

Titan King 841

Chapter 841: The Warden from the North

"And there's Taran," Torvald added. "That damn Pandaren drunkard, he said he'd take me to his homeland for a drink. That special wine, the one with the scent of bamboo shoots... my mouth is watering just thinking about it."

Torvald readily accepted the invitation from his friends, Brontes and Steropes.

"Taran's in a later transport group, Brother Torvald. Come wait for him at our place first," Brontes said. "After we get some food and drink in you, I'll take you to see the tent district in the north of the city. They say there's a perfectly preserved lord's tent there. I'm telling you, as a giant, you should buy some property in Blackstone City. This place is the foundation of our Stoneheart Horde. It's a legend."

When he spoke of Blackstone City, Brontes's voice swelled with immense pride. He and his brother had been slaves in the Thunderwood Forest, marched all the way here. They had the good fortune to rise up from the cannon fodder troops and take part in the city's expansion. They had shed their own sweat and blood to help make Blackstone City what it was today. Now that it was a legendary city, they felt like they were part of that legend.

As the sounds of celebration grew, batch after batch of bloodline warriors emerged from Moonshadow Valley, breathing new life into Blackstone City. When news of the warriors' return spread, the city's populace gathered outside the Horde Hall, anxiously hoping to see their own sons and husbands walk out from its gates.

Ursa, having replaced Rendall, had been appointed by Orion as Blackstone City's new administrator. She was a conscientious leader; seeing the growing crowd outside the Horde Hall, she thoughtfully dispatched a squad of guards to maintain order.

Not long after Brontes, Steropes, and Torvald had left, the figures of Onyx and the Pandaren Taran appeared at the mouth of the passage.

"Ah, I've missed this cold air," Onyx said, looking up toward the eastern side of the valley. That was the territory of his obsidian golem race, a domain Orion himself had granted them. That land belonged to them—it had in the past, it did now, and it always would. The obsidian golem race was fiercely proud of their domain.

"You old drunkard, care to come sit at my place for a while?" Onyx asked Taran. "The scenery over there is one of a kind. It's hard to even get to without a guide."

This was true. As the Stoneheart Horde had grown stronger, the races that had submitted early and proven their merit had been rewarded handsomely. The succubi, the obsidian golems, and the buffalofolk each had their own territories within Blackstone City. Such a reward was impossible to obtain in the present-day Horde, which made these founding races special, unique, and among Orion's most fiercely loyal followers.

"The east, you say? I've never been!" Taran said, looking toward the eastern slopes with great interest. "Let me go find some good wine, and we can talk all night and share a few proper drinks."

Onyx nodded. Among all the newly ascended Alpha-tier experts in the Horde, the Pandaren Taran was the one whose temperament he liked best. The Pandaren were honest, but not foolish, and they lived by their own code of honor. Onyx was more than happy to befriend such a good-natured race.

After Onyx and Taran departed, Thundar's figure emerged from the passage. He greeted the members of his cavalry regiment, then left Moonshadow Valley alone.

Once all the warriors on rotation had passed through, two final figures emerged from the slowly closing passage.

"Do you have any plans?"

"I'm returning to the Northern Icefield. I prefer the climate there."

Gustalon's mind drifted at the mention of the name. For a very long time, he had wandered that vast, icy plain. The perpetually frozen snow, the scarce and hardy creatures, the cold, and the scarcity—those were his impressions of the Northern Icefield.

"Back to your fiefdom?" he asked.

Lumi nodded without speaking. The territory Orion held in the north was, indeed, her domain now.

"To be honest, I want to go back to my Wind Fortress," Gustalon said. "There are flowers there, and lantern bugs, and all the strange and wonderful plants everyone has scattered across the world. But My Lord has a mission for me. I have to go to Lysinthia's city."

Gustalon's own domain, the Wind Fortress, was in the Valkorath Realm. Compared to the Northern Icefield, he much preferred it there. No one bothered him, and that world held a being he deeply respected—a being that represented the goal he strove for.

"He said he left something for me in my territory," Lumi explained after Gustalon had finished his wistful recollection. "He told me to go back and see."

As elemental beings, the communication between Gustalon and Lumi was simpler, more direct, free of the duplicity and cunning that plagued other races.

"Then I will leave first," Gustalon said. "When I've completed my mission, I will come to the icefield to see you."

Lumi nodded. Gustalon was one of her few friends. If what she felt for Orion was love, then what she had with Gustalon was friendship. As fellow elementals, they were more like siblings, and the world itself was their parent.

Gustalon nodded in return, then dissolved into a gust of wind, speeding southwest toward Mist Bay.

Lumi gazed at Blackstone City and released her lord's aura, tinged with a bone-chilling cold.

"A lord's aura?"

"Is My Lord back?"

"No, there's a distinct chill in the aura... the Warden has returned!"

"It's the Warden from the North! She has come!"

"..."

The aura vanished as quickly as it appeared. Releasing it was simply Lumi's way of sending a signal to the people of Blackstone City: their Warden and their Lord were always watching over them.

The presence of a lord's aura brought a sense of security, and it would intimidate any unsavory elements who might have snuck into the city, deterring them from causing any major trouble.

After sensing the state of Blackstone City, Lumi headed for the Horde Hall. She had her own bedroom in the inner keep.

"Greetings, Warden," a group of succubus maidservants said, emerging to bow as she stepped into the keep.

Lumi nodded silently and walked directly to her chambers. After she had entered her room, the lead succubus spoke softly at the door.

"Warden, if you desire anything to eat, or have any other needs, your servants are waiting outside for your command."

"Mm..."

A faint sound of acknowledgement came from within, and the succubus maids let out a collective sigh of relief. If they showed any disrespect in these matters, and Lilith found out, she would flay the skin from their backs.

In truth, Lumi did not stay in her room for long. On the third day, she left the Horde Hall and returned to the Northern Icefield.

Chapter 842: The Ice Phoenix Palace

In the Emerald Dream Realm, Red Moon Valley.

After Lumi's departure, Orion's mirrored avatar remained to personally guard the valley alongside Soraya and Lorelia. Having promised Leonidas he would join a mission with his other brothers-in-arms, this avatar entered a state of seclusion. It was not for cultivation, but to meticulously organize its equipment and catalog its trump cards.

To prepare for the mission ahead, this avatar needed to be exceptionally well-prepared. Orion knew that any task requiring Leonidas to personally recruit help would be no simple matter, and he had to arm himself with every possible advantage.

Meanwhile, in a nearby cavern.

"Aww, the Master has shut his doors to us again!"

"Sister Soraya, don't you think Lorelia City is just so boring?" Lorelia whined. "It can't even compare to Blackstone City! All we have here are little spiders and small scorpions. It's so monotonous!"

She was exaggerating, of course. Lorelia City saw its share of other faces. Giants, Gnolls, Beastfolk, Bearmen, and bloodline warriors from every army frequently came to seek an audience with Orion. Still, in the aftermath of the war, the city did feel somewhat desolate.

Furthermore, most members of the Stoneheart Horde were reluctant to stay for long. Everyone knew this place was a terrifying Nest of spiders and scorpions.

Many had witnessed the horror of the swarms on the battlefield. Even knowing the creatures wouldn't harm them, most people instinctively chose to keep their distance from the chittering, crawling masses.

Besides, with all the major races having been granted their own fiefdoms on the Dusk Continent, why would anyone choose to stay in Lorelia City when they could be free in their own territory?

"Lorelia, you should focus on completing your own task," Soraya chided gently.

Though the war of invasion was over, and the main armies and cannon fodder troops were getting time to rest and recuperate, with many bloodline warriors on leave, things were different for Lorelia and Soraya. They were their races' broodmothers. Their very existence was defined by the number of their subjects.

In the Dusk Continent war, Lorelia's cave spiders had been almost entirely wiped out, save for her personal guard. Consequently, as soon as the war ended, Orion had tasked her with breeding her population back up to over a million. As for Soraya's scorpions, the more, the better.

Since ascending to Archlord and learning the wonders of avatars, Orion had come to a clear understanding: for a faction led by an Archlord, war was a fact of life. To expand one's territory, war was inevitable. Even if he wished for peace, he had to maintain a basic military foundation at all times.

In the Champions Alliance, Leonidas, Alexander, Kraken, or even Isabella might request to borrow his forces—specifically Soraya—at any moment. It was the same principle that allowed him and Leonidas to borrow the undead lords under Arthas's command. As a team, relying on each other and providing mutual aid was an obligation, and a prerequisite for seeking help yourself in the future.

For all these reasons, the two broodmothers of the Stoneheart Horde would have no time to rest.

"Oh, the little spiders? Hatching them is simple. As long as I have the resources, it's no problem at all." Lorelia sounded rather smug. Though most of her subjects had died, the resources she had been allocated were more than enough to birth several million more. She was quite confident she could handle Orion's task.

"Lorelia is so pitiful!" she suddenly declared, her tone shifting dramatically. "Ever since Pallas was born, the Mistress doesn't love Lorelia anymore, and now the Master doesn't love me either!" She lowered her head and pretended to wipe away tears that weren't there.

Soraya couldn't fathom where, in a Horde defined by savage conquest, Lorelia had picked up such a flair for melodrama.

"You," Soraya sighed, shaking her head. "Since you have so much free time, why don't you go and comprehend your Lord's Stone? Don't you want to advance to the Legendary tier? Have you forgotten what Lady Vexis told you?"

Soraya offered the reminder kindly. In truth, even though Lorelia had not yet reached the Legendary tier and had a tendency to play the victim, Soraya was fond of her. As fellow broodmothers, they had much to talk about. Their perspectives on many matters were strikingly similar. Soraya genuinely liked Lorelia and saw her as a mischievous but adorable little sister.

"Advance to Lord?"

Soraya's reminder seemed to jolt Lorelia into remembering her grand ambition. A look of anticipation shone in her crimson eyes.

"Sister Soraya, I'm going into seclusion, just like the Master! I will definitely become a Lord, and when I come out, I'll astound you all!"

Lorelia raised a small fist, and after waving goodbye to Soraya, she scuttled away on her eight spider legs toward her own cavern.

Soraya covered her mouth and laughed. "That little one is certainly interesting."

In the Titanion Realm, the Northern Icefield.

Lumi glided back on the wind, floating through the vast, cold expanse. The wind howled, blizzards of snow filled the air, and the ice below was as hard as steel and as smooth as glass. Amidst the downpour of snow, the world was a boundless, endless white.

At the edge of that whiteness stood a glacier. On its side, where her ice cave once was, now stood an exquisitely crafted palace. Through the swirling snow, Lumi's keen senses, heightened within her own domain, perceived it clearly.

She frowned. This was her territory.

When was a palace built here? Have outsiders occupied this place?

A series of questions filled her mind, but they were quickly dispelled by a deep, resonant voice.

"Do you like it?"

"It's a gift for you. A special Ice Phoenix Palace."

Lumi drifted closer on the wind. Orion's figure emerged from the palace, followed by two neat lines of maidservants.

"This is the Ice Phoenix Palace. It is perpetually shrouded in dense ice and water elements, which will be very beneficial for your cultivation."

Orion appeared at Lumi's side and pulled her into his embrace.

Lumi was a woman who truly deserved his affection. Though she had not been on the front lines of battle, she had silently guarded the cross-realm teleportation array, dedicating herself to him and the Stoneheart Horde without a single word of complaint or a single request for reward. Such quiet devotion made Orion particularly fond of her.

"And they are?" Lumi asked, tilting her head to look from Orion to the two rows of maidservants at the palace entrance.

"They are the maids of the Ice Phoenix Palace, a special race birthed by the palace itself," Orion explained. "Whenever the elemental density within the palace becomes sufficient, it will birth a number of these Ice Maidens. Don't underestimate them. They carry a trace of Ice Phoenix blood in their veins, and their talent for combat is not to be dismissed."

Chapter 843: Our Stoneheart Horde

Orion explained that building the Ice Phoenix Palace had consumed not only a vast amount of rare materials but also a single Lord's Stone.

Most importantly, the loyalty of the palace and the Ice Maidens within was absolute. They belonged completely to Lumi, and to her alone, a private army bound to her will.

"The Ice Phoenix Palace and all who dwell within are now yours."

Orion transferred control of the palace to Lumi and, before she could fully react, wrapped an arm around her slender waist and stepped with her into its crystalline halls.

He had traveled from Stoneheart City well in advance to prepare this gift, a gesture of his genuine affection—one best consecrated in the warmth of their intimacy.

In the south, at the Ironveil Escarpment.

The preliminary work on the City of the Guardian, built upon the escarpment, was nearly complete. After the Stoneheart Horde and the Sea-Drake(seadragon) race finalized their alliance, the pace of construction had accelerated. Even the grand canal, planned to connect the entire territory, was about to be opened.

"Sister Lycanor, the city is in your hands now," Delilah said. She and Lycanor stood shoulder-to-shoulder on the cliff's edge. They had a good relationship, and as Orion's women, they addressed each other as sisters.

"What is that?" Lycanor asked, nodding slightly as she pointed to a tall tower in the distance. When she had first arrived, she had felt a little awkward around Delilah. However, Delilah had proactively broken the ice, speaking of private matters concerning the three of them, and their relationship had naturally grown closer.

Neither Delilah nor Lycanor was a fool. They both knew they had their own positions to maintain and represented different interest groups. But there was no great rivalry between them; they already had status and power.

As for children, with Pallas and Kronos already born, whether they had heirs of their own would not significantly change their standing. Thus, their relationship was a harmonious one.

"It's said that it will be a Mage Tower," Delilah explained. "Orion had it built in advance. In the future, the City of the Guardian will be a special place, connecting the continent and the sea. A large-scale magical ward is a necessity here."

Though the Mage Tower was built, the most crucial step was not yet in place. Inscribing the magical formations and gathering the elemental energies were tasks that only a true mage could complete.

The original plan had been for Orion to petition the Deputy Commander for a powerful protective ward. But that was a one-off transaction, not the ideal solution.

Back when Orion believed a long, drawn-out war with the Sea-Drakes was inevitable, it had been the only option. Now that they had made peace, there was no rush to inscribe the city's wards.

Furthermore, Orion had a new idea: his adopted daughter, Elara. He intended to entrust the task of becoming the Stoneheart Horde's powerful archmage, and of building its army of mages, to her.

The City of the Guardian would be her training ground. This, however, could not be rushed. It would have to wait until Elara was older, until the Deputy Commander himself deemed her ready to take on such a great responsibility. Orion was carefully, methodically laying the groundwork for the Horde's future.

"A Mage Tower?" Lycanor was stunned. "Does your Stoneheart Horde have a powerful mage capable of inscribing its formations?"

Delilah's words were astonishing. Even her own blood elf race had no mages capable of constructing a Mage Tower. Across the entire continent, perhaps only the human kingdoms and the dragons possessed such power.

"Even if we don't have such a rare talent now, the future Stoneheart Horde certainly will," Delilah said with confidence, her thoughts immediately turning to Elara.

Elara was the Horde's eldest daughter, a magical prodigy whose potential far surpassed that of her peers. She was also wise and remarkably adaptable. Delilah believed that if Elara ever grew ambitious, her impact would be greater than that of any of Orion's other children. Pallas and Kronos wouldn't stand a chance.

Delilah's assessment of Elara was high; she understood why Orion doted on the girl and knew that she carried a significant portion of the Horde's hopes on her small shoulders.

"Sister Lycanor, from now on, it is our Stoneheart Horde, not your Stoneheart Horde." Delilah's correction was gentle, a sign that she truly saw Lycanor as one of them now. She knew that with Orion's ascension to Archlord, no one—not even an upper-tier Legendary expert like Lycanor—could hope to make waves within the Horde.

"My apologies. I'm still adjusting," Lycanor said, her apology a mark of respect for Delilah and for the Horde itself. She made a mental note to herself not to act arrogantly toward the Horde's original high-ranking members just because of her own strength.

"It's like that for everyone at the beginning," Delilah said, her mature, melodic voice gentle. "Our two Wardens, Lumi and Soraya, also took time to adjust when they first joined us."

The tone was soft, but Lycanor understood the meaning behind the words. Among Orion's women, you, Lycanor, are not the first at the Legendary tier. It was a subtle but firm reminder from Delilah, a kind gesture if Lycanor was wise enough to understand it. If not, it was an unfriendly warning.

Within the Stoneheart Horde, only experts at the Legendary tier could be called a Warden. Lycanor knew this well. In fact, from the day she moved into the castle, the Stoneheart Horde had gained another Warden, and the news had spread quickly.

So, I am not the only one, Lycanor thought with a sigh. She suddenly felt that the mission her people had entrusted to her was not going to be as easy as she had imagined. The blood elves had calculated that she would gain a certain status and power within the Stoneheart Horde, but they had no idea just how fierce the internal competition truly was.

"Thank you," Lycanor said, and her sincerity was plain.

Delilah knew Lycanor had understood her meaning.

"Over there," Delilah said, pointing to the city's trade district. "Orion has reserved a trade zone for the blood elf race. I'm sure it will be a fine return gift."

The area was vast. In the future, Delilah knew, many of the great factions of the land would fight tooth and nail for a spot within it.

"Yes. I will send word to the City of Blessings."

Chapter 844: If Only I Were a lord

Lycanor followed the line of Delilah's finger, her eyes narrowing slightly as she took in the sight. She gave a faint hum of acknowledgement.

And so, the Warden from the blood elf race and the Elder of Stewardship of the Stoneheart Horde completed their first handover of duties and their first clash of wills. It was clear that Delilah, with the home-field advantage, had come out on top.

Three days later, Delilah summoned her Four-Winged Blood Bat and, leading a squad of the harpy Sentinel Corps, began the journey back to Stoneheart City.

Atop the great bat's back, Delilah gazed down upon the vast territory of the Stoneheart Horde, her heart calm, yet tinged with a familiar sense of dissatisfaction.

In truth, the two succubus sisters were Orion's most able consorts. Since they had joined the Stoneheart Horde, they had managed all of the clan's affairs, large and small, with meticulous order. Lilith, as Orion's wife, perfectly embodied the grace and magnanimity of a queen. Throughout the Horde, not a single negative word was spoken of her. All her people saw her as perfect, as supremely competent. Whether it was her management of the household or her raising of Orion's children, she was beyond reproach.

Her sister Delilah, meanwhile, was known to all as the Giant King's lover, and as the Grand Steward of the Stoneheart Horde. Beyond her own official duties, she would proactively step forward to secure every possible advantage for Lilith and for the succubus race.

The recent intimidation of Lycanor, for instance, was a task that rightly should have fallen to Lilith. As the wife, her authority to do so was unquestionable. But Lilith had to maintain a perfect image, both internally and externally; no scandal or stain could be allowed to touch her.

And so, all the dirty, tiring work fell to Delilah.

"Ah... I suppose I owe it to you. Who else is there to do it, since I'm the older sister? Hehehe..."

Though her sigh was one of complaint, Delilah could always find joy even in hardship, because she did it all willingly. But within that willingness, there was so much that she was not resigned to.

This time, to chasten Lycanor, she had been forced to invoke the names of Lumi and Soraya. For the proud, unyielding succubus queen, this was more painful than suffering a public humiliation herself.

If only I were a lord now, she thought, how different things would be.

In this moment, the presence of Orion's three Legendary-tier women placed an infinite pressure upon Lilith and Delilah.

In the Silvercurrent Sea, on the Serpent Isle.

A month had passed in the blink of an eye. Orion had long since stowed his ancient giant-horned whale and concealed his aura. Thus, when he, Lysinthia, and Slagor landed on the Serpent Isle, they did so in complete silence.

The Serpent Isle was not small at all; in fact, it was huge. Standing on a high point of the island, one could see an endless expanse of verdant jungle stretching to the horizon.

In the far distance, there were mountains and waterfalls, with streams rushing down from the peaks to feed wide, deep rivers that ultimately flowed into the sea. The environment was that of a tropical rainforest, far hotter than the Black Forest, indicating that the isle was located even further to the south.

In their own tongue, the serpentfolk called this island the continent of Jynx. Orion did not yet know its true size; he would leave all of that for Lysinthia to handle.

He had promised to let her deal with the serpentfolk here on her own, and he would not go back on his word. However, he could still build her a base of operations, giving her the foundation she needed to begin her conquest.

"My Lord, the initial survey of the surrounding area is complete," Slagor said, stepping forward to report on their progress. "Within a fifty-mile radius, the forest is dense and the rivers branch out frequently. Based on our observations, the courses of some tributaries may even change with the seasons."

The unspoken meaning was clear: the terrain was complex, and without a local guide, it would be easy to get lost.

Orion said nothing, merely gesturing for Slagor to continue.

"In the nearby forests, we have found tracks of numerous porcupine-beasts, deer, and large snakes. Based on our estimates, the beasts here are mostly high-tier, likely between levels four and six.

Furthermore, most of the rivers are home to sea beasts and crocodiles. We have not yet detected the creatures that may be lurking in the darker, deeper waters."

Slagor's report was detailed. Seeing that Orion and Lysinthia were listening intently, he went on.

"The mountains on the island contain many large caves. They are very deep, and hissing sounds often emanate from within. Our men speculate that these caves are likely lairs for a great number of python-like beasts."

"My Lord, this island is filled with unknown dangers. It would be best if we proceed with caution."

Orion didn't speak, instead turning his gaze to Lysinthia.

"The caves definitely hold snake-beasts," she said with certainty. "Those will be snake swarms raised by the serpentfolk. The caves are the nests they find for their young." She had lived on this island once and knew some of their customs.

"Where do you think we should establish our camp?"

The so-called beasts and serpentfolk were of no concern to Orion. Those were problems for Lysinthia to worry about later. His task now was to find a suitable location, expend a Lord's Stone, and construct a starting point for her campaign. Of course, he also needed to set up an intra-realm teleportation array to facilitate communication and reinforcements between the Serpent Isle and Blackstone City.

"Right on this mountain," Lysinthia said, looking at Orion, her eyes filled with a pleading desire. "We landed here, so let us begin here."

"Recall all troops except for the scouts and patrols," Orion said, turning to give the order directly to Slagor. "Have them begin building a defensive castle using local materials."

They had brought twenty Sea-Devouring Warships, each capable of carrying five thousand soldiers, for a total of one hundred thousand. Minus those who remained to guard the ships and those sent out to scout, a large portion could be used as a temporary labor force.

In truth, this hard labor would not last for long. Slagor and Lysinthia only needed to hold out until the defensive castle was built. With so many bloodline warriors gathered in one place, the serpentfolk would soon react, and war would inevitably follow. When war breaks out, there is never a shortage of prisoners. They could then use those prisoners to construct the Stoneheart Horde's first city on the Serpent Isle, feeding the war with war.

"As you command, My Lord!"

The prospect of war was exciting for Slagor; it was a chance to earn battle achievements. While he would not interfere directly in Lysinthia's war with the serpentfolk, guarding the camp and providing her with a secure rear base was a great contribution in itself. And as the war continued, the opportunities for glory would only multiply.

"Build the castle and the underground teleportation plaza first," Orion instructed. "Once the array is active, the Horde will dispatch specialized personnel to properly construct the city."

In the Emerald Dream Realm, at the Marshlight Sanctuary.

Though this was Orion's territory, he had left the temporary palace Leonidas had built here standing. Now, with Leonidas visiting, it was being put to good use.

Inside the palace, Leonidas and Orion sat on the floor. Between them was a lavish spread of food—meat and wine, pastries and fruit, a feast fit for kings.

Chapter 845: No Rules

"Bro, today I'm gonna give you the full rundown on this mission of ours."

Orion raised his cup, clinked it hard against Leonidas's, and after downing a gulp of wine, made a show of being all ears.

Leonidas drained his own cup in one go and let out a boozy burp.

"It's not really a mission, it's a duel. A duel in the Crucible of the Gods."

He glanced at Orion, a little disappointed when the younger man didn't immediately start asking questions. He hated missing a chance to show off his knowledge in front of the new guy.

Damn it, kid, you're no fun. Don't you know how to play along?

Orion caught the flicker of complaint in Leonidas's eyes and guessed his thoughts. He simply pointed at his own stomach, indicating that he was starving and didn't want to talk.

Taking the roasted beast leg Orion offered, Leonidas tore into it with a savage bite. He chewed for a moment before speaking again.

"The Crucible of the Gods is a space, one made specifically for duelists. It can provide any kind of dueling ground you want. It's a magical place, able to simulate any environment the duelists desire. It's a dueling world that exists somewhere between illusion and reality."

"As for whether it's an artifact or a real pocket dimension, nobody knows. However, the Commander and the Deputy Commander speculate that it's something like the Survivor's Platform. Who knows, maybe it merged into our world from another one."

Orion listened intently. He knew far too little about this world, about the Crucible of the Gods. His experience and knowledge were nothing compared to old monsters like the Commander and Deputy Commander, who had lived for who knows how many years. There were too many secrets he had yet to learn.

"Getting into the Crucible requires a ticket. As for where the tickets come from, I have no idea," Leonidas admitted. "The Commander is always the one who provides them for us when we go to fight."

He pulled out two palm-sized, five-pointed star-shaped metal tickets and handed one to Orion. Orion put down his food, wiped his hands clean, and took the ticket, examining it carefully. There wasn't much to see. The metal star had no writing on it, no special runes.

"The rules of the Crucible are not fixed. They're decided by the two sides of the duel," Leonidas said, his expression suddenly growing serious. "In other words, there are no rules. Because the moment a rule exists, it has a loophole."

He fixed his gaze on Orion. "Bro, do you know what 'no rules' really means?"

Orion narrowed his eyes, thought for a moment, and offered his own interpretation. "No rules means that in a duel, you must use every possible method—the simplest, most direct, and fastest way—to eliminate the enemy."

Leonidas let out a great laugh and clapped Orion on the shoulder. "Arthas has a damn sharp eye for talent. With a battle sense like yours, I have no idea what kind of dumb luck he had to stumble upon you."

Orion just smiled and said nothing, looking at Leonidas and waiting for him to continue.

"This duel is a five-man team battle. The Deputy Commander, Arthas, Alexander, me, and you. Two demigods, three Archlords." The laughter vanished from Leonidas's face as he slowly recited the roster for the upcoming duel.

"Our opponents' lineup is similar to ours: two demigods, three Archlords. However, there is one restriction. The demigods participating can only be phantoms."

Orion slowly let out a breath, a little stunned by the lineup. "Bro, the Archlords on their team... they aren't all at the peak of the tier, are they?"

"Mm-hmm. And just like us, they're all Awakened," Leonidas confirmed with a strange smile.

"Are their Archlords fighting in their true forms or as avatars?"

"Could be either."

A flicker of surprise crossed Orion's face.

"You have to be mad to survive," Leonidas said. "There are always desperate fools who, seeing no other path forward, will take a huge risk and wager their true forms in a duel in the Crucible, all to win more resources and treasures."

As he said this, Leonidas clearly saw a glint of light flash in Orion's eyes.

"That's right. For this duel, both sides have wagered a massive amount of rare items. The winning side, besides receiving a considerable amount of world essence, will also get at least one piece of legendary equipment."

He paused for emphasis. "That's one piece of legendary equipment each."

Orion couldn't help but let out a gasp. Since ascending to Archlord and focusing on gathering faith to empower his avatars, he had truly come to understand how difficult legendary equipment was to obtain. From Lord to Archlord, he had killed a fair number of his peers, but had only looted three legendary pieces: the Boots of the War-Tyrant, the Titan Emblem, and the Abyssal Devil Shield. Of course, there was also the Lightning Cloak, but that was a gift from the Deputy Commander.

These few items were nowhere near enough to arm himself and his avatars. To this day, his Faith Avatar's Asura Titan Form still had five empty hands, with no weapons to wield. For a being of its power, ordinary weapons were useless; they would simply shatter in its grip from the poor quality. Only special equipment and items of the legendary tier or higher could be used to arm it.

Leonidas's words were a clear temptation, designed to stoke Orion's inner desire for battle and victory.

"And if we win and you're not satisfied with the legendary equipment you get, you can sell it to others in the Crucible. Legendary gear is something even demigods covet, let alone Archlords. At that point, you can hold out for the best offer, hold all the leverage, and trade for what you really want."

In Leonidas's view, the Crucible of the Gods was simply a place where the strong and the confident went to plunder others and exchange goods.

"Bro, get yourself ready. The Deputy Commander has already set the match. The duel is in half a month."

Speaking of the duel, Leonidas's expression became grim once more. It wasn't his first time fighting in the Crucible. What he didn't tell Orion was that his own win rate there was less than fifty percent.

Leonidas told Orion many things that day. As he got drunk, he recounted many of his own experiences, greatly broadening Orion's horizons. Afterwards, Leonidas did not leave the Marshlight Sanctuary, but

took up residence there. According to him, the avatar he would use for the duel was the very same Void Dragon avatar he was using now.

"Bro, don't look down on this avatar of mine just because it's only a mid-tier Archlord. When it comes to a fight, it can absolutely go toe-to-toe with a regular peak-tier Archlord," he boasted with a grin.

Orion was well aware of the Void Dragon's combat capabilities. Its abilities—space devouring, spatial locking, and displacement—were all exceptionally special and powerful, and he greatly envied them.

Chapter 846: All Who Offend Me Must Die

In the human kingdom, at Soaring Bird City.

Early one morning, Torin, along with his subordinates Mike and Wyatt, made his way to the Soaring Bird City branch of the Golden Apple Chamber of Commerce. A month prior, Torin had placed an order for a batch of equipment and beast-blood mounts. It was only natural that the City Lord himself would come to inspect the delivery upon its arrival.

"Lord Torin, the items you requested arrived two days ago. Please, come inside."

Torin nodded with a smile, greeting the acquaintances he met along the way.

"The City Lord has become so much more mature, and so much more amiable!"

"Isn't that the truth? After all he's been through, anyone would grow."

"I heard that back then..."

The murmurs of the citizens followed him as Torin, flanked by Mike and Wyatt, entered the Chamber's VIP room.

Within the human kingdom, in the Aisenna Forest.

The Aisenna Forest was located far from Soaring Bird City, well outside the bounds of Baron Torin's territory. Situated on the kingdom's frontier and having been ravaged by past wars, the region was desolate and uninhabited.

The trade road was riddled with cracks, and the old post station was a ruin of collapsed walls, missing bricks, and a caved-in roof. Old, ragged dolls lay scattered in the overgrown grass along the road, lending the decay a bleak, eerie, and sinister quality.

The sound of hooves echoed as a caravan approached, the wind kicking up fallen leaves and clouds of dust.

"Boss, we've reached the old Orio's Cabin," the head of a mercenary corps said, approaching the caravan leader to ask for his decision. "Dusk is falling. I'm afraid we'll have to make camp here for the night."

The leader was Henrik, the former head of the Holy Sword Mercenary Corps in Soaring Bird City. He was the one who had instructed the city guards to extort an entry fee from Torin all that time ago.

"Orio's Cabin? It still hasn't been repaired?" Henrik looked up, his face souring at the sight of the dilapidated structure. It was in even worse shape now than it had been when they last passed through on their way to Soaring Bird City.

"Hmph. The pig-like, useless nobles of the empire," he spat. "They only know how to demand gold from us, but never think to repair the roads and post stations for the convenience of those who actually do the work. I don't know what His Majesty the King is thinking, tolerating those fat pigs as they embezzle every coin he allocates."

Though Henrik was a mercenary, he was backed by one of the empire's truly powerful nobles. The great nobles, while greedy, at least accomplished things. The empire had gained enormous wealth from Soaring Bird City, and every year the King, in conjunction with two Grand Dukes, would issue funds to maintain the trade routes and their waystations.

But after passing through layers of corrupt officials, the gold would vanish, with everyone shirking their duties until the matter was forgotten.

"The cabin is a ruin, and it hasn't been maintained for years. There are bound to be beasts about," Henrik sighed. Looking at the sun sinking below the horizon, he reluctantly gave the order. "Set the patrols. We'll make do here for one night."

The night grew dark. Campfires, roasted meat, dry bread, and rum—the favorites of any mercenary—were brought out.

"Been out here for years. When I get back this time, I'm gonna screw Lisa so hard she won't be able to get out of bed for three months, let alone see any other clients."

"Hahaha... you idiot, still thinking about a piece of trash like Lisa? You have no taste."

"What do you know? Only a woman who's been broken in by countless men knows how to truly serve a man."

"..."

The lives of mercenaries were crude, their ambitions simple. Besides eating, drinking, and relieving themselves, their world revolved around wine and women.

Henrik was leading this caravan to escort a shipment of valuable goods back to the capital. For the mercenaries who had set out with him, it was a chance to go home, and everyone was in high spirits. Filled with joy, they drank, sang, and boasted, their voices loud and boisterous.

And as they celebrated, the ragged dolls, tossed aside by the road and against the ruined walls, began to stir.

They climbed to their feet, their stitched mouths twisting into silent, cold sneers directed at the mercenaries around the fire. Some of the dolls merged, assembling themselves with unnatural speed. From the dark corners, three wooden puppets emerged.

The puppets flexed their limbs with eerie flexibility, striking various warm-up poses. Their bodies were soft, their necks twisted at impossible angles. They turned to face the mercenaries, and on their cold, stiff faces, a sneer could somehow be discerned.

Yet, all of this strangeness was masked by the mercenaries' loud boasting and the crackling of the campfire.

In the middle of the night, crickets chirped and owls hooted.

The three puppets blurred into motion. Their sickles rose and fell, again and again, and the sleeping mercenaries never woke.

Inside his tent, Henrik was taking out the pent-up frustration and impatience from the long journey on a blood elf woman he had purchased from Torin at a high price. As an Alpha-level expert, he was highly alert. When his tent flap was pushed aside, his eyes snapped open.

"Who's there?"

No one answered. What Henrik saw was a wooden puppet holding a large sickle. The creature's featureless face stared at him, filling him with a profound sense of dread.

"Who are you?" he demanded. "Do you know who we are? We're from the Holy Sword Mercenary Corps! We're backed by a Grand Duke of the empire!"

Henrik was certain that no one in the human kingdom would dare trifle with a Grand Duke.

"Hiding behind a powerful name, are we?" a mechanical, furious, and insane voice scraped from the puppet, though Henrik couldn't tell where the sound originated. "Trying to scare me? So you only know how to bully others by borrowing someone else's might. All who offend me must die!"

"Do you know what will happen to you for committing murder in the kingdom? The empire will be watching. Kill us, take the cargo—you won't escape!"

As Henrik spoke, he slowly reached for his longsword.

"I said," the puppet's voice shrieked, suddenly sharp and high-pitched, its sickle beginning to whine as it sliced through the air, "all who offend me must die!"

The puppet lunged into the tent. For a moment, the air was filled with the flash of blades and the clang of steel. Blood splattered in the flickering lamplight.

Three minutes later.

Zzzzt!

The sturdy tent was slashed open. The puppet stepped out, its sickle dripping. Behind it, in the ruins of the tent, lay the dismembered corpse of the Alpha-tier mercenary, Henrik, and the lifeless body of the blood elf woman.

Chapter 847: The Two-Faced Clown

In Soaring Bird City, within the palace.

In a secret chamber, Torin, Mike, and Wyatt opened their eyes simultaneously, their expressions a mixture of excitement and relief.

"Have a drink before you go," Torin's voice drifted calmly from the darkness of the chamber. "I bought some spirits from the dwarves. Take a bottle with you. And what happened tonight... stays buried in your hearts."

"As you command, My Lord," Mike and Wyatt replied, their tone deeply respectful.

The title "My Lord" they used was not just a formality. In the human kingdom, it typically referred to a noble who possessed a fiefdom. Torin, with his title and his territory, certainly fit the description. Furthermore, "My Lord" held more promise for the future than a simple "Master."

"Go on now," Torin added. "And remember to walk slowly. Make sure the night watch sees you."

"We understand, My Lord."

After Mike and Wyatt departed, the secret chamber fell into an profound silence. Torin's heartbeat, at first slow, began to quicken, then pound, until finally, he broke into a fit of hysterical laughter that slowly subsided back into stillness.

Composing himself, Torin entered the Survivor's Platform.

"I need ten more sets of those puppet artifacts," he sent in a message to a powerful contact he had made on the Platform. The puppet artifacts he had just used were single-use items, impossible to recover. They were also an extreme method for eliminating future troubles.

"My toys are fun to use, aren't they? Hahaha!" The reply that came back was supremely confident. "I have plenty of them. But what can you offer me in exchange?"

Torin fell silent. In truth, as an Alpha-tier survivor, he possessed few items of real value. Aside from the collection of miniature buildings he had been accumulating, he had little else to offer. He knew those miniatures were important; he had realized it the first time he used one.

"What do you want?" Torin asked the unknown entity, tucking the few miniatures he held safely away.

"Special resources. Your miniature buildings. And living components for crafting the puppets. Do you have any of these? If not, you can also accept my missions and work for me to earn your reward."

Torin was silent again. If he wanted to keep his prized possessions and still obtain more of those powerful puppets, his only choice was to work for this mysterious being.

"What should I call you?" Torin finally asked after a long period of deliberation. "And what can I do for you?"

The unknown entity didn't respond with words, but instead traded him a contract scroll. The terms were not overly harsh—no enslavement—and consisted mostly of confidentiality clauses. After reading the contract carefully several times, Torin decisively signed it.

"Very good. Here is a list of tasks. Pick one that suits you."

The entity sent him a mission list, which mostly consisted of finding rare magical plants and the high-grade enchanted bones of magical creatures.

"I'll choose this one." Among the many materials, Torin saw one he recognized.

"Oh... I didn't expect your world would have a mineral like Firestone. Very well. One thousand pounds of Firestone in exchange for one puppet."

Torin stared at the reply, feeling like a fattened pig on a chopping block.

"A thousand pounds is too much!" he tried to protest, attempting to bargain for a better deal.

"Kid, I don't haggle here," the reply came back instantly. "You can only earn credit points with me by gradually completing my missions. Only then can you purchase higher-tier puppets. For example, this little thing... hehe..."

The entity initiated a trade, placing a Legendary-level puppet in the window for Torin to see.

At the sight of such an incredible item, Torin's eyes immediately turned red, his breathing growing ragged.

"Fine. You'd better keep your word."

"Don't worry. Here with me, as long as you complete enough missions, you can obtain even greater benefits."

In the end, Torin accepted the reality of his exploitation. The other party held what he needed to grow his power, and that was all that mattered.

"Ogu, you had better keep your word." Ogu. That was the unknown entity's name. Torin had learned it after signing the contract.

"The word of Ogu is always guaranteed, my friend."

If Orion had been in Torin's place, he would have been stunned. In the mission the Deputy Commander had given him to eliminate traitors, the one known as the Two-Faced Clown was also named Ogu.

Ending his conversation with Ogu, Torin fell into deep thought. He didn't possess any Firestone himself. However, he had once seen it in Stoneheart City, at an auction held by the Seeker. It had been a small piece that Orion had put up for sale to support the Blade Hall.

If Firestone appeared in Stoneheart City, then either the Seeker or the Stoneheart Horde must have more of the rare mineral, Torin reasoned. He was smart and could see that the Seeker and the Stoneheart Horde were inextricably linked. Unique treasures aside, if the Seeker had a rare item, the Stoneheart Horde surely had a share of it as well.

Firestone... the Seeker auction house... the Stoneheart Horde...

It seems I'll have to make a trip to Stoneheart City. Perhaps I can bribe that succubus elder and get some information from her.

To complete Ogu's mission, Torin had set his sights on the Stoneheart Horde. As things stood now, Torin's most important assets were in Stoneheart City, and he had a network of contacts there.

After all, the trade between the human kingdom and the Horde passed through his Soaring Bird City. Furthermore, he had a secret arrangement with the Horde, acting as their primary source of slaves from the human kingdom.

In reality, due to his contract with Orion, Torin received very little from Soaring Bird City besides his palace and some nominal privileges. Most of the profits were funneled either to the Stoneheart Horde or to the empire's Grand Princess Ava.

In Stoneheart City, the capital of the Stoneheart Horde.

Orion was seated on his throne, his two children were perched on his shoulders, and he was chatting with Elara and Pallas.

"Daddy, Elara wants to ride Xalathar!"

Lately, Elara had become obsessed with the abyssal dragon, Xalathar. Every day, she would visit him, stand on his enormous head, and shout commands.

"Xalathar, to war with me!"

However, in the face of Elara's enthusiasm, Xalathar would simply ignore her and continue to doze.

Chapter 848: A Goofy Son and a Perceptive Daughter

Xalathar was an exceedingly proud creature. Without Orion's express permission, no one could command it. This included Orion's own children; neither Elara nor Pallas could move the great dragon.

"Daddy, Pallas wants to ride the abyssal dragon too!" Pallas piped up from his perch on the other shoulder, following his sister's lead.

As he had grown, Pallas had become cleverer. He had realized that he could often get what he wanted by either egging his sister on or by making his own request right after hers. In such cases, his daddy would usually agree.

"Alright," Orion said, reaching up to ruffle Elara's hair.

As a look of disappointment began to cross Pallas's face, only to be replaced by one of hope, Orion reached over and ruffled his head as well.

"Tomorrow, there's a festival at the outer city's textile market. It should be quite lively. I'll have Dace accompany you, and you can ride Xalathar there. Remember," he advised, "Xalathar is easy to please. Give it plenty of food, and it will have a better attitude toward you."

As long as his children's requests weren't excessive, Orion was quite accommodating.

"Daddy, the fruits in the magical plant garden are ripe. I saved this one especially for you," Elara said. She reached into her pocket, pulled out a bright red fruit, and popped it right into Orion's mouth.

The familiar, sweet flavor filled his mouth. He knew without thinking that it was one of the rare magical plants Lilith cultivated. It seemed his two little ones had been raiding her garden.

"It's delicious," Orion said, a broad smile spreading across his face. It was a heartfelt gesture from his adopted daughter. The gift itself was small, but the sentiment left him feeling satisfied and content.

"As it happens, Daddy has a gift for you too."

After swallowing the fruit, Orion flipped his hand over, and three amber-like gems appeared in his palm. Within each gem, an elemental sprite—one red, one blue, and one purple—was sleeping.

"Ah... that aura... they're elemental sprites!" Elara, being a student of magic, had enough knowledge to recognize them instantly.

"It seems our little Elara's knowledge is growing broader by the day," Orion said, carefully placing the three amber gems into Elara's small hands. He had obtained them from Aerin, and in all the Stoneheart Horde, Elara was the most fitting owner.

Elara cupped the gems, her face a mask of undisguised joy and curiosity. Under the watchful eyes of Orion and Pallas, she began to slowly chant an incantation.

Abruptly, the magical elements from across Stoneheart City began to converge in her hands. A gentle, multicolored light, soft and not at all glaring, bloomed from the gems, the sprites within releasing their own magical glow.

A moment later, three sprites, each the size of a human thumb with delicate features, chubby bodies, and thin, gossamer wings, emerged. They flitted about Elara, tumbling playfully through the air.

"Giggle... hehe... Fun... this is so much fun!" As the elemental energy pulsed from the three sprites, something within Elara's own body seemed to awaken, filling her with a sense of comfort, joy, and happiness.

"Hehe... from now on, you'll be Ruby, you'll be Sapphire, and you'll be Amethyst!" Elara was truly delighted. She held out her palm, and the three sprites came to rest there. She treated them like new pets, giving them names on the spot.

"Thank you, Daddy! Elara loves this gift so much!" She leaned over and planted a loud kiss on Orion's cheek.

"Da...ddy... Pallas wants one too!" On the other shoulder, Pallas had been eyeing the elemental sprites with unconcealed envy.

"There are no more," Orion said gently. "These are elemental sprites. They are to help your sister with her magic training."

Pallas's disappointment was obvious. Orion felt a pang of sympathy and, after a moment's thought, retrieved a dragon egg from his storage ring and handed it to him. The egg had been a gift from Isabella, brought back from a trip to her own world. While she couldn't procure dragon eggs in large numbers, as a Lord with an Archlord for a father, obtaining a single egg with a good bloodline was a simple matter for her.

Orion's original plan had been to possess the egg himself, creating a dragon avatar like Leonidas if he couldn't find a suitable target for his Scroll of the Devouring Avatar in the short term.

"Thank you, Daddy!" Pallas said, reaching out to hug the dragon egg. Seeing his son, who was barely bigger than the egg he was struggling to hold, Orion suddenly burst out laughing.

Elara turned her head and, seeing the comical sight of Pallas trying his best to hold the egg, also began to giggle. Her laughter was not as restrained as Orion's; it was loud, free, and unrestrained.

"Go on, go find your mother," Orion said to Pallas. "Your mother is a Beast Tamer. She will know how to hatch this egg."

At the words "dragon egg," both Pallas's and Elara's eyes lit up. Even in the Stoneheart Horde, dragons were high-tier creatures, not something an ordinary person could ever hope to obtain.

In truth, the curiosity in their eyes was entirely different. Elara already had her own dragon egg, one that her mentor had even fused with a phoenix egg to enhance its bloodline. She visited her egg every day in the Valkorath Realm. Compared to her own egg, the one Pallas held, while very good, simply couldn't compare. Just from the elemental fluctuations emanating from it, Elara could tell the quality was not as high as hers.

"Sister, sister, Elara-sister, fly, fly, fly! Pallas needs to fly!" Holding an egg bigger than himself, Pallas could barely walk. But he refused to let go or let anyone else touch his new treasure. So, he turned his attention to Elara.

"Go on, you two," Orion said, stroking Elara's head, ready to shoo his two delightful nuisances out. "Those three sprites need to get familiar with the castle. Take them to see your mother."

"Daddy, Elara will come play with you again tomorrow!" Elara said, her eyes crinkling into little crescents. She gave Orion another quick kiss, then with a flick of her finger, lifted Pallas into the air and flew with him deeper into the castle.

Watching them go, Orion shook his head with a wry smile. He had seen the look in Elara's eyes; it clearly meant she would be back tomorrow to ask for another gift. In contrast, his goofy son was so blissfully happy with his dragon egg that he had forgotten to even say thank you or goodbye.

It was clear that Elara was much more perceptive than Pallas. Of course, Orion reminded himself, Pallas was still very young.

Chapter 849: Got You!

In the Emerald Dream Realm, at the Marshlight Sanctuary.

A month can pass in the blink of an eye, a transient moment that time cannot hold. Three days ago, after receiving a notice from the Deputy Commander, Leonidas and Orion had gathered together.

"Remember, the duel map is randomly generated. The first thing you do when you enter is group up with everyone else," Leonidas said, his face grim, his usual teasing tone gone. He drilled the advice into Orion relentlessly. "If you can't group up, then you kill your enemy. Immediately. In the dueling grounds, it's them or you. Only one can survive."

"..."

In truth, the Deputy Commander had already gone over all of this three days prior.

"It's time. Let's go," Leonidas said finally. He and Orion met each other's gaze and nodded. Leonidas was the first to crush the five-pointed star ticket in his hand.

Orion took a deep breath and crushed his own.

The instant the ticket shattered, a brilliant circle of light ignited at Orion's feet, completely engulfing his body. The light blazed for three seconds, then vanished. The palace where he and Leonidas had been was now empty, without a single trace or lingering aura.

In the Crucible of the Gods, the Dueling Space.

When Orion arrived, he was completely enveloped in a beam of pale golden light. The light acted as a barrier, separating him from the dueling space itself, but it did not separate him from his teammates, who appeared nearby.

The Deputy Commander and Arthas were both present as will-projections, their faces blurred and indistinct. Leonidas was in his Void Dragon form, unchanged. Alexander, however, was a surprise. The form he had taken within the barrier was that of a greatsword, its entire blade etched with mystic runes. The aura radiating from the sword was that of a peak-tier Archlord avatar.

So this is my brother's style, Orion mused. The path of quiet, understated, and elegant power? As I thought. The quiet ones are always the best at hiding their strength.

As his mind wandered, the Deputy Commander's voice cut through his thoughts.

"Same old rules. Since you're in the duel, go all out. Either win, or die fighting!"

The Deputy Commander's voice was placid, but to Orion's ears, it was like a clap of thunder. There was no losing or surrendering in this duel. Either your avatar died, or you won. It was that simple.

No one spoke. They all shared this mindset; it was the only way.

Just as Orion was about to respond, he saw the figures of the Deputy Commander, Arthas, Leonidas, and Alexander begin to fade and disappear. They were being transported out. A moment later, Orion felt the same pull, and he too was sent away.

In the blink of an eye, he arrived in a dueling arena shaped like a long, single-path canyon. Though it was a single path, the arena was enormous. In the center stood an inactive teleportation array, and upon it stood a massive Flesh Golem, a warhammer chained to its arm, its eyes fixed on Orion with predatory intent. Steel chains were wrapped around its entire body, one end a scythe, the other the warhammer. It was an obviously dangerous foe.

At the far end of the dueling ground, another figure appeared, also shrouded in a pale golden barrier. This was Orion's opponent.

If the arena itself was a strange sight, what Orion saw when he looked up was truly shocking. The dueling ground he was in was constantly rotating. Above him, four other, similar arenas were also rotating in layered orbits.

For a moment, he felt as though he had entered the inner workings of a giant timepiece, and his arena was but one of its hands. The only difference was that this timepiece had six rotating hands.

"By the rules of the Dueling Space, and in accordance with the contract between the two parties, the duel will commence in ten seconds!" a mechanical, emotionless, and numb voice announced. "Ten, nine, eight, seven..."

In reality, Orion had no mental energy to spare listening to the countdown. The instant the pale golden barrier in front of him vanished, he activated Ghostly Steps, becoming a phantom and vanishing into the void.

The rules here were simple: kill the enemy and the guardian of the central teleporter, and he could transport out and ascend to the uppermost arena. Five combatants would eventually gather there to begin the final, decisive battle.

"Oh, interesting. To think my opponent would be a lower Archlord!"

The voice was like a dusk drum, deep and resonant. Each word seemed to strike Orion's mind directly. It was a rough voice, yet it felt resilient and magnetic, like ancient, weathered sandstone—old, mysterious, and perfect.

Though he heard the voice, Orion could not sense the speaker's presence at all. His opponent was also hidden and was trying to bait him out.

Orion moved through the void, constantly changing his position as he formulated a strategy. To kill a hidden enemy, he first had to find him. But his own senses were currently unable to locate his foe. That left only one option: use himself as bait and launch a decisive counterattack.

But his opponent's offensive came faster than he could have imagined.

"Can't you smell it?" the voice taunted. "The thick scent of blood on you is so conspicuous... tsk tsk tsk..."

Orion's heart leaped. Can he sense my position through my blood-qi?

No, he's bluffing!

To be honest, the opponent's words had unsettled him, making him doubt his own stealth for a split second. But he recovered quickly. He was currently in his Ghostly Steps state; his blood and life force should be completely concealed.

"Got you!" the voice suddenly shouted.

In the air above the arena, a black, crescent-moon-shaped tooth materialized. The tooth pulsed with a bizarre energy and began to spin wildly, generating a powerful suction force. In his phantom state, Orion found he couldn't resist the pull. He felt as if his very being was about to be torn apart, to dissolve into a wisp of smoke and be absorbed by the black tooth.

Forced, Orion dropped out of his Ghostly Steps state.

"Die, you ignorant fool!"

An illusory, terrifying scythe blade appeared behind him, slicing him in half at the waist. The attack was too bizarre, too fast. Orion hadn't even had a chance to defend himself.

Fortunately, a wound like this—being cut in two at the waist—was not yet enough to be fatal.

Chapter 850: Death-Soul Chix

No blood flowed. Skin, muscle, bone, and organs writhed like a mass of worms, rapidly re-fusing and regenerating as new cells were born, sealing the wound in seconds.

This was the result of Orion's Siren Regeneration, a skill that granted him superhuman healing. As long as his head and heart were not dealt a fatal blow, he was effectively immortal.

The attack had, at least, allowed Orion to get a look at his opponent: a shadowy figure shrouded in black mist. It had a humanoid body, powerfully built and as tall as Orion himself.

Within the shadow, Orion could make out a stiff, dead face—or rather, a cold, human-like mask. Behind the mask, two motes of lifeless green ghostfire burned for eyes. They stared at Orion, glinting with a cold light.

At that moment, Orion's figure flashed. With two consecutive leaps, he was high in the air. In the spot where he had just been, another massive scythe blade materialized from the void, slicing toward where his neck had been.

It missed.

"A terrifying healing ability, and something like teleportation. Interesting. But you..."

As the shadow figure spoke, the Flesh Golem at the center of the arena let out a furious roar. A new, even more gruesome scythe flew out on the end of a chain, striking directly at the shadow. The figure was clearly within the Golem's attack range.

The Golem's assault was too sudden, too fast. The shadow figure had no time to parry or dodge.

And yet, when the scythe passed through its body, it was like slicing through empty air. The shadow stood in its original spot, completely unharmed. However, as the scythe swung back around for another pass, the shadow figure flickered, teleporting to a higher position and out of the Flesh Golem's reach. The Golem threw its head back and roared at the figure but did not attack again.

So it's a restricted, peak-Archlord level Flesh Golem, Orion concluded. In that brief exchange, he had gathered his first piece of intelligence. The Golem's purpose was to guard the teleporter and to indiscriminately attack any enemy who entered its limited domain.

Next was the shadow figure. In dodging the Golem, it had displayed two abilities. One was a form of phasing, allowing it to ignore physical attacks. The other was teleportation. Either one would have been a problem. Both together made Orion's brow twitch.

So this is the strength of a peak-tier Archlord? This is certainly a challenge.

In truth, Orion had an opportunity to attack when the shadow figure was being targeted by the Golem. But he had chosen not to. Firstly, his waist wound was still in the final stages of healing. It wasn't that it wasn't functional, but using Instant Impact put immense strain on the body. He worried that using the skill before he was fully healed would aggravate the injury, which would be a costly mistake. Secondly, he wanted to use the opportunity to gather more intelligence on his opponent.

The phasing and teleportation were his reward.

The Flesh Golem's attack had also dissipated the mist surrounding the figure, revealing its true form.

"Is that... a puppet?" Orion wondered aloud.

The being was emaciated, its body wrapped in tight leather armor. Its withered skin was covered in a dense network of mystic runes.

As Orion gazed at them, he had the strange sensation of facing and comprehending Death itself. It was as if the runes held some profound truth that he could see and be shocked by, but whose essence he could not yet grasp. The figure dragged a huge, dark red, rust-stained scythe, undoubtedly the source of the phantom blades that had attacked him.

"A puppet?" the figure scoffed. "Oh, no, no, no. Though we are opponents, please do not insult us with such a comparison. How can such a low-class thing be compared to the soul-form of our Death-Soul race?"

The figure let out a low chuckle and teleported, closing the distance to Orion.

Orion's pupils flickered with a mixture of confusion, caution, and a sliver of opportunity. "The Death-Soul race?" he asked, his confusion genuine. He had truly never heard of them.

"Allow me to introduce myself. I am Chix, Marquis of the Death-Souls. After this duel, perhaps we can be friends. Until then, you have my apologies!"

As he finished speaking, rings of runes began to rise from under Marquis Chix's feet, ultimately forming a sacred, pagoda-shaped formation.

The array took shape, and with another low laugh, Chix teleported directly in front of Orion, his scythe swinging down at Orion's head. Simultaneously, a translucent, illusory pagoda materialized above Orion, pressing down on him like a mountain.

Boom!

Orion's body dissipated. It was not his physical form, but an afterimage. The instant Chix had teleported, Orion had already used Instant Impact to move.

Their brief conversation had not been for the sake of conversation. Chix had used the introduction to distract Orion while secretly preparing his arcane formation. Orion, meanwhile, had used that same moment to finish healing, bringing his body back to its peak state.

"I am Orion, King of the Giants. A pleasure to meet you."

Orion raised his trident, Flame of Will. A fire ignited at its tip, blazing with a heat that mirrored his own searing, endless battle spirit.

At the same time, the Eightfold Spear Barrage materialized in the void, surrounding both him and Marquis Chix. While his opponent had been talking, Orion had been recovering—and preparing his own attack.

"As expected. Anyone who can participate in this duel is a force to be reckoned with." Sensing Orion's fighting spirit, Chix chuckled and raised his scythe, his own aura rising to meet the challenge.

Boom! Boom! Boom!

The blood-red spider spears of the barrage suddenly ignited with crimson flames. With a shudder, they launched themselves at Chix like a shower of fiery meteors.

Faced with such a dense attack, Chix simply smirked. The pagoda-shaped formation enveloped him completely. As the rain of spears struck the formation, they were wreathed in black smoke and, like icicles dropped into boiling water, dissolved into nothingness.

Seeing his attack fail, Orion showed no disappointment on his face. This was just the beginning, the first probe.

Within the Eightfold Spear Barrage, more spears were continuing to form. This time, however, Orion imbued them not only with fire, but also with his lightning power.

Crackling spears of lightning appeared, and the Eightfold Spear Barrage transformed into a deadly electric net, closing in around his enemy.

Marquis Chix looked up. Seeing this, his face grew grim for the first time.