

Titan King 871

Chapter 871: A Tragic Past

Only after seeing the indifferent expressions on both Leonidas's and Orion's faces did Neil finally relax and continue.

"Next is the matter of the dragon itself. We have provisionally set two plans for slaying it. The distribution of spoils will differ slightly for each plan."

"..."

Following this, Borg and Neil worked in tandem, one explaining the plans while the other added details, laying out two combat strategies for Leonidas and Orion.

It was quite simple. The two plans revolved around two main tanks: one with Commander Borg in the lead, and one with Leonidas in the lead.

To put it plainly, it was a dual-tank strategy. Whoever took on the main role would receive a larger share of the spoils in the end.

Neil spoke for a long time, meticulously going over the distribution of the dragon's corpse. From the dragon scales, hide, blood, and bones, he confirmed every type of material with Orion and Leonidas.

After Borg and Neil had left, Orion couldn't help but let out a long sigh.

This kind of thing was so troublesome.

"Heh, I'm just afraid that after we kill the dragon, they won't be alive to collect those materials," Leonidas scoffed.

He had no interest in the materials from a Legendary-level dragon. And he had absolutely no confidence in this Dragonslayer's Lance Mercenary Corps.

They were too self-assured, and they understood far too little about dragons.

...

In the Titanion Realm, on the Serpent Isle.

"My lady, my apologies. Our identities have been exposed, and the camp's location may have been as well."

A Gorgon stood behind Lysinthia, trembling with self-reproach.

Lysinthia didn't speak. She crouched down, examining the serpentfolk captive her subordinate had brought before her. This was the culprit, the one who had tailed them all this way and sent signals to the other serpentfolk on the island.

"What a pity," Lysinthia murmured. "You originally had the qualifications to be transformed into a Gorgon."

As the captive serpentfolk stared in surprise, a strand of Lysinthia's hair began to writhe.

A black snake emerged from it, slithered down her arm, and then, opening its jaws to an unnaturally monstrous size, swallowed the captive whole.

Then, Lysinthia stood and walked to the edge of the city wall, gazing out at the dense jungle in the distance.

"Our identities being exposed was only a matter of time. It's no big deal," she said, turning back. Her cold gaze held a trace of warmth reserved only for her own kind, the Gorgons.

"As for the camp being exposed, that's even less of a problem. The Warden is here. This beacon of Jynx will not be extinguished or fall."

She turned again, looking toward the tall Mage Tower beside the Serathar Spire.

"This place is under the protection of the wind elementals. No outsider can enter here," Gustalon's confident and powerful voice echoed from within the tower.

He was a Legendary-level expert. In truth, Gustalon's presence had given the newly converted Gorgons immense courage—the courage to fight back, to contend for their own territory.

"Prepare yourselves," Lysinthia commanded, her voice ringing with authority. "The war between the serpentfolk and us Gorgons has officially begun."

...

In the Uynting Realm, in an unknown forest.

A campfire is the most indispensable thing when camping in the wild. Its existence not only drives away the cold and the dark but also allows mercenaries to find a sliver of comfort and reassurance in the face of the unknown and the fear it brings.

At this moment, Orion, Leonidas, Yala, and Alilien were sitting around a campfire. They watched the beast meat sizzle as it roasted over the flames, and the sense of unfamiliarity between them gradually began to fade.

In reality, the two young women, Yala and Alilien, had come over on their own initiative. No one knew what brand of honeyed words Leonidas had used, but they had convinced Alilien to drag the half-reluctant but very sexy cat-woman Yala over to Orion and Leonidas's fire.

"Life is short. While you're young, you have to be reckless and romantic," Leonidas was saying, feeding Alilien another dose of his cringey philosophy. "Darling Alilien, do you know? Romance isn't a momentary passion, but a lifetime of a fluttering heart. And you... you make my heart flutter."

As Alilien looked on with a mixture of curiosity and admiration, Leonidas slowly took the greatsword from his back. It was Alexander's spirit sword avatar.

"Alilien, do you know? I used this sword to slay a dragon. The blade is stained with dragon's blood, making it indestructible, able to cut through anything."

As he spoke, Leonidas plucked a hair from his mane and blew on it gently. The hair fell upon the sword's edge and was instantly severed in two.

"See? It can cut a falling hair. Nothing can stand in its way."

To Alilien's astonished gaze, Leonidas casually handed the spirit sword avatar to her, allowing her to hold it and look at it.

Orion, sitting to the side, silently prayed for Alexander.

Good brothers exist to be used to impress girls,

he thought.

Of course, he was also praying that Alexander would get angry enough to just manifest and kill Leonidas. Leonidas's showboating was making him look very plain, especially with a sexy cat-woman sitting right there.

"Did your big brother really slay a dragon?" Yala's voice was soft, not timid, but with a sweet, almost deliberately cute lilt.

"Mm, what my bro says is true," Orion said, turning the roasting meat and adding a little fuel to fire.

"I believe you... you all. You're so strong," Yala said.

Orion turned his head and looked at her. The young woman's pretty face was slightly flushed from his comment.

He tore off a piece of roast meat, placed it on a wooden plate, and handed it to her.

"What about your family?" Orion asked.

He didn't bother asking if she had a boyfriend or a lover; the fact that she had come over with Alilien to hang out with them meant they were both single. Of course, under Leonidas's prodding, Alilien had already spilled all the details about Yala's situation. But while they didn't have official boyfriends, they certainly didn't lack for pursuers.

"They're all gone," Yala said, and her gentle voice suddenly dropped.

In the firelight, her fluffy ears drooped slightly.

Just as Orion was about to offer some words of comfort, Yala began to tell her story.

"A few years ago, there was a beast tide. It crashed against the City of Lube, and the city was attacked by flying beasts."

"My father died fighting on the walls."

"My mother... she died trying to save my younger sister, who had been snatched away."

"And as for my sister... my sister..."

It seemed a tragic memory had resurfaced. Yala gradually curled into a ball, burying her head in her knees. The sight was pitiful, enough to make anyone's heart ache.

In this world, with the exception of the dragons, all the other civilized races lived under oppression and in a state of constant unease.

There were no nations here, no great hordes. The only large-scale factions were organizations like the Mercenaries' Guild.

Because of the harsh environment, the people here were divided, governed by their individual cities. The main body of these cities was made up of the strongest males of the various races—in other words, the mercenaries.

Cities like Lube were generally controlled by a few large mercenary corps. The Dragonslayer's Lance, for instance, held a prominent place here.

Chapter 872: A Hero's Timing

Yala's tragic story struck a chord with Orion. He, too, had lost his parents at a young age. Though he hailed from Earth, the time he spent with his parents and sister was his most treasured memory.

He gazed at the vast, starry sky, wondering silently: Where did my parents go? Why hasn't there been a single clue after all this time? Even the smallest hint would do.

But his only answer was the sigh in his own heart, and the countless stars spread across the night sky.

Orion reached out and pulled the curled-up Yala into his arms, letting her rest against him.

"Here," he said softly, his tone gentle. "You can borrow my lap, shoulder, or chest for a while."

The action was a bit forward, but after hearing Orion's words, Yala, who had been about to struggle, gave up her resistance and let him hold her.

In truth, the potent masculine scent that washed over her had already left her flustered, and with the painful memories of her past resurfacing, she simply let herself collapse against his lap.

At another campfire nearby.

"Borg, is that the 'chaste and virtuous woman' you were talking about?" Robert's eyes were locked on Orion in the distance.

Yala was now lying across Orion's lap, in a posture that looked very much like she was performing oral sex on him. As one of Yala's pursuers, Robert was seething with rage.

He felt as if he had been insulted, as if his woman were being defiled by another man.

"Robert, what Yala wants to do is her own freedom," Borg said, his voice low. "Besides, you should know better than I what kind of woman she is."

He stared at Robert. Robert was not a member of the Dragonslayer's Lance, but a core member of another mercenary corps in Lube, temporarily requisitioned for this mission. Robert was also an Alpha-level expert, but Yala had simply never been interested in him.

"You should know that women are drawn to the strong," Borg warned. "Sirs Leo and Orion are both peak Alpha-level experts. You would be wise not to provoke them."

It was both a warning and a piece of advice. As the corps commander, Borg was actually quite happy to see Yala and Alilien getting close to Orion and his brother. It might mean gaining two powerful new members for the Dragonslayer's Lance.

Besides, as their commander, Borg genuinely hoped that Yala and Alilien would find happiness. In this world, relying on a strong man was the most normal, and most fortunate, choice a woman could make.

"Bitch... whore..." Robert muttered.

He would, of course, never dare to confront Orion and Leonidas. As an early Alpha-tier warrior, he was well aware of how terrifying a peak-tier expert was. But the anger and resentment festering in his heart still forced the curses from his lips.

Commander Borg frowned, but seeing that Robert made no further move, the hawkish look in his own eyes slowly relaxed.

Across the way, lying on Orion's lap and stimulated by his strong masculine presence, Yala's mood gradually improved, her sadness slowly turning to shyness.

"Thank you," she whispered.

Mustering the last of her modesty, she lifted her head and moved out of Orion's embrace.

Orion just smiled. He was no virgin; physical contact of this level with the opposite sex did nothing to stir his impulses.

"I put some secret spices on the roast meat. Perhaps you'll like it," he said, offering her a plate.

He glanced past her and saw Alilien sneaking out of a nearby tent. Her face was flushed and her clothes were disheveled; she had clearly just been with Leonidas.

After Yala had eaten half the plate of meat and her emotions had settled, Alilien, now properly dressed and having changed into a fresh set of undergarments, slowly walked over.

"Yala, we should go back," she said.

Yala stood, after bidding Orion farewell, left the campfire with Alilien.

A moment later, Leonidas strolled up to the fire, humming a little tune. He snatched the roast meat from Orion's hands and began to eat it with loud, smacking noises.

"Delicious, juicy, and supple. Just so good!" he declared.

Orion rolled his eyes. He knew, of course, that Leonidas was not talking about the meat in his hands.

"Bro, I'm not trying to criticize you, but in a situation like that, when you're already holding her, you should just find a tent and drive your lance straight home. As long as you're strong enough, forceful enough, they won't resist."

Having had his fill, Leonidas was now in a very good mood, and he greatly enjoyed teasing Orion. It gave him a chance to pass on his "unique skills" to his pupil, Orion, like a master teaching his apprentice.

"Trash," Alexander's voice suddenly came from the spirit sword. "A dead dog that only thinks with its lower body."

Leonidas had left him stuck in the ground outside while he and Alilien were busy, causing him to miss the whole live show.

"Tch, Alexander, I'm not trying to criticize you, but as a sword, you shouldn't be having such thoughts," Leonidas retorted. "Besides, there aren't any female swords of a high enough grade in the Dragonslayer's Lance for you to play with, are there? Hahaha..."

Amidst this mutual sarcasm and bickering, the two men and the one sword kept watch over the campfire and passed the night.

Seven more days passed.

At dusk, as the mercenary corps entered a forest, they were suddenly attacked by a pack of beasts.

The assailants were a large pack of hyenas, including several at the Alpha level. High above, a flock of vulture-like beasts circled, eyeing the mercenaries hungrily.

The roof of the carriage Orion and Leonidas were in had been removed long ago due to the heat, so they had a clear view of the situation without needing to use their senses.

"Forget about slaying a dragon. They probably can't even handle this pack of beasts," Leonidas said, glancing up at a pair of peak Alpha-level vultures hidden among the flock.

He had absolutely no faith in this grandly-named Dragonslayer's Lance Mercenary Corps.

Orion didn't speak, his gaze fixed on the front of the formation, where the fighting was fiercest.

In the fray, the greatsword-wielding Borg and the great-axe-wielding Robert formed the outer line, their blades hacking and cleaving, holding back the pouncing hyenas.

The fox-person archer, Neil, continuously drew his bow, providing fire support for the frontline combatants.

The lancer Aiden and the dual-wielding swordswoman Alilien were defending the rear, which was in a precarious state.

Only the cat-woman assassin, Yala, was relatively safe, guarding the archer.

The rest of the mercenaries had formed a defensive circle, protecting each other's backs.

"Hey, Dead Dog, your little lover is about to break," Alexander's voice mocked from the spirit sword.

"Now is not the time for a hero to save the damsel," Leonidas replied coolly. "The time for this great hero to act is when my darling Alilien feels she is about to die. Maybe then, she will completely give her heart to me, hmph hmph!"

"Now, let me think, what position should we try tonight..."

Orion turned to look at Leonidas. The latter just gave him a lewd grin, immensely satisfied with the look of shock on Orion's face, and offered him a look that said, Learn from me, bro.

"Besides," Leonidas added, "if we interfere now, we might be misunderstood as petty thieves trying to steal their spoils. Let's wait. Let the situation get a little worse."

Chapter 873: Stealing the Show

Night fell. The darkness gave the hyena pack cover, and it made them more ferocious.

They poured out from all directions like ghosts in the moonlight, completely surrounding the mercenaries.

A few scattered torches were lit, offering a sliver of light to the beleaguered company. The flickering flames danced like the fate of these men, their path forward shrouded in darkness.

"Bro, you handle your end. Big bro is off to play hero and save the damsel!" Leonidas declared.

He grabbed Alexander's spirit sword avatar and, after a quick word to Orion, began to walk toward Alilien's position, dragging the greatsword.

"Darker than darkness are my eyes," the cringey, over-the-top Leonidas chanted, his voice a low murmur. "Redder than the sun is my blood. More hopeful than tomorrow is the sword in my hand. With a heart forged from the sword, I press ever forward."

As Alilien watched, her beautiful eyes sparkling, Leonidas raised the sword and swung.

Vwoom!

A wave of sword light shot out, expanding horizontally like a ripple on water. Wherever the light passed, all the hyena beasts were sliced in two.

The battle at the rear of the formation instantly ceased.

Everyone, friend and foe alike, couldn't help but stare at Leonidas, who stood with his sword still raised. They were shocked, astonished, and in utter disbelief.

"When I draw my sword, blood must be shed!"

Alright, Orion had to admit, Leonidas had really stolen the show with that one.

If we're going to show off, he thought, we might as well do it together.

Orion looked toward Yala's position. The fox-person archer, Neil, could no longer provide support to the outer line. The flock of vulture-beasts circling above had begun to dive.

The two Alpha-level vultures, in particular, had already inflicted casualties on the team.

The cat-woman Yala was an assassin, the archer's guardian. She watched in horror as an Alpha-level vulture glided in, used a wind blade to swat away the deputy commander's arrows, and then, before she could intervene, impaled a nearby archer through the chest with its talons.

The man was carried into the sky and devoured.

With the aerial assault underway and beasts on all sides, no one could come to their aid. No one had a strong counter to the threat from above. That familiar feeling of despair began to creep back into Yala's heart.

"Damn beasts!" Neil cursed, nocking another arrow as the vultures attacked again.

But this time, the two Alpha-level vultures were leading the charge, and their targets were him and the cat-woman Yala at his side.

"Not good!" Neil shouted as he saw his three-arrow spread swatted aside with contemptuous ease.
"Yala, get back!"

But they were in the center of the mercenary formation. There was no room for them to retreat. Protected by the others, they were now like a little fox and a little cat trapped in a cage with no escape from the predators in the sky.

This is it! The thought flashed through both Yala's and Neil's minds simultaneously. They both drew their daggers, preparing to face the vultures' savage strike.

At that moment of life and death, a brilliant light illuminated the entire battlefield.

A trident, wreathed in crackling electricity, shot from the rear of the formation. It was a dazzling streak of light, like a bolt of aurora, like a miracle. It skewered both of the attacking Alpha-level vulture-beasts, stringing them together in mid-air.

Seeing the enemy that had been about to kill her suddenly struck down, Yala couldn't help but turn around.

Orion was standing on the carriage, now holding a longspear. He gave it a fancy twirl, then offered the watching Yala a gentlemanly salute. Then, he pointed forward with his trident.

Yala followed the direction of his gesture. The moment she turned back, the trident impaling the two vultures exploded like a firework.

BOOM!

The terrifying, massive explosion obliterated all the hyenas in the immediate vicinity. The few that were lucky enough to escape death whimpered, tucked their tails between their legs, and fled into the forest in all directions.

The battle had stopped. The beast pack had retreated. It had all happened in an instant.

Orion stood on the carriage, trident in hand, backed by the few flickering torches. His tall, heroic figure stood in the darkness, yet he shone like a star, drawing the eyes of all.

Even Leonidas and Alilien in the rear were drawn by the sound of the explosion and turned to look.

"Holy hell," Leonidas muttered to himself. "This bro's posing... is on a whole other goddamn level."

Brother, aren't you afraid of getting struck by lightning for showing off like that?

He felt that Orion, who hadn't even recited a single cheesy line, had managed to pose in a much more high-class manner, and it left a sour taste in his mouth.

"Leonidas, Orion is... is... so powerful!" Alilien breathed, staring at Orion's back. Illuminated by the flash of lightning, his figure was a dark silhouette, yet it was so incredibly mighty.

"Am I not powerful?" Leonidas grumbled, his tone full of displeasure.

"You are also very strong," Alilien said quickly. "And very big!"

Orion saw something flash in her eyes. Leonidas, seeing it too, suddenly let out a low chuckle and put his arm around Alilien's slender waist. He suddenly realized that this girl named Alilien was not as naive and innocent as he had first thought. She had a sharp wit. He liked that very much.

With the battle over so suddenly, the members of the Dragonslayer's Lance burst into cheers of relief and joy.

"Did you see that just now?"

"What?"

"The sword wave! Wherever the sword wave passed, all the beasts were cut down where they stood!" This was from the mercenaries in the rear who had witnessed Leonidas's display.

"I didn't see a sword wave, I just saw a bolt of lightning!"

"The lightning shot through the sky and killed two of the Alpha-peak vulture-birds!"

"It killed them both at once, and then it exploded and took out a huge swath of hyenas!"

"..."

Amidst the cheerful chatter, the mercenaries began to divide the spoils. They gathered wood, lit new fires, and began to set up camp and cook the meat. The thick, bloody scent still lingered in the air, ensuring that no ordinary beast would dare approach. For now, this area was safer than anywhere else in the forest.

At a new campfire, Orion, Leonidas, Borg, Neil, Yala, and Alilien sat together. To be precise, they sat in distinct pairs, forming a clear contrast.

Leonidas had his arm around Alilien, who, with a happy expression, was affectionately feeding him a piece of roast meat.

Orion sat watching the fire, a faint smile on his face. Beside him sat Yala, who was currently roasting a piece of some unknown beast's organ for him.

Borg and Neil, the two leaders of the Dragonslayer's Lance, were chatting happily.

"Sirs Leo and Orion," the fox-person Neil said, his attitude extremely respectful, his tone exceedingly gentle. "According to our agreement, after we have divided the spoils from the beasts you killed, we will deliver your share to you without a single piece missing."

He too was an Alpha-level expert. Before meeting Leonidas and Orion, he would never have dreamed that the gap between warriors of the same tier could be as vast as the heavens and the earth.

Chapter 874: Food for the Dragon

"I've said it before, we brothers aren't interested in these low-level beasts," Leonidas said, chewing on the meat Alilien had given him. He then turned back to the girl, and the two began flirting and getting cozy again.

Neil, seeing this, could only turn his helpless gaze to Orion.

"As my brother said, we're not very interested in those spoils. The only thing that can attract our attention is the dragon," Orion stated calmly. "If you really want to give them to us, then just give them to Yala and Alilien."

As he said this, Orion turned his head and gave Yala a slight smile.

At his words, even Alilien, who was deep in her flirtation with Leonidas, couldn't help but look up at him.

Faced with their gazes, Orion remained composed, his eyes fixed on the roasting meat over the fire as if its aroma was far more captivating than the current topic of conversation.

"Very well," Borg, as the commander, said, stepping in to make the final decision. "It will be as Sir Orion says. Your share of the spoils will be divided between Yala and Alilien."

Orion nodded and said no more.

Borg and Neil stayed by the campfire for a little while longer, and after eating a few bites of meat, they made an excuse and left.

"Thank you... for saving me," Yala said in a low voice after Borg and Neil were gone. She glanced at Leonidas and Alilien, who were whispering sweet nothings to each other across the fire.

"A 'thank you' like that has no sincerity," Orion said with a teasing expression, giving Yala a mischievous look that said, you figure it out.

Yala lowered her head, not daring to meet his eyes. As a mature woman, she understood the meaning behind his gaze. She returned to her task of roasting the meat, not stopping until she had fed Orion to his fill.

When it was time to sleep, Leonidas and Alilien discreetly made their way to a newly pitched tent. Orion looked at Alexander's spirit sword avatar, which Leonidas had once again stuck in the ground, and chuckled with schadenfreude.

"It's one thing for you to show off; that's your own skill," Alexander's resentful voice came from the spirit sword. "But the sword light Leonidas used was my power, that damn dead dog!"

Orion couldn't hold it in and let out a few low laughs. After chatting with Alexander for a while, he also retired to his own tent.

In the middle of the night, a dark shadow slipped quickly into Orion's tent.

"Hmph... from ancient times to now, love has always been a fatal poison for women," Alexander, who was standing guard by the fire like a hidden sentry, muttered to himself upon seeing this. "Another one offering herself up. A woman for whom there is no cure."

Inside the dark tent, Orion's arm shot out, wrapping around the cat-woman Yala as she slipped into his embrace. Held by him, she didn't dare to look up. Truly, sneaking into his tent and throwing herself into his arms had taken every last bit of her courage.

"Do you know what will happen, now that you've entered this tent?" he asked, his voice a low rumble.

"Mm."

"You won't regret it?"

"Mm."

Orion lowered his head and kissed her.

What followed was the sound of a cat-woman's gentle purrs and cries.

Outside the tent, Alexander's senses were suddenly blocked by a barrier of force. The scene he had been anticipating turned to static, like a television screen losing its signal.

...(Orion could now control his size with ease—human by default, giant when necessary.)

The next morning, Orion and Leonidas emerged from their respective tents, looking refreshed and invigorated. Yala and Alilien had already returned to their own tents before dawn.

After breakfast, the mercenary corps packed up and continued their march.

Thanks to Orion and Leonidas's timely intervention, the corps had not suffered major casualties in yesterday's beast attack. They were still filled with hope for the dragon hunt, and after witnessing the power of their two new members, their confidence in the mission had soared.

Inside the carriage, Leonidas shot Orion a suggestive wink, a clear sign of approval for his conquest of Yala the previous night. Leonidas felt that only now had Orion truly joined the vast ranks of the Dead Dogs.

"Can you two feel it?" Alexander's voice suddenly asked.

As the column drew closer to the dragon's canyon, the senses of Orion, Alexander, and Leonidas could already detect the beast's aura.

"It really did advance to the Legendary level!" Leonidas exclaimed. "My poor Alilien, your Dragonslayer's Lance Mercenary Corps is truly a funeral procession now."

He then covered his face and pretended to wipe away tears, though whether they were real or fake, Orion couldn't tell. With Leonidas's acting skills, it was sometimes hard to know if he was being serious.

"Don't you two find this strange?" Alexander's spirit sword trembled slightly as his voice came again. "A dragon preparing to advance to the Legendary tier should be extremely secretive about its location. And yet, this information somehow leaked to the Dragonslayer's Lance. And then, the corps actually managed to assemble a team to go and kill it. No matter how you look at it, this whole thing stinks."

Alexander's analysis was perfectly logical. Orion was no fool; with a little thought, he guessed at a certain possibility.

"Bro, are you saying this whole dragon-slaying operation has been a conspiracy from the start?"

"Hmph... of course it's a conspiracy," Leonidas, not Alexander, was the one who answered. "Every time a dragon advances, its body is completely drained of energy. It's starving."

Having possessed two dragon avatars, Leonidas knew their habits all too well.

"In my opinion, the news of the dragon in that canyon was deliberately leaked to the mercenary corps," he continued, his voice turning slightly grim. "Every single person in this Dragonslayer's Lance Mercenary Corps is just food, sent as a gift to the dragon."

If they had been ordinary wandering mercenaries, if their strength was truly only at the peak of the Alpha tier, they would have likely died here.

In other words, all of them—including Orion, Alexander, and Leonidas—had been manipulated by someone hiding in the shadows.

"Could it be that commander, Borg?" Orion voiced his first suspicion. As the leader of the corps, he would know the most. And he was a man of few words, only speaking at critical moments.

"It's probably not him," Alexander's voice came, refuting Orion's guess. "The most obvious suspect is often not the true culprit."

"Hehehe, why bother guessing?" Leonidas laughed mischievously. "Let's just play the fool and go along with the act for whoever is pulling the strings. When the truth is revealed at the climax, we'll know everything, won't we?"

"Besides," he added, his eyes glinting, "don't you think the surprise of opening a blind box is the most fun part? The unexpected? The twist? Just imagine, when we brothers step in and slay the dragon, won't that little bug hiding in the shadows be scared shitless?"

Thinking of the fun to be had, Leonidas's eyes began to shine with excitement.

Orion turned his head, gazing out the carriage window at the scenery. The distant forest, hidden in a veil of mist, now held a different kind of charm.

Chapter 875: The enemy is just getting a little impatient

Three days later, Starwind Canyon.

Before the wagon even reached the canyon entrance, Yala and Alilien, who had been scouting ahead, reappeared on the carriage.

"The commander sent us to provide support," Yala announced. "I'm an assassin, and Alilien is a dual-wielding swordswoman. We can take care of any enemies trying to flank you while you're engaged."

Orion and Leonidas exchanged a smiling glance and nodded. They weren't about to refuse the offer. Truthfully, if things went sideways, having Yala and Alilien close by meant they could intervene in a heartbeat.

"Looks like we're fighting side-by-side, baby!" Leonidas said, throwing an arm around Alilien. The two had been inseparable for the past few nights, and their relationship had accelerated at warp speed.

The open display made a blush creep up Yala's cheeks. Just as she was thinking about giving them some space, Orion reached out and pulled her into his arms. With Leonidas and Alilien right there, Yala felt a wave of shyness wash over her. She buried her face in the fabric of Orion's jacket, avoiding everyone's gaze.

From the distant shadows, a pair of eyes filled with resentment watched Orion for a few moments too long.

But that was all it took. Orion's senses, sharp as ever, caught it instantly.

It's him.

Alexander's spirit sword avatar, ever vigilant, had also picked up on the hostile gaze and the killing intent behind it. He sent a mental ping to Orion and Leonidas.

Boring, Leonidas thought, a wave of disappointment washing over him. It was like finally getting a legendary-tier survivor chest only to have it drop a single, useless piece of heroic gear. A total letdown.

He's only human, after all, Alexander added with a sigh, his own interest in the crawler hiding in the dark already fading. Driven by petty grudges and desires. He can't help but show his hand, and he doesn't even know he's done it.

"Bro, that little rat is gunning for you," Leonidas's voice echoed in Orion's mind. "He's your problem when the time comes. The dragon is mine. Don't you dare try to steal my thunder—I already promised Alilien I'd kill a dragon for her. Gotta put on a show."

Orion just nodded, perfectly fine with the arrangement.

"Are you two plotting something again?" Alilien's sharp eyes had caught the look that passed between Leonidas and Orion. She snuggled against Leonidas's chest and murmured the question.

"Just thinking, babe," Leonidas replied without missing a beat, his voice smooth as silk. "Once we get into the canyon, I'm gonna use some dragon hide to make you a little skirt. I bet you'd look even hotter in it." Sweet-talking her was second nature to him, as easy as breathing.

...

Half a day later, the Dragonslayer's Lance Mercenary Corps arrived at the mouth of the valley. After a final meal, Commander Borg gave the order. "Line up! Battle formation!"

The entire company formed up and began a slow, deliberate march into Starwind Canyon.

It was an odd sight. Orion and Leonidas, easily the two most powerful fighters in the entire force, weren't at the vanguard. Instead, they walked calmly in the dead center of the formation, flanked by Yala and Alilien, who had their weapons drawn and were ready for a fight.

It wasn't that Borg didn't want to order the two demigods around. But every time the commander even considered it, the memory of that impossibly wide slash of sword light and the bolt of lightning that had pierced the sky a few days ago immediately extinguished the thought. Besides, this was just a bunch of dragonkin. The Dragonslayer's Lance Mercenary Corps could handle them on their own.

They hadn't gone far into the canyon when a rustling sound began to emanate from the trees around them.

One by one, over a thousand dragonkin emerged from the woods. They had horned heads, scale-covered bodies, and hands that ended in draconic claws. Their fangs jutted out from their maws, and their eyes burned with feral hatred.

ROAR! ROAR! ROAR!

The guttural roars echoed through the canyon, cranking the tension to a breaking point.

"Hold the line! No fear!" Commander Borg's voice boomed, thick with a confidence that steadied the nerves of his troops. "You have your weapons coated in Dragon Crystal Powder! They're weak to it!"

At his command, lances, bows, crossbows, and tridents—all coated with the shimmering powder—were brought to bear.

"What's Dragon Crystal Powder?"

Even in the middle of the tense standoff, Orion found a moment to ask Yala the question. She shot him a surprised look. In the mercenary world, the stuff was common knowledge. But this wasn't the time to dwell on it. Keeping her eyes scanning the perimeter, she gave him a quick explanation.

"When you kill a dragon, you find these crystal cores inside them. Grind the cores into a powder and coat your weapon with it. It's effective against pretty much any draconic creature."

Orion nodded, filing the information away. It might be useful for the Stoneheart Horde in the future. Even if it wasn't, logging it for the Tribe's alchemists and apothecaries was building their collective knowledge base.

At the perimeter, the mercenaries gripped their weapons, their faces tight with tension. But this was what they lived for. As the moment of truth arrived, the tension in their eyes hardened into resolve. These guys were clearly veterans.

"Maintain formation! Shield Warriors, front and center! Lancers, prepare to engage!" Commander Borg roared, raising his greatsword high.

The shouts seemed to finally trigger the dragonkin. With a collective, deafening howl, they charged. The ground trembled as over a thousand of them stampeded forward like a small flood, a wave of claws and scales.

"Crossbows and javelins, fire!" Borg's sword chopped down.

A volley of bolts and javelins flew into the charging horde. But the dragonkin were brutally tough. Most of them simply shrugged off the projectiles and kept coming, wounds be damned. Their claws sliced through the air, and their gaping mouths let loose a foul, stinking breath as they closed the distance.

The Shield Warriors in the front rank roared, planting their feet and raising their massive shields in unison, absorbing the first wave of the impact. The lancers behind them immediately surged forward, stabbing and thrusting into the chaotic melee.

The battle was ferocious. The mercenaries fought desperately, but a section of their formation was quickly overrun. They were losing ground. The dragonkin had them outnumbered, and their natural armor gave them a huge advantage in close-quarters combat.

"Interesting," Orion muttered under his breath.

Yala and Alilien both heard him and turned, their expressions curious.

"It's nothing," Orion said calmly. "The enemy is just getting impatient."

Hearing it was just the enemy, the two women relaxed and returned their focus to guarding their surroundings.

Only Leonidas and Alexander understood. Orion wasn't talking about the dragonkin.

He was talking about the little rat hiding in the shadows.

That breach in the formation hadn't been random. It had been the work of their other unseen opponent.

Chapter 876: The Traitor's Curtain Call

Orion, Alexander, and Leonidas were just as surprised as anyone else.

An inside job. They hadn't seen that coming.

Just as the mercenaries' formation started to break under the mounting injuries, Leonidas stepped forward, sword in hand.

"Looks like it's our turn to clean this up."

Orion pulled his trident back, content to let Leonidas have the spotlight.

This time, Leonidas skipped the cringey, over-the-top monologue. He shot forward, using a Shield Warrior's pauldron as a springboard to launch himself into the air.

"Myriad Sword Convergence!" he roared, suspended a hundred feet above the valley floor.

From his spirit sword, a torrent of light erupted—a waterfall of pure energy that flooded the narrow pass.

The light washed over everything, and in an instant, the thousand-strong force of dragonkin was simply gone, annihilated.

Leonidas landed softly, the mist of vaporized blood creating the perfect backdrop for his bro's grandstanding.

Shameless, Orion thought, the moment he heard the skill name. He knew exactly what was coming next. Still, he had to admit, it was damn cool. That credit, however, went to Alexander. It had nothing to do with this Dead Dog, Leonidas.

"Are... are they... all dead?"

"The dragonkin are gone?"

"What the hell was that?"

"Myriad Sword Convergence?"

The stunned whispers and gulps of the mercenaries were like a round of applause, music to Leonidas's ears. A moment later, their morale exploded. With the dragonkin Tribe wiped out and the immediate crisis averted, their exhaustion was overwhelmed by the sheer euphoria of victory.

"Orion, what Sir Leo just did... he's..." Yala stammered, standing beside him, still reeling from the display.

"My bro's a total badass," Orion said, a strange smirk playing on his lips.

He wasn't looking at Yala. His eyes were fixed on Leonidas, because he knew that his epic, mighty persona was about to shatter.

ROOOOAR!

A dragon's roar echoed through the valley, and with it came an overwhelming pressure that swept over the battlefield. Most of the mercenaries collapsed to their knees under the crushing weight of the lord's presence.

"A... Lord's... aura?"

"Oh, crap, it's a Legendary level dragon! Run!"

"Legendary? I thought it was just an Alphapeak!"

"It's over!"

"There's no getting away!"

An air of utter hopelessness descended upon the Dragonslayer's Lance Mercenary Corps.

"Oh, gods, do you see this?" Leonidas boomed, his voice dripping with theatrical drama. "A vile dragon ravages the land! The innocent suffer! But I, Leo, the greatest swordsman alive, swear I will strike down this beast and let the light of justice prevail!"

"Omni-Slash!"

On the ground, his spirit sword pulsed with light. In the next second, Leonidas kicked off the ground, shooting toward the incoming fire dragon like a cannonball.

But the dragon, now a full-blown lord, simply gathered a ball of plasma in its jaws and blasted it downward.

BOOM!

After a deafening explosion, Leonidas plummeted from the sky like a meteor, carving a deep crater into the ground where he landed.

He lay at the bottom, motionless, his presence completely gone.

Nice, Orion thought from the back line. Ten out of ten performance. Give that man an Oscar for that.

"Bro!" he screamed, his face a mask of anguish. "You goddamn monster! I'll kill you!"

Now it was his turn to take the stage.

Orion hurled three spears in quick succession. Judging by his form, it was supposed to be an all-out attack. But based on their speed and the sound they made cutting through the air, they were barely at an Alpha peak power level.

High above, the fire dragon flapped its wings, conjuring a storm of fire that incinerated the spears instantly.

Orion grabbed another trident from his back and leaped into the air, coiling his body to throw it at the apex of his jump.

"Orion—!" Yala instinctively reached out to stop him, but she was too slow. He was already gone, blasting off like a rocket.

ROAR!

The fire dragon lord shrieked, its wings catching the air as it glided toward him, claws extended. Orion raised his weapon, ready to meet the beast head-on in a desperate clash.

BANG!

A shockwave pulsed through the air. The fire dragon soared past, completely unscathed.

As for Orion, just like Leonidas, he dropped from the sky and slammed into the earth, creating another large crater that conveniently hid his body from view.

A voice, vibrant and full of mock praise, echoed directly in his mind. "And the award for Best Theatrical Dive goes to... Hulk! His brilliant, gut-wrenching performance has brought a tear to every eye! The way he took that hit, his unique face-planting technique—he's the greatest actor of our generation! A true master of the art of getting wrecked!"

It was Leonidas, offering his best commentary for Orion's dive.

"You two are pathetic," Alexander's voice cut in, sharp and dismissive. "Horrible acting, forced emotion, over-the-top movements, cringey dialogue. You're a disgrace to showboats everywhere."

"Quiet, you two," Orion sent back, lying still in his crater. "The real show is about to begin."

The fall of their two strongest champions was a scene the members of the Dragonslayer's Lance Mercenary Corps couldn't comprehend.

"Lord Leo and Orion... they... they're..."

"They're dead!"

"That's a Legendary level dragon! We never stood a chance."

"It's over... the intel was wrong!"

The murmurs of despair rippled through the ranks. For most, it was just panicked chatter. But for commander Borg, the words hit him like a lightning bolt.

"Robert!"

Borg whipped his head around to face the man behind him. The intel on the dragon Alpha had come from him. If this was a setup, the traitor had to be Robert.

SHUNK!

Borg turned successfully, but he was met by the blade of a massive axe. Robert, who had been waiting for this moment, nearly cleaved his commander in two at the waist.

"You figured it out too late!" Robert stared down at Borg's bisected, dying body and suddenly burst out laughing.

"Hahaha... HAHAHAHA!"

It was a wild, cathartic laugh, echoing through the terrified silence.

"Why...?" Borg choked out, blood pouring from his mouth. "Why...? It's a dragon... Your own parents... they were killed... by dragons!"

Chapter 877: This wasn't the plan

Borg couldn't wrap his head around it. Robert's parents had both been killed by dragons. He should have been the last person to betray them.

It was for that very reason that Borg had trusted his intelligence in the first place. Of course, he'd sent his own scouts to verify the report before the mission, but by then, the fire dragon had already reached the Legendary level. It had hidden its true power, and the scouts were completely deceived by the illusion.

"Why?"

"If you had just handed over Yala and sold the Dragonslayer's Lance Mercenary Corps' hidden assets to us, you wouldn't be in this mess today," Robert sneered.

As he spoke, his body began to transform. His skin wrinkled and hardened as patches of dragon scale pushed through from underneath. His hands contorted, sharpening into draconic claws.

"You bastard," Borg choked out. "You've undergone draconic transformation. A traitor. A traitor through and through."

With his dying breath, Borg wasn't just saying Robert had betrayed him; he had betrayed his entire race.

"Commander!"

"Commander!"

The voices of Neil, Yala, and Alilien, the three remaining Alpha-level pillars of the corps, cried out. They finally reacted, rushing toward their fallen leader.

But just as they moved, another figure stepped into their path. It was Aiden, his lance held defensively, blocking them.

"Aiden!"

"Aiden, what are you..."

"Not you too... Why?"

If Robert's betrayal was a shock, seeing Aiden stand against them was something Borg, Neil, Yala, and Alilien found impossible to accept.

"Alilien, you know how I feel about you. I really, really like you," Aiden said, his eyes filled with a deep sadness as he stared at her.

Every night on this campaign, every time he saw her slip into Leonidas's tent, it felt like a knife twisting in his gut. The woman he loved most had chosen someone else.

Aiden's voice grew louder, cracking with rage and grief. "Why did you choose some random, washed-up dude? Was he strong? You loved him so much, didn't you? Well, now he's just a red smear on the ground!"

He was screaming now. "After losing you, I felt like I had no soul, no hope. And if I have no hope, then I'll just destroy all of you and be reborn! I WILL BE REBORN!"

As Aiden roared, dragon scale began to erupt across his skin. He too was transforming, though the process wasn't as advanced as Robert's.

"What I can't have, I will destroy!" he shrieked, raising his lance and pointing it directly at Aliien, his eyes burning with murderous intent.

In Aiden's twisted mind, the Aliien who had chosen Leonidas was no longer the perfect girl he'd idolized. She was corrupt, a stain on his memory that had to be erased.

"You two are basically homewreckers," Alexander's voice noted dryly in their minds. Yala and Aliien choosing Orion and Leonidas had clearly been the catalyst for Aiden's betrayal. If he hadn't turned, the outcome for the Dragonslayer's Lance Mercenary Corps might have been different, or at least less brutal.

"Homewreckers? Are you kidding me?" Leonidas shot back. "The feeling was mutual. This kid is just salty he got rejected and decided to burn the world down. The dude has zero class. Totally pathetic."

Leonidas would never admit to stealing someone's love. He'd only ever admit to being irresistibly charming.

"Shameless," Alexander retorted. "If you two hadn't shown up, Yala and Alilien likely would have ended up with Neil and Aiden."

"Alright, bros, keep watching," Orion interjected. "That overgrown lizard is coming back."

In the sky, the fire dragon, Sorth, was filled with glee. Over three hundred humans, including several Alpha-level fighters, were more than enough to keep him fed for a long time. Human flesh was so much more succulent, more flavorful than that of other beasts.

Sorth's mountainous body descended, his red scales glinting coldly in the sun. Greed and savagery swam nakedly in his enormous eyes. He spread his wings, casting a shadow that blotted out the sky.

The mercenaries below froze, too terrified to even think of running.

The dragon picked his targets. His massive form dove in a blur of motion.

A moment later, he was ascending again.

When Sorth came to a halt, hovering in the air, the survivors saw he had Commander Borg's lifeless body dangling from his jaws. And clutched in his left and right foreclaws were the two traitors, Robert and Aiden.

The sight left Neil, Yala, and Alilien completely stunned.

"Heh. In a dragon's eyes, even dragonkin are just a tasty meal," Leonidas's voice echoed in Orion's mind. "Especially the newly turned ones. They've got this little evolution component in them dragons go crazy for. You really think a dragon cares about its 'kin'? They're just cattle. Food they raise themselves."

Leonidas seemed completely unfazed by the scene. In fact, it felt familiar; his own dragon avatar had done similar things in the past.

High in the air, gripped in Sorth's claws, Robert and Aiden finally realized the truth as they stared into the dragon's malevolent eyes.

"Respected master! I am your servant, a dragonkin, one of your own!" Robert pleaded, his voice trembling with absolute terror. "The food you want is down there! The mercenaries, those Alpha-level humans!"

"Don't worry, they're not going anywhere," the dragon's voice boomed in their minds. "But you two are more of a hassle."

Sorth's maw, lined with rows of razor-sharp teeth, snapped open and shot forward, swallowing Robert whole.

The crunching and grinding of human bone reached Aiden's ears, each crack sounding like a death knell.

"No... no... this isn't how it was supposed to go!" Aiden shrieked in denial. "This wasn't the plan!"

CRUNCH.

Aiden was gone, eaten alive without even a chance to struggle.

Having finished his appetizers, the fire dragon Sorth lowered his head, gazing down at the remnants of the Mercenary Corps. His eyes settled on Neil, Yala, and Alilien. For a newly promoted lord like him, three Alpha-level humans were a major power-up waiting to be consumed.

"Bro, it's your turn to step up," Orion projected from his crater where he was playing dead. He figured it was time for Leonidas's heroic return.

"Chill," Leonidas sent back. "There are too many people still watching. If I pop up now, I'll blow my cover."

Orion went silent.

It was only then that he truly remembered who Leonidas was. He wasn't just a powerful fighter; he was an arch lordpeak, an old monster who had seen ages pass. Why would he feel an ounce of pity for a few mercenaries?

When it came to the mission, nothing else mattered. Not even his beloved Alilien.

Chapter 878: A Parting Gift

Orion realized he'd been misled by Leonidas's role-playing. Maybe the cringe was real, but it was only a tiny part of who he was—a part he chose to show, and only when it served the performance.

ROAR!

The dragon's shriek echoed as the fire dragon Sorth glided in for another pass.

"Run!"

It was impossible to tell which mercenary shouted it, but someone had finally remembered what you're supposed to do in a life-or-death situation.

Seeing the clustered mercenaries finally start to scatter, the diving dragon opened its maw and unleashed a casual gout of dragon's breath. A wave of fire washed over them, and the majority of the two-hundred-odd survivors were instantly scorched to cinders.

"Now that's more like it," Leonidas's voice echoed, cold and ruthless. "Alright, bro. Watch and learn. Time for my signature move."

As he spoke, Leonidas's form flickered and vanished from his hiding spot in the crater, reappearing high in the heavens.

"Come on now," he muttered, patting his spirit swordavatar. "Let your big bro show off a little. I'll buy you a pizza when we get back."

He tossed the spirit swordavatar straight up. It ascended, growing larger and larger until it dwarfed the clouds.

Then, it began to fall. It picked up speed, accelerating downward until the friction from its descent wreathed it in wind and fire, transforming it into a meteor heralding disaster.

The meteor, like a bolt of divine punishment, locked onto the fire dragon Sorth. Only now did the dragon finally sense the absolute certainty of its own death.

Sorth tried to flee, but it was frozen in place, pinned by an invisible force. It could neither fly nor fall. All it could do was watch helplessly as the terrifying weapon of cosmic destruction descended upon it, its eyes widening in sheer terror.

Squelch.

The spirit swordavatar pierced the dragon's massive body, pulping its heart and organs into an unrecognizable slurry. The Legendary level fire dragon died instantly.

The sword and the dragon's corpse plummeted to the earth together. The resulting shockwave from the impact vaporized the handful of remaining mercenaries.

All except for Neil, Yala, and Alilien.

To be precise, Alexander had controlled the force of the blast to spare only Yala and Alilien. Neil survived simply because, in that critical moment, he had instinctively thrown himself in front of the two women to shield them from the shockwave.

Seeing this, Alexander had chosen to let him live.

Its job done, the spirit swordavatar shot back into the sky, vanishing into the clouds before Neil, Yala, or Alilien could even process what had happened.

From the heavens, a single, booming voice echoed, filled with casual bravado. "Another day, another dragon."

There was only the voice, no sign of its owner.

Deep below, Orion's form flickered and he vanished from his crater without a trace.

A short while later, miles away, Orion and Leonidas walked side-by-side, following the faint, transparent dragon soul as it drifted toward the fabled Dragon's Boneyard.

"Just leaving without a single word? Real classy," Alexander's droll voice came from the spirit swordavatar. "No respect for the women, no respect for the romance."

He was digging at Leonidas, and taking a shot at Orion, too.

"They're smart," Orion sent back mentally. "They saw Leonidas kill a dragon. They'll figure out we're not in their league. It's better for them to just think of it all as a dream."

Leaving without a goodbye had been a mutual decision. Bringing the two women with them was never an option.

Forgetting for a moment that the trio was on a mission, the women would be in constant peril. If their little egg-snatching operation was discovered, any enemy they faced would be an arch lord at a minimum. A single pulse of an arch lord's aura would turn Yala and Alilien into paste.

A brief, passionate fling was the smartest, kindest choice for everyone.

One month later.

Neil, Yala, and Alilien returned quietly to the city of Lubrae with their spoils, causing no stir. Neil officially disbanded the Dragonslayer's Lance Mercenary Corps, and the three of them chose to live quietly under new names, trying to have a normal life.

But they carried a piece of the dragon-slaying with them. When Sorth died, his blood had spattered onto the three of them, leaving an invisible mark. A mark of hatred. And that mark eventually attracted a terrifying new enemy.

"Insolent insects. You dare to hunt a youngling of my kind? I will make you pay with your lives, and your very souls will know no peace."

One day, a meteor shower of fire and rock rained down upon Lubrae. Every soul in the city was turned to ash. Neil, Yala, and Alilien were caught in the cataclysm, their delayed sentence finally carried out.

But long after the enemy had gone, after the lava had cooled and the fires had died, three figures climbed out of the ashes.

In her hands, Yala held three cursed Scarecrow dolls. One had already disintegrated, leaving only a fine powder in her palm.

"So," she whispered, her voice hoarse. "This was your gift to me."

She knew then that Orion and Leonidas were still alive.

"Are you from the south?" she asked the empty air. "I think I'd like to see the place you came from."

Nearby, Alilien cradled two bracelets. One had snapped in half—another artifact that had taken a fatal blow in her stead. The other bracelet was intact. Sealed within it was a powerful beast, a final means of protection from Leonidas.

So, they hadn't been completely irresponsible after sleeping with them.

"Leo... Leo..." Alilien clutched the remaining bracelet, refusing to let it go, her quiet sobs filled with longing and a love she couldn't forget.

As for Neil, he had escaped death by a hair's breadth for a second time, thanks to a special ability. Neil was of the fox tribe, and when he had advanced to Alpha-level, he'd unlocked a bloodline power that he'd kept hidden from everyone. He could grow more tails, and while they had no combat use, each tail could take a death blow for him once. He had only grown one. Now it was gone, and he would have to start over.

"Thank god, you're alive!" Neil said, pulling himself together as he saw Yala and Alilien gathering nearby. He was smart enough not to ask how they survived. They had gotten close to Orion and Leonidas; it was obvious they'd received some kind of parting gift. He had already figured out that their survival from the shockwave wasn't an accident, either.

"Lubrae is gone," Yala said, forcing herself to be strong as she looked at Neil and Alilien. "Everyone is dead but us three."

She took a deep breath. "We're going south. That's where Orion and Lord Leo came from. Maybe... maybe we can get stronger there, too."

Chapter 879: Death Is Just the Beginning

In truth, Yala's choice to head south was also a desperate attempt to escape the dragons. They'd survived this time, but who was to say it wouldn't happen again?

"Okay."

"Yala, I'm with you."

Neil and Alilien both agreed to her proposal. The three exchanged a look, cast one last glance at the ashes of Lubrae, and turned south to flee.

In fact, the dragon's mark of vengeance, which was tied to their life force, had vanished the moment the artifacts took their place in death. It was a detail that likely never even occurred to Orion, Leonidas, or Alexander. Even a dragon's death mark had its limits.

Uynting Realm, The Dragon Grave-Mound Region.

"This aura... yeah, this has to be the place." Leonidas stood with his eyes closed, trying to tap back into his draconic senses. He was searching the air for a specific feeling, an aura that felt like... home to a dragon soul.

He opened his eyes and stared at the desolate valley ahead, completely certain.

"Bro, are you sure this is the Dragon's Boneyard?" Orion asked, looking at the same barren landscape with a healthy dose of skepticism.

It didn't look like a boneyard of any kind, let alone a dragon's. Most burial sites were located at the intersection of mountain ranges or rivers—on ley lines or in so-called dragon lairs.

"Doubt anyone else, bro, but never doubt your big brother." Leonidas clapped Orion on the shoulder, brimming with confidence. "Don't let the rundown look fool you. I guarantee, beneath this valley floor, there's a whole different world. Those old lizards are picky. Even in death, they want to park their corpses at a nexus of the world's spiritual energy."

Orion was still hesitant. He glanced toward Alexander.

"Listen to him," Alexander's voice grumbled from the sword. "Leonidas has a good nose for this stuff."

Leonidas shot the sword an annoyed look.

"Quit screwing around," he said to them both. "The trail from that dragon soul just vanished. It must have gone underground, and the aura is being blocked."

The trail's disappearance wasn't bad news. On the contrary, it meant they'd found the right spot.

"Let's go. We'll know for sure once we're inside," Alexander said.

His spirit sword avatar flew out from behind Leonidas, taking the lead. For this kind of exploration, Alexander, a spirit sword, was perfectly suited for the role of point man.

A few moments later, the two men and the sword entered the valley.

"I can already feel it clearly now," Leonidas muttered. "That unique spatial field that belongs to dragons. In a place like this, a dragon's bloodline and skills would be pushed to their absolute limits."

He chuckled grimly. "Heh. Extreme stimulation. The ultimate result is the transformation from life back to death. I bet all the dragons buried here once tried to defy fate and be reborn."

He kept murmuring to himself. He had been a fire dragon, a void dragon; the ancestral memories he'd inherited included secret techniques for rising from the ashes. But the conditions for such a secret technique were absurdly demanding. Even among dragons, it was considered a forbidden art, unknown and inaccessible to most.

"The space here feels... weird," Orion said. His knowledge was lacking, but as an arch lord himself, he could quickly sense that the fabric of space inside the valley was different from the outside world.

"It's the effect of a divine secret technique array," Leonidas explained, showing off his worldly knowledge. "Inside, ambient energy is disrupted, and the elements are sealed off. A really advanced formation can even manipulate fate, heal diseases, or enhance your power."

He was met with a skeptical look from Orion.

"Don't give me that look, bro. This stuff is real. Alexander and I have both seen it."

Seeing Orion's expression shift from doubt to surprise was a thrill for Leonidas. He loved seeing his little bro look so green.

"Bro, you ever wonder about the real origin of tombs?"

Orion frowned. He had a few ideas, but he played along and shook his head, curious to see what kind of mind-blowing theory Leonidas would come up with.

"Let me put it this way," Leonidas began. "A lot of the ancient races, the great sages, they believed death isn't the end. It's the beginning."

"Some beings believed they could journey through the unknown world that comes after death and, eventually, return to their starting point. From death to life. Reborn. Maybe even achieve eternity."

As he spoke, his voice was low, laced with a conviction that sent a shiver down Orion's spine. It was a depth of feeling Orion couldn't comprehend.

"Sounds like a bunch of fantasy bullshit, right?" Leonidas watched him, his expression shifting instantly from profound to playful. "Hard to believe? Something to just scoff at?"

Orion nodded. The idea of being reborn from death, of achieving eternity, was pretty out there.

"Okay, let me rephrase it so you'll get it," Leonidas said. "Bro, do you remember our world? Before we 'awakened'?"

Orion nodded again, unsure why he was bringing that up.

"We lost our bodies. We lost everything from that world." Leonidas's expression became incredibly deep again, like an ocean, like the night sky. "Would you say... that we died?"

Orion froze. It finally clicked.

Leonidas was using their own experience—the experience of all the survivors like them—to show him that death was just the beginning.

Death really was just the beginning.

"Heh heh, bro, let me give you another angle." Leonidas saw the darkening look in Orion's eyes, the heavy shadow falling over his face, and decided he didn't want his little bro getting bogged down in such a heavy topic.

He reached out and clapped him on the shoulder, snapping him out of it and changing the subject with a grin. "Think of all the tombs with guys like Arthas in them. Would you say they're 'reborn'?"

The topic was suddenly, inexplicably, much lighter.

"Zombies, ghosts, even the shambling undead... they're all just another form of new life, right?"

"Cut the crap. We're here." Alexander's voice cut through the chatter, drawing their attention.

Orion took a deep breath, shelving the chaotic thoughts for later. Ever since he'd awakened, he'd been constantly fighting or grinding. He'd never really had a quiet moment to think about any of this.

"Heh. Looks like a cliff, but it's actually a stone door." Leonidas stood before a sheer rock wall. It was positioned in the exact center of the valley, a ninety-degree cliff face that was impossibly wide and soared up into the clouds.

"The dragon soul's trail vanished right here." Leonidas ran his hand along the stone, feeling its texture while searching for any kind of hidden mechanism.

Chapter 880: Nightmare Difficulty

"Stop looking. It's Ghost Stone. Only ghosts can pass through."

The spirit sword avatar flew over and hovered behind Orion. Clearly, Alexander knew that this particular avatar of Orion's could transform into a spectral form.

"Ghost Stone?" Leonidas exclaimed. "For fuck's sake, a piece this big? What a goddamn waste!"

He pulled out a demonic, tusked mask, put it on, and his body immediately turned ethereal, merging into the stone wall.

Not to be outdone, Orion activated his Ghostly Steps skill and phased through right behind him.

Passing through the Ghost Stone wall, they emerged into a narrow, dark passage. The walls were studded with countless thumb-sized gems that emitted a faint green glow, lending a mysterious air to the hidden depths.

"Shit. This is a problem," Leonidas's voice drifted from up ahead.

Orion thought he'd run into some monsters and hurried forward. "What's wrong?"

"Damn it. When I saw the valley, I thought this was a Dragon's Boneyard. I didn't think it'd be a full-blown Dragon Mausoleum."

Orion was confused. He didn't see the difference.

"In dragon culture, the burial ground for any dragon below demigod rank is called a Dragon's Boneyard," Leonidas explained. "Only a place holding the remains of a demigod or higher has the right to be called a Dragon Mausoleum. And a place like this can entomb other dragons, too, but their souls automatically default to a subordinate state to the main occupant."

Leonidas was agitated. Finding a mausoleum was a great opportunity, but it was also incredibly dangerous.

"In plain English, Leonidas," Alexander's cold voice cut in as the spirit swordavatar flew past them to take point.

"This is a mausoleum. That means a huge portion of this world's dragons probably choose to come here for their final rest. In other words, we've stumbled into the main nest."

Leonidas scanned their surroundings, his face a mask of vigilance. "Alexander, our little expedition just went from 'Insane' difficulty to 'Nightmare'."

"There could easily be a demigod-level dragon soul in here. And if something like that managed to transform into an Arthas-type entity... well, you can imagine the consequences."

Alexander went silent. So did Orion. The three of them were only arch lords. If they ran into a true demigod, the outcome would be grim.

"So, are we continuing or bailing?" Alexander asked bluntly.

"Bail? No way!" Leonidas's initial shock morphed into raw excitement. "This is a Dragon Mausoleum! Look, we're already here! It'd be a crime against our good luck not to go deeper and grab some loot."

His eyes gleamed. "What's the worst that can happen? We lose another avatar. Big deal."

"Fuck off!"

"Screw you!"

Leonidas's cavalier attitude earned instant rebukes from both Orion and Alexander. Alexander's spirit swordavatar was exceptionally precious; even if his true body never reached demigod, this sword alone would let him go toe-to-toe with one. Losing it for a few dead eggs just wasn't worth the trade.

The same went for Orion. This was his mirror avatar; if it died, it was gone for good. And hidden inside it was his Death-Soul's Touchavatar. If he lost both here, he'd cry himself to sleep.

"Bro, are we pushing on or pulling back?" This time it was Orion asking, trying to gauge if Leonidas actually had a plan.

"Don't worry," Leonidas chuckled. "When we bros team up, we never leave empty-handed."

He reached into his coat and pulled out two deathly gray dragon scales, handing one to Orion. "These are Void Dragon Scales, each infused with a dragon soul. Stick this on your body, and it'll turn you into a dragon soul. The effect will last until the soul energy in the scale runs out. Should be good for at least a week."

As he spoke, Leonidas pressed a scale against his own chest.

"Bro, stick it on your head or your chest for the best effect," he advised. His laugh was insidious, full of cunning and a little bit of sleaze. "I'd recommend the chest. It's less likely to fall off or blow our cover."

Orion pressed the dragon scale to his chest. His physical body dissolved before his eyes, reforming into an ethereal dragon soul. The sensation was bizarre—to experience draconic existence from a ghostly perspective was a completely new feeling.

"Bro, where did you get these two dragon souls?" Orion couldn't help but ask.

"In another world, a couple of green dragons tried to fight my fire dragon avatar over a female. I roasted and ate them. The souls were a nice little bonus."

A cold sweat ran down Orion's back. Bro code was one thing—but that kind of backstory? That was next level.

"Alright, let's begin our egg hunt," Leonidas declared. He spread his new dragon wings and flew familiar circles around the spirit swordavatar.

Alexander's spirit swordavatar was already an anomaly; it didn't need a disguise. It just had to suppress its aura to pass as a forgotten piece of scrap metal. Orion, on the other hand, struggled. The familiar feeling of being in a ghostly state clashed with the foreign sensation of flapping draconic wings. It took him a good while to get the hang of it before he could fly steadily beside Leonidas.

"Alexander, dampen your aura. Let's take it slow and easy. No noise. Communicate by thought only from now on."

The spirit swordavatar trembled once in acknowledgment and began to drift slowly forward, leading the two dragon souls deeper into the passage.

After what felt like an eternity of navigating winding tunnels and crossing subterranean rivers, the trio finally entered a vast, open hall. They hadn't triggered a single trap or disturbed a single slumbering spirit on their way in.

"The soul we were tracking is just ahead. It's stopped moving." The spirit sword, suppressing its aura even further, silently glided from the passage entrance up to the cavern's high, domed ceiling.

Orion and Leonidas, being in an ethereal state, had less to worry about and didn't need to hide. As they floated into the hall, the scene before them was breathtaking.

In the center of the chamber stood a colossal, transparent monument, its surface covered in intricate relief carvings of draconic patterns and mystical symbols. The surrounding walls were a dense tapestry of mysterious murals.

Guarding the four corners of the hall were four colossal dragon statues, radiating an air of magnificent power.

But the centerpiece, the most critical part of the scene, was the massive platform in the middle of the hall, encircled by a dark, flowing river. On that platform, a massive monster was bound by thick chains crawling with glowing runes.

On closer inspection, they saw that the chains originated from the four giant dragon statues themselves.

"What is that?" Orion transmitted to Leonidas, his mind reeling from the sheer scale of the sight. As he asked, his eyes scanned the murals, which were exquisitely carved with dragons, phoenixes, and all manner of mythological beasts. The strange, arcane symbols etched into the stone made his head spin.