

Titan King 991

Chapter 991: You're finally here

"Darling, Elder Harbek of the dwarven race has entered our ogre territory with a contingent of his people."

As soon as Orion returned to his seat after the opening ceremony, Lilith greeted him with the good news.

"It seems there are still some clever ones left among them," Orion mused. "When Harbek reaches Stoneheart City, bring him to me." He welcomed the arrival of the dwarves; their renowned craftsmanship would elevate the Stoneheart Horde's production capabilities by several orders of magnitude.

"Also, a message from my sister," Lilith continued. "The blood elf race is willing to trade us territory at a three-to-one ratio for the land bordering Soaring Bird City and our ogre territory. They want to open up a direct route to their new lands in the north."

Orion paused mid-sip, slowly lowering his goblet.

"Now that's an interesting proposal," he said. "What are your thoughts?" He didn't make a decision, wanting instead to test Lilith's political acumen. With Delilah acting as an envoy to the human kingdom, Lilith had been managing the Horde's affairs for some time.

"It has its pros and cons. Ultimately, only you can make the final call."

Orion said nothing, simply pulling Lilith into his lap and gesturing for her to continue.

"For the Stoneheart Horde right now, our policy is to seek stability and development. Accepting the blood elves' offer aligns with our immediate plans," she said, trying to ignore the way Orion's hands roamed over her body. Her warm breath ghosted across his skin as she detailed the situation. "However, in the long run, it's a disadvantage. Trading that land means we lose our shared border with the human kingdom. That would be an obstacle to our eventual goal of unifying the continent."

She pressed on. "Furthermore, if we agree, all our future trade with the human kingdom would have to pass through blood elf territory. That gives them complete leverage—we'd be handing them a knife to hold to our throat. It's a good thing Lycanor isn't with the horde at the moment, otherwise this would be even more complicated."

Orion stopped his hands, leaning down to kiss her flushed cheek. "A fine analysis, but you haven't quite reached the heart of the matter."

He gently set her aside and turned his gaze back to the younglings battling in the Colosseum below.

"The heart of the matter? What did I miss?" Lilith's brow furrowed in concentration.

"This proposal didn't necessarily come from the blood elves themselves," Orion said, his voice and expression growing deeper. In moments like this, his charisma was magnetic. "Think about it. We are tied to the blood elves by marriage. We are true allies. Even without a land swap, if they asked, I would grant them free passage to the northern territories."

He let the implication hang in the air.

"If I agree to their proposal, the beneficiary isn't just the blood elves, but the human kingdom as well. That territory they'd receive would become a buffer zone, a moat, protecting the human kingdom's border from us."

Lilith's eyes widened in sudden understanding. "Orion, are you saying the human kingdom is preparing to defend against us?"

When two factions started making such obvious defensive preparations, it meant relations were either already strained or about to become hostile.

"What else could it be? First, they arrange for my own children and wife to be stationed on the border between us, and now they have the blood elves propose this trade." He looked at her. "If you were in my position, what would you think?"

A look of shock crossed Lilith's face, quickly replaced by grim resolve.

"Forget it. We'll agree to their terms," Orion said with a sigh, a relaxed smile returning to his face as if everything was well within his control. "The moat the human kingdom wants to build will also serve as a moat for us. Besides, we have to consider Lycanor's position in all this."

"But Orion, wouldn't the blood elves see this too?" Lilith asked. "Would they really risk souring relations with us for the sake of the human kingdom?"

Orion shook his head. "They are a party to the benefits, so of course they see it. In fact, you could say the blood elves are just opportunists, playing the odds. They're simply trying to survive in the space between us and the human kingdom. When push comes to shove, all this talk of marriage ties and alliances is bullshit. They'll side with whoever they think is stronger."

That was the reality of it. The ruthless, backstabbing game of politics between factions.

"Since the human kingdom wants a period of peace, as do we, why not give them what they want?" Orion continued. "What's more, we can use this as an opportunity to make more demands of both them and the blood elves. Send a message to your sister. Tell her we accept."

Lilith nodded slowly. In these conversations with Orion, she felt the scope of her own perspective expanding.

Silverwood Realm, the Forest of Nature

Banners bearing the Horde's sigil snapped in the wind above a sprawling camp of military tents. Ranks of silent skeletons stood guard, their formations precise and unnerving. This was the Stoneheart Horde's temporary camp, and since the army was primarily undead, an eerie silence hung over the entire area.

In this quiet, Aerin slept for a full day and night.

She had a long dream. In it, she was in a world of impossible beauty. Canopies of green leaves were like clouds, ancient trees reached for the sky, and Wood Elf treehouses dotted the landscape, surrounded by fluttering elemental sprites. Sunlight streamed through the leaves, warm and dappled.

Suddenly, the forest became a cage. The trees twisted into monsters, the streams into great serpents. The entire world devolved into a living Hell.

Amidst the whispers of Demons, Aerin's eyes shot open in panic.

A black night. A black tent. That was all she could see.

Suddenly, the tent flap was thrown open. A brilliant light flooded in from outside, banishing the terrifying darkness. Silhouetted against the glare, a tall, powerfully built figure stepped into the tent.

"You're awake."

The voice was deep and resonant, magnetic, but also held an untamed, rugged edge.

"Hey now," Orion's tone shifted, becoming teasing and familiar as he tried to pull her from her daze. "Is that any way to greet your Godfather?"

"Godfather?" Aerin repeated, confused. "Godfather... Godfather... Hulk?" She mumbled to herself, then her eyes widened as it all clicked into place. Like a little girl, she scrambled from the bed and threw herself into Orion's arms. "Daddy!"

"Godfather! Godfather, you're finally here!" she sobbed into his chest. "Your adorable Aerin was this close to being a goner!"

Chapter 992: Black gold

Orion gently patted Aerin's back. In all honesty, Wood Elves were certainly not lacking in the looks department. Her emerald hair and eyes, even when filled with tears, gave her a wild, fey beauty that seemed to spring from the forest itself.

Seeing her act like this was a relief; it meant she was still the same person, that the horrors of war hadn't fundamentally broken her spirit.

"Aerin, are you trying to take advantage of me?" he said, his tone dry. "And for the love of the gods, stop wiping your nose on my cloak."

Her sobbing subsided into sniffles, followed by the sound of her furiously wiping her face. Orion gently pushed her away, raising an eyebrow.

"Godfather, you're finally here! I don't have to live on the run anymore!" Aerin's eyes were wide as she studied him, her voice bubbling with excitement. "But you were too late! The people I gathered were found by the demonic monsters and scattered. Even my only high elf friend was sacrificed in the battle."

When she mentioned Freyla, her voice dropped, and a wave of sorrow filled the tent.

"You mean her?"

Aerin followed Orion's pointing finger. On a cot next to the one she had just woken up in, Freyla lay still.

"Freyla!" Aerin gasped, darting to her side in an instant. Feeling the faint rise and fall of her friend's chest, she immediately burst into quiet, relieved sobs.

"Oh, thank the spirits... Freyla... you're okay... you're really okay! I thought... I thought we were both dead!"

Orion watched her from a distance, satisfied. This was Aerin's true nature. It proved the flighty Wood Elf girl wasn't a bad person at heart. A person who wasn't malicious, and who was also obedient, had the makings of a loyal and useful subordinate. She was the perfect material for a logistics officer.

"She was still breathing when I arrived, so I brought her back," Orion said flatly. "And I have to say, the combat prowess of you Wood Elves is utter trash." He knew that with a girl like Aerin, constant criticism

and pressure were necessary. Only by making her acutely aware of her own shortcomings would she remain compliant.

"Godfather, we're not like you," Aerin retorted, turning to face him. "Wood Elves love peace."

"And that's why you had no ability to fight back when you were invaded," Orion stated the simple fact, leaving Aerin speechless. He let the silence hang for a moment before his tone turned serious. "Aerin, don't tell me your entire Wood Elf race now consists of just you and your wounded friend here."

"No... not... not necessarily!" Aerin's reply lacked any conviction. She had been separated from the people she had gathered. For all she knew, most of them had already been captured, corrupted, or killed.

"So, you're a general with no army now?" Orion's voice became even colder. As it stood, her only contribution had been to lead them to a plot of deadlands.

"The Wood Elves have secret codes," she said quickly, her mind racing. "There are still many of our scattered people in the Forest of Nature. Godfather, if you clear out the forest, I can find more of your people for you."

She was a clever one. She framed it as finding people for him, not for herself.

"Good," Orion said, satisfied with her answer. With Aerin's faction effectively nonexistent, absorbing the rest of the Wood Elf race would be a simple matter. "Remember what you said today."

He turned to leave. "You stay here and recover with your friend. I'm going to scout the surrounding area." He didn't mention that he could already sense the High Elf, Freyla, was beginning to stir.

As soon as Orion left the tent, Freyla's weak voice filled the quiet space.

"Elder... was that him? The hope you spoke of? Are we... are we saved?"

Aerin rushed to her side, taking her hand. "Yes, Freyla. We're saved," she said, her voice thick with emotion. "And soon, all the Wood Elves scattered across the Forest of Nature will be saved, too."

Saving their people was Freyla's entire reason for living, her faith. Aerin held her hands tightly, affirming that their hope had arrived, desperate to keep that faith from crumbling. For the grievously wounded, a loss of faith could easily mean a loss of the will to live.

"You need to get better quickly, Freyla. Together, we're going to rebuild the Wood Elf race and drive out those demonic monsters."

"Elder... I believe in you."

Stoneheart Horde, The Citadel

Orion sat upon his throne in silence. A message had just come through on the Survivor's Platform from Arthas.

The battle for Dragonflame Island has crippled the dragons' high-end forces and cut their lesser ranks by more than half. Both sides have entered an unspoken truce. Barring any surprises, the Dusk Continent should see peace for the next century.

It was Arthas's summary of the war, and of the tacit agreement reached between the Champions Alliance and the dragon demigods. No one knew what the Deputy Commander and the black dragon lord Monjebel had discussed within the Forbidden Star-God Hexagram formation, but if Arthas was this certain, then it was a done deal.

You remember what I told you about before? Arthas's next message came through.

I remember. The invasion of the Godforsaken Land.

Get ready. I want to launch the invasion soon.

Understood.

Orion's reply was immediate. If the dragons hadn't invaded the Dusk Continent, he and Arthas would have already moved on the Godforsaken Land. He'd thought Arthas might have forgotten about it after all this time.

Bro, what's my role in this invasion?

Just bring your sand scorpion broodmother. I'll provide skeletal dragon support.

When do we drop?

Within the month. I still have some preparations to make.

A data file immediately followed. It contained all the intelligence they had on the Godforsaken Land.

"The Gnasher Race... 'Black Gold,' a metal said to rival god-metal..."

Orion scanned the file, his interest piqued by the mention of the unique resource.

Bro, what's the use of this black gold?

It has many uses. Weapons, armor, fortifications... you name it. But its most important property is that it can be directly absorbed by living creatures.

Chapter 993: Sword King

Directly absorbed?

Orion seized on the key point. He knew Arthas had no shortage of ores for forging weapons and armor. If he was mounting a full-scale invasion of this Godforsaken Land, it had to be for that unique absorption property.

The black gold can be assimilated by the body, reinforcing its durability. It's also rumored to be a key component for forging a divine body.

Arthas's explanation raised a question in Orion's mind.

Bro, can I absorb it too?

Yes.

And you can absorb it?

Of course.

It was hard to imagine a material that could be absorbed by both a living being and a skeleton.

It's different for you and me, Arthas elaborated. I absorb it to increase my own bone density. You can choose to manifest its power in your skin, your bones... even your cock. It's not just incredibly durable; it can also channel divine power.

If it can channel divine power, that puts it on the same level as a relic. Orion's brow furrowed. If this black gold was so precious, the land that produced it should have been a hot commodity. How did it end up a "Godforsaken Land"?

As if sensing his thoughts, another message from Arthas arrived.

It's a Godforsaken Land, which means the black gold is extremely rare. And you know why it's an invasion? Because some demigod has been squatting on the place for ages. We're not conquering; we're

raiding. You've been looking for World Fragments, haven't you? If we shatter that land, you should be able to claim a sizable piece.

At the mention of World Fragments, Orion's eyes narrowed. The Saintess of the Garland Tribe, Violet, and the child she was carrying for him, Caelus—they were a constant weight in the back of his mind, and Arthas had just stirred those thoughts to the surface.

The enemy won't be a pushover, Arthas advised. Have your broodmother spawn plenty of cannon fodder. And if you can, it would be best to bring your archlord-peak Death-Soul to the party.

It was a suggestion, but Orion understood it as a requirement. If his brother was asking for it, he would deliver.

No problem, bro.

Good. That's all for now.

In the citadel, Orion slowly opened his eyes, the conversation with Arthas concluded.

Ever since he had become an archlord, the fighting had never stopped. He had once thought he was moving too fast, being too aggressive. But after spending time with men like Leonidas, Alexander, and Arthas, he had come to a realization: war wasn't an event; it was the natural state of things.

For a faction that wanted to grow, you were either invading or being invaded. Stagnation was decay. It was a trait shared by nearly every major faction founded by a Survivor. They were all looking forward, all aiming for the next level: demigod, then god.

In realms he didn't know, on battlefields he couldn't see, the factions of Arthas, Leonidas, Alexander, and even the commander were constantly at war. That was the truth of it, a lesson he had only recently come to understand.

The Stoneheart Horde could never afford to stop.

In the North, a cave at the base of a mountain.

Lorelia, shaking off a deep slumber, suddenly opened her eyes and whispered, "The master is calling. It's time to go back."

She and her abyssal dragon had followed the Allied Forces, sweeping through the northern barbarian lands. Along the way, she had collected countless resources and captured innumerable slaves. She'd been resting in this cave to digest her gains and spawn more cave spiders, turning the cavern into one of her pre-planned Nests. The territory she now occupied had already been allocated to the Stoneheart Horde in the initial talks of the Four Factions Summit.

"Xalathar, wake up! We're going back to Stoneheart City!" Lorelia called out as she exited the cave. At the entrance, the massive abyssal dragon was sprawled on the ground, fast asleep.

Xalathar opened his eyes, shaking his great head as he rose to his feet with a thunderous roar. "It's been so long! I miss the master and the Mistress. And little Elara and Pallas! I have so many gifts for them!"

Lorelia leaped onto the dragon's back, her face lighting up as she ticked off the gifts on her fingers, beaming. At her command, a thick carpet of cave spiders poured out of the mountain, clearing a path for their departure.

Silverwood Realm, The Stillness.

"The Stillness" was the name Orion had given his temporary camp. To name it was to claim it as his territory.

In the center of the camp, under Clymene's command, teams of skeleton warriors had erected a simple stone fortress. Though crude, Orion had invested a Lord's Stone in its construction. The stone's power wasn't visible in the fortress above ground, but deep in the earth below, where it was transforming the simple catacombs into a true necropolis, a special building worthy of Clymene's power.

"I can see the disgust and fear in her eyes," Orion remarked, glancing at Aerin and Freyla in the camp's main plaza. After being treated with one of his sacred potions, the two Wood Elves had recovered most of their strength in a single day.

"Please don't mind her, Godfather," Aerin explained with an awkward smile. "It's just... your troops... they look an awful lot like the demonic monsters we were fighting." The moment she and Freyla had stepped out of the tent and seen the entire camp filled with skeletons and lurking undead, they'd nearly had heart attacks.

Wood Elves and the undead were polar opposites, and they were still struggling to adjust. Aerin could handle it—she knew Orion was a Survivor, and the undead army was a sign of his faction's immense power. Freyla, on the other hand, was convinced they had jumped out of the frying pan and into the fire.

"You'd better get her used to it quickly. The signal for the counterattack is about to be given." Orion's gaze shifted to the empty plaza. He could already feel the tell-tale ripples of spatial energy.

Caesar and Tangere were about to arrive.

A magical formation blazed to life in the center of the plaza, warping the air and causing the elements in the area to thrum with power. When the light faded, a warrior astride a massive Dire Bear stood in its place. Behind him were five thousand human Shield Warriors in uniform armor. They carried themselves with an extraordinary air of discipline and power.

The newcomer was Julius Caesar, the Alpha-level Sword King.

Chapter 994: This doesn't feel like salvation at all

"Big Boss! We finally meet face-to-face!"

Caesar leaped off his Dire Bear, his massive sword sheathed on his back, and approached Orion with the eager energy of a golden retriever. He seemed almost clumsy in his excitement, his hands lifting and falling, unsure of where to put themselves. For a second, he looked like he wanted to go in for a hug, then thought better of it.

Orion said nothing, just studied the man, a flicker of puzzlement in his eyes. He was certain they'd never met before, yet Caesar had picked him out of the non-existent crowd instantly, as if he'd known him his whole life.

“You’re younger than I pictured,” Caesar boomed, his voice full of genuine admiration. “Exactly how I imagined!”

Breaking the silence, Orion reached out and clapped Caesar firmly on the shoulder. It was a simple, grounding gesture, an unspoken welcome that immediately closed the distance between them.

Caesar visibly relaxed, the tension draining from his frame. “Man, thanks for everything. Seriously. I wouldn’t be here without your backing.” The way Orion spoke now, calm and direct, was the same voice he’d come to know through their remote dealings.

“Have your men clear the platform,” Orion said. “Another friend is about to arrive.”

Tangere’s arrival was imminent, and the five thousand Shield Warriors Caesar had brought with him needed to make some room.

“You got it!”

Caesar snapped into a different mode, all business. He drew his broadsword and raised it high, his voice echoing across the square.

“Fall in!”

The Shield Warriors, their formation slightly disorganized from the teleport, instantly responded. With a thunderous series of shield-thumps against the ground, five thousand men moved as one, locking into a perfect, disciplined square.

“Left face! March!”

The synchronized tramp of thousands of boots was deafening. The sheer discipline on display made Orion re-evaluate the force Caesar had brought to the table. They were more than just a mob.

“They clean up nice, huh?” Caesar said, a hint of pride in his voice.

Orion nodded, a faint smile playing on his lips, but offered no further comment. Discipline was the backbone of any Shield Warrior legion; it was the single most important trait. From this first look, Caesar’s crew was solid. Whether they could hold a line in a real fight remained to be seen.

“Just a minute,” Orion said. “Our other guest should be here any second.”

As if on cue, the air warped with a surge of spatial energy. The silhouette of the plague lord, Tangere, slowly solidified in the center of the plaza.

If Caesar and his five thousand Shield Warriors had been a shockwave, Tangere’s solitary arrival was an unnerving silence.

“Godfather, you gotta be kidding me. One guy?” Aerin whispered from behind Orion, unable to contain her disbelief. “You’re sure that’s him? The Tangere?”

Unlike Aerin, Orion’s expression was one of genuine pleasure. He had repeatedly made it clear that rewards for this venture would be directly proportional to contribution. For a Legendary-level powerhouse like Tangere to show up alone... that meant something. It was a statement.

Suddenly, a crushing wave of power washed over the plaza. A palpable, Legendary-level pressure slammed down, forcing Aerin and Freyla to their knees.

Caesar grunted, driving the tip of his broadsword into the stone for support. His muscles strained, but he remained standing, refusing to buckle.

So this is the power of an upper-tier Legendary. Not bad. Given the unique resilience of survivors, an upper-tier Legendary like Tangere could probably go toe-to-toe with a peak Legendary and hold his own.

“Welcome,” Orion said, striding forward to shake Tangere’s hand. “I think you’re just what the Wood Elves need to pull them out of the fire.”

As they clasped hands, the immense pressure vanished as if it had never been there.

“Your... your aura...” Tangere stared intently at Orion, his eyes wide. He couldn’t get a read on the giant before him. There was nothing. That could only mean one thing: Orion’s power was so far beyond his own that he was effectively invisible. The last time Tangere had felt this was in the presence of an arch lord, at a celebration he barely felt worthy of attending.

Orion chuckled. “Just as you suspect. How else do you think I’m leading this little invasion of the Silverwood Realm?”

Tangere took a sharp breath, his mind reeling. He had assumed Orion was on his level, another Legendary. He never imagined that the organizer of this entire operation was an arch lord. The shock was profound, but it was quickly replaced by a surge of raw excitement. An arch lord leading the charge? This wasn’t just some high-risk raid anymore. This was the big leagues. This meant they were in for a serious payday.

“Everyone, introductions,” Orion said as Aerin and Caesar cautiously approached. He gestured to each in turn. “Aerin. Caesar. Tangere.”

The three sized each other up, curiosity in their eyes. For Aerin, learning that Tangere was another Legendary powerhouse ignited a fresh spark of hope for her people. She approached him with a deep sense of respect.

“Hello. I’m Aerin. Thank you for coming to help us.”

Tangere studied her for a long moment, then reached out and placed a large hand on her shoulder. “I smell it,” he rasped, his voice like grinding stones. “Decay. Corruption. There’s a seed of plague in you.” His gaze was unnervingly intense. “If it’s not cleansed, you’ll become a source. A walking infection.”

Without another word, he did something with his hand. A faint wisp of black smoke drifted out from Aerin’s body, coalescing in Tangere’s palm. When the last of the smoke was drawn out, he pulled his hand back and brought the swirling black orb to his face, inhaling deeply as if it were the aroma of a fine wine.

“A fascinating source of plague,” he mused, a disturbing smile spreading across his face. “Such a beautiful bouquet. I think... I’m going to like it here.”

With a clench of his fist, the black smoke was absorbed into his skin, leaving a cryptic symbol glowing faintly on his palm for a moment before fading.

“Aside from you,” Tangere said, turning to Orion with the deference of a subordinate reporting to a superior, “they’re all tainted. If it’s not dealt with, they’ll eventually turn.” He seemed genuinely curious as to why Orion was completely untouched by the ambient corruption.

“You’re the expert,” Orion stated simply. “Cleansing them is your job now.”

He took a step back, his gaze sweeping over all of them—Aerin, Caesar, Tangere. His voice dropped, taking on an edge of absolute authority.

“And welcome, all of you, to The Stillness. This is my territory.”

The declaration hung in the air. He was making it crystal clear who was in charge, who was the supreme commander of this force.

Aerin, Caesar, and Tangere exchanged glances. No one argued. To them, it felt right. Natural.

But just outside the plaza, Freyla, who had overheard everything, felt a cold knot tighten in her stomach.

The Forest of Nature has always been the home of the Wood Elves. Since when did it become this stranger’s... territory? And when did anyone start calling it ‘The Stillness’?

She stared at Aerin’s back, and for the first time, he looked fragile, small.

Is this really the hope of our people? Somehow... this doesn’t feel like salvation at all.

Chapter 995: A clever fool

No one cared what Freyla was thinking.

Orion led Aerin, Caesar, and Tangere toward the simple fortress he had erected. They had an invasion to plan. They needed to figure out how to reclaim the Forest of Nature and, more importantly, how to secure a foothold in this world.

Meanwhile, in the Titanion Realm, a massive caravan of dwarves and heavy-set exotic beasts rumbled through the gates of Stoneheart's outer city, drawing curious stares from everyone they passed.

"Elder... the way the other races look at us... it's humiliating," a young dwarf named Tordek whispered from inside a covered wagon. He was one of the few who had accompanied Harbek on their failed diplomatic mission to the human kingdom. "I don't even want to face them."

It was a bitter pill to swallow. The dwarves had once been one of the five great races of the south. Now, the dwarven tribe was shattered, its people scattered across the territories of other factions, lucky to be alive. The Tribe was history, little more than a legend or, worse, a cautionary tale told in taverns. What Harbek led now wasn't a nation; it was a branch broken from a dead tree. They had lost their king, their tribal relics, their very faith.

Harbek didn't answer Tordek. The entire journey, his head had been bowed, his hands ceaselessly rubbing a small wooden box. Inside were the ashes of Dain, the dwarven prophet.

"Elder, we're inside Stoneheart. What do we do now?"

The name of the city seemed to jolt Harbek from his grief-stricken stupor. Stoneheart. It was the last instruction Dain had given them.

Harbek's mind finally started to turn. What do we do? What can a homeless people do, with nothing left but the hammers in our hands? He forced himself to recall the prophet's final words, everything he knew about the stoneheart horde.

After what felt like an eternity of silent struggle, he looked up. His voice was a low, raspy growl. “We’re going to the inner city. We’re going to the castle to request an audience with the Giant-King.”

He met Tordek’s uncertain gaze. “We have lost our home. We have lost everything. But we still have our hammers, and we still have our craft. By those alone, we will see the dwarven race endure.”

This wasn’t a sudden revelation. The prophet had discussed this very scenario with him long ago. If the dwarven Tribe could not be restored, they had two paths: the human kingdoms or the stoneheart horde.

The former would almost certainly lead to enslavement over time, their people exploited and oppressed. The latter promised exploitation and hardship too, but in a nation of disparate races, there was at least a chance to earn status and dignity through hard work.

“Elder, shouldn’t we go to the Horde’s official quarters first?” Tordek asked, concerned. “See Elder Durin?” Durin was the Alpha-level dwarf in charge of their people in Stoneheart, a veteran of the dark beast tides. “You’re... you’re not in the best state to see the Giant-King right now. We should at least change, present ourselves with the dignity our Tribe once had.”

“No. We go straight to the castle.” Harbek’s tone was final, cutting off any argument.

If the dwarven Tribe still existed, Tordek would be right. It would be a matter of respect, of protocol. But things were different now. They were refugees. Beggars. They were here to pledge fealty.

The most important thing was to show their attitude. Arriving at the Giant-King’s territory and immediately seeking him out—that was the message he needed to send. Harbek had to show Orion that their submission was absolute, decisive, and without hesitation. Marching straight for the castle was the first step.

In the castle, within Orion’s grand hall, Lilith was already by his side, having received the intelligence reports moments before.

“Harbek of the dwarves is leading his caravan toward the inner city,” she reported, her voice smooth and analytical. “He’s heading directly for the castle. He intends to make a public spectacle of his surrender to the stoneheart horde. A clever dwarf.”

Orion sat on his throne, his expression unreadable as he stared toward the massive palace doors. “The entire city knows the dwarves have arrived. He’s trying to use our own rules, our own sense of honor, to guarantee his people’s safety.” He gave a slight, cynical smile. He’s leveraging our reputation against us. Harbek is underestimating me.

Honestly, Orion was pleased by the dwarves’ arrival. But this move... this was a grand gesture designed to force his hand, to morally corner him and the horde into accepting them on favorable terms.

“If the prophet Dain were still alive, he would have been more discreet. He never would have allowed such a reckless stunt,” Orion mused aloud. “Harbek... he’s a clever fool.”

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Back in the Silverwood Realm, inside the war room of The Stillness, Orion sat at the head of a round table. Aerin, Caesar, and Tangere occupied the other seats.

He produced two maps, unrolling them across the wooden surface. He tapped a red dot on the first one.

“This is The Stillness. Our current location,” he began, his voice all business. “We’re surrounded by five hundred square miles of dense, ancient forest.” His shadow army had been scouting tirelessly for the past two days, mapping the immediate area.

“This second one is a rough map of the Forest of Nature,” he continued, “sketched out by my people with assistance from Aerin and Freyla. It’s incomplete, and a lot of it is guesswork. One of our first objectives will be to create a detailed, accurate map of the entire region.” He had the calm authority of a seasoned general. “Longer term, we need to locate the enemy’s base of operations and identify any other surviving factions in the area.”

Aerin blushed slightly. "We... we had a detailed map, but it was lost during the retreat." The map she had helped create was a chaotic mess, full of gaps that would need extensive correction. If she hadn't served on patrol squads as a youth, she would have had nothing to offer at all.

"So, Big Boss," Caesar cut in, sensing her discomfort. "What's the plan? And who exactly are we fighting?"

Orion raised a hand. On cue, four Skeletal Knights marched into the room, carrying two heavy bodies between them. They dropped them on the stone floor with a pair of wet thuds.

Orion stood, gesturing for the others to join him.

Chapter 996: Right to survive

"This is a plague Cyclops," Orion stated, his voice echoing slightly in the stone chamber. "Key features: single eye, bloated physique. They favor great-axes and spiked clubs."

He nudged the dead creature with his boot, gesturing for Caesar and Tangere to get a closer look. "A word of warning about the eye—it emits a low-level fear and confusion effect. In combat, do not maintain eye contact."

He moved to the second corpse. "And this is a Red-Eyed Ghoul. Part canine, part humanoid. A demonic shock trooper." He looked down at the mangled body. "The red eyes give them night vision, and they have an acute sense of smell for blood. These are likely the enemy's trackers."

They were clearly Abyssal creatures. That meant the enemy they were facing was demonic in origin.

"These monsters have one thing in common," Orion continued, glancing back at Tangere. "They are all carriers. Walking sources of plague."

Tangere understood the unspoken command. He knelt, placing a hand over each corpse. Without a word, wisps of foul, dark energy were drawn from the bodies, flowing into his palm until the demonic flesh seemed somehow cleaner, less virulent.

Then, with a casual flick of his finger, Orion sent a small orb of blood-red fire at the creatures. There was no sound, no roar of flame, but the bodies were consumed in an instant, leaving behind nothing but a faint scorch mark on the stone. The effortless, silent display of power left both Aerin and Caesar momentarily stunned.

"I've already had a pair of each of these sent to your Shield Warrior armies," Orion said, turning to Caesar. "Have your men study them. Get familiar with their anatomy and potential combat styles." Of the three new arrivals, only Caesar commanded a conventional force. They needed to be prepared not just for the fight, but for the risk of infection.

"Our camp will need Plague Totem Poles, and effective ones," Orion said, now looking at Tangere. "I assume you came prepared?"

Before his arrival, Orion had briefed Tangere on the nature of this world. The plague lord wouldn't have come empty-handed.

As expected, Tangere produced a dimensional pouch and handed it to Orion. Inside were not only totem poles designed to absorb and nullify ambient plague but also vials of a shimmering liquid: Plague Ward Potions.

The potion was, itself, a benign strain of plague. Once ingested, it would suppress, purge, or even consume hostile infections, granting the user a powerful resistance.

Orion didn't waste words. He handed a third of the potions to Caesar. "Get your Shield Warriors dosed immediately. I don't want their combat effectiveness compromised by infection."

Next, he passed another third to Aerin. "From this point on, we'll be clearing demonic monsters in an expanding radius from this camp. You can give these to any Wood Elf who is willing to join us."

The implication was clear. Aid was for allies. Those who didn't swear fealty would receive nothing.

Aerin nodded, understanding perfectly. "Don't worry, Godfather. I'll persuade them." As if to prove her point, she uncorked a vial and downed it in one go right in front of them.

Beside her, Caesar and Tangere exchanged a quick, confused glance. The term "Godfather" had clearly thrown them for a loop. Orion saw their curiosity but offered no explanation. Some things only got more convoluted with clarification.

"One more thing," Orion added. "According to the one named Freyla, there's another type of demonic monster out there—something she called a Mist Wraith. They appear and disappear without a trace, and their arrival is always preceded by a thick fog. My scouts haven't managed to capture one yet. Stay sharp during the clearing operations."

Aerin, Caesar, and Tangere all nodded. With Orion's intel, they finally had a basic grasp of the situation.

"I'll skip the formal welcome," Orion concluded. "I'm sure you all have urgent matters to attend to. The clearing operation begins at dawn. Get some rest tonight."

Caesar was the first to respond. "Big Boss, this plague is everywhere. I need to get these potions to my men ASAP. I'm worried any delay could be disastrous."

Orion nodded, dismissing him. With a quick farewell to Aerin and Tangere, Caesar hurried out of the war room.

"I require a sealed, enclosed space," Tangere stated.

It could only be him. Aerin's Wood Elf race currently consisted of herself and Freyla. She had nothing to prepare.

"Follow me." Orion glanced at Aerin, then led Tangere toward the fortress's sublevels.

As they disappeared down the stone steps, a profound sense of loneliness washed over Aerin, followed by a hot flush of shame. I have no one. Not a single soldier. In their eyes, I must be completely useless.

Her spirit flagging, she walked out of the war room and found Freyla in the castle's courtyard garden, looking just as lost as she felt.

"Elder... the Forest of Nature is someone else's territory now?" Freyla's voice was hollow, devoid of hope. The words were a pale shadow of the despair in her eyes. Ever since her wounds had stabilized, a single question had haunted her. Is there really any hope left for us?

"Yes," Aerin said, forcing herself to take a deep breath and push down her own misery. She managed a weak smile. "And it's not called the Forest of Nature anymore. It's The Stillness."

She looked at her friend, her voice gaining strength. "Freyla, our king is dead. Most of the elders are dead. The Wood Elf race has lost its home, its territory, its entire way of life. Our traditions, our laws, our faith... it all shattered. Even the Tree of Life has sealed itself away."

Aerin stepped forward, her resolve hardening with every word. "All we can do now is follow this power—this chance we've been given. We have to gather our scattered people and preserve the spark of our race." As she spoke, she felt the weight that had been crushing her chest begin to lighten.

"Ask yourself, Freyla, what is 'good'? What is 'evil'?" Aerin's eyes were intense. "When one of those demonic monsters is tearing you apart, do you choose to die with honor, or do you choose to live? Now look around you. At these skeletal soldiers, these undead. Why are they here? To harm us? Or to help us?"

She placed her hands firmly on Freyla's shoulders. "If you can't wrap your head around this, if you can't accept it, then leave. Walk out of here before sunrise. They won't stop you."

Her grip tightened. "But if you do, you have to promise me. You tell every Wood Elf you meet that there is hope here. A chance to build a new Wood Elf race from the ashes. You cannot take away their right to survive."

Chapter 997: Is she worth trusting?

Sometimes, no matter how heartfelt, a tearful speech can't change the mind of a lost greenhorn.

Before the sun rose, the Wood Elf Freyla left the temporary camp. She left The Stillness. The idea that the Forest of Nature could be renamed was something she, and likely many others, could never accept.

Aerin stood at the edge of the camp, a solitary figure staring into the dark woods. She had been the one to see Freyla off. Her eyes were dull, her spirit at its lowest ebb. She was now truly, completely alone.

"You're not going to comfort her?" Tangere's voice was a low murmur from behind Orion. "A woman is most vulnerable when she's feeling down. A shoulder to lean on goes a long way."

And a vulnerable woman is the easiest to conquer, was the part he didn't say. He didn't need to. He was sure Orion understood the implication.

"Do you want a weak ally," Orion asked without turning, "or a strong one?"

The simple counter-question left Tangere with no reply. It wasn't a choice. Any fool would want a strong, powerful ally. Only an alliance between equals had strategic value. To occupy the Forest of Nature, they had to deal with the Wood Elves. Aerin was their key—the bridge to her people. Therefore, Orion needed an Aerin who was strong, principled, and, ultimately, loyal.

She could have her moments of weakness, but she couldn't be weak.

"She needs to get through this on her own," Orion continued, his voice deep, layered with a wisdom that seemed at odds with his powerful physique. "She needs to hit rock bottom and rebuild a new Wood Elf Tribe from scratch. An effective, useful ally—that's what we want. We have no use for some bleeding-heart idealist screaming about peace while the world burns."

Tangere remained silent. He could hear the gravity in Orion's words. "Tangere," Orion said, his tone serious, "don't you want an ally you can understand, someone you can actually work with?"

The word "ally" felt foreign to Tangere. He was a plague lord. His path to power was paved with death and decay. He had always been a lone wolf. In his experience, attachments were weaknesses, and weaknesses got you killed. But now, for the first time, he wondered if he had stumbled into a pack.

After a long pause, he finally spoke. "Is she worth trusting?"

It was a question with two meanings. On the surface, it was about Aerin. But the real question was directed at Orion. Are YOU worth trusting?

"For me, absolute trust doesn't exist," Orion stated flatly. "Sometimes, you can't even trust yourself. What I do is evaluate people. I assess their potential, their value. I determine if they're a worthy investment, if they can handle responsibility." He finally turned his head slightly, his gaze locking on Tangere. "In my eyes, you are someone who can handle responsibility."

Trust was a heavy word. It wasn't something you could pay lip service to. It had to be proven through action.

Although Orion came from another world, he had grown up here, and he carried warm memories of the parents who had raised him. But then, without warning, they were gone.

Orion refused to believe they had simply died—there had to be a reason. They hadn't told anyone a thing, not even their children. Perhaps it wasn't trust that had kept them silent; perhaps their only wish had been for Orion and Clymene to survive.

The succubus sisters, Lilith and Delilah, had never mentioned it either. Their relationship began as a political marriage—an alliance of mutual interest. Especially Delilah, who had offered herself to him in the succubus vault.

There was no trust there, only ambition. But as long as they, and the entire succubus race, remained useful to him and he to them, their fates would be intertwined. It was on that foundation of mutual utility that real affection—for his women, his children, his people—could begin to grow.

Recognizing reality is brutal. Accepting that brutality is the only way to survive it.

This principle was perfectly illustrated by his bros in the Champions Alliance. His deep bond with Arthas wasn't built on declarations of trust. It was built on a series of calculated investments.

Arthas gambled on Orion's potential, his character, his growth. He gave him the elite Bone War Trident, the Ghostbone Armor, the Lord's Stone, the sacrificial ritual for Clymene's transformation. Every gift was

a calculated risk, a move in a long game. Their alliance was forged piece by piece through actions that benefited them both.

Now, Orion intended to build that same kind of relationship with Aerin, Caesar, and Tangere.

The weight of the conversation left both men in a contemplative silence. It was broken only when Clymene strode into the hall.

"My lord," she said, her voice crisp and formal. "The undead armies are prepared. The ten thousand newly summoned Skeletal Knights are ready for deployment."

In the presence of outsiders, Clymene always addressed him with his title. Orion didn't mind; professionalism had its place. He nodded, then glanced at Tangere.

The plague lord was in a state of shock. Since his arrival, he hadn't sensed another Legendary-level presence in the camp.

Now, emerging from a massive necropolis he hadn't noticed before, stood a mid-tier Legendary Being whose power was a palpable threat.

Clymene's casual mention of "undead armies"—plural—made his eyebrows shoot up. The skeletal sentries posted around the camp weren't just a token force. They were the tip of the iceberg.

"Before you arrived," Orion said to Tangere, "you mentioned you'd be bringing a force of one hundred thousand. Care to show them to me?"

In truth, Orion had only brought three thousand elite undead as a probing force. It wasn't that he couldn't bring more; it was a deliberate choice. If he had dropped into this realm with a million-strong army of cannon fodder, he would have immediately drawn the attention of the faction behind the demonic monsters. They might have responded with overwhelming force, sparking an all-out war before he was ready. That wasn't his goal.

This initial deployment—three thousand of his elite Skeletal Knights, Caesar’s five thousand Shield Warriors, and Tangere’s hundred thousand disposable troops—was the perfect size for a standard lord-level faction.

It was strong enough to be taken seriously but not so large as to attract the attention of any arch lords. It was the ideal setup to quietly explore the world, consolidate power, and make a fortune while staying under the radar.

Orion had already decided. Unless the allied forces ran into an arch lord, he would not personally step onto the battlefield.

This avatar, his projection in this world, would remain hidden in the camp—the secret weapon, the nuclear option, directing the war from the shadows.

Chapter 998: Fighting plague with plague

“Here? There won’t be enough room,” Tangere cautioned.

Orion didn’t reply, simply turning and leading the way out of the fortress and back into the main plaza.

Once there, Tangere produced a ritual cauldron shrouded in a sickly green mist. He performed a series of intricate hand gestures, muttering an incantation that broke the vessel’s seal. He placed the cauldron on the ground, and it immediately began to grow, swelling in size until it stood ten feet tall.

A faint, dry scraping sound echoed from within. Then, one by one, a grotesque menagerie of creatures with mottled green skin began to crawl out. They were a horrifying mix of corrupted races—humans, beasts, and others, even a few lesser drakes of impure bloodline.

“My Plague-thralls,” Tangere announced, a note of immense pride in his voice as the horde continued to spill from the cauldron. “Ten thousand of them. This is the army I’ve brought.”

Compared to Caesar’s five thousand Shield Warriors, this was a truly massive force.

“Each one carries a custom-made plague of my own design,” he explained. “They are highly infectious and can consume other plagues to grow stronger.” A low, wicked chuckle escaped him. “Heh heh heh... from now on, we won’t be the only ones dealing with a plague problem.” Fighting plague with plague. Pretty slick, right?

“Of course,” he added, “they have their weaknesses. They lack Agility, their movements are slow, and they aren’t very durable. They’re easy to destroy.” He shot a confident look at Orion. “But I can create more. It won’t be a snowball effect, but I can maintain their numbers at ten thousand.”

He finished his presentation and turned to Orion, clearly expecting a word of approval from the arch lord.

Instead, all he got was a frown.

“What is the result when a Plague-thrall infects another creature?” Orion asked, his voice sharp. “And can you control the newly infected?”

The two critical questions immediately made Tangere understand the reason for Orion’s skepticism.

“After being infected by my plague, the enemy’s flesh will continuously rot until death,” Tangere explained. “If I am on the battlefield to harvest and process them in time, I can bring the new corpses under my control.”

He answered the questions, but the look on Orion’s face told him it wasn’t the right answer.

“Given your role as a commander,” Orion stated bluntly, “you won’t be on the front lines. Which means the vast majority of infected enemies will not be under your control. They will remain hostile and capable of fighting, a threat to our own soldiers, until the moment they finally drop dead.”

Tangere opened his mouth to argue, but no words came. He couldn’t refute it. Orion was right. His Plague-thralls were a unique, evolving troop type, but they were far from perfect.

“Perhaps the weaknesses you mentioned will be improved by the end of this war,” Tangere said, his tone humbled. He wasn’t a fool. He knew his creations needed to devour more potent plagues to evolve. The demonic monsters infesting this forest were the perfect catalyst.

“Perhaps,” Orion agreed, nodding slightly. He didn’t press the issue. When this man’s creations can finally control their own infected spawn, that will be the day he truly ascends.

“Holy fuck, Big Boss! What is this awesome treasure?” Caesar’s booming voice cut through the tension. The appearance of the army had drawn both him and Aerin from the fortress. “I thought you showed up solo like Aerin!” With his earnest, what-you-see-is-what-you-get personality, the outburst wasn’t surprising at all.

“Plague-thralls,” Tangere replied, his tone more modest now after Orion’s analysis. “Just cannon fodder, really.” But even feigning humility, he couldn’t help but feel a sense of superiority over Caesar. The gap in power and resources between an Alpha-level warrior and a true lord was immense.

“According to the plan,” Orion announced, seizing the moment to assign roles now that everyone was present, “your Plague-thralls will form the vanguard. Their initial objective is to clear out demonic monsters and collect corpses for my undead armies.”

He then turned to Caesar. “Your Shield Warriors have discipline and tactical awareness. I’m assigning the ten thousand newly summoned Skeletal Knights to your command. Your mission is to construct the camp’s defensive fortifications while the clearing operation is underway.”

It was a two-pronged strategy: clear the area and build the base simultaneously. High walls and menacing arrow towers were essential for security. Only then could their forces rest easy at night. A safe, heavily fortified bastion was also the only thing that would attract more Wood Elves and other potential allies.

Finally, Orion looked at Aerin, whose spirits seemed to have lifted considerably. “You will go to the front lines. When our forces encounter surviving Wood Elves, it will be your job to persuade them to join us.”

In truth, the sight of Tangere’s ten-thousand-strong army had given Aerin an enormous jolt of confidence. To her, isolated and without allies, a massive army was the most reliable force in the world.

She didn't know Orion was an Arch Lord, nor did she know about the undead armies hidden within the necropolis. She had assumed he was just a particularly powerful lord, and her faith in him had been shaky.

Since arriving in The Stillness, she hadn't seen the legions of elite, beast-mounted warriors she'd imagined. But now, watching the horde of Plague-thralls fill the plaza, her eyes shone with a renewed belief in the future, and in her choice.

"Yes, Godfather!" she declared, her voice ringing with conviction.

"Then let's get to it," Orion said, and with the orders given, he turned and strode back toward the fortress. His shadow scouts had just delivered updated maps from all four cardinal directions. He needed to integrate the new intel and continue planning the coalition's next moves.

As Orion departed, Caesar walked over to Aerin. "Ms. Aerin, you need to be careful out there." He unclasped a bracer from his own arm and handed it to her. It was a hero-level defensive item, capable of projecting a protective shield—quite rare. He then assigned two of his early Alpha-level Shield Warriors to act as her personal guard. It was a gesture of pure, uncomplicated sincerity.

"Thank you, Caesar," Aerin said, accepting the gift without hesitation. She knew she would face incredible danger on the front lines. She had to survive if she was going to rally her people, build her own strength, and be of use to her new allies.

"I'll be out there with you," Tangere stated, glancing at Caesar. He offered no item, but his words gave Aerin a profound sense of security. With a lord-level powerhouse like him on the field, her confidence soared even higher.

Chapter 999: Is your submission true?

"Great Giant-King, I, Harbek, pledge the allegiance of the dwarven race to the stoneheart horde. We are ready to serve."

In the vast hall, Harbek knelt, offering up a small, silver hammer with both hands. Among dwarves, the hammer was a symbol of one's station, a representation of their honor. In presenting it, Harbek was presenting his loyalty.

From his throne, Orion said nothing. He had made Harbek kneel there for a full day and a night. A dwarf who acted with such audacity needed to learn that the Giant-King's authority was not to be challenged.

The crushing silence made Harbek's bitter heart pound with a fresh wave of terror. After twenty-four hours on the cold stone, the initial storm of anxiety and grief had subsided, replaced by a dreadful clarity. He was finally calm enough to see his mistake. He had marched on the castle in a grand public display without consulting anyone, effectively trying to leverage the horde's honor and force Orion's hand. It was a grave insult.

Fear gnawed at him, but his resolve hardened. This is the last, best home for my people. I cannot let them become wanderers without direction. I will rebuild our race. I will give them security. They will not live in fear or as a lesser people. I am Harbek, an elder of the dwarves, and I will bear this burden.

He knew with chilling certainty that if the stoneheart horde turned them away, the other factions would descend like vultures, carving up the remnants of his people. Dwarves, with their peerless forging skills, were the perfect race to enslave. The thought of that future made him tremble.

"Giant King," Harbek said, his voice cracking but firm. "I, Harbek, am willing to sign a contract of servitude. I will offer my life and soul in exchange for your mercy and your protection over the dwarven race."

This was his choice, the consequence of his arrogance. It was also exactly what Orion had been waiting for. The allegiance of an entire race wasn't something to be accepted lightly. Without a true show of commitment, Orion would not have it. He didn't know Harbek, and unlike the blood elves, the dwarves had no ties of marriage to the horde. There was no foundation of trust. For now, the only guarantee of loyalty was a contract.

Hearing Harbek's plea, Orion slowly opened his eyes.

"Is your submission true?" his voice boomed, devoid of any magical pressure yet carrying the weight of absolute power.

“It is!”

“Will you obey the commands of the horde?”

“I will!”

“And will you bleed for the stoneheart horde?”

“I will!”

The three simple questions hung in the air, each one a hammer blow of authority.

“Then sign this slave contract.”

A scroll unfurled from the throne and drifted down before Harbek. He took it, not daring and not wanting to read the fine print. He signed it immediately.

“The contract is returned,” Orion said, the scroll vanishing back to him. Now, Harbek could be considered one of his own. “You have three days to settle your people. Then, you will assume the title of Stoneheart Warden and travel to Soaring Bird City. There, you will assist the Elder of Stewardship, Delilah, in the Four-Partite Summit.”

The dwarven race had officially joined the stoneheart horde.

“Will you go?”

“Yes, I accept the master’s arrangement!”

“Good. You may leave.”

Harbek gently placed his silver hammer on the floor before the throne, then backed away respectfully and exited the hall. Only after he was gone did Lilith, who had been waiting silently at the side, walk forward. She picked up the small hammer and came to Orion's side. He gently pulled her onto his lap.

"The stoneheart horde has grown stronger again," she murmured, marveling. It felt like the horde was transforming overnight. The allegiance of the dwarves would make their war machine run that much smoother. Soon, once they were fully integrated, a new wave of superior arms and armor would sweep through their armies.

"The dwarves are only the beginning," Orion replied, idly twirling a lock of her hair around his finger.

"Orion," she asked, "are you sending Harbek to Soaring Bird City so he can use his status as a dwarf to secure more benefits for us?"

"That's part of it. The dwarven race has joined us, so it is only right that we claim a portion of the defunct dwarven Tribe's legacy."

"But will the other factions agree? The tribe has already fallen."

"They will agree," Orion said with utter confidence, a look that made Lilith's cheeks flush slightly. "Even if they don't care about their old commitments under the Five-Race Alliance, they will have to give me some consideration."

He shifted her in his lap to face him. "As their king, I must grant them a place to settle, to give them a sense of belonging. But land is not given freely." He leaned in and kissed her, long and deep.

When he finally pulled back, he continued his explanation. "According to the laws of the horde, territory is earned with battle achievements. I am sending Harbek to that summit so he can, as the current de facto leader of the dwarves, leverage the last vestiges of his people's influence. The more benefits he can secure for us there, the larger the territory I will grant them. I hope he's smart enough to understand that."

Orion's gaze drifted past her, out toward the plaza beyond the castle walls, his eyes growing deep and distant. Lilith followed his gaze, a knowing smile playing on her lips.

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In the Silverwood Realm, the plague-ravaged part of the forest was unnervingly silent. There was no birdsong, no animal cries, not even the buzz of insects.

Sunlight pierced the canopy in sharp, shifting beams, painting the forest floor with a thousand strange and mottled shadows. At a glance, it looked as if countless phantoms were locked in a silent, desperate battle. The woods were grim, quiet, and deeply wrong.

ROOOAR!

A sudden bellow shattered the silence from deep within the trees—a sound of both warning and threat.

The inevitable had happened. The Plague-thralls had run into a Cyclops.

With a wet crunch and a heavy thud, a Plague-thrall was sent flying backward from the treeline, its chest completely caved in. A moment later, a massive Cyclops wielding a giant spiked club burst through the foliage, its single eye glaring malevolently at the crumpled creature.

The Plague-thrall landed in a heap, the sound of its bones snapping audible even from a distance. It was grievously wounded, but it still staggered back to its feet, letting out a guttural hiss and lurching back toward the giant.

At the same time, more Plague-thralls began to emerge from the surrounding woods, shambling forward to encircle the lone Cyclops.

Chapter 1000: Banshee Crystals

The Cyclops stood tall, its single, massive eye burning with malice as it scanned the ring of enemies closing in. Suddenly, the eye dilated, and a ripple of black energy pulsed outward—its fear ability.

It had no effect. The mindless Plague-thralls were immune.

With rotting flesh sloughing off their bodies and green smoke rising from their skin, they charged.

The Cyclops roared, its spiked club a whirlwind of destruction. It smashed several thralls into pulp, but the horde was relentless. They swarmed it, tearing and biting, until the giant finally crashed to the forest floor, life fading from its malevolent eye.

Once the Cyclops was completely still, the Plague-thralls dispersed, melting back into the trees to continue their search.

A moment later, four figures emerged from the dense woods and approached the scene of the battle.

“Exquisite material,” Tangere murmured, kneeling beside the dead Cyclops. He placed a hand on its corpse and drew out the lingering plague essence, his eyes filled with the loving gaze of a connoisseur admiring a masterpiece.

“You’re amazing, Tangere!” Aerin said from behind him, looking at the fallen Alpha-level beast with a mix of awe and sorrow. She and Freyla had encountered monsters like this before. Even with a large group of Wood Elf warriors, they had been powerless to stop it. Yet for Tangere, a creature of such power was little more than a toy. The difference in their capabilities was staggering.

“Not amazing,” Tangere corrected, absorbing the stolen plague into his own body. “I just happen to be their perfect counter.” He unceremoniously stuffed the massive corpse into his storage pouch. The body could be repurposed, another log to fuel the growth of the undead armies.

“My little darlings are sending me a different kind of signal,” he said, turning to Aerin. “From the northeast.” He pointed into the dense forest. “I think they may have found some of your people.”

“Really? How many?” Aerin’s face lit up. “Tangere, thank you! You’re the best!”

Tangere was unmoved by her gushing praise. "The exact number is unclear. Judging by the disturbance, I'd estimate twenty or thirty."

"That's wonderful! Truly wonderful!" she exclaimed, her voice urgent. "We have to go now, Tangere! Before they move on!"

He nodded and was about to take the lead when a soft, faint light enveloped him. It shimmered for a second, then vanished.

"Hm? What was..." He turned, looking at Aerin in confusion.

"It's a Blessing of the Wilds," she explained. "It will help us move through the undergrowth without being hindered, and it makes it harder to get lost in the forest."

Tangere took a moment to focus, realizing his thoughts did feel sharper, his sense of direction clearer than before.

So, this Wood Elf ally isn't entirely useless after all. With a nod for Aerin to follow, he stepped onto the path trampled by his Plague-thralls and plunged into the deep woods.

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In the Emerald Dream Realm, at the Palace of Leonidas, the sun was bright, the sky and sea a perfect, matching blue.

Orion's avatar, guarding the rear lines, was meeting with Makareth, who had just returned to the Dusk Continent, and Isabella, who had come as soon as she heard the news.

"Your energy is unstable," Orion observed, looking at the shirtless Makareth. In the bright sunlight, the fresh, half-healed scars crisscrossing his chest were clearly visible. "Trouble back in your territory?"

“Just a little scrap with some dragons,” Makareth boasted. “Came away with some massive upgrades to my power and gear. Got a little ambitious when I got back and decided to take out a local Weeping Banshee. Just a few minor scrapes.” He flexed his pecs for emphasis, which earned him an epic eye-roll from Isabella.

Orion tossed them both a flask of wine. “Kraken is at the front. We’ll open the Dragon Crucible when he gets back.”

That was the reason for their visit. The Dragon Crucible was built, the materials gathered from the last war. It could have been opened ages ago, but with the Deputy Commander, Alexander, and Leonidas all in regenerative slumber, Orion had wanted to wait for his bros. But when Makareth and Isabella pressed him for a date, he consulted with Arthas.

Arthas told him not to wait, explaining that the others didn’t need this particular baptism. So Orion had sent word to his three active friends: the Dragon Crucible would open in seven days.

“With no demigods dropping in, I bet Kraken is just tearing that battlefield apart,” Makareth mused, lounging on a sun chair and gazing out at the sea.

“Feeling restless?” Isabella shot him a look, a competitive fire in her eyes. “How about another round?”

“Whoa, easy there! You’re the strongest, we all know it! Have mercy!” Makareth threw up his hands in surrender. “Can’t you see I’m on the injured list? You’d really pick a fight with a guy in recovery?” He deeply regretted going all-out in their first sparring session. Now, every time they met, she demanded a rematch. This relentless pestering from Isabella was enough to make even a Demon like him a little “afraid.”

“Hey, O,” Makareth said, deftly changing the subject to Orion. “I got something recently. I think you’ll be interested.”

“What is it?” Orion glanced at him, a flicker of genuine curiosity on his face. He knew Makareth well enough to know he wasn’t one to brag about nothing.

“I heard you have two succubus wives?”

Orion's eyes narrowed slightly. He simply nodded, offering no explanation.

"Haha! Then you'll definitely have a use for this." A wicked grin spread across Makareth's face. "Consider it a little gift for one of the ladies."

Two perfectly round, transparent white orbs landed in Orion's palm. He held them up to the sun. He could feel an immense reserve of spiritual energy within them, but nothing else.

"Those are Banshee Crystals," Makareth explained. "You only get them from Weeping Banshees." He paused, his grin widening. "They're the eyes."

"I don't know exactly what they're used for," he continued, "but I know for a fact that certain succubus lords would trade a mountain of slaves for one."

Orion nodded, closing his hand around the crystals. He gave Makareth a look of sincere gratitude.