

Titan King 971

Chapter 971: He's mine, and he's yours

The one backing me?

The question echoed in Orion's mind. Alexander, who could read people like an open book, caught the flicker of confusion in his eyes.

"Think about it," Alexander said, leaning forward slightly. "If you were a demigod, would you let some random, unaffiliated arch lord start leveling up in your own territory?"

The question hit Orion like a physical blow. The answer didn't even require thought.

Absolutely not.

"So, think back. Who are the demigods you've actually met in this world?" Alexander pressed, guiding him to the obvious conclusion. Whoever was letting Orion operate had to be someone he'd already encountered.

"Lady Seraphina."

The name surfaced instantly. The impossibly beautiful mermaid demigod, with her snow-white skin, hair that flowed to her waist, and gentle, mesmerizing eyes that seemed to hold the mysteries of the deep.

"Looks like you have your answer," Alexander's voice cut through his recollection, pulling Orion back to the present. "You're strong enough now to stand on your own two feet. You don't need to worry."

It was a subtle reminder, a clear signal that Orion had the Champions Alliance in his corner.

"I'm not afraid," Orion said, shaking his head. "Just... confused. Looking back, some of the things I did... I was playing way out of my league."

His understanding of his own place in the world sharpened. That time he'd stormed the Silvercurrent Sea—for Marina. He must have been under Lady Seraphina's watch the entire time. Otherwise, how could she have known to jump in and save the day at the last second?

But why would she let him cause so much chaos in her own holy land in the first place?

Solving one puzzle only revealed another, and a new layer of caution settled over Orion's perception of the world.

"The business with the clown is on hold for now. I'll handle tracking him," Alexander said, shifting topics. "You just focus on the Emerald Dream Realm."

"Right. I will."

The Dusk Continent and the surrounding seas in the Emerald Dream Realm were primarily his, Kraken's, and Isabella's territory. With Kraken managing the waters, it was up to Orion to get the continent up and running. As for Isabella, without reaching the arch lord tier, she had no real voice in the Champions Alliance.

"That's all for now," Alexander stated. His form flickered and dissolved into nothing.

Orion stood by the window of the Silent Goblet for a while longer, gazing out at the sprawling view of Stoneheart City before returning to his own castle.

The North. The Silvercurrent Sea.

In a mysterious abyssal trench, where coral formations served as decor and a massive clamshell was a bed, Lady Seraphina's eyes slowly fluttered open. With a languid flick of her tail, she shifted her sleeping position.

In a smaller clamshell nearby, Marina sat with her eyes closed in meditation, a fierce aura of supernatural power surging around her. The presence of that power meant she had finally broken through to the Legendary level.

"So, love really is the greatest driving force in the universe," Seraphina mused, her voice echoing softly in the water. "To love and be loved, happiness and fulfillment, promises and responsibilities... Is it pain, or is it pleasure? I can feel such an intense longing."

She watched Marina with a meaningful gaze, her words a strange, bittersweet mix.

"Are you talking about yourself?" Marina opened her eyes and rolled them.

She was Lady Seraphina, and Lady Seraphina was her.

"They say you fall for the looks, get hooked by the talent, and stay for the personality," Seraphina continued, a teasing lilt in her voice. "So, which part got you? That titan is a mountain of muscle. Does he even have 'looks' to speak of? And titans are brutal and bloodthirsty. He probably doesn't even know what 'talent' is. As for personality... all those women in his tent tell you everything you need to know about that."

Marina closed her eyes again, ignoring Seraphina's prodding. A demigod talking to her own avatar like this, she thought. I'm either going insane or I'm just incredibly thirsty.

"Hee hee... 'thirsty.' What a fun word," Lady Seraphina giggled. Her mind was linked to Marina's; the thought appeared in her own consciousness the instant it was formed. "Since you've successfully reached the Legendary level, you should go find your little lover."

"He's mine, and he's yours," Marina retorted flatly.

"Hee hee... true. Mine as well."

"Hmph."

The Emerald Dream Realm. Near Dragonflame Island.

The moment Orion began the summoning ritual, an aura of terrifying annihilation flooded the area. The red dragon, Adras, sensed the danger instantly. Without a second's thought, he used teleportation to appear directly in front of Orion, his now-massive claws swiping down to obliterate the summoner and shatter the ritual.

But as a barrier of pure light flared into existence, the exact same look of disbelief that had once been on the brass dragon Latychrenber's face now appeared on Adras's.

"The Aegis of Light... That's impossible!"

That ability was the exclusive signature of the Great Dragon King of Light, Mondusath—a power unique even among dragons.

"With this offering you so loved, I call upon you to descend! Ghost Dragon!"

The shock in Adras's eyes was quickly replaced by pure terror. Orion had completed the ritual. A draconic pressure far more terrifying than his own, a will that held absolute authority over his kind, descended upon him.

Adras found he couldn't move. His body, his spirit, his very soul were locked in place.

Across from him, Orion was grinning, leveling his trident. That teleportation had been a fatal mistake. Adras had just served himself up on a silver platter.

"Die!"

Orion surged with all his power—lightning, blood energy, and Abyssal energy twisting together into a single, spear-like torrent of supernatural force that shot from his trident.

ROAR!

Just then, a different dragon's roar echoed through the area. A phantom composed of pure faith emerged from Adras's forehead, radiating an aura of immense power and authority.

"Bind!" the body of faith commanded.

A single word. The moment it was spoken, the very fabric of the void froze solid. Orion, trident raised, was stopped dead in his tracks, frozen in place like an action figure.

It was a bizarre tableau: both Adras and Orion were now paralyzed, one by the power of a summoning, the other by a Word of Power. The force behind that command was already touching upon the fundamental laws of reality.

With the space locked down, the attack from Adras's body of faith came, its claw descending like a falling mountain, its power absolute.

GRAAAH!

Unable to move, the ancestor sigil on Orion's forehead blazed with light. A guttural roar ripped its way out of him—a sound filled with so much agony and raw power that it shredded the binding energy suffocating the space around him.

"Break!" Orion snarled, the paralysis shattered just enough for him to move again.

Chapter 972: Why can't I?

In that split second, gouts of fire erupted from Orion's trident, the Flame of Will. The weapon transmuted, becoming an Elder Wyrms of skeletal bone wreathed in shimmering Chillbone Fire. It coiled and dove straight into Adras's massive physical form.

This was another one of Orion's hidden trump cards: Wyrms' Death Coil.

The ability was born after the Flame of Will had been fused with a shard of the Elder Wyrms' dragon bones, then further tempered by Arthas's bonfire. Alongside its Bonechill Armor and Chillbone Fire abilities, it had gained this powerful transmutation skill.

ROAR!

As the fiery wyrm tore into Adras's body, a deafening roar exploded from Orion's own throat.

This was the Titan's Roar, a blast of pure will and pressure laced with concussive sonic attacks. While not as potent as the ancestor soul's cry, it was all Orion.

Adras's body of faith was right in the blast zone. Hit by the double impact of the internal assault on its body and the external sonic blast, its attack faltered. The phantom shuddered violently, its form destabilizing.

"You're not getting away!"

With a guttural roar, Orion did something completely unexpected. His jaw unhinged and expanded to an impossible size, and he lunged forward, swallowing Adras's entire body of faith in a single, monstrous bite.

The action was so fast, so purely instinctual, that Orion himself barely had time to process what he'd just done.

Is this... the Titan's Maw? An awakened ability of my Titan Form?

The realization dawned on him after he let out a resounding burp. He could feel a new space inside him, something like a dimensional stomach. Trapped within that newly formed void, Adras's body of faith was frantically trying every method of escape. But every teleportation artifact and ability was useless, as if they had been disabled.

More accurately, their effects were being infinitely nerfed. The body of faith was constantly teleporting, but it was only moving from one end of the stomach to the other.

How do I finish him off?

The moment the thought surfaced, the pocket dimension responded. A thick, fuming liquid flooded the space, submerging Adras's body of faith. The phantom immediately began to corrode, dissolving piece by piece as it was digested by the potent fluid. It wasn't exactly corrosion, but that was the only word Orion could find to describe the effect.

Simultaneously, he felt a massive surge of faith energy coalesce within him. Inside his mirrored avatar, a new form took shape—an eight-armed Asura Titan Form, just a size smaller than his true body. The sight nearly made his jaw drop all over again.

If that was the biggest shock of the day, then the Survivor's Cache left behind by Adras's physical body after the Ghost Dragon devoured it was simply the icing on the cake.

"Hah..." Orion let out a long breath, a feeling of pure adrenaline washing over him. The fight had been dangerous, but he'd handled it with confidence. That feeling of being in complete control was incredible.

With one enemy down, Orion looked up towards the ancient giant-horned whale. The dragon captain it was fighting was a skilled arch lord, holding its own against the colossal beast.

Orion raised his hand, the Flame of Will reappearing in his grasp. But just as he was about to join the fray, Kraken's voice echoed in his ear.

"Let me take him." The massive octopus surfaced, its enormous body breaking the waves. Kraken gently lifted Orion onto one of his tentacles, his tone a cold, hard plea. "This is the bastard who led the ambush on me. He's the one who tore off most of my tentacles. Today, I'm going to drain him dry."

Orion could feel the ice in Kraken's voice. His massive eye was shot through with red veins, a clear sign of absolute hatred.

"Between us, man, you don't have to ask," Orion said with a smile, granting the request.

He knew why Kraken had asked. That dragon captain was technically Orion's kill, which meant a potential Survivor's Cache drop. To attack without asking would have been blatant kill-stealing.

"Go. The ancient giant-horned whale and I will lock down the area. He's not getting away."

"My thanks."

With Orion's guarantee, Kraken sank beneath the waves, his form becoming a dark shadow that shot toward the battlefield.

Orion watched him go, a little impressed. He had only just finished off Adras, and Kraken was already here. That meant Kraken had already dealt with the other arch lord dragon beast he had been fighting. Even if that one was only a middle arch lord, it proved Kraken was more than capable of punching above his weight class.

Now that Kraken is an arch lord, his Sea Race units will start evolving soon, Orion mused. I'll have to talk to him about trading for some of the new troop types. And it's about time I sent a team to scout that large island Sea-Drake king Neptor gave me.

While he planned, Orion directed the ancient giant-horned whale to disengage. With Kraken taking over the fight against the dragon captain, Orion and his whale were now free.

He looked up at the sky, where his storm avatar, his bone dragon, and Sever were locked in a three-on-three battle with the remaining dragons. A cold smirk spread across his face.

However, just as Orion prepared to join the sky battle, the three dragons sensed the sudden disappearance of their comrades' life forces. They immediately unleashed their ultimate escape maneuvers, turning tail and fleeing in different directions.

They had no choice. Anyone could see that if they stayed and fought, every arch lord dragon here would fall. The dragons of Uynting Realm were resourceful; each of the three possessed a special teleportation artifact or ability.

"Shit!" Orion cursed. "Get them!"

The enemy's retreat was decisive. By the time Orion used Instant Impact to close the distance, his chosen target had already vanished in a warp of spatial energy.

High above, only one dragon remained, trapped by an intricate magical formation cast by the battle-hardened storm avatar.

"Damn, too bad," Orion muttered. He flashed back to the ocean's surface, standing guard over Kraken's fight. This last dragon captain absolutely could not be allowed to escape. As for the one trapped in the sky, with the Deputy Commander, the bone dragon, and Sever all focused on it, its fate was sealed.

Far from the chaos of the arch lord battles, Isabella stood atop her colossal dragon, gazing at the towering figure holding the trident.

The earth-shaking roars, the appearance of the colossal unknown phantom, and the overwhelming pressure of the dragon's body of faith had drawn the attention of nearly everyone on the battlefield.

She was one of them. She'd had a clear view of Orion's entire fight.

Watching him personally slay a peak arch lord dragon, Isabella finally, truly understood just how vast the gap was between herself and the titan.

If they can be this strong, she thought, her hands tightening into fists, then why can't I? We're all survivors.

Chapter 973: Nothing left to discuss

As a queen, Isabella was prideful. She refused to allow anyone to shine brighter than her.

If such a person existed, and she couldn't eliminate them, then she had only one option. Isabella knew she would just have to work harder, push further, and burn with a brilliance that would eclipse them all.

Bloom, Isabella, she told herself, a fierce fire igniting in her soul. You will be the star that outshines every other in a thousand worlds.

Compared to Isabella's self-motivation, the Demon Makareth was far more direct.

"Kill! Kill! Kill!" he shrieked, his voice cracking. "You all have to die! I need more resources! I need to build my city, Miseria! I need..."

Makareth was in a bizarre state. Perhaps from absorbing the life force of too many others, he had become completely unhinged. He was a whirlwind of slaughter, muttering a constant, insane litany to himself as he cut a bloody path through the enemy ranks.

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"Is that the leader I've been searching for?"

A voice carried on the howling wind. It was Gustalon.

In the distance, Orion stood on the back of the ancient giant-horned whale, his trident in hand. He was like a mountain, a force of nature that dominated the entire region, his presence crushing the will of all his enemies.

Whenever the allied forces saw that indomitable figure, their morale surged, and a certainty of victory ignited in their hearts.

The battlefield was a chaotic mire of rage, bloodlust, and fear. Pain and screams were the soundtrack to the carnage. It didn't matter if you were wounded or stumbling from exhaustion; you fought until the end.

There was no other choice, unless one side was annihilated, or fled.

On Dragonflame Island, almost every combat-capable unit had been deployed, leaving only the old, sick, and young to guard the Dragon Nest. The threat wasn't just in the skies overhead, but from the countless enemies swarming across the Kasenna sea.

Unknown Space. The pocket dimension created by the forbidden formation.

"Your Excellency, you must know that if we both go all out, the only result is mutual destruction," said the black dragon, Monjebel, the ruling lord of the dragons of Uynting Realm. "The only ones who would benefit are our rivals, hiding in the shadows and watching. Let's call a truce. Let it end here."

"And you think we can just call a truce?" the Deputy Commander shot back, shaking his head. "We both know why you're here. This isn't your call to make."

Monjebel fell silent. The Deputy Commander was right. Initially, they had only intended to seize some land, a token invasion of Champions Alliance space to appease the Great Dragon King of Light, Mondusath. But then Mondusath had revealed the existence of the World Dragons, and the six demigod elders of the dragon race had been swayed by greed.

Monjebel was no exception. He needed the World Dragons too.

A World Dragon's egg wasn't born naturally. It could only be created by gathering a vast number of newly-laid eggs from every dragon flight and fusing them with a secret technique. Even then, the chances of success were minuscule.

To even attempt it was to declare war on dragonkind itself. No dragon would ever willingly allow its clutch to be used in such a ritual. In essence, it was the systematic murder of their young—a genocidal act that would sever the roots of their entire race.

The World Dragons were a forbidden topic, a taboo of the highest order. Monjebel couldn't even imagine how many thousands of eggs Mondusath must have stolen over the past hundred thousand years.

But now that the egg was out in the open, the dragons could not allow it to remain in the hands of outsiders. So, Monjebel's offer was empty. The other five demigod dragons would never give up. As long as their true bodies remained safe elsewhere, they had the confidence to drag this war on indefinitely, sending endless waves of their lesser kin to die.

"Your Excellency, you must be aware that you are no match for me," Monjebel's voice turned cold, his attempt at diplomacy discarded. He was the lord of the dragons, and his earlier pragmatism was for the sake of his people. With that path closed, he was now simply what he was: a merciless demigod who had slaughtered countless foes.

"And just because I'm no match for you, I'm not supposed to show up for the fight?"

To be honest, facing a phase-two demigod had the Deputy Commander under immense pressure. He was certain his demigod will projection would be destroyed in this battle. But before that happened, he would buy as much time as possible for Orion, Kraken, and the others. More time meant more dead dragons, more of their armies shattered.

They had to beat the dragons so badly, cripple them so thoroughly, that they would learn a lesson they would never forget. Only then could the Dusk Continent know a lasting peace.

Of course, this would earn them the eternal hatred of the dragons of Uynting Realm.

But the Deputy Commander didn't care. Arthas didn't care. Alexander and Leonidas didn't care. And Orion and Kraken, who needed this time to grow, certainly didn't care. The longer this dragged on, the stronger the Champions Alliance would become.

And when the time came, they would simply wipe the dragons of Uynting Realm from the map.

"It seems there is nothing left to discuss."

ROAR!

A dragon's cry shook the pocket dimension as divine power condensed in the air. Within it, clusters of divine fire ignited—the signature of a phase-two demigod.

Facing the flames, the Deputy Commander, Edward, poured all of his power into the magical formation, abandoning any notion of attack. He switched to pure defense. If he was outmatched, attacking was just a waste of divine power.

"After this battle, this means war. One of us will not rest until the other is annihilated," Monjebel declared. It was the official declaration of war from the dragons of Uynting Realm against the Champions Alliance.

"Bring it on," Edward replied, his voice unwavering.

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The Dwarven territory.

Bodies clogged the rivers and littered the plains in a horrific tableau of defeat.

With the clown's failure and Torin's escape, the human Saint, Noel, and King Harold had finally joined the main battle. The northern tribes' coalition shattered like glass.

"Look, big guy, I got a Lord's Stone! It's all mine!"

"It's Lorelia's first war, and I already got a Lord's Stone! My master will be so proud of me when he finds out! Tee hee..."

The middle Legendary-level werewolf, Orwar, hadn't lasted more than a few moments against Xalathar and Lorelia. The Abyss Dragon's overwhelming assault, perfectly complemented by Lorelia's Dreamscape powers, made them a flawless killing duo.

"Ms. Delilah," Lorelia sang, holding up her prize. "Isn't this Lord's Stone pretty?"

Chapter 974: The Forest of Nature has fallen

"It's beautiful!"

Hearing Delilah's praise, Lorelia beamed with delight.

“This will be the first gift I give to my master!” she declared. “And in the future... there will be countless more spoils for Lorelia to claim! Right, Xalathar?”

The Abyss dragon let out a low, rumbling growl of assent. On the matter of following Orion and killing more enemies for their master, Xalathar and Lorelia were in complete agreement.

Is this the confidence that comes with becoming a lord? Delilah wondered, watching the ecstatic girl.

Her thoughts were interrupted by the arrival of a soldier. “Your Excellency, King Harold requests your presence.”

Delilah was shaken from her reverie. With the Northern Coalition routed, its forces either dead or scattered to the winds, it was time for the victors—the Human Kingdom, the Stoneheart Horde, the Dragons, and the Blood Elves—to carve up the spoils of war. Before that, however, the four allies would have to push the border further north.

Regardless, the Stoneheart Horde was guaranteed to receive a massive share of the profits from this victory, and its territory in the south would expand significantly.

“Keep an eye on our troops, little one. I’m heading to the war council,” Delilah said, turning to leave.

“Ms. Delilah, let Aldous go with you! He’s super strong now!” Lorelia called out with a cheerful grin.

Delilah paused, blinked, and then a wave of relief and ease washed over her. She was right. The Stoneheart Horde was a far cry from the fledgling power that had been so short on talent.

Stoneheart Horde. Stoneheart City.

A throne is a symbol of power and glory. To sit upon it is to command authority and respect. But only those who have sat there know the truth: a throne is a cold, lonely seat.

Orion lounged against that cold loneliness, making it feel even more profound as he let his consciousness sink into the Survivor's Platform.

A series of frantic messages were waiting for him.

Aerin: Godfather... Orion... help me!

Aerin: I'll do anything you want to get me out of this hellhole, in any position you want. 😊

Aerin: ...

A faint smirk touched Orion's lips. Ever since he'd given her those life-saving Scarecrows, Aerin had gotten reckless. He'd reached out a few times before, but she'd given him the cold shoulder, acting like she didn't need anything from anyone.

Now, it seemed her supply of get-out-of-jail-free cards had finally run out.

He replied calmly.

Orion: Call me Godfather.

Aerin: Godfather! Lord Godfather, please save me!

Orion wasn't done having his fun.

Orion: Call me Daddy.

Aerin: Daddy... Daddy... please save your poor, pitiful daughter!

She replied instantly, without a moment's hesitation.

He hadn't expected her to actually do it.

Orion's smirk vanished. For her to debase herself like that... the situation on her end had to be genuinely desperate.

Orion: Tell me what's going on.

Aerin didn't reply immediately. Orion waited for a long moment as she apparently gathered her thoughts.

Aerin: Daddy, I'm begging you, all the Scarecrows are gone!

Aerin: The Forest of Nature has fallen! There was a spy inside the Wood Elf ranks. Now I'm not just dealing with the plague, I'm caught in a civil war! My people have gone insane!

Aerin: Daddy, please, you have to get me out of this nightmare world!

She was sobbing. A wave of trade requests began spamming his interface. The items she was offering were a chaotic mix of high-tier magical plants, a few Building Miniatures, and even personal effects like stockings and panties.

Orion wasn't sure if it was an act of panic or a calculated move. Perhaps she thought that by offering him more valuable—and personal—goods, he'd be more inclined to save her.

He didn't refuse, accepting the entire bundle of items she offered. Rejecting the trade now might just send the panicked girl spiraling even further. After the trade was complete, he waited another moment before replying.

Orion: You still alive, kiddo?

The teasing tone was back, but it was softer now. As long as she wasn't dead yet, pulling her out of whatever mess she was in would be easy with his current power. He immediately initiated a new trade.

Aerin: Thank you, Godfather! Thank you, Daddy!

Orion grunted softly. Her reaction was exactly what he'd expected. He'd traded her five Scarecrows. He could have sent more, but he needed her to understand how valuable they were.

Orion: Now, talk. How exactly do you want me to save you?

With five extra lives in her inventory, Orion figured she'd be calm enough to give him a straight answer.

Aerin: Godfather, this whole world has gone to hell. Please, just get me out of here. The Forest of Nature isn't safe anymore.

Orion: Get to the point.

Aerin: Oh, right. Okay, so here's what happened...

Unknown realm. The Forest of Nature.

Deep within the dense woods, high in the canopy of a colossal tree, Aerin was hiding in a dark hollow. Compared to the beautiful arboreal home she used to live in, this hole was no better than a dog's den. There wasn't even a bed.

Leaning against the rough bark, Aerin opened her eyes. Two fat, glistening tears rolled down her crystalline cheeks, dripping from her flawless skin onto her green hair.

"Sniffle... When it really matters, Godfather is the only one I can count on," she whispered.

The five Scarecrows in her possession were five more chances at life. If Orion couldn't help her further, they at least gave her the confidence to try and escape the Forest of Nature on her own.

The truth was, she had no idea what the world outside the forest was even like; she had never left.

But ever since the demonic monsters had managed to corrupt some of her people and breach the forest's defenses from within, the thought of escape had consumed her. The alternative was to stay and face two outcomes: being corrupted herself, or dying.

For a survivor, neither was acceptable.

She had to run. She was a Wood Elf, blessed with a long life, and all she wanted was to live her comfy, carefree, bougie life.

Yes, that was the word for it. Her life before all this, propped up by the Survivor's Platform and her connection to a big boss like Orion, had been perfect.

If not for the invasion, she would have been happy to live out her days just like that.

But now, it was too late.

Chapter 975: Plague lord

In all this time, Aerin hadn't spared a single thought for alchemy. She and the few other elves who had managed to escape their settlement had been relentlessly hunted. In one life-or-death battle after another, her combat skills and awareness had been honed, sharpened by grim necessity.

After all, this new strength had been purchased with ten of her own lives.

Even now, as her mind was focused on the Survivor's Platform, her body remained on high alert. She sat in the pitch-black tree hollow with a bow on her back and a sword at her hip. She didn't even dare to light a fire. "Panic" was no longer a strong enough word to describe her state of existence.

Orion was her only lifeline. If he'd told her to strip, she would have done it without a second thought. For a survivor who wanted nothing more than to keep breathing, concepts like dignity and shame were worthless luxuries. And for those gifted with the Survivor's Platform, the will to live was an overwhelming, all-consuming drive.

I will survive this, she told herself, clutching the Scarecrows he had sent her. It was a mantra she had repeated to herself through countless nights on the run.

Sometimes, she missed the person she used to be. But that nostalgia was always followed by a wave of self-loathing. The Aerin of today could take on a hundred of her old self. No, a thousand.

She took a deep breath and focused her mind on the Survivor's Platform again, laying out the whole story for Orion.

It all started with the demonic monsters. They were creatures that looked vaguely human, or perhaps elven, but their souls were utterly twisted by evil. They knew no good or evil, only the drive to kill.

Worse, they carried a plague—a horrifying infection that could demonize other species.

The Forest of Nature had fallen because a Wood Elf had been infected. The corrupted elf had torn down the protective wards from the inside. After the barrier fell, the Wood Elf queen was killed in battle. The elders were either slaughtered or demonized themselves. Only a handful made it out alive, leading small, scattered bands of survivors deeper into the forest, hoping to find a way out into the wider world.

Aerin and her small group were among those refugees.

But then, one of the elders who had managed to escape the forest returned with devastating news. The world outside the Forest of Nature was even worse than the hell they were fleeing. Aside from the core territories of a few major races, the rest of the world had been completely overrun. Eighty percent of her world now belonged to the demonic monsters.

Stoneheart City. The Castle.

On his throne, Orion's brow furrowed. He muttered something under his breath, too low to be heard.

Demonic monsters, a plague, the Forest of Nature, a Wood Elf in distress... and her territory... This looks like an opportunity I can make a play for.

Aerin had just explicitly asked him to get her out of her world. That gave him a perfect justification to get involved.

Hmm. This needs some careful planning.

He spent a few more minutes calming Aerin down, then traded her a squad of cave spiders for some extra protection. He promised he would contact her again in three days. By then, he would have decided whether to launch a full-scale invasion or simply focus on her extraction.

His mind churned with the possibilities of Aerin's world. Finally, he opened his friends list and sent a message to Tangere.

Orion: You free? Message me back when you are. Need to talk to you about something.

He'd chosen Tangere because the man was a plague lord—a master of the craft. Orion figured this could be a chance to strengthen their relationship and get a better read on the guy's character.

Invading Aerin's world was not something he, a single arch lord, could do alone. Any faction capable of overrunning an entire world had to have demigod-level power behind it. His plan was to establish a beachhead, figure out what he was up against, and then call in his Champions Alliance bros to carve up the spoils. But before that, this was a perfect chance to test Tangere, Caesar, and even Aerin herself.

As for Scarecrow, the guy had been radio silent for a while, and he hadn't posted any food for sale recently either. Orion guessed he was in the middle of his advancement to the Legendary level and hadn't finished yet. So, for now, Scarecrow was off the table.

Two hours later, a reply came through.

Tangere: I'm here. What's up?

Orion: Interested in teaming up to invade another world?

The other end went silent for a long time.

Tangere: Are you serious?

Orion: I am.

Tangere: Okay, lay it on me. I'll give it serious consideration.

Orion appreciated Tangere's caution. It showed he was the kind of person who got things done. Anyone who made it to the Legendary level, especially a lone wolf like Tangere, had to have a good head on their shoulders.

Orion: I have a friend whose world has been demonized. There's a mysterious plague spreading everywhere...

He gave Tangere the short version of Aerin's story.

Tangere: You "have a friend"?

Tangere: When a story starts like that, I tend to assume it's bullshit.

Orion smiled. Tangere's skepticism was a good sign. It meant that despite his caution, he was already hooked.

Orion: Just give me a yes or no. Are you in?

Orion: If not, I'll find other partners.

Once you've piqued a man's interest, you apply pressure. It was a negotiation tactic he'd picked up from spending so much time with Leonidas and Arthas.

Tangere: That fast? You're not going to let me think about it?

Orion: You can think. You've got one day.

After sending that, Orion ignored the overly cautious man and opened a chat with his apprentice. His tone shifted completely.

Orion: Caesar, you busy? How'd you like a ticket to the big leagues? A high-stakes adventure in another world.

For some reason, interacting with Caesar was always easier, more relaxed.

Caesar: The big leagues?

Caesar: Big boss, I am absolutely free.

Caesar: Big boss, just tell me what you need. As long as it doesn't violate my code, I'll get it done, and I'll do it right.

Caesar replied instantly. He was all in.

Chapter 976: Get down here

“Alright, get ready,” Orion said. “We’re invading another world. Bring every combat unit you can muster.”

“The more firepower you bring, the bigger your cut.”

With Caesar, it was simple. The kid trusted him completely.

The feeling was mutual.

Unlike with Tangere, there was no need for a sales pitch, no cautious hemming and hawing about needing time to think. Caesar was just in.

With his team locked in, it was time for Orion to take the lead.

Emerald Dream Realm, near the Dragonflame Island archipelago.

“We’ll push ahead. The magical formation will take time to set up.”

The battle in the sky above had already concluded.

The Deputy Commander glanced at the Kraken, currently locked in a brutal struggle with a Bronze Dragon, then gave Orion a curt nod. He, along with the skeletal dragon and Sever, broke off, pushing the front line toward Dragonflame Island.

The arch lord dragon they had just killed hadn’t yielded a body of faith upon its death.

Clearly, the creature had an escape plan.

Orion had no issue with the Deputy Commander’s departure. The strategy had been set from the beginning. Their forces were split into two balanced fireteams. Orion, the ancient giant-horned whale,

and the Kraken formed one—a versatile trio with melee, ranged, and colossal beast capabilities. The storm avatar, the bone dragon, and Sever formed the other, an equally well-rounded squad.

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As Orion surveyed the distant front, the fight between the Kraken and the Bronze Dragon reached its fever pitch.

The Kraken was clever. From the moment the fight began, it had dragged the Bronze Dragon into the sea, turning the ocean into its personal arena. The dragon, for its part, was far from helpless in the water, but this was a fight to the death. As it grappled with the massive octopus, it constantly tried to drag the battle skyward.

The open air was the dragon's domain, a disadvantageous terrain for the Kraken. If the fight moved, the tables would turn instantly.

But the Kraken saw the dragon's intent and countered, fighting tooth and tentacle to keep it submerged.

The deep, dark water churned violently, sending colossal waves radiating outwards. At the epicenter, the mountain-sized Bronze Dragon breached the surface, its body half-exposed. Rune-etched scales shimmered as immense power gathered around it. Anyone could see it was preparing to unleash some form of draconic magic.

Suddenly, the magical energy around the dragon pulsed, and a pair of immense, ethereal wings erupted from its back. They were vast and translucent, like two storm clouds blotting out the sun.

The arcane wings phased through the Kraken's python-like tentacles, unfurling to their full, magnificent span and beginning to beat the air. A deafening whoosh echoed across the water as wind elementals gathered, trying to lift the great beast into the sky.

But the Kraken wasn't about to let that happen.

It plunged several of its free tentacles deep into the water, and four massive, downward-pulling vortexes instantly formed on the seafloor. The whirlpools anchored the Kraken, and by extension, the struggling dragon.

But that wasn't enough. In a shocking display of brutal determination, the Kraken tore one of its own tentacles in half, the thick appendage ripping apart with a wet schism. Now, it had an extra limb.

Ignoring the searing pain, the Kraken began to wave the newly-split tentacle, chanting a guttural, arcane verse. Moments later, dozens of tentacles formed from pure seawater erupted from the depths. Some shot up to shred the dragon's arcane wings while others wrapped around its body, pulling it back down into the abyss. The Kraken knew, with absolute certainty, that it could not let the dragon reach the sky. It could not afford to lose its home-field advantage.

"Last time, it was you," the Kraken roared. "You were the one who severed my tentacles."

"Today, I'll drain you dry, piece by piece!"

"Get down here!"

With its bloodline ability fully unleashed, the Kraken's rage crested. It dragged the Bronze Dragon under the waves. Simultaneously, thousands of razor-sharp suckers covering its tentacles pulsed with a vicious light and tore into the dragon's hide.

ROAR!

The Bronze Dragon was no passive victim. Its own assault was relentless. It opened its massive jaws and spewed a torrent of incandescent dragonfire, a flame so hot it could melt steel. The torrent washed over the Kraken's tentacles, and the flesh sizzled, blackened, and carbonized in seconds. The surrounding seawater instantly boiled, erupting in a cloud of steam.

Yet the Kraken was undeterred. It pressed its attack, enduring the horrific flames, splitting more of its limbs to create more water-whips to lash at the dragon's throat, trying to choke off the stream of fire.

The sheer savagery of the battle was breathtaking. Orion watched as the Kraken ripped off its own scorched and severed limbs, shoving them into its maw to be devoured, only for new ones to regenerate moments later.

All the while, the Bronze Dragon raked at the Kraken's body with claws like obsidian daggers and thrust its barbed, conical tail at the octopus's core. Several times, Orion raised his trident, ready to intervene, but stopped. He saw the Kraken withdraw a tentacle just long enough to pull out a vial and drain its contents.

As the unknown potion took effect, the Kraken's blue-white skin flushed with a spreading darkness. Within seconds, its entire body, from its eyes to its razor-sharp beak, had turned a solid, abyssal black.

Orion had never seen it like this before. The Kraken's aura hadn't changed, but he could feel a cold, unyielding killing intent radiating from it.

Schlick! Schlick! Schlick!

A series of sickening, wet tearing sounds followed as the Kraken's venomous beak and poisoned suckers punched through the dragon's scales. Having committed to its final gambit, the Kraken began pumping its potent toxins directly into the Bronze Dragon's body.

The dragon shrieked, a sound of pure, unadulterated agony that echoed even through the water. It thrashed wildly, its claws, tail, and ethereal wings beating in a frenzy.

Orion couldn't imagine the pain it was enduring, but he saw the dragon lock its jaws onto one of the Kraken's tentacles and begin to tear and swallow huge chunks of flesh, as if inflicting mutual harm was the only way to alleviate its own suffering.

Unfortunately for the dragon, this only seemed to fuel the Kraken's insane fury.

Chapter 977: Operation Overworld

The wind died.

The waves subsided, the churning vortex vanished, and even the dragon's agonized cries faded into silence.

In the end, the massive octopus, the Kraken, had won a decisive and brutal victory.

The Bronze Dragon went from thrashing in torment to lifeless in a matter of seconds. Before Orion's eyes, its magnificent scales shriveled and flaked away like old parchment. The muscle on its claws and wings atrophied, seemingly sucked back into its core as its entire body began to dissolve. Its huge, crystalline eyes went dull, vacant, their focus lost to the eternal dark of the deep.

The Kraken's tentacles slowly relaxed their death grip as it began to savor its prize. An eerie, malevolent aura pulsed from its black form as it shifted its tentacles, plunging thousands of siphon-like suckers into the dragon's corpse and beginning to feed.

Orion watched in silence as the Kraken siphoned a black, viscous fluid from the dead dragon. A few minutes later, the Bronze Dragon's remaining frame suddenly collapsed, dissolving into countless fragments that drifted down into the abyss.

Only then did the Kraken's immense body begin to shrink, finally reducing itself to a palm-sized octopus that zipped through the water and landed softly on Orion's shoulder.

"Can you still fight?" Orion asked, turning his head to look at the jet-black creature. The name 'Kraken' had just taken on a whole new meaning for him.

"Don't worry," the Kraken replied, letting out a satisfied burp. "Absorbing that big guy more than covered my losses. It's a shame I couldn't force out its body of faith, otherwise I would've erased it for good."

"If you're good to go, then we move."

The ancient giant-horned whale flicked its tail, cresting a massive wave that propelled them forward, carrying Orion and the Kraken at high speed toward Dragonflame Island.

Dusk Continent, the city of Lorelia.

Having completed her mission to purge the heretics, Clymene led her undead armies back to the city's Necropolis. The vast underground complex was something she had requested Orion build after her ascension to a lord. More than just a place to house the undead, the Necropolis could actively nurture them, even spawning low-level Bone Warriors and Skeletal Knights. It was much like Lorelia's Nest, built deep within a subterranean cavern.

Orion and Clymene stood at the cavern's entrance, watching the silent, disciplined columns of undead march into the darkness.

"My dear Clymene," Orion began, his tone direct, forgoing any preamble. "Are you interested in expanding our borders?"

"Expanding our borders?" she asked, her head tilting slightly. "Is there a problem on the Dragonflame Island front?"

Orion shook his head. She'd misunderstood.

"No. An invasion of another world. I've acquired the coordinates."

Clymene turned her empty eye sockets toward him. She looked at the man her little brother had become, a towering figure who now served as the pillar for their entire tribe—a body that shielded them all.

"When do we leave?"

Orion wasn't surprised by her response. She didn't ask why they were invading or what dangers they might face. She only asked when.

"You'll have to wait. I can't spearhead this until the war on Dragonflame Island is over."

“Will we be invading with the allied forces?”

“Not at first. I expect they’ll join later. Initially, I need you and a few other allies to establish a beachhead. Set up a base camp for us.”

The ‘allied forces’ Clymene referred to were the members of the Champions Alliance. For the invasion of Aerin’s world, Orion needed to gauge the enemy’s strength first. Only then would he decide whether to call in his bros.

If the faction opposing the Wood Elves only had one or two demigod phantoms backing them, Orion felt he could take the whole world for himself. If it proved too much to swallow, then he’d call for backup and they’d split the prize.

“You want me to begin preparations now?”

“Yes. Time is a factor. As soon as I have an agreement with my allies, you’ll need to be ready to deploy.”

“I will have the armies restored to full strength immediately.”

Orion then gave his sister a brief rundown of the situation in Aerin’s world, so she would know what to expect. He had a specific reason for choosing Clymene’s forces as the vanguard: the plague.

No matter how well he prepared, an unknown contagion would almost certainly affect troops of flesh and blood. He wasn’t willing to risk his people, not even the spiderlings or the small scorpions. They might be cannon fodder, but they were fodder cultivated with countless resources.

The undead, however, were immune to most plagues. That was Clymene’s edge.

Titanion Realm, Stoneheart City.

After speaking with his sister, Orion focused his mind, sinking his consciousness into the Survivor's Platform. He created a new private channel and pulled in Caesar, Tangere, and Aerin.

The ability to create channels was a function unlocked only after a survivor reached the arch lord level. The realization had startled him when he first learned of it. It meant that in the grain merchant channel Scarecrow had pulled him into, there was a hidden arch lord. The thought put him on edge, reinforcing his wariness of other survivors.

As if by coincidence, all three were online and accepted the invitation instantly.

[Private Channel: Operation Overworld]

Hulk: This is a private channel for this op. The four of us are the entire team for now.

Hulk: Before we start, let me lay down some ground rules. I'm leading this. If you can't follow orders, you're out. If you betray the team, I will hunt you down myself. No quarter.

He set the tone before anyone else could speak. It had to be clear. Follow the plan, and everyone wins.

Caesar: Big boss, whatever you say. We're with you.

Caesar, ever the loyal subordinate, was the first to reply.

Aerin: I'll do whatever it takes to survive.

Aerin knew her position. The primary objective of this mission was to save her and what was left of the Wood Elf race.

Tangere: I'm good.

Tangere hadn't been able to resist the allure of a new world; he'd accepted Orion's offer. But as he looked at the chat, a sense of unease settled over him. It was obvious the other two were already in Orion's pocket.

He figured any objection he raised would be shot down immediately. He decided to keep his mouth shut and just see how things played out.

Chapter 978: Your timing is impeccable

Hulk: Alright. I need each of you to send me a detailed breakdown of the forces you can muster—numbers, unit types, everything.

Hulk: I'll distribute all resources we acquire based on your initial investment and your performance during the operation.

Hulk: You're all my allies. If you have an issue with the split, bring it to me directly. I don't want this team falling apart over loot drama.

As the leader of this invasion, Orion needed hard data. Only then could he make the right strategic adjustments based on their collective strength.

Hulk: If there are no other questions, sign the contract.

Orion uploaded a Contract Scroll to the private channel. It was visible to all three of them, ready to be signed. Such items weren't native to the Stoneheart Horde, but that didn't mean the powerful magic faction backing the demigod, Deputy Commander Edward, didn't have them.

Orion had exchanged points for a small stack of them in the treasury the Deputy Commander had opened to him back on the Dusk Continent. They were convenient tools for building trust and ensuring cooperation.

Caesar: Signed, big boss!

Aerin: I've signed it too!

Unknown Realm, a land ravaged by plague.

Inside a crumbling castle, Tangere stared at the replies from Aerin and Caesar and felt an overwhelming urge to scream. He'd started reading the moment Orion posted the magic contract, and even now, he was only halfway through the dense text. Their replies meant they had signed it practically blind.

Tangere's eyes narrowed. Are these two morons? Signing a binding magical contract without reading the terms? Are you that naive? Or have you worked with Hulk before and just trust him implicitly?

For a fleeting, paranoid moment, Tangere wondered if this was an elaborate setup. A trap laid by Orion, in league with the other two, designed to fleece him of his resources, or worse, pry the Lord's Stone from his very soul.

He was, by nature, a cautious man.

He forced himself to calm down, and then read the entire Contract Scroll three more times from beginning to end before finally signing his name.

Hulk: Good. Everyone start prepping. I'll be making my move in two weeks, max.

Caesar: Roger that, big boss. I can be ready in three days!

Aerin: Ready when you are!

Tangere: No problem on my end.

With confirmations from his team, Orion closed the channel and sent a private message to Aerin.

"Use this time to gather as many of your people as you can," he wrote. "You're an Alpha-level. You must have some standing among the Wood Elves. Don't tell me you have zero influence."

An Alpha-level Wood Elf should hold a position equivalent to an elder. In Orion's mind, no matter how much of a recluse or how disliked Aerin might be, when their race faced extinction, some Wood Elves would surely rally to a powerful leader.

Her strength gave her an edge. And with the squad of cave spiders and the two Alpha-level arachnids he had traded her, she had the assets to build a respectable following. That would give him a foundation to build upon when he arrived, so he wasn't starting from scratch.

"Don't worry, Godfather," she replied, her tone careful, almost timid. The title had become a regular part of her vocabulary. "I'm already gathering the scattered survivors. I have three hundred so far. I estimate at least a thousand in two weeks."

"See that you do," Orion replied flatly. "Otherwise, Caesar and Tangere will think you're useless."

Her only reply was a small, sad-faced emoji.

Emerald Dream Realm, Dragonflame Island.

The island was cloaked in an unnatural twilight. The blazing sun was obscured by a vast shadow cast by the massive magical formation Deputy Commander Edward had deployed overhead. The fact that the formation held meant there was no demigod-level powerhouse present on the island to command the dragon forces.

By the time Orion and the Kraken arrived, the allied forces, under the command of the storm avatar, had already begun their amphibious assault.

Swarms of dragons and lesser dragon beasts poured from the island's interior, constantly reinforcing the coastline. The sky was thick with them, and the air thrummed with the ceaseless, buzzing beat of thousands of leathery wings. The sound was so immense that it nearly drowned out the deafening roars and sounds of slaughter from the beachhead below.

High above, four massive dragons were locked in a desperate melee with the storm avatar, the skeletal dragon, and Sever.

"Looks like we're not too late," Orion muttered.

He left the Kraken and the ancient giant-horned whale behind and shot forward like a meteor, slamming into a dragon that was attempting to ambush the storm avatar from behind. The arch lord-peak dragon was sent tumbling, grievously wounded but not killed.

Orion braced himself for a follow-up attack, but the moment he stabilized, all four of the massive dragons broke combat and retreated, diving back toward the safety of the island's central Dragon Nest. The arrival of Orion, the Kraken, and the whale had been enough to shatter their nerve. They refused to fight.

A scowl formed on Orion's face. He'd been counting on killing at least one more to get another Survivor's Chest. As an arch lord, he felt his own arsenal of abilities and resources was still dangerously thin.

"Your timing is impeccable," the Deputy Commander's voice boomed. Orion landed on the skeletal dragon's back next to the storm avatar.

"They ran," Orion grumbled, his mood soured. The prize he'd been hoping for had just slipped through his grasp.

"Our primary objective was to cull their high-end combatants, which we have done effectively," the Deputy Commander stated, his gaze fixed on the island below. "Now we can proceed with cleansing Dragonflame Island and trimming their mid- and low-tier forces. Their retreat gives me the time I need to finish deploying the final layer of the magical formation. I leave the field to you."

Orion nodded, turning to wave the approaching Kraken and ancient giant-horned whale forward.

"Kraken, you lock down the eastern sector. Ancient giant-horned whale, take the west. Skeletal dragon, the south. I'll hold the north," he commanded, his voice ringing with authority. "Until the Deputy Commander has the formation sealed, we keep those lizards pinned in their Nest."

The Kraken nodded, swelling back to its massive true form before rocketing toward the eastern coast. The two great undead beasts, the whale and the dragon, moved to their own assigned positions without a sound.

"Sever," Orion said, turning to the silent warrior. "Protect the storm avatar. Kill anything that gets near you."

"As you command," Sever replied, clutching his massive sword as he positioned himself behind the avatar.

The storm avatar gave a slight nod of acknowledgment before ascending silently into the heavens.

Chapter 979: What is their goal?

The Deputy Commander began the intricate process of weaving a massive magical formation, one designed to encompass the entirety of Dragonflame Island.

The Champions Alliance's counter-attack was not just about retribution; it was a statement. They needed to cripple the Dragonkin, to display their power for every other faction in the Emerald Dream Realm to see. It was a warning to any hidden powers with ambitions on the Dusk Continent.

With the key players in position, the conflict between the arch lords of the Champions Alliance and the Dragonkin came to a halt. It was a tense standoff, a hunter's pause before the final strike.

But below the arch lords' silent vigil, the battle for Dragonflame Island raged.

It was a brutal war of landing and defense. Both sides poured troops onto the coastline, and as the minutes ticked by, the front line of fire and blood stretched further and further. The Alliance's strategy was not a single, overwhelming push but a series of distributed attacks.

The Dragonkin's main defensive force was concentrated where the first landing had occurred. By spreading their assault along the island's vast coastline, the Alliance could exploit the areas where the defenders were stretched thin.

It was a strategy agreed upon by all, and with its execution, tactical command of the smaller fronts shifted to Makareth and Isabella. They would lead elite strike forces, hitting weak points in the enemy line and creating more opportunities for the main army to establish a beachhead.

On the shore, a chaotic melee was unfolding. Countless Merfolk warriors, whale-back riders, crocodilian leviathans, blood-maned sea lions, and blue-backed sea serpents crashed against the Dragonkin's land-based thralls and dragon beasts. The golden sand was quickly stained a deep, wet crimson.

From his vantage point, Orion saw the Kraken's Merfolk warriors lead the charge. Small and agile, they were less likely to be stranded on the beach. Wielding harpoons, clad in tough, iridescent scale mail, they surged from the waves and crashed into the enemy ranks.

They were met by a wave of dragon beasts—draconic creatures with wings too small for flight, which they used instead as shields and bludgeons. The beasts showed no fear, meeting the amphibious assault with roaring blasts of fire. The Merfolk warriors countered, raising walls of seawater to douse the flames.

But dragonfire and mana are finite resources. When both sides exhausted their magical reserves, the fight descended into a close-quarters bloodbath amidst clouds of steam. Here, the Merfolk were physically outmatched. They fell in droves, only to rise again from the blood-soaked surf, charging forward with no sense of pain or fatigue.

Undead summoning. The allied forces were riddled with necromancers and high-tier undead units. As the corpses of the Sea Race began to rise, the dragon beasts' superior strength and defense were no longer insurmountable.

This was war. Death was just part of the equation.

"Hey, Hulk," the Kraken's voice echoed in Orion's mind. "How do you think the Deputy Commander and Arthas are doing?"

From their vantage point, Orion and the Kraken were not only shielding the storm avatar and keeping watch on the Dragon Nest, but also surveying the entire battlefield, ready to spot any weakness for the allied forces to exploit. Overhead, a vast shadow loomed—the magical formation had clearly drawn its attention.

Orion glanced over at the Kraken, whose long, thick tentacles were waving slowly through the air, giving it the full appearance of a mythical monster from a forgotten age.

"A battle between demigods isn't like a physical brawl," Orion sent back. "It's a battle of wills, a war of attrition fought on a conceptual level. Unless there's a major power gap, a fight like that won't end quickly."

He understood the Kraken's curiosity. Every creature that reached the arch lord level looked up to the demigod realm as their next great goal. Wondering about the nature of their power was only natural.

"You think those overgrown lizards will try to make a run for it? Interrupt the Deputy Commander?" the Kraken asked.

"Maybe," Orion replied. He couldn't be sure. All he could do was keep his eyes on the Dragon Nest while he stood guard.

Inside that very Dragon Nest, the four surviving dragon arch lords were gathered, their heads all tilted toward the sky.

"That is the signature of a magical formation!" one of them hissed.

"Damnation! That storm mage is inscribing a super-scale formation over the entire island! Are they trying to sink Dragonflame Island itself?"

"Rhonar, what do we do?"

Only three of the dragons were speaking. The fourth, a black dragon at the peak of the arch lord level named Rhonar, remained silent. He was a descendant of their demigod, Monjebel, and the strongest among them. With Monjebel trapped, leadership had fallen to him.

"He is only an arch lord," Rhonar finally said, his voice a low rumble. "No matter how powerful his formation is, it cannot break the wards protecting the Dragon Nest, let alone sink the island." His tone

was confident, born from an unshakeable faith in the ancient defenses of his kind. Even a demigod would struggle to shatter those wards quickly.

"Then what is their goal?" another dragon demanded. They were not fools.

"If their target is not us," Rhonar said, his voice turning grave, "then it is our forces outside the wards. Our dragon beasts, our thralls, our kin."

"What? You mean they intend to wipe out our army? Why not recall them?" the other three exclaimed in unison. To repel the initial landing, they had sent nearly every dragon out of the Nest.

"It is too late," Rhonar stated. "If we open the wards to recall them now, the enemy's focus will shift directly to us. Haven't you realized? We, the arch lords of the Dragonkin, are their primary target."

The black dragon had a keen strategic mind. He had correctly deduced the Champions Alliance's objective. Their main goal was to cull the Dragonkin's leadership. Only when that became impossible did they shift to the secondary objective: annihilating their conventional forces.

"Who are these people?" one of the dragons growled in frustration. "Why are they so dead-set on fighting us to the death?"

It was the critical question, but one Rhonar could not answer for them.

Unlike the other three, who were kept in the dark, Rhonar knew the truth. Their master, Monjebel, was not the only demigod within their ranks.

There was another: the Great Dragon King of Light, Mondusath.

Chapter 980: You brought this upon yourself

When the war first broke out, their leaders had dispatched messengers to inform this draconic ancestor. But the Great Dragon King of Light, Mondusath, had never appeared.

It was one of the primary reasons the Dragonkin were now in such a passive, desperate position. If Mondusath were to enter the fray, Rhonar would have gladly led his people in a fight to the death, confident they could annihilate the invaders on Dragonflame Island.

"Ask no more questions," Rhonar commanded, his voice cutting through the others' anxiety. "The elders have made their decision. We will obey."

"The forces outside will serve their purpose: to buy us time."

"Our duty now is to maintain the integrity of the barrier and wait for our lord to break free. The outcome of the battle between demigods will decide the outcome of this war."

Rhonar was rational, almost cold, and in the face of this overwhelming crisis, he had made the most strategically sound choice.

In other words, he was abandoning every single dragon outside the protective ward.

It was a decision few could make.

And so, Rhonar and the other arch lords remained in their nest, watching as Orion and his allies stood vigil outside. Both sides were now waiting.

Titanion Realm, within a city of the northern satyrs.

Lorelia, mounted atop her abyssal dragon, trotted calmly through the breach in the city wall created by an Abyssal Flame Bomb.

"Yield and be spared. Defy us, and you'll be cut down where you stand!" she declared, her voice ringing with newfound authority.

"Kill their warriors, loot their coffers, and burn their halls to the ground!"

"By my name, Lorelia, I grant clemency to the ignorant women and children, and they will be provided for!"

"My people, charge!"

Standing atop the dragon's head, Lorelia raised her sword high, her pronouncements carrying an oppressive weight that blanketed the entire city. She was ecstatic. She loved this strategy, a brutal philosophy inherited from Orion: if they are your enemy, kill all, loot all, burn all.

Mine. It's all mine. Everything in this city belongs to Lorelia, she thought, a giddy laugh bubbling in her chest. Finally, I can gather resources for myself! Hehehe...

This was the queen of the cave spiders.

The sword in her hand pulsed with a mysterious light. Every enemy who met her gaze found their own eyes glazing over as they unwillingly slipped into a Dreamscape. There, within their own minds, they were subjected to Lorelia's will. Those who chose to submit would awaken and stand, raising their voices in a chorus of devotion.

"Queen!" "Queen!" "Queen!"

The chant grew, spreading through the streets. The name of the Spider Queen echoed throughout the city and was carried by the tongues of the allied forces back to the ears of the various factions.

"Her power... it's beyond comprehension," Delilah whispered from behind her. She looked at the small figure commanding this entire battle and felt a sense of unfamiliarity. This was a Lorelia she had never seen before—one who reveled in slaughter, who was bloodthirsty and detached, orchestrating death and destruction with a cheerful laugh and a wave of her hand.

Can leveling up really change a person this much? Delilah wondered, staring at Lorelia's back. The power she so desperately sought felt closer than ever, as if it were just one step away. A single step, and she could see the beautiful, terrible world that Lorelia now saw.

But she had no idea how to take that step.

In another corner of the city, Rolan pinned a strange-looking satyr to the ground with his trident. This one was different; its upper body was more like that of a Demon. Rolan walked over, severed the satyr's head, and ran a hand over its magnificent horns. Just moments ago, these same horns had deflected a blow from his Bloodthirsty Trident. They were clearly something special.

An idea sparked in his mind. He would offer them to his mentor. It was his first real battle, his first true trophy. It felt like the perfect gift. His mentor might have no use for them, but Rolan felt compelled to make the offering.

"Rolan, check it out! Look at this awesome cape I scored!"

It was Steelblade, now draped in a ridiculously oversized cloak woven from golden fleece. As a newcomer to the battlefield, he was ecstatic with his first piece of real loot.

"That's totally badass!" Rolan said with genuine admiration. "Where'd you find it? I want one!"

At Steelblade's direction, the two of them plunged deeper into the city, eager for more spoils.

This was the nature of war. For one side to win, another had to lose. And the victors had earned the right to enjoy the spoils they'd paid for with their lives.

Northern territories of the gnomes, in a subterranean cavern.

In a grim, circular chamber, the stone walls were freshly carved with profane, evil runes. The ink was still wet, seeming to weep a dark fluid. It was clear this sacrificial magical formation had only just been completed. Intricate lines and bizarre symbols were etched into the floor, forming channels through which a dark, mysterious liquid flowed sluggishly.

At the very center of the formation, Torin knelt. The black liquid had already soaked through his clothes, crawling up his body to pool around his head.

"Torin," a sad voice whispered from a wooden puppet sitting before him. "I am so sorry. Your fate was decided from the very beginning."

"If you had been more compliant, perhaps we could have been true friends."

"Don't blame me. You brought this upon yourself."

It was the Clown Ogu. With his Grand Duke avatar destroyed, he had sent a sliver of his consciousness to inhabit this puppet. It sat there, regarding Torin with an expression of profound sorrow.

Torin's own limbs had been transformed into lifeless puppet parts, rendering him completely immobile. He stared at Ogu, his eyes burning with helpless rage. He wanted to speak, to scream, to curse, but the black liquid had sealed his mouth shut. He could feel it corroding him, eating away at his memories, his very soul.

"The sacrificial ritual is about to begin," the clown said, its voice dripping with mock sympathy. "Do you have any last wishes? Perhaps I could fulfill them for you."

Torin, of course, could not speak. It was all a hollow performance.

"No? Nothing to say?" the puppet chirped. "No wishes, then? What a pity. Well, this is goodbye!"

With that, the puppet stood and walked, step by wooden step, out of the magical formation, stopping in a nearby passage to watch.

A moment later, the formation flared to life. A wave of pure evil descended, enveloping Torin and consuming him utterly. Where he had knelt, a single, mysterious black crystal now lay.

"The offering is... good... very good..."

A faint, ethereal voice, the lingering echo of a dark god, whispered in the clown's ear as he walked back into the circle and picked up the crystal.

"Ah..." Ogu sighed, turning the crystal over in his wooden fingers. "Just this little bit? It seems the quality of the offering was insufficient."

The clown's disappointed murmur echoed in the cavern. Then, with a ripple of spatial energy, he teleported away from the Titanion Realm.