

Titan King 901

Chapter 901: There's our chance

"Your Excellencies, the dragon race has only just arrived in this world. Could there be some kind of misunderstanding between us?"

Monjebel was a black dragon, the leader of this expeditionary force, and the most powerful of the dragons who had made the journey.

At first, he had no intention of talking to his opponents. Anyone who dared to provoke the dragon race deserved only to be annihilated.

But after he and the green dragon, Kork, had fought together for a while, he was forced to admit that the attacking demigods were incredibly powerful. He and Kork would not be able to break the hybrid magical formation anytime soon.

"A misunderstanding? What misunderstanding?" Arthas's icy voice echoed from within the storm, followed by two more surprise attacks from his blade. "Even if there is, you'll have to beat us before we're willing to talk!"

Two dragon phantoms roared in unison, combining their strength to block the attack.

"Your Excellency, we can sit down and talk through any misunderstanding! There's no need to fight to the death!" Monjebel tried again to de-escalate the situation. If this continued, the people on Dragonflame Island would be in grave danger.

"You actively invaded our territory. What is there to talk about?" Arthas's cold laughter was woven into the sword light as it swept over them again.

"Invasion? Then you must be—?!" Monjebel didn't have time to finish his sentence before he was forced to deal with the sword light and the spatial rifts that were appearing at random.

Damn you, Mondusath! Damn that Great Dragon King of Light!

Monjebel cursed him internally. He cursed Mondusath, the one who had lured them to this world. Mondusath was a former ruler of the Uynting Realm, but he was not the current one.

Monjebel and his forces had come here solely because Mondusath had revealed the coordinates to a new, evolving world. Faced with such a temptation, the great powers of the dragon race would never pass it up. So, they had descended, and they were very satisfied with what they found.

But Mondusath had failed to mention just how powerful his enemies were.

When Monjebel first discovered that the political situation in the Emerald Dream Realm was in utter chaos, he had been thrilled. It meant their arrival would likely go unopposed. He never imagined that, thanks to Mondusath's concealment of the facts and their own insufficient intelligence gathering, they would invade the faction territory of the Champions Alliance and provoke such a violent backlash.

Only now, with the two demigods, Deputy Commander Edward and Arthas, attacking them, did Monjebel finally understand.

The Great Dragon King Mondusath had hidden the truth about his enemies for one reason: to force the dragon race into a true, hostile relationship with the faction before them. As casualties mounted on both sides and hatred grew, that hostile relationship would only become more entrenched. Then, and only then, could the dragon race be used—and perhaps even controlled once more—by Mondusath.

That damn, scheming fossil! To plot against his own people!

Monjebel was resentful, but establishing a foothold in an evolving world like the Emerald Dream Realm was undeniably a critical goal. Initially, the dragons had agreed that Mondusath's enemies were their own. But now... now the enemy was proving to be a bit tougher, and a lot more ruthless, than they had anticipated. Monjebel and Kork were starting to have regrets.

On Dragonflame Island, the storm raged, the rain of lightning and ice-knives unending.

Under the assault of Deputy Commander Edward's ultra-large-scale magical formation, the dragons' hastily erected protective barrier finally shattered.

"Bro, there's our chance!" Leonidas immediately transformed into the Behemoth. He sacrificed the custom-made great axe he carried, activating his Bloodhowl Axe domain.

Orion, controlling the ancient giant-horned whale, burst from the surface of the sea and soared into the sky.

"Kill them all!" Leonidas had become a being of pure rage, beating his chest and roaring incessantly.

Orion was filled with just as much fighting spirit. His Titan Form materialized, and the ancient giant-horned whale activated its Gigantic Form, letting out a continuous, high-pitched cry—a combination of a sonic shockwave and a sonar prison.

The whale, carrying Orion and Leonidas, slammed directly into the most densely populated area of Dragonflame Island, where countless dragons of all sizes were gathered.

BOOM!

Of course, the dragons were not without their own powerhouses. Four arch lord-level dragons—two red, one green, one blue—shot into the sky and met the charge without a shred of fear. When it came to physical prowess, the dragon race feared no one.

Four terrifying impacts rang out one after another. Violent shockwaves blasted outwards, inevitably washing over the other dragons that were clustered together. The lower-level dragons, and those whose bodies weren't strong enough, were instantly killed by the shockwaves and waves of raw energy.

The great charge was just the opening act. Both Leonidas's Behemoth and Orion's ancient giant-horned whale were massive creatures that were not of the dragon race. And this time, they had come to be dragonslayers.

"Heh heh ha ha ha!"

At the center of the collision, Leonidas had wrapped his hands around the neck of a dragon and was piledriving it directly into Dragonflame Island below. He didn't just want to kill the dragon in his grasp; he wanted the shockwave from their impact to kill as many other dragons as possible. It was all about maximizing the attack.

On the other side of the battle, Orion, wielding his trident, had already landed on the back of a red dragon. The dragon's body was wreathed in flames, trying to burn him off. But Orion was wearing his new suit of Ice-Bone Armor and completely ignored the fire.

"An arch lord dragon. I assume this is your true form?" Orion muttered, then violently twisted the Flame of Will in his hands. A ball of white bone-cold fire erupted from the trident and began to incinerate the dragon's body.

Ever since it had been reforged by the demigod Arthas, the level of fire Orion's trident could unleash had been elevated by several tiers.

ROAR!

The dragon's body was incredibly tough. Even after taking a full-power Instant Impact from Orion, it wasn't killed instantly, only letting out continuous, agonizing howls.

Not far away, another dragon was tangled up with the ancient giant-horned whale, the two of them tumbling through the sky. The dragon tried to use dispelling and purification magic to seriously wound the whale, but the whale, in its Gigantic Form, had locked onto its target and was simply trying to ram it to death.

It wasn't that the whale didn't want to use its own abilities to fight back. It was because, during the initial collision, it had activated its Ancient Devour skill and swallowed another arch lord dragon whole.

At this moment, the ancient giant-horned whale was in extreme danger. It was being attacked from both inside and out. It could go berserk at any moment, or it could be torn apart from within by the dragon it had swallowed.

Because of this, Leonidas and Orion had to finish their own fights as quickly as possible.

Orion licked his lips, tasting the blood that had splattered from the dragon's wounds.

"Dragon-ghost sleeping in the endless dark, please heed my call. With this blood as the medium..."

Chapter 902: A duel

Without hesitation, Orion activated the Ghost Dragon summoning.

Killing the enemy, reducing their top-tier combat power, and ensuring his own safety—that was all that mattered right now.

On the ground, the behemoth and the blue dragon were locked in a deep crater, the sounds of their physical collisions and enraged roars echoing from the pit. Clearly, Leonidas and his opponent had also entered a life-and-death struggle.

For the dragons of Dragonflame Island, the scenes unfolding before them were like a nightmare. In all the worlds they had ruled or invaded, no race or faction had ever mounted such a terrifyingly swift and violent counter-attack.

After what felt like an eternity, the Legendary-level dragons finally snapped out of their shock and began to fly toward the crater where Leonidas was fighting, intending to help.

But just as they moved, a spirit sword materialized from the void. Like a scythe cutting through wheat, it decapitated the surrounding dragons one by one.

It was Alexander. Wherever the spirit sword passed, dragon blood rained down. A merciless slaughter of the weak by the strong was now playing out on Dragonflame Island.

Irisgarde, The Royal Palace.

"The Big bosses are all gone. I'm posting in the public channel, but no one's responding," Demon Makareth said, standing on a balcony overlooking the churning sea. "What do you think they're all doing?"

He had a feeling they were up to something big.

"They're obviously out there getting work done," Kraken replied. "There's only one reason they wouldn't tell us: the operation is too dangerous, and we're not qualified to know."

Kraken knew the Champions Alliance's leaders, especially Leonidas, quite well. The Alliance strongly encouraged its members to push their limits and would actively create opportunities for them to do so. But they would never send their members on a suicide mission.

Kraken lay in his fishbowl, blowing bubbles as he talked.

Isabella pulled her gaze back from the distant horizon. The exquisite dessert in her hand and the magnificent gown she wore only enhanced her beauty. She turned her head, her eyes fixed on Demon Makareth.

"Those who forge their own Lord's Stone to advance are a rare breed in any world, a symbol of immense combat power," she said, her tone both serious and eager. "How about I change, and we have a little spar? Let this Queen see for herself just how strong your type of lord really is."

"I'd be happy to oblige," Demon Makareth replied instantly. He had no problem fulfilling such a request from one of the group's veterans. In fact, he was also very curious to know how he stacked up against the other members of the Champions Alliance who were at his level, besides the Big bosses.

"A duel?" Kraken's voice called out. "If the combat zone is nearby, count me in!" He crawled out of his fishbowl, demanding to be included. Irisgarde was a coastal city; he could bring a good portion of his power to bear in a fight here.

"Since you all agree, let's use the beach over there as our arena," Isabella said, rising to her feet. With a sway of her graceful figure, she headed deeper into the palace to change and prepare.

"Aren't you going to get ready?" Demon Makareth asked, looking at Kraken in his fishbowl with a well-intentioned suggestion. He didn't want to offend these veterans; he just wanted to test their strength, not embarrass them.

"Like you, I am always ready," Kraken replied. "I can enter a combat state at any time."

His words made Makareth pause. He took a long, deep look at Kraken.

That kind of mindset would serve you well even in the Abyss.

"Your combat power is certainly strong, there's no doubt about that," Kraken said. It was a word of advice. His relationship with Makareth was, for the moment, quite good. He was happy to offer a bit of guidance. "But, my friend, do not underestimate anyone in the Champions Alliance. Especially the two you were just shooting the breeze with yesterday."

"You mean Leo and Hulk?" Makareth shook his head respectfully. "They are arch lords. Of course they are beyond my ability to challenge right now."

"No, you're not understanding what I'm saying." Kraken draped himself over the edge of the fishbowl, one tentacle waving idly in the air.

"Hm?" Makareth turned, looking at him in confusion.

"Even at the same level," Kraken said slowly, his gaze fixed on the blue sky and white clouds in the distance, "you might not be the strongest here."

Under Makareth's astonished gaze, Kraken continued. "Someone, at the peak of the Legendary level, once took on three lower arch lords at the same time and won. Someone else, also at the peak of the Legendary level, killed two arch lords in quick succession—one lower, one upper."

He paused. "The first story is something I heard. The second one... while I didn't see it with my own eyes, it happened right beside me. Can you pull off a feat like that?"

A wave of melancholy washed over Kraken.

Orion had joined the group later than he had, yet now he was already an arch lord. It was frustrating. You just can't compare yourself to others. The more you compare, the more pissed off you get.

"Beating three opponents a whole tier above you?" Makareth pressed, his eyes wide with question marks, as if to say: Bro, are you sure you're not joking? You're not just messing with me, are you?

"I wish it were a lie," Kraken said, finally turning to look at Demon Makareth. Though there was a hint of dejection in his eyes, it was overshadowed by a fierce determination to catch up.

Seeing that look, Makareth's own expression of disbelief and condescension slowly faded.

"Are they all that strong?"

"Yes. Maybe even stronger than what I've said." Kraken's voice was serious. "When we fight in a moment, I hope neither of us holds back. Let's have a proper match."

"Agreed."

From the depths of the palace, a dragon's roar echoed. Isabella, now clad in gleaming silver knight's armor, ascended into the sky on her colossal dragon, looking down at Makareth and Kraken. The pride and challenge in her eyes were completely unconcealed.

"Uh... we're just sparring, right?" Makareth stammered, his gaze fixed on the colossal dragon as it flew overhead, its peak-Legendary level aura on full display. "Do we really need to call in backup like that?"

"Isabella is a Dragon Knight," Kraken said. Seeing the look on Makareth's face, he couldn't help but feel a little schadenfreude. "Without her dragon, she can't even use her full power."

Chapter 903: Who won?

Dragonflame Island. The great battle was not over.

Orion stared down with an icy expression as the dragon's body beneath him disintegrated bit by bit. The Ghost Dragon summon had been a success, sealing everything in its path. Forget a dragon; even a demigod would likely have been devoured.

Orion collected the survivor's loot box, but there was no joy in his eyes.

Because after the dragon's body dissipated and the Ghost Dragon vanished, a smaller version of the dragon, wreathed in flames, appeared. It opened its mouth and spewed torrents of fire at him.

This was the dragon's body of faith. And what it spat was not true fire, but countless motes of faith energy.

Orion's form flickered, and he used Instant Impact to teleport to a higher altitude. The lightning storm in the heavens had not yet ceased, and the demigods' lightning magic was something the body of faith dared not approach.

In truth, this kill had revealed a weakness in his Ghost Dragon summoning skill: it couldn't annihilate special entities like a body of faith.

At first, Orion had thought the Ghost Dragon's sealing power was absolute; it was just that effective. But after being tested by one arch lord after another, he had come to understand that there was no such thing as an unbeatable skill in this world. If you thought a skill was unbeatable, it just meant your own toolkit wasn't big enough yet.

Orion stared at the body of faith. Without a physical form to anchor it, it couldn't exist for long. He had understood this ever since he had advanced to arch lord himself. It was why his own body of faith never strayed far from his physical body, for fear of it destabilizing and collapsing.

Seeing that it had no way to harm Orion, the fire dragon's body of faith gave up and flew back toward one of the Dragon Nests on the island.

Orion frowned. He wanted to give chase, but a glance at Leonidas and the ancient giant-horned whale made him reconsider. The Dragon Nests were the dragons' foundation, just like his own base of operations. There were certainly defensive measures hidden within.

Without hesitation, Orion raised his trident and charged the dragon that was still tangled up with the ancient giant-horned whale. As for why he didn't go to help Leonidas—it was because Leonidas had already beaten the dragon in his grasp to a bloody pulp.

SQUELCH!

Orion's trident stabbed into the dragon that was tearing at the whale with its massive jaws and claws. Before the dragon could even react, he flashed onto the whale's back, preparing to smash the dragon's head from the front and free his beleaguered mount.

But just then, Deputy Commander Edward's urgent voice came from the heavens.

"There are violent void energy fluctuations on Dragonflame Island! You all need to withdraw now!"

The Deputy Commander had barely finished speaking before Orion had already pulled out his urn and sealed the ancient giant-horned whale inside. He then activated the fixed-point teleportation function on his legendary equipment, the Boots of the War-Tyrant, and vanished from sight, leaving behind a dragon whose expression was a mixture of shock and savagery.

Before he left, Orion glanced over at the area where Leonidas and Alexander had been.

Not a soul in sight.

They sure were damn fast on their feet.

Orion, Leonidas, and Alexander had successfully withdrawn, but the battle between the demigods in the sky still raged on. Three seconds later, two more dragon demigod phantoms shot out from the Dragon Nests on the island, soaring into the heavens to join the fray.

Dusk Continent, Irisgarde.

The return of Orion, Leonidas, and Alexander didn't attract much attention. Because aside from Kraken, who seemed normal, both Makareth and Isabella were in a foul mood, looking like they had the weight of the world on their shoulders.

"Squiddy, what's up with them?" Leonidas asked, walking over to Kraken's fishbowl and collapsing into a lounge chair. He took a tough cut of meat Orion handed him and began to tear into it. "We were only gone for two days. How'd they become completely different people?"

The Behemoth was certainly powerful. He had even managed to kill an arch lord dragon during their little welcoming party. But after every battle, Leonidas had to eat ravenously. If he didn't consume energy-rich food, his Behemoth body would suffer from energy depletion, leading to mental confusion and even madness. It was a side effect of the transformation.

"The three of us had a little sparring session," Kraken explained, using one of his tentacles to operate a wine keg and pour drinks for Leonidas and Orion. "And this is the result."

"Where's Alexander?" Kraken asked after pouring the wine.

"It's wartime. He's got stuff to do. He's busy."

Kraken nodded. That made sense. Even if Alexander wasn't personally gathering intelligence, the amount of information that crossed his desk every day was terrifying. He had to review a lot of it.

"A sparring session? Who won?" Both Leonidas and Orion, who had been focused on their food, looked up, their eyes filled with gossipy curiosity. "Squiddy, don't tell me you brought shame upon your big brother."

"Of course not! The Squiddy of today is not the Squiddy of the past!" Kraken said, raising his goblet in a toast to Orion and Leonidas.

"Then what about those two?"

Orion had expected Kraken to be stronger than Makareth and Isabella. After all, the current Kraken could go toe-to-toe with a lower arch lord. Facing Makareth and Isabella should have been a walk in the park.

"I won both my matches," Kraken stated. "Isabella won one and lost one. Makareth lost both."

That was the result of their three-way spar. One was happy, two were miserable.

"I can understand why Makareth would be in a bad mood after losing twice," Orion said, swallowing a mouthful of roasted meat. "But Isabella went one-and-one. With her strength, she should be happy. Is there something I'm missing?"

"Isabella brought out her peak Legendary level colossal dragon," Kraken said, downing his drink in one gulp, his tone perfectly deadpan, "and she almost fought Makareth to a draw."

"Garbage!"

"Pathetic!"

The insults came from Orion and Leonidas, completely unfiltered.

Although Isabella and Makareth were not actively participating in the conversation, they were still secretly listening in on the trio's discussion. Besides, this was Isabella's palace, and she herself was a Legendary level powerhouse. Of course she heard every word Orion and Leonidas said.

"Argh... you bastards!"

A loud crash echoed from deep within the palace, followed by the sound of splintering wood and shattering glass. Isabella was apparently destroying everything in her bedroom.

"You loud-mouthed assholes! Get out of my palace!" she screamed.

Faced with this level of verbal abuse, the two brutes, Orion and Leonidas, couldn't have cared less. In fact, the more pissed off Isabella got, the wider their smirks of schadenfreude became.

Chapter 904: Orders for War

Three days later, Deputy Commander Edward and Arthas returned from Dragonflame Island. They were tight-lipped about the demigod-level engagement, a silence that spoke volumes.

"Arthas, what's the verdict?" Leonidas asked, unable to contain his impatience the moment he sensed Arthas's return. Among the teammates gathered in Isabella's palace, he had the most right to ask.

Since their return, the Deputy Commander and Arthas had been completely incommunicado, secluded from everyone.

"What do you think? You didn't seriously expect one raid to send them packing, did you?" Arthas shot back. "Get back to war prep."

He wasn't wrong. A faction with demigod-level powerhouses wouldn't be deterred by anything less than a cataclysmic, world-shattering blow. Their will to invade was too strong.

Still, as Arthas's friend of many years, Leonidas could read between the lines. The ghost's curt reply told him things hadn't gone well.

They didn't win, Leonidas realized. They might not have even broken even.

In other words, the enemy was proving to be a serious problem.

"Hahahaha, is the war finally kicking off for real?" Makareth boomed, his voice filled with a demonic glee. "My axe is getting thirsty!"

For the Demon, war was a primal passion, a source of almost spiritual fervor. Slaughter and destruction were in his blood.

"The dragon flight is off the board for the immediate future," Arthas announced to the room. "That means they're gearing up for a full-scale invasion next."

"Use this time to prepare. I want our two biggest weaknesses—intel and troop numbers—solved by the time they make their move."

The truth was, the raid led by Deputy Commander Edward and Arthas was about more than just a morale boost.

Beyond rattling the enemy, the primary objective had been to thin out the dragons' mid-to-high-tier combat forces. The ultimate goal was to buy time—precious time—for the Champions Alliance to develop.

Naval combat was the foundation of any war between their two factions, and besides Kraken, none of them were true Sea Race. They couldn't commit their full strength to a fight on the water.

This raid was a strategic delay, a chance for their own forces to catch up. It bought time for Leonidas to rally his subordinate Sea Race, for Orion to cultivate his swarm of Ocean Hunters, and for Alexander to plant his network of spies, an opportunity created by the chaos of their strike.

War never happened in a vacuum. It was always driven by a confluence of interest and necessity.

"Isabella," Alexander's calm voice cut through the room after Arthas finished. He'd singled her out.

"Take your colossal dragon to the front lines. Your performance has been... disappointing."

Clearly, Alexander was not satisfied with the results of the sparring match between Makareth, Isabella, and Kraken.

Isabella had potential, but she needed to be forged in the fires of real combat.

"Boss, what about me? What about me?" Makareth asked eagerly.

"You're on the front lines too," Arthas ordered. "Your combat prowess is needed. Take your squad and sweep the perimeter of our faction's territory. Clear out any dragon scouts that have crept in."

"You got it. Consider it done!"

Orion, who had been quiet until now, suddenly remembered something. "Arthas," he said, "you still looking for arch lord dragon bones? I've got a complete skeleton right now."

"Yeah, I need one. Did you score it on this last run?" Arthas asked.

"An ancient giant-horned whale swallowed a dragon whole. Its stomach acid ate away most of the flesh. By the time I realized and got it out, only the skeleton was left," Orion explained.

"That's more than enough," Arthas confirmed. He had only recently ascended to demigod status, and his bone dragon mount needed an upgrade. While he had other dragon parts, none were from an arch lord.

As Orion and Arthas spoke, a wave of shock rippled through Kraken, Makareth, and Isabella.

Is killing an arch lord as easy as taking out the trash for him now? The thought was a mix of pure envy and resignation for Kraken. He desperately wanted to ascend to arch lord himself, to join Leonidas and the others in the big leagues, to witness the truly epic clashes.

The man is an absolute monster. Isabella had seen Orion's power firsthand. She could barely wrap her head around the fact that he was killing arch lords while still at the peak of the legendary tier. What the hell is he capable of now that he's an arch lord himself?

Killing an arch lord's dragon? So he's the one Kraken told me about... the one who punched up and killed an upper arch lord? Giants... they must be an Abyssal race, right? No wonder he's so cracked.

Of the three, Makareth was paradoxically the least shocked. His reaction was a mix of pride and fierce competitiveness.

First, he held a deep respect for Abyssal races; to him, any race that emerged from the Abyss was bound to be incredibly powerful.

Second, Makareth knew his own strength. He had forged his own Lord's Stone to advance. He was confident that once he reached the peak of the legendary tier, he could challenge the records set by anyone on the team.

Punching above his weight class wasn't just something he craved; it was something he expected of himself. He was a Demon, a prodigy, an awakened. He was supposed to be undefeated among his peers.

Titanion Realm, Stoneheart City.

After trading the requested items to Arthas, Orion exited the Survivor's Platform and slowly opened his eyes. He could sense his children, Elara and Pallas, sneaking around just outside the main hall.

"You can come in," he said, his voice a gentle rumble.

From outside the door, Elara's proud voice rang out. "See? I told you Daddy would let us in!"

The words had barely faded when Elara and Pallas teleported inside, appearing on Orion's massive shoulders. He let them sit there, one on each side, their small feet dangling. It was an amusing, familiar feeling.

"Did you two need something?" Orion reached up, affectionately messing up Elara's perfectly neat hair before patting Pallas's little head.

"Daddy, Pallas's dragon is about to hatch! We want to invite you to the ceremony!" Elara announced.

"A ceremony?"

"Yeah! Don't you have a ceremony when you sign a contract with a dragon?"

Orion smiled as he looked into Elara's wide, earnest eyes, which sparkled like polished gems. She had a way of looking at you that was both endearing and dangerously persuasive.

"I saw people who came out of the Abyss with their battle partners," she continued, "and they all had big parties to celebrate. So after Pallas signs his contract, we should have a celebration, too. We can invite all his friends from the youth camp to the castle, and I'm gonna make them all call me the boss!"

Orion nodded along with her excited chatter, then turned his head to look at Pallas. "Is that what you want, too?"

Pallas squirmed a little under his father's gaze but quickly found his footing. "Yes, Daddy. That is what I want."

"But..." he hesitated. "But I'm afraid Mom won't say yes!"

Chapter 905: The Prophet's Seclusion

A flicker of pride lit up Orion's eyes as he watched Pallas find his confidence, his words flowing smoothly even under the weight of his father's presence.

"So," Orion said, a ghost of a smile playing on his lips. His tone wasn't angry or pleased, but held a note of playful challenge. "You two came to me to run interference with your mother, is that it?"

"You are the heart of the Stoneheart Horde, Daddy," Pallas said, lifting his chin. It was the first time he had ever spoken to Orion with such formal, ringing conviction. "The greatest there is. In the Stoneheart Horde, what you say, goes."

Seeing the raw sincerity and flicker of zeal in his son's eyes, Orion suddenly let out a booming laugh.

"Alright! I'll be there for the ceremony," he declared. "And you have my permission to host a celebration for the younglings in the castle square."

"Yes!"

"Awesome!"

As Elara and Pallas cheered, Orion rose from his throne.

He decided to take his two children for a walk through Stoneheart, to breathe in the everyday life of the city he had built.

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Emerald Dream Realm, a military camp outside Irisgarde.

With the dragon invasion underway, the combat armies of the Stoneheart Horde had all been mobilized here. They weren't needed for the naval battles, but the order from Orion was clear: they were the reserve force.

If the allied forces lost the war at sea and in the air, the fight would bleed onto the Dusk Continent, and they would become the main line of defense.

But even as reserves, maintaining combat readiness was a basic requirement for these veteran armies.

"Looking out at that ocean... does it remind you of anything?" Dirtclaw mused, perched atop a massive watchtower at the camp's entrance. He gestured toward the waves crashing endlessly against the rocks and sand below.

"Reminds me of the Valkorath Realm," Earthshaker said, sitting beside him. "That sea of fungal creatures."

He had just transferred over from Blackstone City and hadn't seen his old brothers-in-arms in a long time.

"That stuff was way worse than any ocean. You fall in that, you're dead. No two ways about it."

"If we could just break through to the Legendary level," another soldier chimed in, "the damn ocean couldn't stop us from joining the fight, from earning battle achievements for the Horde and the Alliance."

At the mention of battle achievements, the eyes of the group—Dirtclaw, Fergus, Dace, Earthshaker, and Hammerhoof, all sitting together—glinted with a familiar, hungry light.

"Praise My lord! You guys know what I saw in the Alliance's exchange vault last time?" Dirtclaw asked, too excited to wait for an answer. "A full Legendary-level, three-headed hellhound carcass!"

He slumped back, the excitement draining out of him.

"I didn't have enough battle achievements for it. If I could've just traded for it, devoured it... I might be a great, loyal, powerful gnoll lord by now."

"Damn, Dirtclaw. Rough break," someone muttered. Missing out on a treasure that perfectly matched your path was a special kind of heartbreak.

Since the members of the Champions Alliance had joined forces to secure a foothold in the Emerald Dream Realm, they had opened their faction vaults to one another. The goal was to accelerate the growth of their mid- and low-tier members, helping them find more suitable materials and skills.

To get anything, you either had to trade item for item or use the universal currency: allied battle achievements.

Lured by the treasures in the allied vaults, the members of the Stoneheart Horde had seen their strength and resources grow at an explosive rate.

"Word is, the invaders are a dragon flight from another world," Dace said. "Wonder if we'll even get a chance to get in on the action."

To most races, dragons were the stuff of legend—powerful, terrifying, and majestic. But to this band of grizzled killers, a dragon was just a walking treasure chest.

Dragon teeth, dragon blood, dragon scales... every single part was a prize, either for alchemy or for smithing.

"Too bad Slagor isn't here," Dace added. "A guy like him who knows his way around the water could probably sneak his way onto the front lines and rack up some achievements."

"Pah! That coward?" Dirtclaw spat. "The moment he found out the enemy was dragons, he probably went into hiding. No way he'd risk his own neck. Best he'll do is direct his lackeys from the shadows, letting them do the dirty work while he farms a few cheap battle achievements."

Clearly, Dirtclaw knew Slagor's style inside and out.

"You, though, Bro Fergus," Dirtclaw said, turning. "You could probably apply for a spot on the front line."

All heads turned to Fergus, their eyes filled with envy.

Not only did Fergus have an Alpha-level abyssal dragon, but with the help of Thunderhawk Rayden, he had also bonded with another thunderhawk from the Stoneheart Horde's aerial armies. Outwardly, Fergus was now a carbon copy of the old Orion.

With a flying mount, he had a real shot at earning battle achievements.

But Fergus just shook his head, rejecting the idea. "I just got the thunderhawk. I don't have enough air combat experience. Going out there now would be a suicide run."

He was grimly realistic. "The enemy is dragons. Their ability in the air is stronger, more violent than a thunderhawk's. If I let one get in close, my mount would be crippled, maybe even killed."

Fergus had a good head on his shoulders; he wasn't about to be blinded by his newfound power.

"Fergus is right," said Hammerhoof, Earthshaker's cousin. "Our skills are on the ground. If we suddenly jumped into an air war, especially without our own squads around us, we'd be completely exposed."

Hammerhoof had been an Alpha for some time and had grown immensely powerful after securing a number of boons in the Emerald Dream Realm. As one of the first to immigrate here, he had been managing the buffalofolk on the Dusk Continent before voluntarily rejoining the combat armies when the war horn sounded.

"By the way," Dirtclaw said, looking back at Earthshaker, who had been visiting old comrades since arriving. "How come the prophet (Onyx) didn't come this time?"

"The prophet buried himself under a mountain," Earthshaker said quietly. "He's gone into seclusion."

The term "seclusion," once a specialized word for cultivation used only by Orion, had now become common slang among the troops.

"Seclusion?" Dirtclaw exclaimed, his voice sharp. He knew what that meant.

Onyx was at the peak of the Alpha tier. Seclusion could only mean one thing: he was making a push for Lord.

"Any good news?" he asked, his voice softer now.

Earthshaker just shook his head. The answer wasn't no; it was that nobody knew.

Everyone present—giants, buffalofolk, and gnoll—represented the core races of the Stoneheart Horde.

More than anything, they hoped one of their elders would finally break through to the Legendary level, to become a Warden who could protect and maintain their peoples' standing and interests within the Horde.

They desperately needed that voice, that power at the top.

"Agh..."

A collective sigh went through the group, and they fell into a heavy silence.

Chapter 906: A Reckless Arrowhead

Deep beneath the sea, aboard a Sea-Devouring Warship, Orion and Isabella stood side-by-side. Orion held a large glass tank in his hands; inside, his friend Kraken looked out.

"Well?" Orion asked.

"They're breeding faster than when we were handling them," Kraken's voice echoed from the tank.
"And they're growing stronger."

Orion watched the swarms of Ocean Hunters, already a formidable school, surging near the surface. He had to admit, he was impressed with Kraken's methods.

"It's actually simple," Kraken explained. "You use the flesh of high-grade deep-sea leviathans, supplement it with a few alchemical growth agents, and it speeds up their development. You can't just feed these little things raw meat all the time."

As an expert on Sea Races, Kraken was the authority.

As he spoke, a single tentacle snaked out from the tank, holding a storage pouch. He placed it in Orion's hand. It contained the agents he'd mentioned.

"Give them a little more time, then you can take this first batch to the front lines and see how they perform," Kraken advised. "If they're effective, I'll divert more resources your way."

With that, Kraken had enough of the cramped tank. He flowed out of it, transforming into a massive octopus. Half of his colossal body sank into the ocean while the other half remained level with Orion on the deck of the warship.

"I'm off to check on the troops Leonidas is rallying. I need to get them deployed properly. Use this if you need me."

Kraken tossed them two communicator conches. As long as he was in this stretch of ocean, the shells would be able to reach him.

Orion and Isabella nodded, and Kraken submerged, his presence vanishing into the depths.

"So... um..." Isabella began, a little hesitant. "After the war is over... do you think I could get some fry of these... weird fish?"

She gazed at the Ocean Hunters teeming in the water. As a cannon-fodder unit, they were the easiest and most hands-off type of Sea Race to manage. If she had an army like this, she wouldn't be completely helpless in a naval engagement.

"Oh? You have an ocean territory?" Orion asked, a teasing glint in his eye.

Isabella rolled her eyes. If Makareth hadn't already run off to join Leonidas's squad, she wouldn't be stuck here with Orion.

"My mount is a colossal dragon," she stated. "In my world, aside from my land-based territory, I also have a few small islands. With these things, those islands would truly be mine."

Orion shrugged, agreeing to her request.

"When are we heading to the front?" Isabella asked, her impatience showing.

Leonidas and Makareth were already on their way. In the western seas, the vanguard of the Champions Alliance had already started to clash with the dragon flight. When the top-tier powers on both sides were too evenly matched to force a decisive victory, war usually devolved into a grinding contest of who could afford to lose more mid- and low-tier troops.

"What's the rush?" Orion said calmly. "The war isn't going anywhere. We're waiting. The support units from the Deputy Commander and Arthas haven't all arrived yet."

In any war, Arthas's undead armies were indispensable. And considering the enemy this time was dragons, the Deputy Commander was also sending a detachment of mages as support and a countermeasure to their magic.

"Speaking of which," Orion said, his tone light and joking, "since the enemy is dragons, you sure that colossal dragon of yours isn't going to switch sides?"

"It seems you don't understand dragons," Isabella shot back, glancing at Orion before lifting her head to watch her colossal dragon soar overhead.

"Besides their internal classifications, the beliefs they follow are often completely different. 'Dragon' is just a generic term for this type of apex predator. In fact, many of the more dominant dragon types prey on weaker ones."

She scoffed. "The dragons from Uynting Realm are just a minor branch in the grand scheme of things."

"To my colossal dragon," she said with a sharp, predatory smile, "they are nothing more than food."

As a dragon rider, Isabella's mind was linked with her mount. Through their bond, they understood, respected, and cherished each other.

ROOOAR!

As if in response, a triumphant, joyous roar echoed from the sky.

Orion glanced up at the colossal dragon, a flicker of hesitation in his eyes. He had initially planned to put Isabella in command of his aerial forces. With her colossal dragon, she would be a perfect spearhead for any charge.

But seeing her now... he observed her brazen, swaggering confidence. She's a sharp arrowhead, for sure, but a reckless one.

He decided against it.

Thunderhawk Rayden has worked too hard to build up a mixed aerial army. If I handed it over to Isabella, this hothead would likely get half of them killed in a single, glorious, and utterly stupid charge. It would be a catastrophic waste.

"Let's go," Orion said, turning back. "We'll head back and wait for the reinforcements."

Far away, in the deep sea.

"Hahaha... Boss! With these bad boys, I can go anywhere! Sky, sea, you name it! I'll clear a path through any enemy you point me at!"

Leonidas and Makareth were each mounted on a devil fish of the legendary peak tier. They were mid-to-high-tier assets Leonidas had summoned from one of his few ocean territories. The creature's massive body, its gaping maw, the rows of hook-like barbs lining its wings, and the giant, thrashing tail all screamed that it was an incredibly vicious predator.

Mounted on such a beast, ready to fight in the deep sea, Makareth felt like he could take on a low-level arch lord and give them a run for their money.

"Easy there, hotshot."

Sensing Makareth's overconfidence, Leonidas zipped over to his side and clapped a heavy hand on his shoulder.

"I know you're strong, kid. You're brave, you're fearless, and you love a good fight. But this is a war, not a duel. It can't be won by one person's strength."

Leonidas's grip was firm. "When you're in the thick of it, keep an eye on the allied troops around you. They're the key to you being able to stay in the fight."

It was both a warning and a lesson. If the Demon Makareth had ever fought in a large-scale war, he'd know exactly what Leonidas was talking about.

"Don't worry, Boss," Makareth said, his grin not fading in the slightest. "Makareth isn't just a great fighter; I'm a Demon who sees the bigger picture and knows how to play for the team!"

"Hahaha! Good! With words like that, the vanguard command is yours!" Leonidas laughed, appreciating the response.

"Heheheh... Just watch me, Boss. I'll sweep aside any enemy that dares to show its face!"

Leonidas found himself genuinely liking this new recruit—a man of action who also had a brain. A Demon lord from the Abyss was bound to be extreme and flashy, but anyone who had survived as long as Makareth was no fool.

He knew exactly what he could and couldn't do.

Chapter 907: Tribute and Treachery

Human Kingdom, the Southern Rose Manor

The rumble of wagon wheels was incessant as the latest tribute from Baron Torin of Soaring Bird City arrived on schedule.

The carts were laden with a dazzling array of goods: precious jewels, rare animal pelts, high-grade magical plants, and chests overflowing with gold coins—all destined for Princess Ava.

At the gates of Rose Manor, the convoy was halted by the Rose Knight Regiment. Squads of soldiers in formal armor stood alert, their expressions stern.

"Halt!"

No commoner was permitted entry to Rose Manor, the residence of the kingdom's eldest princess. As was protocol, the Knight-Captain, Garrett, stopped the entire delivery crew.

"You'll wait here while we inventory the cargo. Once we're done, you are free to go."

"As you command, Knight-Captain," the mercenary leader replied respectfully. He was under contract with Torin and knew full well that the master of these goods was the princess herself. Caution was paramount.

"Cap, where is this place? It's incredible!" one of the younger mercs whispered, his first time on a job this far south.

"Acres of crimson blossoms, the scent of roses everywhere... this is Rose Manor," the captain murmured. "A world away from the wilds up north. This is what civilization looks like."

During their break, the new recruits in the Mercenary Corps couldn't stop marveling at the manor's beauty. They stepped away from the wagons, standing by the roadside to take in the spectacular view.

"Cap, did you see that?" another one hissed. "Inside the manor—is that a Raptor rider from the Stoneheart Horde?"

The mercenary captain glanced toward the depths of the estate. The sounds of training—shouts and the screeching of Raptors—carried on the wind.

"See nothing. Ask nothing," the captain ordered in a low voice, a flicker of old rumors crossing his mind. "Keep your eyes down and your mouths shut."

Half an hour later, the inventory was complete.

"The cargo count is correct. No issues here. You may leave," Garrett announced. "Come back for the wagons tomorrow."

The mercenary captain let out a quiet sigh of relief. Their job was done.

"Understood. A pleasure serving you, sir."

He accepted a certificate bearing Princess Ava's personal seal, then called out to his crew. They turned and left Rose Manor without a backward glance.

"Elder James, was that a trade caravan from the Stoneheart Horde, or from Soaring Bird City?"

On a manor wall overlooking the road, the commotion had drawn the attention of Kronos and James. They stood behind the parapet, watching the departing mercenaries.

"From Soaring Bird City," James answered. "If it were from our Stoneheart Horde, I would have been notified in advance."

Kronos's shoulders slumped in disappointment. He had truly been hoping it was a caravan from home. If it had been, he might have received a letter from his younger brother, Pallas, or his older sister, Elara.

Though he was far from Stoneheart City, he still corresponded with them. He'd recently heard that Pallas had received a dragon egg and was about to become a dragon rider.

A small, childish part of Kronos had harbored a desperate hope.

Maybe his father, the great King of Giants, might send one for him, too.

It was a foolish wish. He was disappointed, but not surprised.

"When you are older, you can venture into the Abyss," James said, his voice a low rumble. He had been with Kronos long enough to read his thoughts. "You can conquer an abyssal dragon, just like your father did. You will bring honor to the Horde."

James's words were meant to inspire, and they found their mark.

"I will," Kronos said, his voice hardening with resolve. "I'll prove to my daddy that I'm every bit as good as Pallas."

James nodded, a proud, encouraging smile on his face. That was the spirit of their giant bloodline.

In the heart of Rose Manor, Princess Ava stood with her maiden, Klythia. While Kronos had been watching the mercenaries, she had been watching him.

"Princess Ava, His Highness the Prince seems to be hoping for something," Klythia observed gently.

Ava sighed, her heart aching for her son. The news that Pallas, back in the Stoneheart Horde, had received a dragon egg had spread like wildfire among the major factions of the continent.

Ava had considered trying to acquire one for Kronos, but had dismissed the idea each time. A treasure as rare as a dragon egg was something a great faction would never allow to fall into outside hands. Kronos's hope was a fragile, impossible thing.

"Is there any news from Soaring Bird City?" Ava asked, pushing aside the futile thoughts.

After the assassination of two of the kingdom's Alpha-level powerhouses, the nobles who'd backed them had blanketed the primary suspect, Soaring Bird City, with spies. Baron Torin and his palace were under constant surveillance.

"None, Your Highness," Klythia reported. As a woman, she had become Ava's trusted aide, and her competence was remarkable. "Our intelligence shows that Baron Torin is lying low. He rarely leaves the city. All his business dealings with the Stoneheart Horde are being handled by his subordinates."

"In a situation like this, staying quiet and offering no resistance is the smartest move," Ava mused. "Torin is a clever man."

The dukes and royal family of the kingdom had already communicated with Ava; they all agreed Torin was the most likely culprit. And from Ava, they had gotten the information they needed to cement their suspicions.

"But Your Highness," Klythia pressed, "the reports also show that Torin and his two chief subordinates have alibis for the time of the assassinations. A great number of people in Soaring Bird City can attest to their whereabouts."

That lack of evidence was the only reason Torin was still alive.

"Klythia, it's not that simple," Ava said, her voice weary. "With Henrik and Mateo dead, Torin is the one who benefits most. It doesn't matter if he was involved in the assassination or not. The kingdom's nobles have him in their sights."

"The root cause," she continued, "is that their profits have been threatened. Never get between a nobleman and his gold. In their eyes, Torin has committed a blood offense."

Klythia frowned. She had come from the life of a wandering knight; the schemes of the nobility were still foreign to her, a dark and filthy world she had yet to fully grasp. She didn't understand.

That night, near the stroke of midnight, as the roses swayed in the gentle breeze and the moon hid behind a veil of clouds, a silent change occurred.

From a hidden compartment beneath one of the delivery wagons left in the courtyard, a squad of puppets climbed out.

They stared silently toward the heart of the manor, then melted into the wind.

Shnk.

Thump.

Fsssk.

Thud.

The guards posted near Kronos's bedchamber were eliminated one by one.

The puppets moved like ghosts, unheard and unseen, until they were forced to confront the two Alpha-level giant warriors standing guard directly outside the prince's door: Brom and James.

"Who's there?!" James roared, his senses finally screaming a warning.

The puppets were discovered.

"Brom, assassins!"

Chapter 908: The Fall of Soaring Bird City

James's grim warning echoed across Rose Manor, jolting a sleeping Ava and the vigilant Klythia awake in an instant.

Moments later, the entire estate erupted into chaos. By the time most had scrambled to their senses, the din of battle—shouts and the clang of steel—was already raging from the direction of Kronos's chambers.

Assassins? Ava thought, her heart seizing. Their target is Kronos?

She scrambled out of bed, and as the reality of the message hit her, her legs went weak. If the knight Klythia hadn't been there to steady her, she would have collapsed.

"Quickly... go support them!" Ava commanded, drawing on her inner reserves of strength to force her body to obey. She and her personal guard rushed towards her son's courtyard.

When they arrived, the scene was a desperate melee.

The giant warrior Brom, the giant shaman James, and the Knight-Captain Garrett were locked in fierce combat with the intruders. Over a hundred Raptor Riders and manor guards had formed a tight circle around a small squad of only ten puppets, their faces masks of terror.

Who could have imagined the assassins would be a troop of puppets?

"Where is Kronos? Is he alright?" Ava's first thought wasn't for the enemy, but for her son.

"He is unharmed, Your Highness," a giant warrior reported, stepping forward to answer. "He is being kept in his room, under guard. We will not let him leave."

Ava finally let out the breath she hadn't realized she was holding. The taut wire of fear inside her went slack with relief.

"Klythia, you go too," she ordered, her voice trembling slightly. "Take down these... these monsters!"

But Klythia shook her head. She didn't move an inch, instead planting her greatshield firmly and standing guard beside Ava. "With so many giant warriors and guards here, the enemy will not escape."

The battle raged into the latter half of the night. The puppets were relentlessly tough, but under the combined assault, they were finally smashed into shattered, inert fragments.

Soaring Bird City, the Palace.

The sound of crashing and smashing echoed from a secret chamber, followed by a roar of pure, impotent rage.

"Useless! Idiot!" Baron Torin shrieked. "Didn't you swear to me? Didn't you guarantee a one-hundred percent success rate?"

Damn it all! They'll suspect me now. No, after this, they won't suspect, they'll know. The delivery crew was mine! They'll come to kill me.

"Curse you! Bastard! Was it you? Did you throw the fight on purpose?!"

The mission's failure had sent Torin into a frenzied state of panic, fear, and frustration that boiled over into hysterical rage. He snatched the scroll Ogu had given him from the table, threw it to the floor, and stomped on it viciously.

The appearance of this creature had fed his ambition, inflated his ego, and led him, step by step, to the ruin of his once-promising future. He was drowning in bitter regret.

"My friend, you misunderstand me," a voice, tinged with surprise and its own hint of anger, emanated from the crushed scroll on the floor. It unfurled itself, an eerie, unnatural sight. "Those few Alpha-level trash could never have stopped my little toys on their own."

The voice of the Two-Faced Clown Ogu continued, "My toys were suppressed by a will projection while they carried out their mission. That is why we failed."

"Will projection? What is that?" Torin demanded.

"It is something only those at the Legendary level possess. A means for powerhouses of that tier and above to project their will."

"Are you saying there's a Legendary-level powerhouse stationed at Rose Manor?"

"Mmm... no," Ogu's voice replied calmly, a response that only confused the frantic Torin more. "If there were, my little toys would have been discovered long before they acted."

"Then what are you saying?" Torin asked, snatching the scroll from the floor. He had no way out now. This scroll was his only hope.

"A powerful being has left a will projection at Rose Manor, a ward that guards the place," Ogu explained. "My friend, the target you chose for assassination is being watched."

Two figures instantly flashed through Torin's mind: the king of this human kingdom, and the impossibly arrogant King of Giants from the Stoneheart Horde.

"And my friend," Ogu's voice turned smooth and sympathetic, "regardless of who is watching Rose Manor, you have no path of retreat. The puppets were discovered. You are exposed. If you don't make a decision soon, you might not live to see the dawn. And when they catch you, your death will not be your own to choose."

The clown's voice was a poisonous empathy, both pitying and seducing Torin in the same breath.

"Everything that's happening to me is your fault!" Torin spat, but his words were feeble.

"Hahahaha..." The clown's laugh was chilling. "My friend, this was your choice, was it not? You sent your own caravans to the dwarven tribe. You had them build the altar. Oh, Yi, I can feel the excitement and madness hidden within you. I think you've been waiting for this moment for a very long time, haven't you?"

The clown's laughter grew, even wilder than Torin's rage. "Yi, begin the ritual! Your plan to drive a wedge between the human kingdom and the Stoneheart Horde has failed. There is no place left for you in either of their domains. There is nothing left for you to cherish here."

"Convert the dwarves! Welcome the advent of my puppet army! Gather the northern clans and forge a new, great faction! Only then will you be able to speak to those great factions as an equal! Our future will be filled with—"

The Two-Faced Clown Ogu spoke for a long time.

In the end, Torin summoned his two most trusted subordinates, Mike and Wyatt. Before the sun rose, the master and his two servants activated the sacrificial array they had been secretly constructing within the palace.

In the final hour before dawn, Soaring Bird City was plunged into its darkest hour.

Demonic roars, undead wails, and the screams of monsters echoed through the streets as they hunted down the city's fleeing populace.

Soaring Bird City was destroyed in a single night.

When morning finally broke, the mercenaries and caravans returning to the city found it shrouded in a thick, dark mist. The entire city had become a tomb.

Stoneheart Horde, Stoneheart City.

Orion opened his eyes. Two figures had appeared below his throne. One was Delilah, head of the Sentinel Corps. The other was a figure cloaked in shadow, an agent from the Blade Hall.

"Report," Orion said. He had already guessed that something was wrong. The will projection he had hidden within Kronos had already sent him fragments of what had transpired.

"My lord, there is a situation in the human kingdom's Soaring Bird City," Delilah began, her brow furrowed. With the situation there, she had also lost contact with the agents she had stationed in the city.

"Sometime last night, for reasons unknown, the entire population of Soaring Bird City vanished. It was only discovered at dawn by approaching caravans."

"The city is enveloped in a malevolent black mist," she continued. "Based on the initial intelligence, we believe the entities responsible may be from the Abyss or from Hell."

Chapter 909: The Two-Faced Clown

Orion said nothing, his face an emotionless mask as he gestured for Delilah to continue.

"The human kingdom has already dispatched a Grand Duke to handle the matter," she said, her voice tight. "Furthermore, they have issued a travel ban against the stoneheart horde, the blood elves, and the ogre race. There are also signs that some of their armies are moving toward the northern border."

She paused. "My lord, should we inform Aldous?"

Orion still didn't speak, instead tapping a single finger on the arm of his throne. The implication was obvious. The human kingdom's actions were aimed squarely at the ogre race, or perhaps, they were casting suspicion on the Stoneheart Horde itself.

"Send word to Aldous. Tell him to maintain a state of high alert," Orion finally commanded. "Also tell him not to make any rash moves. A reaction like this from the human kingdom is to be expected."

He considered for a moment. "Finally, send a letter to Harold under my own seal."

The incident at Soaring Bird City had nothing to do with the Stoneheart Horde, but diplomacy and explanations were still necessary.

"And Delilah," he added, just as she turned to leave. "Put all armies on alert. Await my command."

"Yes, my lord." She nodded, her usual alluring charm completely gone, replaced by a deadly seriousness.

One wrong move, and the Stoneheart Horde could be facing another war. When one really thought about it, the disaster at Soaring Bird City offered no benefit to them whatsoever. The human kingdom's reaction felt less like that of a confused partner and more like that of a suspicious rival.

Only when Delilah's figure had vanished from the great hall did Orion turn his gaze to the silent shadow.

"What have you found?"

The figure hidden in the darkness bowed slightly. A voice, impossible to pin as male or female, answered respectfully. "Dubhe-Fourteen greets the Elder."

It was a code name. Orion possessed a token from Alexander, making him one of the highest-ranking elders in the Blade Hall. The greeting was also a countersign, a way for the agent to verify his identity. If something was amiss, Orion could obliterate him with a single thought.

"Report," Orion said, closing his eyes in a sign that the identity was confirmed.

"The assassins from last night... Blade Hall has records of such things, but I do not have the clearance to view them," the agent said. "The Elder may look them up himself or inquire with the Hall Master."

"As for the anomaly at Soaring Bird City, based on the intelligence, it appears to have been a sacrifice. A type of Demon sacrificial ritual. Our archives also have records of this method. I suspect the same party is responsible for both the assassination attempt and the destruction of the city."

As the agent spoke, Orion's brow furrowed slightly. Following that line of reasoning, the primary suspect was Torin, the awakened, and the entity behind him. Thinking of it that way, everything that had happened in the human kingdom suddenly made a terrifying kind of sense.

But why try to assassinate Kronos? Orion wondered, sinking into deep thought. Was it purely to drive a wedge between the Stoneheart Horde and the Human Kingdom? Or did he somehow find out who I am? Is this just to spite me?

He knew Torin was capable of causing trouble, but he had never imagined something on this scale. Betraying the human kingdom and sacrificing his entire city offered Torin no tangible benefits. Where could he possibly go after this?

"You are dismissed. Continue monitoring Rose Manor."

"As you command."

He already had layers of security around Kronos. In addition to the three hundred Raptor cavalry from the Tribe—an increase Lilith had authorized after the prince's last visit to Stoneheart City—Delilah had also stationed Sentinel Corps agents to protect him from the shadows.

On top of that, Orion had added two more layers himself: his own will projection, and the agents of the Blade Hall. The shadow hadn't intervened during the attack simply because the situation had not yet become dire enough to warrant their appearance.

After a long while, Orion closed his eyes again, his consciousness sinking into the Survivor's Platform.

"Bro," he said, getting straight to the point as he contacted Alexander. "What's the secret behind these puppets?"

He had expected many things, but not the reply he received.

"You found the Clown?"

The traitor, Two-Faced Clown Ogu?

A jolt went through Orion, a sudden, chilling premonition.

"You don't know?" Alexander's voice was sharp. "Then how do you know about the puppets?"

Orion steadied himself and quickly recounted the details of the assassination attempt and the sacrifice of Soaring Bird City.

"Puppets are the Clown's signature," Alexander explained. "Those were his toys. As for the sacrificial ritual, it was likely just a distraction. A way to draw all eyes to Soaring Bird City so he could make his real move elsewhere."

It was a swift analysis born from a deep understanding of his former comrade.

"Don't tip him off," Alexander commanded. "I will handle this. Wait for my signal and be ready to move in to eliminate the traitor. I'm worried if he gets wind of us, he won't even dare to let his will projection descend."

With Alexander taking the lead, Orion could only agree.

"On the Dragonflame Island front, Leonidas has engaged the dragon flight," Alexander continued, shifting topics. "The dragons are furious about our last raid. They've deployed a massive number of Sea Race and other vassal troops. This is going to be a war of attrition. You should prepare. It's time you went to the front."

"The Ocean Hunters are nearly ready," Orion replied. "I can be on the front lines within three days."

"Good. And one more thing. Keep an eye on Isabella for me. Don't let her get herself killed."

"Don't worry, bro," Orion said. "I'll watch her."

Ending the conversation, the initial shock Orion felt began to fade, replaced by something else entirely: anticipation.

Yes, anticipation for a confrontation with a traitor from the Champions Alliance.

Two-Faced Clown Ogu, is it?

Ever since ascending to arch lord, Orion hadn't had a chance to truly cut loose in a real fight. There was either no opportunity, or no suitable opponent. Only powerhouses with the depth and skill of Alexander, Leonidas, or Arthas before he became a demigod could have truly pushed him to his limits, and as teammates, fighting each other was out of the question.

I hope you don't disappoint me.

"Torin, oh, Torin," Orion murmured to the empty hall. "I never would have guessed that the entity backing you was a traitor to the Champions Alliance. It seems I won't even need to lift a finger. The Clown will probably play you to death himself."

I'll be watching to see what happens to you.

Orion turned his head, his gaze falling upon the massive sand table map of the world that dominated one side of the hall. A predatory gleam sparked in his eyes.

Now, where will you appear?

Chapter 910: The Enemy of My Enemy

Emerald Dream Realm, Dusk Continent.

A terrifying pulse of mighty energy flashed across the continent and vanished. Members of the Champions Alliance who sensed it looked up, but the sky was empty.

High above, in the void of space, Arthas appeared, his longsword held in a low, ready grip. He stared at the phantom that had materialized before him.

"The surge of power was brief," Arthas stated, his voice calm. "It seems you're not here for a fight."

The phantom's approach was a clear, if cautious, signal.

"Allow me to introduce myself. I am Pollard, the progenitor of the Blood-Eyed Black Serpent race," the phantom said, its form shimmering. Within the apparition, the vague outline of a serpent's head coiled and writhed. "The serpents that once inhabited Dragonflame Island were my Tribe."

Arthas remained silent, waiting for the rest of it.

"The enemy of my enemy, I believe, is my friend," Pollard continued. "The dragons destroyed my vassals. They are my enemy, and they are your enemy. We can form an alliance. A common cause."

Arthas stared at the phantom for a long moment before speaking. "An alliance? And what value do you offer that would be worthy of our friendship?"

It wasn't that Arthas looked down on the demigod before him, but a stranger who appeared out of nowhere was never acting out of the goodness of their heart. His question was a test, a probe for more information.

"Such arrogance," Pollard hissed softly. "Is a demigod not valuable enough on his own?"

The ancient being was clever, seeing through Arthas's gambit and revealing nothing.

"One demigod is valuable," Arthas conceded. "But an alliance like this is meaningless. Your credibility is zero."

It was the simple truth. Who would trust the unprompted kindness of a stranger? This felt less like an offer and more like a trap.

"You require a show of good faith, is that it? You shall have it."

With that, the demigod's phantom vanished.

Arthas stared into the empty void. After a long moment, certain that the visitor was truly gone, he turned and faded back into the emptiness himself.

Survivor's Platform.

The strange surge of power had set the team's private channel buzzing.

Leonidas: Deputy Commander, Arthas, what the hell was that?

Alexander: An unfamiliar presence. It was gone in a flash. A passing demigod from another continent?

Hulk: So I wasn't the only one who felt it.

Kraken: Seriously, that scared the crap out of me. I thought the dragons were making a push!

Makareth: Definitely not the dragons. I'd have them crying for their mothers.

Isabella: Why couldn't I feel anything? Are you all that fast?

In truth, only Alexander, Leonidas, and Hulk had truly perceived the demigod's aura. The others had merely felt a ripple of power pass by; by the time they tried to focus on it, it was gone.

Makareth: Ahem. I didn't get a clear lock on it either. Notice how I didn't say what it was? Hahaha...

Just as the conversation was about to derail, their own demigod, Arthas, logged in.

Arthas: The visitor was an unknown demigod. He claims his vassals were the former inhabitants of Dragonflame Island. He came to propose an alliance.

Not two seconds after Arthas's post, Leonidas replied.

Leonidas: The patron of those races from Dragonflame? For real? This isn't some kind of setup, is it? A double agent?

It was a normal reaction. When you were at war, any stranger who suddenly appeared was treated as a potential enemy.

Alexander: I have a question. If the previous inhabitants of Dragonflame Island were backed by a demigod, why were they driven out and devoured by the dragons? A demigod would have instantly sensed an event like the annihilation of his people.

He sounded frustrated. With the dragons occupying the island, almost all life had been wiped out, leaving Alexander with no clues to investigate this mysterious demigod.

Hulk: I have a bad feeling about him.

Orion typed his thoughts. The demigod's aura felt dark and sinister, similar to the foul presence of the Tusha. His instincts were screaming that this was bad news.

Arthas: Explain.

Hulk: Based on his aura, I suspect he might be one of the beings who invaded the Emerald Dream Realm alongside the evil demigod Tusha. He could be approaching us to gather intel, especially since we took half of the Dusk Continent from them. Furthermore, his involvement would only complicate the war and make the situation harder to control.

This was their inner circle. Orion laid out his thoughts exactly as they came to him.

Leonidas: Bro's got a point. We need to be wary of the other powers in the Emerald Dream Realm.

Alexander: Hulk, are you certain this feeling came after you sensed the demigod's aura?

Hulk: Positive. His presence felt very similar to Tusha's.

Arthas: So it's likely he's here to stir the pot.

That was enough. The intuition of an arch lord was something they all trusted. Based on that alone, they could make a judgment.

Leonidas: Arthas, did you negotiate? What was the outcome?

Arthas: I refused. I told him his offer lacked sincerity. He said we would get our proof of his sincerity, and then he vanished.

Alexander: Even if his intentions are hostile, we could still potentially use him against the dragons. Whether he has a grudge against them or not, he walked right up to our door. We should treat him like a tool—a blade to be used and discarded.

Orion agreed with Alexander's bold thinking. With the commander, deputy commander, and Arthas as their backstop, the Champions Alliance could afford to be aggressive.

Arthas: Alright. The Deputy Commander and I will discuss how to handle this. Given the impending war and the security of the Dusk Continent, the Deputy Commander will be constructing a large-scale defensive magical formation. Make sure your subordinates cooperate fully.

The discussion ended. Orion and Isabella logged out of the Survivor's Platform at the same time and walked out onto the deck of the Sea-Devouring Warship.

"How strong is a demigod, exactly?" Isabella asked, coming to stand beside Orion. She followed his gaze out over the vast ocean, asking a question that had been on her mind for a long time.

"Think about how easy it is for you to step on an ant," Orion replied without looking at her. "That's how easy it is for a demigod to kill you."

The difference between a lord and a demigod was the difference between the earth and the sky.

"I still can't imagine it," Isabella said, shaking her head. She felt Orion's description was too abstract. It was a scale of power she simply couldn't comprehend.