Alexander's voice, cold as the void, sounded at Orion's ear, "then we will burn her out."

Orion watched as Alexander produced a scroll that seemed woven from captured starlight. Next came a heavy sacrificial brazier of obsidian, intricately carved. Finally, he placed a single, flawless gem of purest light beside it.

Alexander tore the scroll. Reality groaned as a vast magical formation bloomed across the sky, its lines of power spreading to cover the heavens as far as the eye could see.

He then began placing common offerings into the brazier—dried herbs, animal bones, shards of iron—in a precise, arcane sequence. When the last item was placed, Alexander bit his own thumb and began to draw runes in the air.

Golden blood, impossibly bright, flowed from the wound. The runes he painted hung in the air like living things, a script of pure light, before diving into the void. At the same time, the offerings in the brazier dissolved, vanishing like snow in a furnace.

Orion stared, his expression hardening. Alexander's avatar, a being at the peak of the Legendary tier, bled with the golden ichor of the divine. Most Archlords could not claim such vitality.

As the golden runes vanished, the formation in the sky began to tremble. The lines and symbols shimmered, fading, not into nothingness, but melting together, coalescing into searing, golden scars upon the firmament.

The Scars of Heaven. They grew wider, their light growing more intense with every passing second.

"The Rite of Sacred Radiance," Alexander announced, his voice carrying not just to Orion, but across the entire landscape, a clear message for their hidden foe. "The circle is complete. Holy light will fall from these rifts. It will scour this land. In its brilliance, all shadows will perish. All darkness will be unmade."

Orion said nothing. He watched the golden wounds in the sky, waiting to see what manner of destruction they would unleash.

Suddenly, a single beam of immaculate light lanced down from the highest rift. It struck the earth like a spotlight on a celestial stage, a pillar of gold imbued with a terrifying, holy power.

Chapter 773: Another Transcendent

The holy light fell.

The golden wounds in the sky bled radiance, widening as they poured their searing benediction upon the land. Below, where the light touched the earth, the Shadow Banshees that could not flee in time simply dissolved, their final, silent screams absorbed by the brilliance.

Swathes of their kind were unmade in an instant.

Nor were the other corrupted things spared. Where the holy light fell upon their twisted forms, they ignited like oil-doused torches, their flesh burning away in plumes of foul-smelling, purified smoke.

It was a power unlike anything Orion had ever witnessed—a single spell that commanded the entire sky. It was brutal. It was absolute.

He couldn't help but glance at Alexander. The assassin stood motionless, his face an impassive mask, his senses stretched thin, tasting the vibrations of the void.

"What is this power, Alexander?" Orion asked, swallowing hard.

"The might of a being of Light, channeled from its celestial domain," Alexander replied, his voice flat. "As for its potency... you see for yourself. If the formation is not broken, the light will only intensify as it

feeds on the lives it consumes. It will eventually burn through the forest, through the soil, through the very bedrock, until it scours the void itself. Nothing that serves the darkness will escape."

Alexander's tone was so utterly detached. The countless lives being immolated across the landscape were, to him, no more than ants under a magnifying glass. Orion had seen the power of Arthas and Leonidas, and while formidable, it was nothing compared to the apocalyptic grandeur of this ritual.

"This light," Alexander stated with chilling conviction, "will drive back all my enemies."

If Selinda did not show herself, her entire race would be offered up as fuel for the fire.

"This is... excessive," Orion admitted. He possessed no such magic. He had never even conceived of it.

"You find this excessive?" Alexander asked, a ghost of something unreadable in his tone. "And the true power of Arthas or Leonidas, you do not?"

Orion fell silent. Then, a frown creased his brow. Alexander's words implied that he had not, in fact, seen their true power. That what he had witnessed was merely the tip of the iceberg.

The thought lodged in his mind and refused to be moved.

They have been playing games, he realized with a jolt. They haven't been taking any of this seriously.

And why would they? This world was crawling with demigods and dominated by Archlords. Faced with such impossible odds, his allies had shown no fear, no hesitation.

They had a quiet confidence that Orion now understood was not arrogance. It was certainty. A certainty born from the knowledge that they held the power to carve a sweet, bloody piece of this world for themselves, and there was nothing anyone could do to stop them.

The realization was both humbling and exhilarating.

As Orion processed this, the rain of light continued, its holy strands falling like silk, like thread, like knives. The entire territory was bathed in its fatal glory—a divine reaping machine.

"Such an irritating light!"

A voice, sharp and hateful, echoed from the distance. A patch of absolute darkness bloomed in the void, spreading like a pool of ink to meet the celestial radiance, and where they touched, light and shadow annihilated one another.

Orion's focus snapped to the source of the voice. A woman now hovered in the air, clad in a flowing gown the color of a starless night. Her skin was alabaster, her eyes held the darkness of a tomb, and her figure was a sinuous, deadly curve.

She pointed a single, elegant finger toward the heavens. A sphere of condensed shadow shot upward like a cannonball, exploding at the apex of the sky in a massive, silent firework of pure void.

"Before my Shadowfinger, all holy formations will shatter."

Selinda, the Banshee Queen, had revealed herself. With a single gesture, she had broken the Rite of Sacred Radiance. To Orion, the display was one of incredible, inscrutable power.

"You gathered your strength while hiding and used a prepared artifact," Alexander's voice cut through the air, sharp and dismissive. "Who are you trying to frighten?"

With a single sentence, he stripped the veneer of mystique from her grand entrance.

Orion understood instantly. Given enough time to gather his own power, he could have shattered the formation as well. A spell of that size was spread too thin to have a truly resilient defense.

"Kill her," Alexander commanded. "She only dared to appear because the other two Archlords are using an artifact to reinforce her."

His voice still echoed in the air, but his physical form had already vanished, melting back into the void.

Orion, however, was not slow to react. The moment he confirmed Selinda was a physical being and not an illusion, he unleashed his Instant Impact.

Thump.

The sound was dull, the sound of a blow striking empty air. His attack had failed.

He now stood where Selinda had been floating, his trident held ready, his eyes scanning the oppressive darkness that had descended. The Banshee Queen's body had simply ceased to be the moment before his trident would have struck home.

"Such a brave, strong, and handsome giant," a voice like honeyed poison whispered from all around him. "We are both children of the abyss, you and I. Why must you be so cruel to poor me?"

"If you were to sue for peace, Selinda would gladly serve you, and fill your nights with such ecstasy you would forget the waking world."

Her voice was as enchanting as Delilah's, but Orion was no callow youth. He recognized the offer for what it was: a venomous trap, a soul-snare for the weak-willed. He had no interest in the poisoned chalices offered by queens of shadow.

"She's mine," Alexander's voice spoke directly into his mind. "Stay alert. The other two are coming."

Orion focused, trying to pinpoint his ally's location, but it was useless. Alexander was as untraceable as Selinda. The feeling was profoundly frustrating. To be teamed with a partner against a foe, only to find yourself unable to land a blow on either of them... it was a warrior's nightmare.

In that moment, he felt a flicker of understanding for Rendall, for Lilith, for all those who fought at his side, wanting desperately to help but finding themselves outmatched.

"They are two minutes out. Prepare yourself." The Deputy Commander's voice boomed, seemingly from the sky itself.

Orion looked around but saw no one. It was the third time in as many minutes that he had been struck by the sheer, untraceable power of his allies.

"The Wind Barrier is forming. The battlefield will be divided. Hold your ground. Do not fall in some forgotten ditch."

This time, Orion could feel it. The air around him grew thick, the wind beginning to stir with an unnatural, directed force. A sliver of his confidence returned.

Three minutes later, the void shimmered, and the hulking form of the Abyssal Devil Ray, Mokka, and the predatory shape of the Dark Sphinx, Sphinx, materialized a short distance away. Their powerful gazes locked onto Orion.

"Who are you?" Sphinx hissed, her eyes widening slightly as she felt the power radiating from him.

Mokka rumbled, a tremor of shock in his deep voice. "Can it be? Another Transcendent?"

Chapter 774: The First to Kneel

A flicker of defiant inspiration seized Orion. He looked upon the two Archlords, beings of immense power and cosmic dread, and a slow, wicked smile spread across his face.

"Now," he said, his voice calm yet carrying over the rising wind, "which one of you will be the first to kneel?"

"Kneel?"

"Kneel?"

The two Archlords stared, momentarily baffled. The sheer, unadulterated arrogance of the statement, combined with the giant's mocking grin, was so unexpected that it took them a second to process.

Then, fury erupted.

"You court death!" Sphinx snarled.

"Insolence!" Mokka boomed.

But before either could act on their rage, the wind rose to a gale. It was a strange wind, unsettling to the soul.

At one moment it shrieked like a dying crane, the next it sounded like weeping from a distant, forgotten age, and then it would fall to a murmur so faint it was like whispers in the dark.

The very air grew thick with roiling elemental power. A shimmering, green barrier descended, partitioning the world.

Mokka and Sphinx had no time to react. An invisible force seized them, pulling them apart, separating them as if they were on opposite sides of a vast, growing chasm. Though they were still close in physical distance, the translucent wall of wind between them was a gulf as wide as the heavens.

"A Sealing Ward!" Mokka's voice reached Orion, sharp with a terror that bordered on disbelief.

Orion himself was stunned. To so silently and effortlessly imprison and separate two Archlords... to be on the receiving end of such a power would be horrifying. As an ally, however, it filled him with a profound sense of security.

"The Wind Ward is a sealing magic," the Deputy Commander's voice echoed in his mind, seeming to come from both the edge of the sky and a whisper at his ear. "It will repel all attacks. Nothing short of a demigod can breach it."

"If I were to release the ward, you would face their combined strength, and the resonance of our power would draw enemy reinforcements within minutes."

"Therefore, you have two options: kill your opponent, or hold him here until Alexander finishes his own hunt and comes to your aid."

Kill or stall. Orion understood. Either path demanded everything he had.

At that moment, Mokka swelled to his full, hundred-meter glory, a living mountain of abyssal flesh shrouded in black mist. Without a second thought, he hurled his immense bulk at the shimmering green wall.

CLANG!

The sound was like two continents colliding, a deafening metallic shriek that made Orion's head ring.

He's distracted. Now is the time.

"How do you wish to die?" Orion asked, raising his trident. The Flame of Will at its tip seemed to sense his intent, blazing brighter, hotter.

"Hahaha... a mere Legend at his peak, speaking with such arrogance!" Mokka roared, shaking off the reverberations of the impact. He had only been testing the barrier's strength. "Who gave you such courage?"

Since the ward was unbreakable, and he was sealed in with only this one warrior, Mokka's fear gave way to contempt. Even if this giant was a Transcendent, how powerful could he truly be?

In Mokka's estimation, he was worth one lesser Archlord at best. At the same time, he could probe the creature, learn of the faction that dared to challenge them.

But Orion was not taking the bait.

"Since you won't choose, I will choose for you."

Orion thrust his trident skyward. The Spear Barrage materialized—countless spears of blood-red, solidified spidersilk hanging in the air, their tips aimed with murderous intent at the Abyssal Devil Ray.

With a sound like a thousand whips cracking, they launched.

Faced with the storm, Mokka was unconcerned. The black mist around him roiled, and a layer of fine, overlapping scales erupted from his skin, forming a dense coat of abyssal armor. The first wave of spears hammered against it, striking sparks and filling the air with a cacophony of screeching metal.

From a distance, Orion watched, his expression unchanged. Abyssal creatures were known for their resilience and regenerative abilities; he was not surprised. A wide, scattered attack would not be enough.

He swept his trident again. The hovering spears in the air began to writhe and merge, twisting together to form larger, thicker, sharper projectiles.

"Fall," he commanded.

The second wave descended with a roar that tore through the air.

Skrr-CHUNK! Pshk!

No matter how thick the armor, under the concentrated, three-hundred-and-sixty-degree bombardment, weaker points in Mokka's defense gave way.

"ROOOAAAR!"

With a furious bellow from the Devil Ray, the spears still raining down upon him stopped dead, frozen a yard from his body, held fast by an invisible force.

"ROOOAAAR!"

With a second roar, the spears were hurled back, turning on their master.

"Interesting," Orion noted. The roars were sonic attacks. They not only had the power to paralyze, but to manipulate objects through sheer sound pressure. It was a rare ability. He'd only seen its like from the great whale broodmother of the fungal creatures, and Mokka's power was a pale imitation of that.

As the spears flew back at him, Orion activated his Battle Will Surge. A pulse of pure power erupted from him, and he instantly reclaimed control of the projectiles, halting them in mid-air.

Across the enclosure, the wounds Mokka had sustained were already closing, wreathed in abyssal energy. Within a few breaths, he was whole again.

"An enviable healing ability," Orion remarked softly. It was the great advantage of the abyss-spawn.

"Vile crawler," Mokka hissed, his gaze fixed on Orion. "I smell a familiar scent on you. The scent of the abyss... but it is faint, diluted! What race are you?"

The abyssal energy on Orion was not truly weak, but insulting an enemy was standard practice.

"I am of the Giant tribe," Orion replied, his face a placid mask. He made no move to attack again, instead engaging his foe in dialogue.

"Giant?" Mokka scoffed. "Impossible. I have seen the giants of the abyss. They are tusked and brutish. They are not puny crawlers like you."

"You will believe me soon enough."

Orion's expressionless face suddenly broke into a cold, predatory smile—the smile of a being who held the fate of another in his hands.

Chapter 775: How Will You Compensate Me?

Orion reached out, his left hand closing around the shaft of a blood-red spear. Its tines were slick with a fluid as black as ink—the abyssal ichor of Mokka. He brought the spearhead to his lips.

He licked the black blood, a coppery, alien taste flooding his senses, and swallowed.

Then, like a profane shaman, he began to chant.

"Spectre of Dragons, sleeping in endless night, hear my call! Through this blood, I offer a tribute you hunger for! Descend and claim your prize, O Ghost Dragon!"

In Mokka's disbelieving eyes, a tempest of power—lightning, abyssal energy, and raw vital force—began to swirl within Orion's abdomen. The energies fused, coalescing into a vortex of sanguine, ghostly mist that was both beautiful and terrifying.

It erupted from Orion's core as a low, ancient draconic roar echoed from the depths of reality.

By now, even a fool would have known something was terribly wrong. Mokka thrashed his long tail, hurling his immense body forward in a desperate charge to break the ritual.

He was too late.

A dragon forged of blood-red ectoplasm surged from the mist. It was the Ghost Dragon. But this was not like the one Kian had once summoned; this one was more ancient, more malevolent, and infinitely more powerful.

Time itself seemed to stop.

Mokka's charge froze mid-lunge. His body, his mind, his very soul were seized and held fast in the Ghost Dragon's unyielding grip.

"I told you," Orion's voice boomed, cold and resonant, "I am of the Giant tribe."

He activated his Titan Form. Power flooded him, his body swelling, muscles coiling like pythons under skin that now crawled with glowing runes, giving it the appearance of shimmering scales.

A nimbus of crimson rage enveloped him as he locked his will onto the paralyzed Archlord. He launched himself forward, crossing the distance in a single, explosive instant.

His trident plunged into the region of Mokka's skull. Lightning, fire, and pure concussive force pumped into the helpless creature. The raw thrill of the kill twisted Orion's face into a predatory snarl. To have an enemy of this magnitude utterly at his mercy, to unleash his full power without restraint—it was a glorious, savage ecstasy. Mokka's body, mind, and soul crumbled and broke under the relentless, overwhelming assault.

The kill was flawless, executed with the precision of a master hunter. First, the spear barrage to draw blood. Then, the dialogue to stall for time while the blood rite was performed. Finally, the summoning of the Ghost Dragon to immobilize his prey for the slaughter. It was all according to the plan he had conceived in the heat of battle, and his enemy was annihilated for it. It was the easiest battle against an Archlord he had ever fought.

Soon, he felt Mokka's presence wink out of existence. As the long-awaited victor's coffer materialized in the air, Orion finally allowed himself a breath of relief.

At the same instant, with his focus lapsing, the Ghost Dragon's summons ended. Mokka's physical form began to decay at a visible rate, crumbling into a fine dust that scattered on the unnatural wind. He was the sacrifice. His body, his mind, his soul—all now belonged to the Ghost Dragon.

"You have cost me a faithful servant."

A voice, chilling and ancient, spoke from directly behind Orion.

"How will you compensate me for my loss?"

Every hair on Orion's body stood on end. A cold dread, sharper than any blade, shot up his spine. He tried to move, to turn, but he was frozen solid, held fast by an unseen power.

One moment, he was the jailer. Now, he was the prisoner. The wheel of fate had turned with sickening speed.

Who? Who is this?

he screamed in his mind, but only silence answered.

He scanned his surroundings. The Wind Ward was still intact. That meant no demigod had breached it from the outside; the Deputy Commander would have warned him.

The enemy had to have come from within the ward. From the now-dead Mokka. It wasn't Mokka himself—the victor's coffer was proof of his death, and the Ghost Dragon had consumed his essence. That left only one possibility: a will-projection. An echo of a demigod's consciousness, hidden within his servant.

"Heh heh... truly unbelievable," the voice mused, a sound like dry leaves skittering over gravestones. "That a lofty being like the Ghost Dragon would answer your call, that it would deign to send a phantom to bind your foe."

"If its gaze had been turned on me, perhaps I, too, would now be a sacrifice. Its power is such that I had no chance to even save my follower. So, my loss... you will repay."

Orion could not see the being, could not sense it, but he could feel his own body. A sliver of cold energy touched his back, sinking through his skin and muscle, and began to spread. It was an invasion, an attempt to seize control of him, to possess him and make him its own. He knew the feeling all too well. It was the same violation he had suffered under the Flower Goddess's curse.

He struggled, but he was pinned, his own powers locked away. To be so utterly helpless again ignited a burning, desperate hunger for greater strength.

Wait, a thought pierced through his panic. The Wind Ward. The Deputy Commander set it. He must be able to sense this! He must know what's happening!

There was still hope. He just had to endure. He had to fight until help arrived.

Elsewhere, within the folds of the Wind Ward, the Deputy Commander Edward had, moments before, been speechless. For an esteemed patron such as himself, trapping an Archlord was a simple enough matter. The difficulty lay in maintaining the integrity of the ward while doing so. But his astonishment had a different source.

Orion had killed his target even faster than Alexander. A middle-tier Archlord, even an avatar, annihilated in minutes. It was an unbelievable feat.

"This one's battle record," Edward murmured to himself, "is already approaching the Commander's."

It was no exaggeration. Edward had watched Arthas, Alexander, and Leonidas grow. He knew precisely what they had been capable of at the peak of the Legendary tier. The power Orion had just displayed had already surpassed them at the same stage and was closing in on the level of the Commander himself.

"When this one ascends to Archlord..." A rare smile touched Edward's lips. "The Champions Alliance will gain another pillar of strength."

But the smile had not yet settled before it froze, his ancient eyes widening in alarm.

Chapter 776: Calamity and Opportunity

"A demigod's will-projection," the Deputy Commander breathed, his voice tight. "So, it was there after all."

He snorted, a sharp, cold sound. For a moment, he prepared to release the echo of his own demigod-will, to locally shatter the Wind Ward and intervene.

But then he paused.

His ancient eyes narrowed, focusing intently on Orion and the faint, shadowy form that clung to his back. In the end, he did nothing. He held the Wind Ward steady, but his full attention was now a burning lens fixed upon Orion.

Inside the ward, the battle for Orion's body raged on.

To be imprisoned within your own flesh is a torment beyond words. Helplessness, frustration, a suffocating powerlessness—a tide of negative emotions washed over him, threatening to erode the bedrock of his will. His muscles, locked in a single pose for what felt like an eternity, began to cramp and burn.

The silent, screaming rage, with no outlet and no release, poisoned his mind and seeped into his very soul. It was agony.

And yet, just as he felt he might break, a new power stirred within him. The Curse of a Hundred Blossoms, the dormant brand upon his chest, sensed an opportunity. Perhaps it was the presence of a rival predator, or perhaps it simply saw its chance to finally claim the vessel it coveted.

It bloomed into being, a third combatant entering the war for his soul.

"Eh? What is this?" the invading will hissed inside his mind. "This essence... it is... divine power! Why do you carry the power of a god?"

A moment of confusion, then realization.

"No... this divine power is weak, a mere remnant. Hahahaha! To think such pure divinity was hidden within you! What a feast! What a glorious supplement for my own power! Fate smiles upon me! You, and this divine echo, are both MINE!"

The demigod's will, which had been focused on consuming Orion's consciousness, turned with ravenous glee to attack the power of the Flower Goddess. For the first time in minutes, the pressure on Orion's own mind lessened.

He took a metaphorical breath of relief. While he had been waiting for the Deputy Commander's aid, a part of him had been hoping for this very thing. As predicted, when faced with a threat, the dormant curse had been roused to action.

And so, a silent, desperate war raged within him.

Three forces—the divine power of the curse, the will of the demigod, and Orion's own consciousness—crashed against each other like phantom torrents. Orion's will was, by far, the weakest of the three. It was a battle fought with no sound, yet fraught with more peril than any physical conflict.

The Deputy Commander watched, his expression grim. It was impossible not to worry. But still, he did not intervene.

In the third pocket of the Wind Ward, the world had been plunged into shadow. It was a churning vortex of darkness, a dreamscape where the air thrummed with the essence of death, decay, and slaughter.

For a time, there was only the sound of the black whirlwind, consuming all light and motion.

Then, a flicker of steel gleamed within the storm. Claws of solidified shadow lashed out, trying to tear the darkness asunder.

A low, pained, resentful roar echoed from the heart of the maelstrom, and then, silence.

Drip. Drip. Drip.

The sound of liquid striking the ground broke the quiet. It shattered not only the silence, but the shadow-dream itself. The darkness receded. The shadows bled away.

Alexander appeared, standing alone in the wind ward. In one hand, he held a dagger that dripped fresh blood. With the other, he dragged the corpse of the Shadow Banshee, Selinda. Her robes were shredded, her body a canvas of deep, mortal wounds. The form that had once been a vision of deadly grace was now a broken, ruined thing. Alexander gave it no heed.

"Hm? The battle is over?" he murmured, his gaze immediately shifting to Orion's section of the ward. He saw Orion standing perfectly still and let out a soft sound of surprise.

"Hulk drew the short straw," the Deputy Commander's voice explained in his mind. "The will-projection was on his target. I don't know what constitution the boy has, to be such a magnet for those who would seize another's body."

"He killed his target before I killed mine?" Alexander asked, a note of disbelief in his tone.

"Yes. Faster than you. Faster than Leonidas or the boy wonder, too."

Alexander fell silent. The implication was clear. In a contest of equals, at this same stage of power, they might not have been Orion's match.

"This one," Edward continued, his voice heavy with significance, "is very likely on the same path of peerless dominion as the Commander."

This was the highest praise, and the greatest hope for the Champions Alliance. They had not recruited Orion simply because he had reached the Legendary tier.

There were many Legends on the Survivor's Platform. Few were ever invited. From the beginning, it had been Orion's ability to fight and win against foes far beyond his rank that they had coveted. If he could maintain that ability all the way to Archlord, or even demigod... he would be their most successful investment.

"Will he succeed?" Alexander asked, his voice now devoid of its usual chill.

"The possibility is high. If he survives this, he will be able to ascend to the rank of Archlord ahead of his time."

That was it. This was Orion's great trial. His calamity, and his opportunity.

The curse of the Flower Goddess, the will of the demigod—at their core, they were both manifestations of faith-based power. If the battle between them could draw out more of the Flower Goddess's energy, and if Orion could then use the technique the Commander had devised long ago to sever the conscious wills from that power... then a vast sea of pure, untethered faith energy would remain within him. It would be the fuel and the foundation for his ascension to Archlord.

This was what the Deputy Commander had been considering. This was why he had stayed his hand.

This high-risk, high-reward gambit was a path that Arthas, Alexander, and Leonidas had all walked before, more than once. It was why they faced demigods not with the fear of a mouse before a cat, but with the challenging spirit of a true rival.

"His growth is too fast," Alexander said, a hint of envy in his voice. "It took Leonidas centuries to become an Archlord. How many years has it been for him?"

"Such things are a double-edged sword," Edward's voice replied, old and wise. "Rapid growth means less time for experience to settle. His foundations will be shallow. The faction he builds will be green and untested."

"He will have time enough to build his foundations once he is an Archlord," Alexander countered. "It is better than being stuck at the peak of the Legendary tier. The rank is different. The perspective, the very world, is different."

Alexander's voice was no longer cold. He looked at Orion, his gaze filled with a profound and fervent hope.

Chapter 777: The Commander's Blade

The war of wills was silent. It was a hurricane ravaging the sea of his consciousness, a lightning storm illuminating a chaotic darkness. In the endless struggle between the Flower Goddess and the demigod's will, Orion waited for a rescue that never came.

Ridiculous... so ridiculous... a thought echoed in the storm. No one is coming to save me.

To rely on others is to invite despair...

The only one who can save me... is me. It has to be me.

This was not just a thought; it was a roar from the very depths of his soul. In the agonizing crucible of that wait, Orion finally understood. Hope was not a thing to be placed in the hands of others. When the final moment came, he could rely on no one but himself.

The war of wills is an invisible game of chess. Under the crushing weight of desolation, despair, and helplessness, some minds shatter into paranoia, others curdle into hatred. And some, a rare few, awaken.

Orion was of the last kind. He finally understood that the only true fortress was the self. Each thought became a chess piece, each conviction a defensive wall. As he relentlessly affirmed his own existence, his own sovereignty, he forged a bastion within his mind, a citadel that would not be easily breached or broken. His will hardened, becoming dense and heavy as a fallen star.

But this change did not go unnoticed. The two foreign powers, the curse and the will-projection, sensed the shift. They ceased their struggle against each other and, in a moment of shared purpose, turned their combined might against the rising fortress of Orion's consciousness.

"I WILL DEVOUR YOU BOTH!"

The defiant roar echoed in the depths of his mind. It was his final scream before the end, and it was his solemn oath.

The battle that followed was beyond the measure of time. Orion found himself in an endless sea of flowers, locked in combat with a great serpent whose body was a flowing river. He fought until the sky bled into dawn, and fought until the last light died, again and again, without rest.

He fought until he was so weary he could no longer open his eyes, could no longer see anything at all. He fought until his last ounce of strength was spent. And then, his consciousness retreated, sinking into the deepest, quietest part of his soul.

"Heh heh heh... his will is broken!"

"The body is mine!"

Two triumphant thoughts rang out in his mind—the demigod's will and the Flower Goddess's curse.

"Let us devour his essence first. Then we shall settle the matter of ownership between us."

"Agreed."

The enemy of my enemy is a temporary friend. With their pact sealed, the two powers surged toward the depths of Orion's consciousness like twin tidal waves, intent on scouring away the last vestiges of his being.

Yet, just as they were about to breach that final sanctuary, a flash of light erupted from within it.

It was the concept of a blade. Cold, absolute, and possessed of a killing intent so pure that to merely witness it was to be unmade.

A single cut that carried with it an eternity of pain.

A single, perfect strike that annihilated everything in its path.

Orion slept, and as he slept, his mind finally knew peace. Of the two blade-flashes gifted to him by Commander Thresh, one had now been spent.

This trial had been far more perilous than the Flower Goddess's first invasion; though the blade had appeared then, it had not been consumed. This time, it had been. It had sliced through the divine power and the will-projection, severing the consciousness from the energy. The invaders were scoured away, leaving behind only pure, raw power—nourishment that now flooded Orion's body and soul.

"The Commander's presence," Alexander murmured, a note of reverence in his voice. "As clean and decisive as ever."

He and the Deputy Commander had both felt the echo of the blade's intent emanating from Orion's body. Just as Orion fell into his deep slumber, a final flash of light burst from his eyes—the sign of a spirit made whole, transparent, and perfect.

Alexander's gaze burned with inspiration. He hoped that one day, his own killing intent could achieve such a state of absolute purity.

"Excellent," the Deputy Commander's voice confirmed. "The divine power and the phantom have both been rendered down and absorbed into his body. Though he sleeps, his consciousness did not shatter."

"Hulk has passed the trial. He is worthy."

It was the first time Edward had given Orion his unqualified approval.

With his mind at peace, the invading powers within Orion's body collapsed, their wills erased, their essence dissolving into pure faith energy that integrated itself into every fiber of his being. It was a "gift" from the Flower Goddess and the demigod phantom. In their contest for his soul, neither had been the victor. Orion had.

"Very well," said Edward. "Leave the last one to me."

His storm avatar spoke the words and then dissolved into a single, unstoppable blade of wind that pierced the wall of the ward. A minute later, Sphinx was dead, her body torn to pieces. The Wind Ward slowly dissipated.

"This avatar is returning. The Valkorath Realm requires a warden," Edward's voice announced. "The situation here is chaotic. A major war could erupt at any time. Prepare your true forms."

With that final instruction, the Deputy Commander stepped into a portal and vanished.

Alexander looked up at the sky, his brow furrowed. The Deputy Commander's true form must have already descended upon the Emerald Dream Realm, engaged in the great chess game against the other demigods.

Lowering his gaze, Alexander flashed to Orion's side, catching the unconscious warrior before he could fall. He turned his attention to the battlefield below. It was a charnel house.

Isabella was slumped over the back of her colossal dragon, her armor shattered, her breathing shallow. The dragon itself was in retreat, shielded by an undead lord.

Though Selinda was dead, her seven remaining lords had proven too much for Isabella's forces. If not for the aid of a Legendary-tier shadow assassin, her fate would have been much worse. Even so, the dragon's belly was riddled with dark wounds that wept black ichor, defying the creature's potent regenerative abilities.

"Not dead," Alexander observed upon reaching them. "Good enough."

He knew Isabella had talent, but her pride, born from a life of privilege under her Archlord father's protection, was a flaw. In her own kingdom, she had known nothing but victory and adulation. Such flaws could be corrected.

"Give her to me," he said to the great dragon. "With your constitution, you can still fight. Return to the front. You will not retreat until the enemy does."

The dragon let out a low whine of protest but did not dare to disobey. It carefully transferred Isabella to Alexander's care before turning and flying back toward the battle.

Alexander adjusted his grip on Orion, then hefted Isabella's unconscious form over his other shoulder. Burdened with his two comrades, the lone assassin began the long walk back to their makeshift camp.

Chapter 778: On the Verge of Ascension

"This feeling... it's familiar." Alexander's face was a mask of stone, but within his mind, memories churned. "It's been a long time."

Centuries ago, after a few particularly brutal cross-realm campaigns, he recalled carrying Leonidas and Arthas back in much the same way. Though Leonidas's treatment had been less dignified; Alexander remembered dragging him back by the thick mane on his neck.

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> Survivor's Platform // Champions Alliance Public Channel

Leonidas: Day 47 of watching paint dry. Am now an expert in bubble-blowing and advanced napping techniques.

Kraken: Sirs, you have to give me something to do. I feel like a tourist on a holiday where all the shops are closed. Is there a portal home?

Leonidas: Squiddy, my boy! Why don't you swim over to the Ashenfang Traverse? My forward scouts are already tangling with the Silvermoon Empire. Plenty of action for you here!

Kraken: I appreciate the offer, Leonidas, but while I can manage on land for a time, my Sea-Race warriors can't.

Alexander: Kraken, find a suitable location and establish a base of operations. Use this time to fortify our rear. My situation here is stabilizing; I will have a coastal encampment soon. You can teleport over then. There may be opportunities for you in the seas of this continent.

The great battle was not yet over, but with the enemy Archlords all slain, the outcome was certain. The Shadow Banshees and their allies would break; it was only a matter of time. Alexander's message was a quiet declaration to the others: he had made progress.

Leonidas:

So quick? No way. Don't tell me you brought your true form down.

Leonidas was always the first to cry out in shock or doubt—partly because he was perpetually bored, but mostly because it was his nature.

Alexander: My true form remains where it is. The arrival of Hulk and the Deputy Commander broke the stalemate. We caught the enemy completely off guard.

Leonidas: Ah, so the Deputy Commander himself showed up! Well, no wonder!

Leonidas's tone took on a playfully sour edge. He couldn't stand to see his brothers suffer, but he died a little inside when they got a new warhorse and he didn't.

Leonidas: Commander Edward, sir, do you not love me anymore? Hulk and I were in mortal peril last time, and you didn't so much as send a postcard!

Sometimes, the squeaky wheel gets the grease. When dealing with beings on the level of the Commander and his Deputy, Leonidas had no shame in acting the part of the squeaky wheel.

Edward: The key to this victory was not me. It was Hulk. The credit is his.

Leonidas: You can't be serious. I know the kid is tough, but this is ridiculous. Sir, your avatar is at the peak of the Archlord rank.

Edward: Hulk's strength is greater than you imagine. He slew a middle-tier Archlord in less than a minute. Furthermore, he endured an encounter with a demigod's will-projection. It was a trial by fire, but because of it, he is now on the verge of ascending to the rank of Archlord himself.

Following the Deputy Commander's words, the Champions Alliance public channel fell into a dead, profound silence.

The most stunned of all were Leonidas and Kraken.

No... it can't be, Leonidas thought, the words echoing in his mind. It's only been a few months. He's going to become an Archlord? Did he have another breakthrough? Or... when we fought together... was he holding back?

The questions spiraled, finally settling into a long, weary sigh. Gods, he's about to become an Archlord. How far am I, really, from demigod?

In an undersea cavern in the coastal shallows, Kraken and his retinue were hidden. He had been breeding fodder troops and sending out scouts, searching for a viable target.

Hulk is ascending? Impossible! The news hit him like a physical blow. He became a Lord after I did! Is this a mistake? No... the Deputy Commander said it. It must be true.

If anyone was shocked, it was Kraken. He and Hulk had joined the Champions Alliance around the same time. They were brothers of the same cohort. And while no one ever spoke of it, everyone knew they were in a constant, unspoken competition.

It had started in the Godforsaken Land, when Arthas and Leonidas had first led them. It had continued in the Valkorath Realm against the fungal creatures, a race for resources, for power. The Deputy Commander had even contributed the legendary Lightning Cloak as a prize to fuel that rivalry, to drive them both toward the rank of Archlord.

And now, Hulk was there. The news was a heavy blow for Kraken, who had not yet amassed a sufficient foundation, who had no clear path to his own ascension.

It seems... in my competition with Hulk... I have lost. The massive octopus mused in the deep, a swirl of surprise and frustration churning within him.

But there was also, strangely, a sense of relief. He and Orion were good friends. With the example set by the likes of Arthas, Leonidas, and Alexander, he knew their own bond of brotherhood would be no different. Birds of a feather flock together, a rule that held true even in the Champions Alliance.

Shaking off his melancholy, Kraken's spirit rekindled. He focused on the future.

Kraken: Alexander, when will your position be stable? I can be ready to teleport at any time.

If one road was blocked, he would find another. Perhaps the seas off this new continent held the opportunity he sought. If he could conquer a domain here, he could accelerate the growth of his own power. This was his path forward. He would seize it.

Alexander: The fighting should conclude within half a month at the latest. Prepare yourself. You can teleport then. I will send my shadows ahead to scout the nearby seas for you.

Kraken: Ah, thank you, sir. If there is anything I can do, you need only ask.

Alexander: We will speak of it then.

Once Alexander established his coastal camp, his cooperation with Kraken would be essential. He would need Kraken's forces to secure the shallows and protect his flank. Only then could his own army truly be said to have a secure foothold.

It was the same principle as his arrangement with Leonidas: mutual reliance, mutual support, and the creation of a safe rear. It was the only way to survive.

Chapter 779: Enough to Ascend

When Orion opened his eyes, half a month had passed.

A leaden weight still pressed down on his mind, the memory of that timeless battle in his consciousness still vivid and raw. He closed his eyes again, letting the recent past wash over him.

"You're awake."

A familiar voice pulled him back. He turned his head. Isabella, dressed in a practical leather tunic, was leaning against the headboard of a large, velvet-draped bed, watching him with an intense curiosity.

"Why are you here?" Orion asked, his own voice raspy. He ignored the question in her eyes. "Is the battle over?"

"Like you, I was wounded. I'm recovering," she said with a shrug. "And no, not quite over, but it's in its final throes. The enemy is broken, and our forces are sweeping the field."

As she spoke, a brilliant, unrestrained excitement lit up her face. This victory meant they would finally have a firm foothold on the Dawn Continent. As a key member of the allied force, she stood to gain a share of spoils and resources beyond her wildest dreams. That was the true source of her smile.

At this moment, if someone had told her that every last one of the cavalry she brought had been annihilated, she wouldn't have shed a single tear. In her world, a realm of perpetual war, knights and their mounts were a plentiful resource; an army lost was simply an army waiting to be re-mustered with a summons and a coffer of gold.

"Where is Alexander?" Orion asked.

It was good news. The war was won. He felt a wave of relief; he had come here to help, and he had. The debt he owed Alexander for the information about the Spring of Life had been repaid, and the thought eased his mind.

"He's leading a party south, scouting a location for our main base of operations," Isabella answered. "He should be back soon."

Orion nodded, saying no more. He closed his eyes again, turning his senses inward to assess the changes within him.

After the repeated baptism of divine power, his body felt stronger, more resilient, as if it had been reforged in a celestial crucible. He felt a deep, tectonic shift in his very essence, a subtle but undeniable evolution in his bloodline. The cells in every corner of his body felt like they were humming with new potential, new growth.

But most crucially, he could feel a vast, placid ocean of power pooled within him. It was faith energy, pure and untethered to any foreign will.

He focused his own will, and the ocean answered, flowing into him without resistance, a willing tribute absorbed into the abyss of his soul.

Hours passed. When the last drop of energy had been integrated, Orion felt a sudden, staggering comprehension of his own state. He was stunned into silence, his mind reeling.

The reservoir of power within him... it was immense. More than enough.

It was enough to begin forging a body of faith. Enough to take the next step. Enough to ascend.

"What is it?" Isabella's voice cut through his shock. She had seen him emerge from his meditation but had respected his silence. Now, sensing the tremor in his aura, her curiosity finally won out.

"Nothing," Orion said, snapping back to the present. His reply was swift, perhaps too swift. "I was just... checking my condition. The speed of my recovery... it's startling."

A light, musical laugh escaped Isabella's lips. "You're a strange one," she said, her eyes sparkling with amusement. "I've never met a man who was shocked by his own strength."

Orion just shrugged, offering no further explanation.

"Alexander told us," she began, her tone shifting, the curiosity returning tenfold, "that you killed a middle-tier Archlord. Is it true?"

She had to know. Hearing it from Alexander, it had felt like a legend, a distant tale of heroes. But to hear it from Orion, a fellow Lord, a peer—that would make it real. Her gaze was so intense, so full of desperate wanting, that Orion could not mistake it.

He met her eyes. "Yes," he said simply. "I killed an Archlord. An Abyssal Devil Ray."

Isabella's mouth fell open. Her eyes went wide, silently asking him to say it again, to confirm the impossible.

But Orion simply ignored her, swinging his legs off the bed and pulling his cloak over his shoulders. He walked out of the tent.

He rose into the sky. The war was indeed in its death throes, but small, desperate pockets of fighting still raged across the blighted landscape.

Below, the vast legions of the dead swarmed over the plains, hunting down the last of the beasts and dark races.

The conflict had moved past strategy and into pure annihilation. A miasma of dust and smoke churned over the battlefield, a canvas of the berserk fury of beast-armies and the cold, implacable resolve of the undead. This was a war for territory, for the right to exist, fought with a final, desperate brutality that made the very earth tremble.

And amidst it all, the Blind Spiders of Queen Lolth were in their element. They were the true masters of the hunt, their pursuit of the dark creatures more skillful, more predatory than any other force on the field.

Aoooo!

The cry of a dragon echoed behind him. Isabella had followed, urging her colossal mount upward, gesturing for him to join her. With a flicker of movement, Orion appeared at her side on the creature's broad back.

"Come on," she said, her earlier shock replaced with a warrior's zeal. "Let's help them finish this. We can speed things up."

Orion nodded. That had been his intention as well.

The dragon surged forward, its scales glittering like gold in the sunlight. Its healing was no less remarkable than Orion's; with the aid of recovery potions from Isabella, the grievous wounds on its belly had already sealed, leaving not even a scar.

"Are dragons common in your world?" Orion asked, his mind already turning to the future, to trade and alliance. "Do you ever have eggs for sale?"

Isabella shook her head. "No. This one was a gift from my father when I became a Lord. He is exceptionally rare."

"As for other eggs... I can look for you. But I cannot guarantee a noble bloodline, and even the eggs of lesser dragon-beasts are precious and costly in my realm."

Orion knew this to be true. Dragons, no matter the world, were always treasures.

"I would be grateful for the trouble," he said.

Chapter 780: A Pillar That Cannot Stand

The war drums were a slow, heavy heartbeat under the snap of wind-whipped banners. The air itself was a weapon, carrying dust and the scent of death, reaping lives with every gust.

With each swing of his trident, Orion obliterated another high-level dark creature on the ground below.

"Is a trident truly so effective?" Isabella wondered aloud from beside him on the dragon's back. As a dragon knight, her own weapon was a lance, and watching Orion's fluid, deadly efficiency was a revelation.

"Your lance is a duelist's weapon," Orion explained, glancing at her. Now that they were more familiar, the proud young queen's gaze was often bold and appraising. So much for the untouchable ice-queen persona. "It excels at the close-range thrust, the sweep, the parry. In the thick of a melee, fighting blade-to-blade from dragonback, it gives you the advantage."

"My trident is different. I favor the long-range throw. When it leaves my hand, the target is either dead or maimed."

"I am skilled in close combat, of course, but I have no taste for drawn-out brawls. My style is to strike from a distance, to break an enemy's will before the lines ever meet. And if that is not enough, then I close the distance for a single, final blow."

He eyed the lance in her hands. It was a masterwork weapon, longer and more needle-pointed than a typical knight's lance, designed for the devastating charge. It was easily as long as his own trident.

"Could I not throw my lance, at a critical moment?" she mused, her eyes bright with a new line of tactical inquiry.

"You could," Orion said, shaking his head. "But I would advise against it."

This was not idle talk. His own style had been forged in the crucible of his own specific history. He had first mastered the thrown trident because he possessed 1000% trident proficiency. He excelled at throwing both tridents and spears.

Only later, with the mastery of abilities that allowed him to close distances in an instant and lock down a foe, had his style evolved into the one-strike-kill doctrine it was today.

For Isabella to copy him, she would have to abandon her own wealth of experience, her own hard-won skills, for a result that was anything but guaranteed. She was no fool; she understood the folly of a sparrow trying to soar like an eagle.

"What you say... it has the ring of truth," she conceded, a slight frown on her brow. She had been captivated by the sheer, cold lethality of his style, and a part of her was still desperately trying to understand how he could kill foes so far above his own rank.

"His path is much like my own," a new voice said, calm and quiet. "It is not suited for you."

Alexander had appeared on Isabella's other side as silently as a thought. He stared toward the horizon, his focus absolute.

"The site for the southern base has been chosen," he announced. "I have already placed the territory core. The skeleton crews are at work; it will not be long before we have a proper fortress."

He turned his gaze from the horizon to Isabella. "You will be needed there. Supervise the construction."

He continued without pause. "Kraken has secured the nearby shallows. You will coordinate with him. See to his needs. His presence in the coastal waters is what will grant us a truly secure rear."

The words were both a command and a lesson.

"After that, dispatch the undead legions to patrol the borders of the former banshee territory. Slay any dark races attempting to push south. For now, we cannot advance north. We must give the appearance of consolidation, as if we are content to wait for the final reckoning. Let the enemy grow complacent. Lower their guard."

To Orion, this strategy was sound. When you cannot overwhelm an enemy, you dig in, gather your strength, and wait for a better opportunity. The conquest of the Emerald Dream Realm was not a matter of a single campaign; it was a war of attrition.

"Mr. Alexander... you are leaving?" Isabella asked, her familiarity with him allowing her to read the intent behind his words.

He didn't answer her directly, instead turning his gaze to Orion. "My intelligence confirms it. The Spring of Life is in the southeast, in a territory controlled by another nest of darklings. With the local Archlords dead and their posts still vacant, now is our chance. We must move quickly."

Orion nodded. This was the reason he had crossed a continent. The sooner it was done, the better. Alexander's words also served as his explanation to Isabella.

"Isabella will see to things here," Alexander stated. "Let's go."

With that, he vanished in a flicker of motion, streaking toward the southeast.

"Until next time!" Orion called to Isabella, and then launched himself in pursuit.

Watching their two forms recede into the distance, Isabella felt the thick cloak of security she hadn't realized she was wearing suddenly thin.

"Alexander, Hulk... be safe!" she called out after them, her voice nearly lost on the wind.

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As they traveled, Alexander finally spoke, his voice low. "You have the Commander's ward inside you. Barring some unforeseen catastrophe, you were never in true danger of annihilation."

They walked along a winding beast-trail at the foot of a colossal mountain range.

"The demigod's will was slain, and it left behind its essence as pure faith. That was your opportunity. That is why the Deputy Commander did not intervene."

At the height of a life-or-death crisis, to be abandoned by one's allies... anyone would feel a sting of resentment. Orion was no different. For all his strength, a cold knot of it had settled in his gut.

Alexander, Leonidas, Arthas... they had all felt it before. He knew what Orion must be thinking.

"It is natural to feel bitterness," Alexander continued, his voice even. "But you must understand. This is our way."

"We are not soldiers in a conventional army. Each of us is a pillar. And a pillar that cannot stand on its own is worthless."

"That trial... it was necessary."