

Titan King 1001

Chapter 1001: The list

For Orion, the crystals themselves were of little consequence. But for succubus sisters like Lilith and Delilah, they might have a very specific, very potent use.

“A fine gift,” Orion’s avatar said. “I accept.”

The three of them spent the rest of the afternoon lazing in the sun.

Kraken still hadn’t returned by the next day, and Makareth, unable to bear the idleness any longer, took off for the front lines to find him. In truth, he was a battle junkie. With a war raging just over the horizon, it was a miracle he’d managed to sit still for a single night, and only because he was still injured.

“I envy that guy,” Isabella murmured, watching his retreating back, her beautiful eyes filled with a complex mix of admiration and frustration.

Makareth was a high-tier Demon by birthright, a pedigree far superior to her own or even Orion’s. That, combined with his insatiable love for battle, had allowed him to condense his own Lord’s Stone and ascend on his own terms. It was an enviable position. In the terms of their past lives, Makareth was a golden boy, one of heaven’s chosen.

“What are you looking at?”

Isabella bristled, feeling Orion’s gaze on her. She reacted like a cat whose tail had just been stepped on. She wasn’t being overly sensitive; Orion’s stare was intensely predatory. As his eyes swept over her, she had the distinct and unnerving sensation of being stripped bare.

“I was just thinking those boots look good on you,” he said, turning his head, his tone casual and teasing. “Very... flattering.”

Just as she was about to explode, he continued, “And don’t forget what I asked you. You promised you’d help me acquire a batch of dragon eggs.”

“Get lost!”

The reply was a furious snarl. Before the wars in the Emerald Dream Realm, when her territory was secure and her losses were minimal, she had readily agreed to Orion’s proposal. But now, having weathered several brutal campaigns, she understood. War wasn’t just about victory and spoils; it was about attrition. Rebuilding from that kind of loss took time and a massive amount of resources.

And right now, dragon eggs and other high-quality cavalry units were the exact resources she desperately needed to replenish her own forces. For Orion to press the deal now, while she was struggling to rebuild and expand, felt like he was trying to kneecap her progress—like he was trying to bleed her dry. At least, that’s how it felt to her in that moment.

“Hey, a promise is a promise,” Orion chuckled.

“Piss off!”

A boot came flying at his head. He blew a gentle puff of air, deflecting it effortlessly, and added, “And they stink.”

.....

Titanion Realm. The Castle.

Orion, sitting on his throne, opened his eyes. He spoke to the deep shadows in the corner of the room. “Bring Lilith to me.”

A few moments later, she entered the hall with her usual grace. “Darling. You called for me?”

He nodded, gesturing for her to come and sit with him on the throne. A small smile graced her lips as she approached. In truth, as his wife, it was rare for her to actually sit upon the throne that was his alone. To sit there was to hold power in your left hand and glory in your right. More importantly, it meant bearing a weight of responsibility and pressure she wasn't sure she could handle.

"Send Sylvana to Soaring Bird City," he commanded. "She is to take over Delilah's duties and continue the negotiations with the other three factions."

The opening of the Dragon Crucible was imminent, and both succubus sisters were on his list of candidates. This first activation would generate enough resources to baptize five thousand individuals. He and Kraken would each get fifteen hundred slots; Makareth and Isabella would get one thousand each.

According to his plan, a third of his fifteen hundred slots would go to the pioneers who had first migrated to the Emerald Dream Realm. They had bled to pioneer the horde's new territory and had earned the right. Another third was reserved for the horde's veteran Alpha-level powerhouses with distinguished battle achievements, especially key figures like Rendall and Onyx.

The final third was for the younglings in the youth camp and, most importantly, for the descendants of those who had died with honor in the horde's service. The spirit of heroes had to be passed down, and their bloodlines deserved to be strengthened.

"You remember the list I gave you," he continued. "Recall every one of them within seven days. The Dragon Crucible in Lorelia City is about to be activated."

Lilith's eyes lit up. Orion had described the Crucible to her as a unique structure capable of dramatically enhancing one's power and potential. For those like her, stuck at the Alpha-level peak, the baptism offered a chance to finally ascend. The sudden news made her breath catch in her throat.

"Bring Elara and Pallas with you as well," Orion added. "It's time they met our people in the Emerald Dream Realm. Let them learn about the beasts and heretics of the Dusk Continent. They need to understand that the enemies of the stoneheart horde exist on more than just the continent of Utessar."

He spoke in a tone that allowed no argument. Lilith could not, and would not, object.

“Should... Kronos be notified?” she asked softly after a long pause.

“No.”

The word was ice.

“Every youngling on that list has a father who bled for the stoneheart horde. Many of them paid the ultimate price. Kronos has done nothing. He has not earned a place.”

The way he said it sent a chill down even Lilith’s spine. It felt cold, merciless. No matter the circumstances, Kronos was his son. Even if his mother, Ava, had done nothing for the horde, the boy still carried Orion’s blood.

“I am not singling him out. The same rules apply to Pallas. Because Pallas is receiving the baptism of the Dragon Crucible, your personal merits, as his mother, will be cleared to pay for his spot.”

Lilith nodded slowly, saying nothing. This was his way of raising his heirs. She didn’t fully understand it, but she didn’t oppose it. Orion stood on a higher peak than she did; he saw the world more clearly, more completely.

“Lorelia is returning to Stoneheart. I will have her accompany you. She can take command of the garrison at Lorelia City. Have Soraya swap out with her and return to Golden Pearl for some leave. Her next mission will be long, and she won’t have another chance to visit her family for some time.”

Soon, Soraya would be joining Orion to aid his bro Arthas in the invasion of the Godforsaken Land. With Lorelia’s recent promotion to lord and her new combat experience, garrison duty would be the perfect way for her to consolidate her power and prepare for the next war.

“Of course,” Lilith said. “Who will be left to manage affairs here in the Titanion Realm?(Utessar Continent)”

With most of the horde’s key figures about to be absent for some time, the horde’s lack of high-level personnel—its greatest weakness—was once again laid bare.

Chapter 1002: You are a member of the stoneheart horde now

“I will remain here and oversee the realm. I have everything under control.”

With Orion himself managing the horde, Lilith’s last worries evaporated. “I’ll go and make the arrangements at once.”

Orion gave a slight nod, watching her as she left the great hall.

.....

In the south, at the human kingdom’s capital of Soaring Bird City.

The stoneheart horde maintained a magnificent castle within the city, a permanent embassy granted to them by the human kingdom. The grounds were sovereign territory. Not even the city’s own ruler, Princess Ava, had the authority to enter, let alone conduct a search, without express permission. In turn, the human kingdom held a similar palace within the walls of Stoneheart.

At this moment, in the main hall of the embassy, Delilah was playing the part of the perfect hostess for two of the tribe’s Wardens: Aldous and Harbek. She watched with a serene smile as they ate, occasionally signaling for the maidservants to bring them more dishes.

“So, to be clear,” Delilah began, her voice soft but probing, “before Prophet Dain passed, he used the long-standing friendship between dwarves and humans, along with your entire territory, as leverage to get the human kingdom to intervene?”

“That is correct, Your Excellency,” Harbek replied, setting down his goblet. He was exceedingly polite to Delilah, despite being her superior in rank. As the Grand Steward of the stoneheart horde, Delilah held a crucial position, and Harbek, being new to this complex faction, wasn’t yet sure of his own standing. He wisely chose to be humble.

“Harbek,” Delilah said after a thoughtful pause, a gentle, knowing smile playing on her lips, “do you understand why my lord sent you to Soaring Bird City?”

“Was it not to assist Your Excellency with the four-party summit?”

“Oh, Harbek, it’s never that simple.”

As Harbek frowned in confusion, Aldous, who had been eating with a slow, deliberate elegance, finally set down his utensils.

“Your turn, big guy,” he grunted.

The ogre’s second head, whose saliva had been dripping in a thick string, immediately lunged at the leftovers. Aldous glanced at it in disgust as it began to shovel food into its maw. Since taking dominant control of the ogre lord’s body, Aldous’s main head had adopted a refined demeanor, savoring the taste of every bite. The other head, by contrast, could only be described as a gluttonous beast.

“Pathetic creature,” Aldous muttered. “A bottomless pit.” He picked up a crystal glass with one hand, admiring the deep red wine within.

“It is, indeed, not that simple,” he said, echoing Delilah. He was here as her bodyguard, her muscle. But beyond that, he considered Delilah a friend’s wife and felt a sense of loyalty for the excellent food and drink she had provided him during his stay. His words immediately captured the attention of both Delilah and Harbek.

Delilah beamed. She knew Aldous was an exceptionally intelligent creature. Orion himself had said the ogre could easily serve as her advisor, and over the past few days, he had offered several brilliant, constructive suggestions from the sidelines. It was no surprise to her that he understood their lord’s true intentions.

Harbek, however, was still completely lost.

“Cheers!” Aldous declared, raising his goblet high for the dwarf to see. “To my friend, the great Giant-King!” He drained the glass in one go.

“Don’t you see it yet, short stuff?” he said, turning his sharp gaze on Harbek. “My Lord is helping you.”

“Helping me?”

“Yes. He’s helping you secure a new home for the dwarven race. Or do you want your people to live as wanderers, hunted by every other faction with an eye for a good blacksmith?”

The words were like a flash of lightning in Harbek’s mind. His eyes widened, but his brow quickly furrowed again, his thick beard trembling slightly. His emotions were in turmoil.

“Your Excellency,” he said, turning to Delilah, his voice thick with humility. “I would be grateful for your guidance.” Harbek was not a brilliant political mind, nor was he one for scheming. But he knew his own limitations, and he knew how to seek help.

“Warden Harbek, you are too kind,” Delilah replied with a gracious nod. A Warden’s rank and power were above her own, and she showed him the proper deference. “This war began as a human conflict, but the dwarven race was dragged into it as an innocent victim. Even with the prophet’s sacrifice, the surviving dwarves have the right to demand reparations from the human kingdom.”

Her warm smile and clear words resonated deeply with Harbek. It was true. A human civil war had plunged his people into an abyss. If they hadn’t pledged fealty to the stoneheart horde, they would have no leverage to make such a demand. The prophet, seeing this clearly, had never even mentioned the possibility to him.

But now, things were different. As part of the horde, Orion had the right—and the obligation—to demand justice on the dwarves’ behalf. And the instrument of that justice was Delilah, here at this summit.

“Your Excellency... is such a thing truly possible?” Harbek asked, his voice still shaky with uncertainty.

“Idiot,” Aldous grunted, not Delilah. “Is your IQ as short as your stature?”

Harbek glared at the ogre. You could call a dwarf an idiot, but you did not comment on his height.

“You need to understand, short stuff,” Aldous continued, ignoring the glare as he swirled his wine, “you are a member of the stoneheart horde now. The interests of the dwarven race are the interests of the stoneheart horde.”

He took a slow sip. “Whatever you gain for the dwarves at this summit, you are gaining for the horde. Securing those benefits is how you earn merit. And only by earning merit can My Lord grant your people a fiefdom with legitimate cause.”

He looked at Harbek, a mocking smile playing on his lips. “You really couldn’t see that?”

Aldous glanced at the dwarf one last time, then raised his goblet, savoring the wine. “You know... if a wine isn’t ready, I’ll put it away in the cellar. I’ll only bring it out to share with friends once it has matured.”

Chapter 1003: Only the wise and good wine are never failed by time

Aldous finished his wine and delivered another one of his cryptic, veiled comments.

Beside him, Delilah, the stoneheart horde’s Elder of Stewardship, could only stare at the ogre with wide, amazed eyes. This is one of My Lord’s friends? He’s terrifyingly brilliant.

The dwarf, Harbek, having finally grasped the full meaning of Aldous’s words, fell into a deep, contemplative silence. The ogre’s strange intellect was irrelevant. All that mattered was the fate of the dwarven race.

And so, the banquet settled into a peculiar quiet. Delilah, with a radiant and charming smile, continued to play the perfect hostess. Aldous cradled his crystal glass as if it were a beloved toy, or a woman. And Harbek sat with his brow furrowed in thought.

After a long time, the dwarf finally stirred. He glanced once at Aldous, then stood and gave Delilah a formal bow.

“Your Excellency,” he said, his voice now firm with resolve. “Harbek is at your complete disposal. I will assist you in the summit and do whatever is necessary to secure the greatest possible benefits for our stoneheart horde. Your command is my command.”

Delilah rose and personally helped him to his feet. She could not treat a formal pledge from a Warden lightly. “It is all for the dwarven race, Lord Warden,” she said softly. “And for our stoneheart horde.”

“I understand,” Harbek replied. As he straightened up, a new light shone in his eyes—a mixture of awe and sincere commitment. This was the attitude of someone ready to get things done. With the future of his people on the line, he was now giving the mission his absolute focus. He would follow Delilah’s lead without question.

“Fools have already died on the battlefield,” Aldous mused into his empty glass, seemingly to no one. “Only the wise and good wine are never failed by time.”

.....

Three days later, Delilah—the woman in whom Harbek and the entire dwarven race had placed their hopes—was replaced by Sylvana. It was a development Harbek had not seen coming. Delilah was already on her flying mount, speeding back the way she came.

Silverwood Realm. The Stillness.

“Any regrets?”

Orion and Caesar stood at the base of a newly erected arrow tower, gazing up at its impressive height. From this angle, it seemed to pierce the clouds, a majestic and intimidating sight.

Orion had tasked Caesar with its construction, then linked it to the necropolis, reinforcing the entire structure with necromantic power—a miraculous transformation that had occurred right before

Caesar's eyes. Orion was teasing him, asking if he regretted selling him the blueprints for so many of these unique buildings back in the day.

Caesar tore his gaze away from the tower. His eyes, bright and focused, shone with a raw curiosity for these wonders and a deep-seated desire to explore the unknown. He shook his head, not answering the question directly. Instead, he told a short story.

"If I were dying of thirst in a desert," he said, his voice calm, "and in front of me was a single bottle of water and a pile of money that could buy all the water in the world, I would choose the bottle of water without a second thought. The water would save my life. The money would just make me a wealthy corpse."

The parable was answer enough. Orion's face remained impassive, betraying no emotion. But his next words were a clear reward, a piece of vital intelligence meant just for Caesar.

"The tower's attack range is five hundred yards. As a lord, you can set its targeting parameters. If you don't, it will automatically engage any hostile presence that approaches." He let the information sink in. "With enough of these, we have an impregnable fortress." For any lord in the early stages of building a territory, a defense like this was enough to make an invading force tremble in fear.

With these special buildings, the city Caesar already possessed back in his own world could become a true, defensible base of operations, as long as he wasn't facing ridiculously overwhelming numbers. It was the kind of crucial tactical information he never would have learned without Orion.

"Thank you for the guidance, Big Boss," Caesar said with a respectful nod, understanding the value of the gift he'd just been given.

Orion accepted the thanks and led Caesar toward the tower. "The Forest of Nature lacks any large mountain ranges, so we're short on stone. A proper wall is out of the question for now. But we have an endless supply of massive trees. They'll be enough for a temporary palisade."

As they walked, Orion continued the lesson in fortification. "Have your men set up barricades and traps at all crossroads. Do you know what a cheval de frise is?"

Caesar nodded. He might not know how to build them, but he knew of them.

“You can just call them spiked barricades,” Orion clarified. “Bind logs together in an ‘X’ pattern with thick vines, then sharpen the ends. It’s a simple but effective defense. Use the arrow towers as anchor points, and build a line of these barricades anywhere from five to a hundred yards outside the main wall. It’ll break up enemy charges and buy time for the defenders on the palisade.”

Orion found himself getting into it, explaining the simple but effective defensive measures as they inspected the perimeter. In truth, against thick-skinned beasts or massive creatures, these wooden spikes wouldn’t do much. And against anything with magical abilities, they were little more than decorations.

But their real value, for now, was psychological. For the other races who would eventually settle in The Stillness, these visible, tangible defenses, backed by a strong army, would provide a crucial sense of security and confidence.

And practically speaking, the barricades would still be useful for Caesar’s Shield Warriors. Any enemy that made it through would have lost its momentum, lessening the pressure on the shield wall.

Furthermore, Orion had other tricks up his sleeve. The stoneheart horde had an alchemical ointment, rendered from animal fat and blood, that could drastically increase the durability of wood. And he suspected the Wood Elves, as a race close to nature, had their own magic for strengthening wood.

What Caesar and his men were building was far from pointless. Besides, the Shield Warriors were an elite force compared to the disposable skeletons and Plague-thralls. Their place was as a steadfast shield wall, not wasted on dangerous clearing missions.

Chapter 1004: What do we do?

“Take these,” Orion said, handing Caesar a storage pouch. “They’re for you and your men only. A logistics buffer.”

Inside was a large quantity of grain and cured meat. Of all the coalition’s forces, only Caesar’s Shield Warriors actually needed to eat. And while five thousand might not sound like a huge number, their

food consumption was immense. Especially during wartime, when they were constantly in full armor, the physical toll was enormous.

Orion knew this from experience; the stoneheart horde had its own Shield Warrior army composed of Thunderstorm Bearmen. In peacetime, their appetites were manageable. But once mobilized for war, their food consumption would triple, sometimes even quintuple.

“Thank you, Big Boss!” Caesar’s relief was palpable. He had been planning to bring this up with Orion himself. The last two days of hard labor had completely exhausted his men’s personal rations, and he was starting to worry. Orion had told him not to be concerned about food before they arrived, but until he saw it with his own eyes, the anxiety had remained.

“Don’t worry,” Orion said, clapping him on the shoulder. “The Wood Elves are master cultivators. Once we gather more of them here, we’ll have more food than we know what to do with.” He was pointing Caesar toward a sustainable future. If their coalition could unite the Forest of Nature and drive out the demonic monsters, the Wood Elves could solve the food supply problems for all their territories.

“I’m on it, Big Boss,” Caesar said, his resolve renewed. “I’ll get this camp built as fast as I can. Give the Wood Elves a safe place to finally come home to.”

Orion nodded, then turned and walked back toward the fortress.

Outside the camp, deep in the dense forest.

Hah... hah... hah...

Ragged, desperate breaths echoed through the silent woods. Xylia stopped, her back pressed against a massive tree, and forced herself into a rhythmic breathing pattern to calm her racing heart. A moment later, her breathing even, she nocked an arrow.

Thwip!

The bolt tore through leaves and branches, crossing an impossible distance to shatter the skull of a Red-Eyed Ghoul. It was a testament to the power of her skill: Gale Force Shot.

Unlike some pampered diplomat, Xylia was a true elite, a battle-elf trained from birth to become a Guardian of the Wood. When the Wood Elf base of operations was overrun and the Tree of Life sealed itself away, she had survived by sheer luck, having been on a patrol rotation away from the main enemy assault.

But the demonic monsters' relentless pursuit of the survivors had been brutal. She and her squad were hounded, exhausted. The Forest of Nature was their home; they knew it better than anyone. It was the only reason they had survived this long, leading the monsters on a desperate chase.

But a chase meant injuries. And injuries meant the smell of blood. And the smell of blood meant the Red-Eyed Ghouls would never give up.

She glanced down at the makeshift bandage on her left thigh. The dried blood and the dull throb of pain were a constant, terrifying reminder. Damned corpse-hounds. How do I shake them? The wound was why she had broken off from her squad, to draw the pursuit away from the others.

Grrrrrowl...

The low snarls from the woods behind her started up again. A tremor of fear ran through her body despite her resolve. She pushed off the tree and took to the branches, continuing her desperate flight.

Less than five miles away, the squad Xylia was trying to protect was also cornered. A pack of Cyclopes and Red-Eyed Ghouls had them surrounded.

The twenty-odd Wood Elves leaped between the canopy of the giant trees, raining arrows down on the monsters below. They had inflicted heavy casualties, but it wasn't enough. The ghouls were climbing the massive trunks while the Cyclopes were simply uprooting them one by one, shrinking the elves' battlefield with every tree that fell.

"Vice-captain, what do we do?" one of the elves cried out. "Once they knock down all the trees, we'll have nowhere left to go!"

This was Xylia's squad. Without their captain, they were lost.

"The captain went east! We break out to the east!" yelled Angel, Xylia's second-in-command. "Emma, Yvaine, you're on point! Clear a path! I'll hold the rear! Go now, before it's too late!"

Faced with certain death, she chose to sacrifice herself.

There was no time for the others to think. They had faced this situation too many times in the past weeks. Their squad had been whittled down from a hundred to just these twenty survivors. They had learned their hard lessons.

As one, they turned east, unleashing a volley of arrows as they leaped through the canopy, a desperate bid for freedom.

Angel remained behind, firing three arrows at a time, unleashing her power with the desperation of one who had already accepted her fate. She knew that to create a path for the others, someone had to stay behind to bleed. The scent of her blood would draw more of the monsters to her, buying her comrades a sliver of a chance. Before they tore her apart, she would take as many of them with her as she could.

Her arrows fell like rain. In that moment, she was fearless.

After firing hundreds of shots, her arms, swollen and trembling, finally gave out. They hung uselessly at her sides. She had nothing left.

Her vision blurred. Is this the end? Maybe in my dreams, I can go home... back to the Forest of Nature as it was. Captain... I'm sorry. I couldn't complete the mission. I couldn't get them out. I'm sorry, my friends...

She closed her eyes, waiting for the end, unwilling to watch the monsters feast on her body.

But death did not come. Instead, she heard the familiar, piercing whistle of an arrow slicing through the air.

A Red-Eyed Ghoul that had been climbing the tree towards her was struck mid-lunge, its body thrown back to the forest floor below.

It was the sound of an arrow. A sound Angel knew as well as her own name.

Chapter 1005: Thank the gods

Is the captain back?

Angel's eyes fluttered open, drawn to the direction the bolts had come from.

But the person she saw wasn't Xylia, their captain. It was a slender, unfamiliar figure in the distance.

Then, a chorus of bizarre shrieks echoed from the dense woods nearby. A new type of monster, one Angel had never seen before, swarmed out of the trees, crashing into the pack of demonic monsters that had surrounded her.

Are they... fighting each other? The bizarre scene threw her for a loop.

Angel could only watch as a brutal war erupted between the demonic monsters and the wave of Plague-thralls. It was a primal battle of tooth and claw, a storm of savage bites and crude, hacking blows.

She didn't know how much time had passed when the whistle of incoming bolts sounded again, this time from behind her.

"We're back, Angel! We're getting you out!"

"If we die, we die together!"

“We’re not leaving you behind!”

The voices—exhausted but fiercely determined—made Angel want to cry. Not long ago, Xylia, the rock of their team, had drawn off the main horde of demonic monsters alone to save them. Now, her squad had charged back into the fire to save her.

No, you shouldn’t have come back. The whole forest is crawling with demonic monsters!

“Go... get out of here... run...” Angel screamed, but the sound that escaped her throat was just a dry, pathetic rasp, lost in the chaos.

Deep within the woods, Tangere glanced at the elf beside him. “Those your people?”

It was Aerin who had fired the bolts that saved Angel.

“Yes. Thank you, Tangere.”

He gave a slight nod, then launched himself into the air, appearing in an instant above the battlefield. A crushing wave of a lord’s supernatural presence washed over the area, paralyzing the two-dozen returning Wood Elves in their tracks. The remaining demonic monsters, already reeling, were instantly overwhelmed and torn apart by the Plague-thralls under his absolute control.

“No... it’s a Legendary level powerhouse!”

“It’s over. We’re really done for this time.”

Only the strongest of the Wood Elves could even form a coherent thought. The others buckled under the terrifying pressure, many collapsing to their knees.

Just as despair set in, Aerin’s nimble form appeared. Leaping gracefully from one massive branch to another, she landed softly in front of Angel and the terrified Wood Elves.

“Don’t be afraid!” she called out, her voice clear and calm. “He’s not an enemy. We’re here to help.”

She knelt by Angel’s side, uncorking a healing vial and gently pouring it into her mouth before casting two restorative spells unique to the Wood Elves. A warm, green light enveloped Angel’s wounds.

“Better?” Aerin asked softly.

Her voice snapped Angel out of her daze.

“El... Elder Aerin?”

“It’s me.” Aerin’s face broke into a relieved smile. Finding any survivors was a victory. Meeting Orion, Caesar, and Tangere had been a relief, a bond forged in shared crisis. But this was different. These were Wood Elves. This was kinship, a connection that ran deeper than any alliance. Though most of them didn’t know her personally, as an Elder of the Wood Elves, they all knew of her.

“Elder... what are you doing here?” Angel stammered.

“I was looking for you,” Aerin explained with a warm, reassuring smile. “They aren’t enemies. They’re our allies.”

Her words finally registered with the other twenty-something Wood Elves.

“Elder Aerin?”

“Is that really her? One of our Elders?”

“I heard a new elf was just ascended to the council. Her name was Aerin.”

“So she’s here for us?”

“Thank the gods, we’re saved!”

A wave of relieved, excited murmurs spread through the group. At the same time, the crushing pressure of the lord’s aura vanished as if it had never been there.

Half an hour later, the battle was over. With Tangere orchestrating the assault, the few hundred demonic monsters never stood a chance against his Plague-thralls.

Aerin, now supporting a recovering Angel, led the rest of the Wood Elves to where Tangere stood. “Tangere, thank you for saving my people.”

“Honored one, thank you for your aid!” Angel echoed.

“Thank you for saving us!” the rest of the Wood Elves chorused, bowing their heads in respect.

Tangere’s expression remained unreadable as he finished collecting the corpse of a Cyclopes from the ground. He turned to face them.

“Thank Aerin,” he said, his voice flat. “She’s the only reason we’re here.”

It wasn’t false modesty. Tangere knew that for Aerin to gain real authority among her people, this victory had to be hers.

Aerin shot him a grateful look. He simply shrugged and went back to collecting the valuable monster corpses.

“Elder, is this powerhouse really on our side?”

“Are they truly our reinforcements?”

With Tangere's intimidating presence now at a distance, the Wood Elves began peppering Aerin with quiet, hopeful questions.

"Tangere is—"

Aerin was cut off by a sudden, sharp cry from Angel.

"The captain! Elder, you have to save our captain!"

Seeing Aerin's confused look, Angel explained frantically, "Our squad captain, Xylia! She led the main horde away from us so we could escape. She's still out there alone!"

Her plea reignited the panic in the other Wood Elves.

"Please, Elder, you have to find her!"

"Save our captain!"

Aerin held up her hands, silencing the desperate flood of requests.

"Wait here."

She walked over to Tangere. She knew perfectly well that in this wilderness, he was the only one they could truly rely on.

"Tangere—"

"Don't have to say it. I heard," he cut her off, rising after stowing the last Red-Eyed Ghoul corpse. "I know where to find your friend."

He turned and started walking.

Aerin nodded once, then waved for Angel and the others to follow.

.....

The Emerald Dream Realm, Red Moon Valley.

It was the busiest day in Lorelia since the city's reconstruction. The square outside the newly erected Dragon Crucible was packed, not only with the elite of the stoneheart horde but also with key figures from the territories of Kraken, Makareth, and Isabella.

"Mom, look! A Demon! A big Demon with wings!" Pallas's small voice piped up with wonder, his little finger pointing at a massive abyssal Demon standing not far off.

"He's an ally, sweetie. One of your father's friend's men," Lilith said, gently lowering his hand. It was rude to point. She offered a warm, apologetic smile to the high-ranking Demon, who had turned at the sound of her son's voice. The Demon gave a slow, deliberate nod, his expression unbothered, before turning away.

"So that's the Dragon Crucible daddy built?" asked Elara, who was perched in Delilah's arms while Lilith held Pallas. "It looks pretty awesome."

They all gazed up at the spectacular structure. The Dragon Crucible was a pagoda-shaped palace, and though it stood only 300 feet tall, it projected the aura of an ancient guardian watching over Lorelia's fate. A colossal stone dragon was coiled around its exterior, its body winding up the tower until its head crested the roof, looking down upon the crowd in the square. When you met the gaze of its eyes—two enormous, luminous pearls—you felt an unshakable sense of being watched, an instinctive urge to stand straighter and speak softer. The base and walls were covered in countless runes and draconic carvings that pulsed with a faint, golden light. If you caught them in your peripheral vision, the dragons seemed to slither and writhe across the stone, their eyes glinting as if alive.

It was a structure that radiated ancient power, its design both grand and archaic.

“Your daddy told me it took four Lord’s Stones to build this,” Lilith murmured, her eyes tracing the glowing runes. “I’m sure there’s more to its power than what we can see.” She felt a thrum of anticipation. After they had teleported to Lorelia, Orion had made a special trip from Leonidas to give her and Delilah each a Banshee Crystal. He couldn’t have known what the crystals truly meant to the succubus twins, but Lilith’s eyes had practically glowed since the moment she’d held it.

“Gods above, do my eyes deceive me?”

A fawning voice cut through the air behind them. Elara and Pallas turned to see Dirtclaw, his face split into a grin of pure, sycophantic delight.

“My great master!” he exclaimed, bowing deeply to Delilah. “Dirtclaw has missed you so! Your beauty is as radiant as ever, a beacon in the darkness!”

He then immediately turned to Lilith, executing an even more profound bow. “And all hail to the great Matron of our people! Your grace and wisdom are legendary, celebrated across every inch of the Horde’s territory!” He was smart,

Lilith noted. He knew the hierarchy. By praising Delilah’s beauty, he was praising them both, as they were identical. But for her, Orion’s mate, he chose words of virtue.

What a suck-up. Elara was wise enough to keep her expression neutral.

But Dirtclaw’s sugar-coated praise was already turning on her.

“And can this be? The renowned Princess Elara of the stoneheart horde!” he boomed. “It is an honor! Your beauty and cunning, much like your mighty Inferno Dragon, are known across the continent!”

Elara knew it was flattery, but she couldn’t stop the smile that bloomed on her face. Who didn’t like being praised?

“Your Highness, a gift from your humble servant,” Dirtclaw said with a grin. He reached behind him and pulled forward a young gnoll, already half the size of a man, and presented him to Elara. “This is Anubis,

the most promising of my sons. He will be the strongest of the gnoll race's next generation of bloodline warriors. May he serve as your most powerful and loyal protector!"

Elara's eyes went wide as she stared at the young gnoll, Anubis, who looked shyly away.

"A protector?" she said, her voice filled with excitement. "I accept. He can be my new sidekick." Orion had promised her a guard detail, but they were still in training. This was different. Anubis was hers, right now.

"What about me?" Pallas demanded from Lilith's arms, his tone a mix of jealousy and indignation. His sister was getting a bodyguard, and he, the prince, was being ignored.

"Prince Pallas!" Dirtclaw immediately dropped to one knee, a clear and public display of loyalty. Where praise was sufficient for Orion's powerful female companions, only fealty would do for his son and heir.

Pallas blinked, taken aback for a second before he puffed out his small chest. "You may rise."

Lilith exchanged an impressed glance with Delilah at her son's regal composure.

"Your Highness," Dirtclaw said, getting to his feet. "This is Wepwawet. His bloodline is every bit as strong as Anubis's. He will be a faithful and mighty guard for you as well." He produced another young gnoll pup and presented him to the prince.

"Very well," Pallas announced after inspecting his new subordinate. "You are now my personal guard." He shot a smug look over at his sister. See? I have one too.

Elara ignored him completely, her attention fixed on her new charge. "I heard my father gave you your name. Is that true?"

Anubis desperately wanted to say 'yes,' but in the presence of so many esteemed patrons, his voice failed him. A small, dog-like whimper escaped his throat.

“Hee hee! He’s so cute!” Elara giggled, delighted by his bashful reaction.

Chapter 1006: Don’t look at me

“Greetings, Your Grace!”

“Greetings, Your Grace!”

Just then, the senior leadership of the stoneheart horde approached—Rendall, Onyx, Thundar, Dace, Ursa, Fergus, Tarn, and the others. They all bowed their heads respectfully to Lilith; in Orion’s absence, her authority was second to none.

“There’s no need for formality,” Lilith said with a graceful nod. “Let’s all wait for the Dragon Crucible to open together.”

The elders formed a loose circle around her, their presence adding to the weight of anticipation in the air.

“Rolan!” Pallas’s sharp eyes spotted a familiar face in the crowd.

Rolan, who had been standing behind the elders, stepped forward as the group parted for him. “Lady Lilith. Your Highness,” he said with a respectful bow.

Lilith beckoned him closer. No one would ever underestimate Orion’s personal disciple. Though not yet an adult, Rolan’s name and skill were already legendary across the southern continent. He had challenged and defeated every opponent his age, leaving him peerless among his generation. He was also one of the key role models Lilith often used in her lessons with Pallas.

“You’ve gotten taller,” she said warmly. “Have you seen your mentor?”

"I have," Rolan replied. He seemed a bit shy, not because they had grown distant, but because he was growing up. As a child, he had spent every morning in Orion's tent, eating his meals there before training just outside. After his own mother, Lilith was the closest thing he had to a maternal figure.

"I've made a new cloak for you. Come by the castle to pick it up when we get back."

"Thank you, Lady Lilith," Rolan said, a genuinely happy smile spreading across his face—the same smile he'd had as a boy. Before Pallas was born, Lilith had made clothes for him every year, thinking of him as one of her own.

"Rolan, I challenge you!" Pallas wriggled out of his mother's arms, landing on his feet. He stared up at the older boy, his expression dead serious. "I'm going to ride my dragon and beat you!"

Rolan knelt, meeting the young prince's gaze at eye level. "I accept your challenge, Your Highness," he replied, his tone equally serious. "But only after you've defeated every other youngling your age. Then, you and I will have our battle."

He stood up and unslung the Bloodthirsty Trident from his back.

"My mentor passed this on to me," Rolan said, holding the trident out. He knew Pallas's bloodline would allow him to hold the weapon's weight. Sure enough, the boy reached out with one hand and took the massive trident, his small arm surprisingly steady.

"Can you feel the battle lust coming from it?" Rolan asked. "If you defeat me, it's yours."

With that, he took the trident back and slung it onto his back once more.

Pallas stared at the weapon, a burning desire igniting in his eyes. In the brief moment he'd held it, he'd felt the overwhelming, aggressive energy humming within the metal. Tempered by the indomitable wills of both Orion and Rolan, the Bloodthirsty Trident was no ordinary weapon.

"You better mean it!" Pallas declared solemnly.

His serious posture didn't last three seconds. Lilith scooped him up and gave him a gentle tap on the head.

"That's Rolan. You will show him respect."

And so, in a lighthearted atmosphere, they waited.

.....

Meanwhile, at the Leonidas Palace on the Kasenna Sea, Orion was lounging on a sun chair.

"The Dragon Crucible is opening. You're not going to be there to oversee it?" Kraken asked, slumping into a chair beside him. He and Makareth had just returned from the front lines.

"No need," Orion said, passing Kraken a drink. "Everything's set. Our people just need to enter in an orderly fashion. The interior is partitioned, so they won't get in each other's way. How much they improve comes down to their own will and talent. Us being there won't change a thing."

"Still, gotta hand it to you two bros," Makareth said, taking a hard swallow of his drink. His voice was laced with envy. "You're playing the long game, giving slots to a bunch of talented kids."

Orion and Kraken had instinctively allocated a portion of their slots to the next generation. As arch lords, they knew the importance of fresh blood for the long-term health of their factions. It was a luxury Makareth and Isabella couldn't afford. Given their current resources and strategic pressures, they had to give every precious slot to their top commanders, hoping for an immediate boost to their territory's overall power.

"Our situations are different, that's all," Kraken said. "Back when we were at your stage, we had it way tougher. An opportunity like the Dragon Crucible? We couldn't have even dreamed of it." He wasn't exaggerating. As one of the few of his kind, he'd spent most of his early days grinding it out alone in the deep sea with no support.

“From now on, let’s all make a point to collect dragon corpses,” Orion proposed, seeing an opportunity. “Once we have the materials, we can open the Crucible again. By then, you’ll probably have the breathing room to invest in the talented kids in your own territory.”

That was a suggestion everyone could get behind. Gathering the resources alone was a monumental task, but if they worked together, they could shorten the timeline significantly, strengthening all their factions in the process.

“Heh, speaking of which...” Makareth leaned in conspiratorially, clinking his glass against theirs. “I know a place. Second layer of the abyss. There’s a whole roost of abyssal dragons. Once you two have some free time... how about we pull a job?”

Orion and Kraken’s eyes lit up. A high-risk raid with no territory to hold, just pure, profitable slaughter? That was their kind of mission.

“And just what do you three think you’re planning without me?”

Isabella’s sharp voice cut in as she strode toward them, the heels of her boots clicking on the stone. She shot Makareth a glare, then turned it on Orion and Kraken.

“Hey now, we weren’t cutting you out,” Makareth said quickly. “You know how it is, Izzy. The abyss is huge, and it hates anything holy. Your colossal dragon would be a giant, glowing target down there. You’d get swarmed the second you arrived.”

He wasn’t joking. A creature of the light like her dragon would be hunted by every powerful being in the abyss.

“I don’t care. You’re not leaving me behind,” she insisted, turning her gaze to Orion. With the other big bosses like Leonidas, Alexander, and Arthas away, he was the one calling the shots.

“Don’t look at me,” Orion said, holding up his hands. “We’re just spitballing here. It’s not even a plan yet.”

Chapter 1007: Was it you who saved us?

“First off, I’m swamped,” Orion stated flatly. “And besides, Kraken can’t leave right now.”

He gestured toward the ocean. “Don’t think for a second that this front is quiet. The dragons might not be escalating the war, but they sure as hell haven’t agreed to a ceasefire.”

The situation in the Emerald Dream Realm was far from stable. Kraken was the team’s only Sea Race arch lord; he was essential to holding the line. As for Orion, his schedule was already packed. On top of the planned invasion of the Silverwood Realm, he had promised to go with his bro Arthas to the Godforsaken Land to raid for black gold. He had absolutely no time for a side trip to the abyss.

“Ugh, and it was such a perfect plan,” Makareth sighed dramatically. “Right down the drain.” Isabella’s expression soured as well.

“Instead of chasing materials for a hypothetical raid, maybe you should focus on locking down your territories on the Dusk Continent,” Orion said, twisting the knife.

.....

The Silverwood Realm, The Stillness.

While Orion was giving Isabella a hard time, a certain Wood Elf was living through her own personal hell.

Thwip!

A wind-infused bolt shot from the dense woods, striking the lead Red-Eyed Ghoul. It tumbled to the forest floor in a spray of blood, only to be swarmed by the ghouls following it, which immediately began to tear the corpse apart in a cannibalistic frenzy.

The arrow had bought Xylia thirty seconds. Tops.

Once the corpse was devoured, the pack of demonic monsters, still hungry, picked up her scent and resumed the chase.

Xylia's face was a calm mask, but panic was clawing at her insides. What now? My mana is completely gone. I can't manage a power shot, can't even cast a basic healing spell.

She glanced down at the bandage on her left leg, now soaked through with fresh blood. Ripping another strip from the hem of her tunic, she wrapped it tightly over the wound, trying to staunch the bleeding.

There has to be a chance. There has to be hope for the Wood Elf race.

As one of the Guardians of the Wood Elves, Xylia's will was iron. She wasn't like Freyla. Xylia had seen more combat, had lived by the brutal laws of the forest. For survival, for a sliver of hope for herself and her people, there was no line she wouldn't cross. That was the difference between a Guardian and a standard Elder.

Even now, pushed to her absolute limit and completely out of options, she refused to give up. It was that unyielding spirit that had forged her squad—Angel and the others—into such a loyal and capable unit.

Roar!

Just as she hauled her aching body onto the branch of a massive tree, a piercing shriek erupted from the woods ahead. It was a sonic attack, the kind only an Alpha-level Cyclopes could produce.

With her mana depleted, she had no defense. The sonic attacks slammed into her, and she lost her grip, plummeting from the tree.

Damn it! An ambush!

She hit the ground with a sickening thud. Her left arm, which she'd used to break her fall, was now useless, sending waves of agony up to her shoulder. But even then, the will to survive didn't flicker.

Gritting her teeth against the pain that felt like ground glass in her bones, she tried to push herself up, to crawl into the relative cover of a nearby bush.

It was no use. Her wounded leg gave out. She couldn't move.

"Drive out the demonic monsters... rebuild our home..." she whispered, her voice a raw rasp.

The massive, one-eyed Cyclopes stepped out of the trees. Xylia pulled the dagger from her belt.

"Drive them out!" she screamed, raising the dagger toward the beast in a final act of defiance.

In that instant, an overwhelming Legendary level presence descended, crushing the Alpha-level Cyclopes and freezing it in place.

Boom!

A stone pillar, like a massive totem pole, fell from the sky, smashing the Cyclopes into a gory pulp.

At the same time, the shrieks of the Red-Eyed Ghouls in the woods behind her were joined by a chorus of low, guttural snarls—the sound of something not quite man, not quite beast. The forest suddenly felt far more sinister.

"Who are you?" Xylia demanded, her guard still up. She watched as a figure landed silently atop the totem pole.

Tangere ignored her. He hopped off his plaguetotem and stared down at the pile of gore with an expression of genuine annoyance. An Alpha-level Cyclopes corpse was a prime reagent for summoning rituals. What a waste.

"Who are you?" Xylia asked again. She knew anyone who could kill a Cyclopes that effortlessly was far beyond her league, but she felt no fear. The stranger had saved her life, a fact she couldn't ignore, so her tone was a fraction less hostile than before.

“Who I am doesn’t matter to you,” Tangere said without looking at her. “If you want to know why I saved you, just wait. The people you’re looking for are on their way.”

He glanced back at her confused face, then turned and walked toward the sounds of combat between his Plague-thralls and the Red-Eyed Ghouls. He was here to collect corpses, after all.

“Captain!”

“Captain, where are you?”

Before long, familiar voices echoed from the woods. The confusion in Xylia’s eyes vanished. “I’m here!” she yelled back, her voice cracking.

Moments later, a group of Wood Elves, led by Aerin and Angel, leaped through the canopy and landed around her.

“The captain’s hurt!”

“Oh, gods, Captain, what happened?”

“Don’t you die on us!”

Seeing the faces of her twenty-something squad members surrounding her, Xylia finally let out a breath she didn’t realize she’d been holding. The tension that had kept her going for days finally snapped.

“Elder Aerin,” she said, looking up at the woman already casting a healing spell over her. “Was it you who saved us?” She recognized the newly ascended Elder from a few brief encounters during past patrol rotations.

“The wounds weren’t fatal, but you let them fester for too long,” Aerin said, her focus on the spell. “We can talk later. Let’s get you back to camp first, and I’ll explain everything.”

She needed to get them all to safety before she dropped the whole story on them. It was the only way to ensure they'd stay.

Xylia studied Aerin's face for a long moment, then nodded, accepting the offer.

Chapter 1008: They're watching us

The Stillness, Necropolis.

While Caesar was overseeing the construction of the camp's defenses, Orion descended into the hidden necropolis beneath the castle.

Clymene stood within a summoning formation, wreathed in a tangible aura of death. As the formation activated, the agonized wails of lost souls echoed from the void. The offerings placed within the circle began to decay at an impossible rate, flesh and blood turning to dust as their life essence was siphoned into a pile of pristine white bones. As the wailing faded, skeletal warriors began to claw their way out of the sacrificial remains, their empty sockets gazing around in mindless confusion.

Hsssk!

A low hiss escaped Clymene's lips. As if bound by a sudden contract, the newly-formed skeletons shambled out of the sacrificial ritual and into the nearby graveyard, where they lay dormant, awaiting a second awakening.

"The offerings are too few," Clymene said, stepping out of the formation to join Orion. "At this rate, we won't be able to form the undead scourge you're looking for anytime soon."

"There's no rush, Clymene," Orion replied, his voice calm. "True wars provide the fastest way to collect corpses. After our first major battle, sacrifices will no longer be an issue." He knew that only with a sufficient supply of bodies and prisoners could they summon the legions of skeleton warriors and Skeletal Knights they truly needed. Their coalition had only just arrived; they couldn't afford to overextend themselves before everyone was ready.

“What about the shadow assassins? Can they be summoned or trained?” Orion asked. The truth was, their forces desperately lacked a dedicated intelligence-gathering unit. The few assassins Clymene had already converted weren’t nearly enough.

“It’s difficult,” Clymene admitted. “Those shadows were specially trained in life, which is why they became high-tier undead upon conversion. Replicating that training under these conditions is nearly impossible. If we were in the abyss, we could capture some Shadow-fiends and train them as assassins and scouts.”

The answer was no, but he had at least offered a solution. For Orion’s own undead armies to grow, he needed to fill out the basic unit roster to avoid being easily countered on the battlefield. She made a mental note about the Shadow-fiends. She would either have to capture some herself on a future trip to the abyss or make a deal with the Demon Makareth to procure them.

Tangere’s Plague-thralls could serve as scouts in a pinch, but their slow speed and obvious presence meant they had to rely on sheer numbers, which they currently lacked. Spreading out the ten thousand they had would just get them picked off one by one.

Looks like I’ll have to transfer Gustalon here, Orion concluded. Gustalon was currently fighting on the dragon front. With no enemy arch lord present, he was practically invincible; even if outmatched, he could escape with ease.

“The plague lord has returned,” Clymene said suddenly. With the entire camp patrolled by her undead armies, nothing that happened within its walls escaped her notice.

“It sounds like our ally had a successful hunt. I’ll go see what he’s brought back.”

Clymene nodded and silently returned to the summoning formation to continue her work.

Near the camp’s main gate, Tangere and Aerin led Xylia, Angel, and the other Wood Elves inside. The survivors’ eyes widened in amazement at the sight of the wooden walls and defensive structures. Fortifications meant the ability to resist an attack. Even if they couldn’t make a permanent home here, they could at least find a moment of real rest.

"I never knew a camp like this existed in the Forest of Nature."

"Look, are those... humans?"

"They're building a wall. Are they planning to settle here?"

"Captain, I sense a dark presence."

"It's undead. Skeleton warriors. They're watching us."

The whispers rippled through the elite squad. Xylia and Angel heard them, of course. Xylia saw the skeletons and the humans herself, her mind a swirl of questions. But she remained silent, choosing to trust Aerin. She chose to trust her fellow Wood Elf. At the very least, Aerin carried no taint of evil, nor had she been turned into one of the undead.

"I'm going to drop off the materials. Your people are your responsibility now," Tangere said to Aerin.

"Right. Thank you again, Tangere," she said with a grateful nod.

He turned and walked deeper into the camp. He could already sense Orion standing at the castle entrance, waiting for him.

Once Tangere was gone, Aerin turned to face her kin. In unison, all twenty-something Wood Elf warriors, including Xylia and Angel, fixed their gazes on her, waiting.

"The Wood Elf Tribe is gone."

Her first words shattered their every hope.

“Our king fell in battle. The Tree of Life has sealed itself away. The entire Forest of Nature is overrun with demonic monsters. For the Wood Elf race, there is nowhere left to run.”

With their illusions torn away, all that remained was reality. Aerin had faith that these elves, survivors of countless horrors, could withstand the blow.

No one spoke. They just watched her, their expressions a mixture of grief, numbness, and dawning despair. They had lost their homes, their families, their entire world.

“This camp is called The Stillness,” Aerin continued, her voice steady. “As you can see, it’s guarded by the undead. It was only under their protection that I was able to survive long enough to have a chance to save you. So I made a choice. I pledged my service to them in exchange for their sanctuary.”

As she spoke the words, she was surprised by her own calmness. It feels so distant, as if the tragedy of our people happened to someone else, a story I read in a book, she thought.

She looked at Xylia and Angel. “I’m sorry. I know this isn’t what you wanted to hear, but the Wood Elf Tribe is truly gone.” She gave them a gentle, apologetic smile filled with a profound sadness.

“This is The Stillness. This is someone else’s territory. If we want their protection, we must submit. The only thing that will keep us safe is proving our value as Wood Elves to the lord of this place.”

She didn’t mention Orion, Tangere, or Caesar. She didn’t explain the full nature of their coalition. For now, the hard truth was enough.

Chapter 1009: Stay, or leave?

In Aerin’s mind, the path forward was clear. To survive, they had to take shelter under Orion, to earn his protection. For the Wood Elves she had just rescued, the best way to do that wasn’t through an alliance, but through submission. To put it bluntly, what was left of the Wood Elf race was in no position to negotiate as equals. Pledging fealty now would save them all a great deal of conflict and trouble down the road.

"Xylia, Angel... none of you have entered the inner camp yet. You still have a choice," Aerin said, her voice heavy. "My friends, the most I can do for you now is to beg the lords of this place to look for more of our people during their purges. I am sorry, but I don't have the power to lead you out of this darkness myself."

It took a great deal of courage to admit one's own powerlessness. A part of Aerin desperately wanted these Wood Elves to stand with her, to support her and become the foundation of her new position here. But another part simply wanted them to have a choice, to be free. Whatever they decided, she wouldn't blame them. Goodness was, after all, in the nature of the Wood Elf race.

"The Wood Elf Tribe was destroyed," Xylia said, her gaze locked on Aerin. "But we can rebuild it." Each word was spoken with defiant conviction.

"We can rebuild it together, Elder," Angel added. She might not have trusted Aerin yet, but she trusted her captain completely.

Aerin could only shake her head. The idea of rebuilding the entire Wood Elf Tribe with just the two dozen of them was a pipe dream. It wasn't that she looked down on her own people; it was that the world outside this camp had no place for them. She knew that the moment they stepped outside the walls of The Stillness, they would be hunted down and devoured by the demonic monsters.

"With just the few of you?"

A voice, dripping with contempt and power, echoed from the direction of the castle. "Where would you rebuild? And how?"

The Wood Elves all turned to see an imposing figure approaching slowly, his hands clasped behind his back. He was a giant, tall and broad-shouldered, the hooded cloak he wore whipping dramatically in the wind.

"Allow me to introduce myself," he said, his voice a low rumble. "I am the master of The Stillness. And a king of the giants."

Orion knew he had to step in. If he let Aerin's soft-hearted approach continue, this valuable group of elves might actually choose to walk out of the gate to their deaths.

"The Forest of Nature is crawling with demonic monsters," Orion stated, his tone leaving no room for argument. "Step outside this camp, and you will die. I suspect you understand that reality better than I do." It was the simple, brutal truth, and the foundation of the psychological pressure he was about to apply.

"Submitting to me is not the same as being enslaved. If and when the time is right, I will even support your efforts to rebuild the Wood Elf race. With our backing, that goal is no longer a fantasy. It's an achievable objective."

Orion's eyes settled on Xylia. This one was different from the others—more composed, with a stronger will. He could tell in a single glance that she was the one in charge of this squad.

"But you are of the dark races," Xylia countered, her voice steady despite her injuries. "We are incompatible. We stand on opposite sides."

Ah, there's the real problem, Orion thought.

He let out a deep, unrestrained laugh that boomed through the courtyard. "Wood Elf, tell me, are dark and light, good and evil, truly always in opposition? If so, please explain why my 'evil' subordinates bothered to save you. And then, tell me if you would rather lead the elves behind you out there to a pointless death, or stay here, survive, and one day reclaim your home."

His questions were a rapid-fire assault, giving Xylia no time to think.

"Now, tell me your choice. Do you stay, or do you turn around and leave?"

He presented it as a simple choice, deliberately avoiding any negotiation of terms. He was pushing them into a corner. If they chose to stay, they would have to accept his conditions, whatever they might be. If they chose to leave, he wouldn't lose any sleep over a handful of stubborn rebels dying in the woods.

“Stay, or leave?” he pressed again. As if on cue, a chorus of low, terrifying snarls echoed from beyond the camp walls. The sounds were a chaotic mix, and the Wood Elves couldn’t tell if they belonged to the demonic monsters or the Plague-thralls.

“My lord,” Aerin cried out, breaking the tense silence. She dropped to the ground, prostrating herself before Orion. “Please, I beg you, allow my people to stay. Grant us your protection. We will serve you in any way we can, with all the skills we possess.”

Orion looked down at Aerin, satisfied with her intervention. He mulled over her carefully chosen words. With all the skills we possess. Was that just a desperate plea, or was it a promise?

The air grew heavy as the silence stretched on.

“And what makes you think you can protect us?”

After a long moment, Xylia pushed herself to her feet, her eyes meeting Orion’s directly.

Orion felt a flash of admiration. The fact that she could still ask that question meant his pressure tactics hadn’t completely broken her. It also told him that, ultimately, they would stay. All he had to do now was show them his power.

“Insolence!”

Before Orion could speak, a low, hoarse voice roared from the castle. Clymene emerged from the shadows, Tangere following a step behind. Clymene had just finished receiving the new materials for the necropolis. Tangere had been unfazed by the elf’s defiance, but Clymene, the former lord of a giant tribe, was instantly enraged. Orion was her brother. She would not suffer such a low-tier creature to insult him.

A crushing wave of dark, necrotic power swept over the courtyard, slamming Xylia, Angel, and every other Wood Elf flat on the ground.

“The majesty of the King of Giants is not to be questioned,” Clymene snarled. She came to a stop behind Orion, the suffocating aura of death pressing down relentlessly on the small squad of elves.

Tangere said nothing, simply taking his place on Orion’s other side. His silence was its own statement.

Xylia, pinned to the ground, saw it all. She already knew Tangere was a Legendary level powerhouse.

Now, another figure of Legendary power had shown up.

Chapter 1010: As long as we’re alive, there’s still hope

With Tangere and Clymene flanking him as subordinates, Orion’s own power and status were terrifyingly clear. Xylia understood that now.

“Enough,” Orion said, raising a hand. Clymene immediately retracted his oppressive aura. Orion then looked down at Xylia, still struggling on the ground, and his voice softened slightly. “What is your name?”

“Xylia, honored sir.”

“Xylia, let me be clear. Even if the Wood Elf race were at its peak, I could wipe you out with a wave of my hand. Is that enough power to protect you?”

“I...” Xylia didn’t know what to say. The two Legendary level powerhouses standing behind him had already said it all. Still, a part of her refused to admit that her people, at their peak, could be so weak.

“Our enemies were never you Wood Elves,” Orion continued, his composure absolute. “They are the demonic monsters—the ones who shattered your forces. You and your people need to understand something: this territory I hold, I did not take it from you. I took it from them.”

Every word was a statement of fact, and every fact was a hammer blow against the crumbling walls of their pride. Orion glanced over the defeated elves. He had anticipated this exact scenario before he’d

even set foot in the Silverwood Realm. It was one of the reasons he had waited for Aerin to be the one to beg for help.

“If you wish to stay, then follow Aerin. She will teach you how to survive in The Stillness.”

With that, Orion turned and walked away, Clymene and Tangere falling into step behind him. From start to finish, he hadn't revealed an ounce of his own power. To make a show of his strength here would have been beneath him. Besides, he knew when to stop. Pushing any harder would be counterproductive.

Only after Orion's figure had vanished into the castle did Aerin rise and help Xylia and Angel to their feet. This was the final task he had left for her: to use her own charisma to win them over now that their defiance was broken. Only then would they truly follow her lead. Building on the gratitude they already felt for her saving their lives, she could finally earn their trust.

“It's not as dark here as you might think,” she said gently. “Besides the undead, there are humans, too.” She gestured to the distant figures of Shield Warriors felling massive trees to reinforce the wooden ramparts and arrow towers. “You saw them when we came in. They are part of this community.”

She met Xylia's gaze. “I don't think, from where we stand now, that we're in any position to judge the lines between light and dark, good and evil. Your duty right now is to survive. And then, to do as I did: save more of our people. Wouldn't you agree?”

Xylia and the others tore their eyes away from the distant Shield Warriors and looked back at Aerin.

“Elder,” Xylia asked, her voice barely a whisper, “if we stay... will we truly see the day the Wood Elf Tribe is rebuilt?”

Aerin stepped forward and pulled her into a hug.

“Trust me,” she said, her voice firm. “As long as we're alive, there's still hope.”

.....

Emerald Dream Realm, Lorelia.

Led by Lilith and Delilah, the high command and younglings of the stoneheart horde stepped through the wide-open doors of the Dragon Crucible. The interior was surreal, radiating a profound and ancient mystery. Just inside, a series of archways made from the colossal bones of dragons led to separate pocket dimensions. The air thrummed with the tormented wails of countless dragon souls, bound to this place by the Crucible's power to summon them back to their mortal remains.

This agonizing sound wasn't a punishment; it was a tool. To undergo the ritual in this environment was to be tempered by the raw, furious power of the dragon souls, a trial by fire for the will that would forge it into steel.

"I'm going in," Delilah said, squeezing Lilith's hand before walking toward one of the bone-white doors.

Lilith was confused for a moment, but then she looked at the hand Delilah had touched. Resting in her palm was the second Banshee Crystal.

Don't refuse it. You know the succubus race needs a lord. And the wife of the King of Giants must be one as well, Delilah's voice echoed in her mind, a private message through their sisters' telepathic link.

Lilith didn't answer. She took a deep breath, her resolve hardening, and walked Pallas to one of the bone archways.

"Pallas, listen to me. Once you're inside, summon your dragon. Then, train just as you always do."

"I will, Mom."

"Good. Now, go."

She watched until the shimmering portal of the bone door closed behind him, then walked back to pick up Elara.

“Be good. Meditate and train hard inside. And release your Inferno Dragon—this will be good for him, too.”

“Don’t worry, Mom!” At critical moments like this, Elara dropped all of her usual sass and attitude.

Lilith sent her into the portal next to her brother’s. Only then did she turn back to the assembled leaders of the horde.

“Send the rest of the horde’s younglings in first,” she commanded. “Then, you may each enter a chamber and begin the rite.”

“As you command!”

Moments later, after the last of her people had passed through the bone doors, Lilith finally stepped through a portal of her own.

The space within was even more otherworldly than she had imagined. It was a perfect, egg-shaped chamber. She was standing on the surface of a lake of crimson liquid, shot through with veins of shimmering gold.

The lake was bottomless, yet its surface held her weight like solid ground. In the center floated a diamond-shaped stone slab covered in cryptic, glowing runes.

As Lilith stepped onto the stone slab, the crimson-gold water began to churn. It rose rapidly, filling the entire chamber until she was completely submerged. She felt no discomfort, no need to breathe.

After a moment of adjustment, a tidal wave of pure, raw energy surged into her, nourishing every muscle, every cell in her body.

On the curved walls of the chamber, luminous dragon symbols began to glow. They peeled away from the walls, swimming through the liquid like living creatures. They swirled menacingly before surging towards her, merging with her body, one after another.

A strange new consciousness, a torrent of life energy, flooded her being. It was an extraordinary sensation, as if she were forming a symbiotic bond with a nascent, mindless dragon. Mysterious knowledge and primal instincts bloomed in her mind, cleansing her spirit and reforging her body. A wondrous transformation was beginning.