

## **Titan King 1011**

Chapter 1011: Rights and obligations

Silverwood Realm, Forest of Nature.

On a scorched plain just outside the forest's edge stood a menacing black tower, six stories of jagged obsidian that seemed to claw at the sky. Gates opened on all four sides, each one a gaping maw disgorging an endless stream of demonic monsters. Like beasts unleashed from their chains, they swarmed into the forest, drawn to the rich scent of life within the gathering places of other creatures.

In their place, a returning tide of demonic monsters flowed back into the tower, some hauling resources, others herding slaves, their bodies already twisting and corrupting from demonic influence.

The sheer number of demonic monsters suggested the tower's interior was a world of its own.

Within a vast chamber on the fourth floor was an unholy sanctum, a desecrated chapel to forgotten gods. There were no candles; the grand altar and surrounding effigies were all shrouded in an oppressive, impenetrable darkness.

Rize stood by a tall, arched window, looking down on the ceaseless activity of the demonic monsters below. From this specific vantage point, he could see the entire panorama outside the tower, yet not a single ray of sunlight could penetrate the gloom of the room.

Suddenly, a shimmering portal of violet light tore open the air behind him. An unusually large Cyclops strode through it, stomping angrily to Rize's side.

"Rize. You ruined my fun. You'd better have a damn good reason for this."

Hebika, a Cyclops lord, had been in the middle of enjoying the spoils of war when Rize had summoned him. He had just forced a Wood Elf to carry his spawn. The elf was strong; Hebika had been looking forward to seeing how many powerful offspring she would produce.

"According to our agreement, the female spoils of war are yours to do with as you please," Rize said without turning around, his own form remaining an indistinct silhouette in the shadows. "That is your right."

He paused. "But you also have an obligation: to breed more demonic monsters for the church and to secure more resources for the war effort."

Rights and obligations. The two were always intertwined.

"So? Spit it out. What do you want?" Hebika growled. He was a Cyclops—hot-tempered, bloodthirsty, and prone to rage. He didn't have the patience for the labyrinthine mind games of a Mist Wraith like Rize.

"Hebika, the resources your offspring have been bringing back have dwindled these past few days. You should go out and see for yourself. I feel compelled to remind you that if we fail the task given to us by the High Priestess, we might find ourselves becoming the next sacrifice."

Rize and Hebika were both Legendary level powerhouses, but they were also merely priests in the Cult of the Four. Above them was a High Priestess, an arch lord whose power was absolute.

After the initial conquest of the Forest of Nature, she had moved on to other war zones, leaving the two of them in charge of pillaging this territory. Now, with the forest not yet fully pacified, their returns were already diminishing. As the one responsible for strategy, Rize had to address it.

"Our demonic monsters report a forbidden zone deep within the forest. Any who enter it never return," Rize's voice was a low whisper, far more serious than before. "I need you to lead a force yourself, Hebika. Clean out the Forest of Nature. We need to pick up the pace."

"Is that a threat, Rize?" Hebika sneered. "The Wood Elf Tribe is in ruins. All their Legendary warriors are dead. What trouble could a handful of stragglers possibly cause? Or are you just jealous? Did you see a particular bitch you wanted for yourself?"

At the vile term, Rize finally turned, his shadowy form coalescing as he fixed a cold, chilling gaze on the Cyclops.

"Do you really think everyone is like you, Hebika? Your mind filled with nothing but depraved games to play with your victims? Have you already forgotten about the next war zone? The glory we could earn? The secret technique for ascending to arch lord that the church offers as a reward?"

The raw venom in Rize's tone made Hebika pause. He could sense this wasn't just a casual complaint. And the mention of the secret technique for ascension had struck a nerve.

"It's a trivial matter. You don't need to order me around like one of your minions," Hebika grumbled. He was tempted, but Rize's attitude still infuriated him. They were partners of equal rank, not master and subordinate.

"If you don't want me breathing down your neck, then meet your quotas. Frankly, the less I have to see of you, the better."

"You don't need to worry about the mission," Hebika snarled. "Tomorrow, I'll lead the charge myself and crush every last little mouse hiding in that forest."

He turned and stormed back through his portal. Rize was right about one thing; he didn't want to be here either.

As the violet light faded, Rize sighed, his voice a wisp of cold air. "A race of morons who only know how to think with their loins."

Emerald Dream Realm, Dragon Crucible.

Pop. Pop. Pop.

Elara was utterly bored. She blew a stream of lazy bubbles, idly watching the glowing dragon runes peel off the walls of her chamber. Strangely, whenever the ambient energy or the runes drifted near her, her body seemed to automatically repel them.

The Dragon Crucible had absolutely no effect on her.

Not that she cared. She could sense that the life energy swirling around her was... impure. It was nothing compared to the pure world essence her daddy had given her.

"I wonder how my little brother Pallas is doing," she muttered to herself, a mischievous glint in her eye. "I really want to pinch his chubby cheeks. When my little dragon wakes up, I'm gonna go find him and pinch them so hard."

She glanced over at her Inferno Dragon, which was curled into a tight ball, greedily absorbing the life energy and dragon runes. The little guy had been ecstatic upon entering the chamber and had almost immediately fallen into a deep, transformative slumber.

"My little dragon's aura is getting stronger and stronger. Daddy was right, this Dragon Crucible is really good for him," she whispered. "When we get out, I'll test his new power against Pallas's black dragon. Heh heh, and then I'll beat Pallas up, too."

Pop. Pop. Pop.

A happy little smile spread across her face as she went back to her bubble-blowing, lost in her happy thoughts.

In another chamber, Pallas and his black dragon were both in a state of deep hibernation. A massive, translucent phantom of a giant had materialized around Pallas's small body. With its mouth wide open, the phantom was inhaling the life energy and dragon runes of the chamber, consuming everything.

If one looked closely, a faint, intricate mark was slowly beginning to form on Pallas's forehead. It was still indistinct, but it already carried the faint, unmistakable aura of an ancestor soul—the same power his father, Orion, possessed. His bloodline was awakening.

Chapter 1012: Only an idiot would believe that

Pallas was not the only one undergoing such a profound change.

Rendall, Onyx, Delilah, Rolan... nearly everyone was experiencing a breakthrough, especially the Tribe younglings. For them, the benefits were even greater than for the veterans who had long been stuck at their level caps.

These powerful transformations weren't limited to the stoneheart horde, either. The subordinates of Kraken and Makareth were also reaping immense rewards from the ritual.

The baptism of the Dragon Crucible continued, a ceaseless torrent of energy flowing into each chamber. With the sole exception of Elara, every single person who had entered walked away with their power vastly augmented.

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Titanion Realm, Stoneheart City.

Orion sat upon his throne, his gaze fixed on the man kneeling in the center of the great hall. He was silent, his thoughts a mystery.

The man's name was Wyatt, one of Torin's lieutenants. He had been in charge of his master's slave trade, and his slaver bands were infamous for their cruelty. Orion was genuinely surprised the man had managed to survive the allied assault, let alone make his way to Stoneheart City.

"Tell me how you got here," Orion said, his voice a low rumble. He held a sealed letter Wyatt had presented to him but made no move to open it yet. "I'm interested to know how you survived."

"Your Majesty, King of the Giants, I only survived because of My lord's foresight," Wyatt said, his head bowed low.

Orion said nothing, his stare unwavering. Wyatt didn't dare look up. He felt like he was being watched by a predator, a chilling pressure that kept him frozen in place.

"My lord must have had a premonition. Before the final battle with the southern coalition, he sent me away from the Northern Coalition with this sealed letter for you." Wyatt's voice trembled slightly. "I

changed my identity multiple times, posing as a merchant and a mercenary. It was the only way I could deliver it safely into your hands. Your Majesty, I swear my allegiance to you. I will do anything you ask."

Still, Orion was silent. Then, Wyatt heard the distinct crackle of a wax seal being broken. He had no idea what the letter contained. He only knew his master, Torin, was dead because the magical contract binding him had dissolved moments after he'd departed. He had been tempted to open the letter countless times, but he had resisted. He'd had a feeling that this letter was his only ticket to a new life, a way to find a place within the stoneheart horde and continue to live in comfort.

"Did you open it?" Orion's voice was calm.

"On my life, Your Majesty, I swear I did not."

"Does anyone else know of this letter's existence?"

"No one!" Wyatt shook his head frantically. The tone in Orion's voice made him realize just how important the letter was.

"I see," Orion said with a sigh. A ball of fire bloomed in his palm. He flicked it forward.

Wyatt never had time to scream. He didn't even have time to feel the pain before he was incinerated, leaving nothing but a pile of fine gray ash on the stone floor.

Under normal circumstances, Orion might have spared him. But the contents of Torin's letter were too sensitive, revealing secrets known only to a handful of Survivors. For that, Wyatt had to die.

He wrote about the Survivor's Platform, Orion thought, his eyes scanning the parchment. He knew. He knew how the clown arrived in this world, and he explained it all perfectly.

He leaned back on his throne. What was his motive in sending this to me? Did he figure out who I really am?

The suspicion wasn't baseless. Once Torin had ascended to the Legendary level, he would have gained knowledge of special world structures. With all the unique buildings and arrow towers in Stoneheart City, a sharp mind like Torin's could have easily noticed the signs.

Or was this a plea for revenge?

After defecting from the human kingdom, the only powers on the continent of Utessar that Torin could have turned to were the stoneheart horde and the dragons. And during his time in Soaring Bird City, his dealings had been primarily with the horde.

I wonder if he sent a similar letter to the dragons,

Orion mused. Torin was a real troublemaker, stirring up shit even from beyond the grave.

In truth, Orion had already pieced together most of it. When Torin sensed the clown's malice and realized something was wrong, he sent his two most trusted slaves, Mike and Wyatt, on separate missions.

Wyatt came to the stoneheart horde. Mike was sent to the dragons. But Mike's luck had run out. His path had crossed with the southern coalition, and he was unceremoniously bludgeoned to death by one of the ogre Aldous's subordinates. The letter, along with his body, was devoured, long since turned to shit and scattered to the winds.

Torin's plan had been simple: a dead man's switch. If he died, he wanted the dragons and the stoneheart horde to have the information they needed to find and kill the clown. His final thought was one of spite: If I die, everyone dies. He hadn't sent a letter to the human kingdoms because there was no one left there he could trust.

So, the Awakened... and by extension, Survivors... aren't a secret to certain powerful entities. The implication hit Orion like a physical blow. A late-blooming Survivor might be discovered the moment they started making a name for themselves. If that was true, the consequences were terrifying. They would either be hunted down and killed, or worse—captured by some powerful being and raised like cattle for the slaughter.

The thought coiled in his gut.

Am I... am I just another pig being fattened in a pen?

Orion's eyes narrowed, then closed. He opened the Survivor's Platform and sent a message to Arthas. The man had been around longer; he might know more.

Orion: Bro. Being a Survivor... we're not exactly a secret, are we?

Orion: What I mean is, to some people, we're an open book.

The question was one they had touched on before, but never explored in depth. This time, Orion needed a straight answer.

Arthas's reply was almost instantaneous, and brutally direct.

Arthas: Who the hell ever told you we were a secret?

Arthas: Only an idiot would believe that.

Orion stared at the message, then replied with a simple '...' before he began to type out the full story of Torin's final, damning letter.

Chapter 1013: It's just the starting gate

Arthas: It's exactly what you're thinking. In some worlds, the existence of Survivors is an open secret. In others, we're actively hunted by everyone.

Arthas: Think about it. The rise of a Survivor is almost always fueled by slaughter and war. That means threatening the status, resources, and territory of the established powers. Not everyone is as lucky as you, to rise so quickly and successfully.

Arthas's words were heavy, as if dredging up bad memories.



Arthas: And it's not just Survivors who have it rough. None of the Awakened do.

After a long pause, another message came through. Orion was about to ask for more details when Arthas sent something that blindsided him completely.

Arthas: You know Lolth, right?

Orion: The spider broodmother on the Dawn Continent in the Emerald Dream Realm. The Deputy Commander's slave.

Arthas: She's dead. The Deputy Commander ripped her soul right out of her body.

Orion drew a sharp, cold breath, a chill washing over him as if he'd been doused in ice water.

Arthas: What exactly is the Survivor's Platform? Everyone is trying to figure that out, but nobody has the answer. But when you discover that Awakened exist from other worlds... dissecting their 'talents' becomes a viable way to study the Platform. We do it. They do it. To certain powers, the Awakened are nothing more than prey. We're lab rats.

A heavy silence hung between their messages.

Arthas: There are some things you're only qualified to know once you reach the demigod level. But since you asked, I'll tell you a few things.

His tone turned serious, cold, and impersonal.

Arthas: That Torin you mentioned... my guess is the clown either tore out his soul or sacrificed it to some Reaper. The history of the Champions Alliance is filled with instances like this. Even some gods are hunting the Awakened, devouring them.

The revelation made Orion's skin crawl. Suddenly, it all made sense. This, perhaps, was the real reason the Big Bosses like Arthas were so desperately searching for and cultivating allies. There was strength in numbers, and huddling together for warmth was always better than freezing alone.

Arthas: The irony is that traitors like the clown and the witch sold out the Champions Alliance, sold out our commander, all for some shortcut to the demigod level. They're too stupid to realize they'll just end up on someone else's plate sooner or later.

Arthas: Hulk, I think you get it now. Our real enemies are the gods who have yet to fully manifest in this world. They hunt us, so we have to fight back.

The Awakened... Survivors... Gods... Devouring... A series of keywords flashed in Orion's mind, and a horrifying thought began to surface.

Orion: Bro, that Flower Goddess, the one who's been giving me so much trouble... she's not...

He couldn't bring himself to finish the sentence.

Arthas: What else would she be? Do you think she'd waste her divine power harassing you time and time again if you weren't one of the Awakened? Think about it. Why did she try to invade your sea of consciousness in the first place?

Orion fell silent. All this time, he'd thought the Flower Goddess's obsession with him, the damned Curse of a Hundred Blossoms, was because of Violet. He never imagined the real reason was his status as one of the Awakened.

Arthas: Look, don't overthink it. As long as the gods haven't fully manifested, we're relatively safe. Focus on getting stronger. When the new Age arrives, we'll need every ounce of power we have just to survive, let alone to fight for supremacy.

The new Age? Orion was full of questions, but when he asked what that meant, Arthas went silent on the topic.

"Heh..." Orion let out a dry, humorless laugh. "I thought demigod was the finish line. Turns out, it's just the starting gate."

Honestly, since reaching the arch lord level, he had felt secure, powerful enough to protect himself in both the Titanion Realm and the Emerald Dream Realm. That confidence had bred a certain amount of pride.

Now, he realized how far he still had to go. His current power as a middle arch lord was only possible because he had merged with the body of faith created by his mirror avatar.

The road ahead is long, he murmured to himself in the quiet of the grand hall.

Silverwood Realm, The Stillness.

Inside the castle, Orion granted an audience to Aerin and Xylia, who had come to formally pledge their allegiance.

"Rise," Orion said from his throne. "The Wood Elves will not be treated as slaves in my territory. Offer me your loyalty. Fight for yourselves, for your people, and for me. As your lord, I will reward great service with the spoils of war, with slaves of your own, with a fiefdom, and with the resources to grow stronger. You will want for nothing."

He paused, letting his words sink in. "As Aerin has likely told you, this world is not our home. Which means we have the power to make good on every single promise I just made."

The fact that the Wood Elves had chosen to stay genuinely pleased him. Aerin and Xylia rose to their feet, a clear look of relief on both their faces. To not be enslaved was more than they had hoped for.

"My lord, Xylia pledges her sword and her life to you and the Horde," Xylia said, her voice firm.

Orion nodded. Compared to Aerin, Xylia was more ruthless, a decisive killer. Aerin was better suited for internal affairs—leading the Wood Elf race within the territory, a role in which she already had his

complete trust. Xylia, on the other hand, was a weapon. She should be out in the Forest of Nature, leading search-and-destroy missions alongside Tangere, rescuing more of her people.

"Here is my decree," Orion announced. "Aerin, you will be in charge of overseeing the construction of the camp's defenses and managing the logistics for both the Wood Elves and the Shield Warriors. Xylia, I am assigning Caesar and a contingent of his Shield Warriors to you. Expand your search-and-rescue operations. Find as many of your people as you can, as quickly as you can."

Caesar and his men were warriors. Keeping them on construction duty is a waste. A wolf needs to hunt.

"As you command, My lord!"

"As you command, My lord!"

With a wave of his hand, Orion dismissed the two visibly overjoyed elves.

Chapter 1014: Moon Elf

Silverwood Realm, Staghelm City.

The roar of demonic monsters tore through the dawn quiet of Staghelm City. They swarmed from the shadows, a tide of claws and fangs, their only purpose to unmake the world.

A sharp, metallic clamor echoed through the city's stone corridors. Within moments, figures launched themselves into the sky. They shifted in mid-air, their forms melting away to be replaced by massive Great-Clawed Owls. Their shrieks were a piercing counterpoint to the demonic horde's bellowing as they conjured crackling orbs of lightning in their beaks, blasting the monsters nearest the city walls. Soon, the sky was choked with a roiling canopy of black and blood-red clouds.

The war had begun.

On the battlements, druids in the form of giant stags stomped their colossal hooves, the ground trembling with each impact. A verdant aura of raw nature flowed around them.

After a deafening chorus of stomps, a thick armor of woven roots and living stone encased their bodies, their antlers sharpening into deadly blades. With a final, unified cry, they leaped from the walls, their majestic forms crashing down into the enemy ranks and charging forward, kicking up plumes of dust and gore.

Behind them, the remaining Moon-Bear warriors stood in disciplined ranks, loosing a relentless volley of crossbow bolts and spears into the fray. A moment later, arcing spheres of magical fire soared over the walls, detonating within the demonic monsters' lines. The brutal, close-quarters fight had begun, and its intensity only grew with every passing second.

High above the chaos, two figures clashed and recoiled in a flash of power.

"That white tiger you're riding," one of them snarled, her voice a venomous purr. "I want it. Surrender it to me, and I might just grant Staghelm City a three-month stay of execution."

It wasn't two figures, but three: a woman, a man, and the tiger. Riding the beast was Isilra, the lord of Staghelm City and a rare Moon Elf. But she wasn't a typical elf; she was one of the elemental sprites, a being utterly unique, with no true kin. The white tiger beneath her was her bonded mount, elevated to the rank of arch lord by her blessing.

"A devil's promise isn't just untrustworthy," Isilra stated, her voice as cold and clear as a winter night. "It's a fool's bargain."

A moonstone mark rested on her brow, and it now pulsed with a soft, internal luminescence, feeding her a seemingly infinite well of power.

"Heh heh heh, true enough," the other woman laughed, a throaty, mocking sound. "A devil's word is wind. But a contract signed with a devil? That is always honored. What do you say? Let's call it professional courtesy. I'll make you a deal."

The speaker was Yil-leia. If Isilra's beauty was like pure, cold moonlight, Yil-leia's was a dark, seductive venom. And there was something fundamentally wrong about her. She hailed from the Abyss, a serpent-demon of the Nali race, and she possessed six arms. Two hands gripped a long, wicked lance, two held short, curved daggers, and the final pair wielded heavy, spiked hammers. She was a living weapon, built for nothing but slaughter. Her six arms moved in a fluid, unpredictable dance, making her seem impossibly dangerous.

Of course, she had another title: avatar of the Witch and one of the thirty-six High Priestesses of the Cult of Four.

"Demons are always plotting, always looking for an angle," Isilra said, her own hair beginning to catch the light from her mark, shimmering with a holy, ethereal glow. The light formed a subtle aura around her, deflecting the psionic assault Yil-leia had just unleashed.

"Such a perfect specimen!" Yil-leia's eyes widened with greedy appreciation. "You know, I'm not so interested in the tiger anymore. I'm interested in you. Imagine all the powerful men I could wrap around my little finger with a body like that!"

The Witch stared at the Moon Elf, her beauty and power making her a prize worth converting.

"Moonlight is everywhere," Isilra declared, ignoring the predatory gaze. "And it will be your cage!" She flicked the shimmering ribbon in her hand, and strands of pure moonlight descended from the dark clouds, weaving themselves into a lattice of light that shot towards the Witch.

"Hee hee, if you insist on playing, then let's play!" The Witch spun her lance and daggers, creating a blur of afterimages. She unleashed a torrent of pure Abyssal energy, raw and black, that erupted upwards like a colossal serpent, shattering the moonlight cage before it could even form.

"Give up," the Witch hissed, the playful tone gone from her voice. "You killed one of our High Priestesses. The gaze of a Pontiff has already fallen upon this place. Do as I say, become my tool, and I might be able to spare your life."

If she waited for a demigod to arrive, she knew this rare Moon Elf arch lord would be nothing more than a sacrifice.

“You have ruined this world! You are Demons!” Isilra shot back. “And any Demon that walks this land must be driven out—or destroyed!”

Swish!

Isilra drew and loosed her longbow in a single, fluid motion. An arrow of solid moonlight screamed through the air, locking onto the Witch.

BOOM!

The arrow exploded in a blinding flash. Yil-leia shrieked, a sliver of pain cutting through her arrogance and igniting her notoriously short fuse.

“You ungrateful bitch! You dare to strike me? Unforgivable!”

A storm of black mist instantly enveloped the Witch as she shed her humanoid guise. Her true form ripped through the veil of reality—a titanic serpent blotted out the sky, six massive, clawed limbs sprouting from its sides. With a deafening hiss that shook the very air, the serpent-demon charged the distant white tiger and its rider.

The mark on Isilra’s brow flared, its light consuming her. She became a brilliant, falling moon, rocketing towards the colossal serpent.

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In the Forest of Nature, near the territory of The Stillness.

While the Witch assaulted Staghelm City, the demonic monsters sent to sweep the forest were being systematically dismantled by Tangere and Caesar.

The clash between the demonic monsters and the Plague-thralls was a meat grinder. The monsters Tangere's forces faced weren't the main army, allowing the sheer numbers of the Plague-thralls to overwhelm them, pulling down one beast after another to be sacrificed for the undead armies.

But the raw power and speed of the larger Cyclopes were on another level. They smashed through the lines of Plague-thralls, their crude clubs and sharp claws tearing the undead apart. Thralls were dismembered, blasted into pieces, their bodies reduced to nothing more than a foul paste on the forest floor.

But whenever a stronger, Alpha-level Cyclops appeared, Caesar and Xylia were there to meet it. Both were Alpha-level themselves, though Xylia, being in the early stages, was slightly weaker. Her intimate knowledge of the Forest of Nature and the monsters' fighting styles more than made up for the difference.

"Hah!" Caesar roared.

He launched himself into the air, a whirlwind of motion. His body twisted impossibly as his greatsword sang, coming down in a shearing arc of razor-sharp sword light. The attack cleaved an Alpha-level Cyclops clean in two, right down from the crown of its skull.

Xylia watched in awe from a distance. That sword energy... it's immense. Her estimation of The Stillness's power rose yet again.

Caesar landed lightly and walked to the bisected corpse. He prodded the two halves with his sword for a moment, but found none of the crystal cores he had expected.

Chapter 1015: Are they in danger?

"Weird," Caesar muttered to himself, nudging the corpse with his boot. "These demonic monsters are strange. No crystal cores, no magicite... completely useless aside from the body itself." He grunted, then pulled out a dimensional pouch and stuffed the hulking corpse inside before turning back toward Xylia.

"Just got word from Tangere. His scouts spotted some of your Wood Elves on the outer perimeter. Let's move."



Xylia nodded, not bothering to ask how Caesar had received the message. News that her people were alive was all that mattered.

Deep within the forest, on the farthest edge of the Plague-thralls' formation, a dozen Wood Elves leaped between the colossal trees. They were being hunted. The stench of their living flesh had drawn a pack of demonic monsters that pursued them like mad dogs.

"Captain, there's another large group of those passive demonic monsters ahead!" a scout called back, her voice tight with panic. "The ones that don't attack on sight. What are our orders?"

"Go around them! Avoid contact!"

It was a bizarre, desperate flight. The Wood Elves were not only evading the monsters hunting them, but also the ranks of Plague-thralls. To them, the shambling undead were just as much of a threat as the demons at their heels. So they ran, threading a needle between two armies.

But even elven stamina had its limits.

Inevitably, a few who had fallen behind were finally cornered. A pack of Red-Eyed Ghouls burst from the undergrowth, their claws scrabbling for purchase on the massive tree trunks. They swarmed upwards, slavering jaws snapping, towards the two exhausted Wood Elves who had stopped to catch their breath.

Suddenly, a volley of bolts whistled in from the trees ahead, punching through the lead Red-Eyed Ghoul and sending it tumbling back to the forest floor.

"Move, now! Don't stop!" a voice shouted from the distance.

The two exhausted elves looked at each other. In that shared glance, a grim smile passed between them, a silent understanding of what had to be done.

"Captain, you have to go!" one of them yelled. "We can't keep up! We'll cover your retreat!"

Slice! Slice!

Both elves drew their daggers and dragged the blades across their own forearms. The rich, coppery scent of fresh blood bloomed in the air, instantly distracting several of the Red-Eyed Ghouls that had started to pursue the main group. They turned, their crimson eyes locking on the new, easier prey.

“Get the others to safety, Captain! Live! Go, now!” The two warriors charged, meeting the swarm of Red-Eyed Ghouls in a desperate, final stand.

From the trees far ahead, a single, choked command was given. “Go!”

The fleeing Wood Elves didn’t need to look back. They knew the fate of those who stayed behind. The sounds carried on the wind—the tearing of claws, the soul-shaking roars, and the wet, horrifying noises of chewing and swallowing.

Is there any way out for us? The question echoed in the mind of every survivor, a soul-crushing weight.

A short while later, Caesar and Xylia arrived at the scene with a small contingent of Wood Elf and Shield Warrior reinforcements. The air was thick with the stench of blood, but there wasn’t a single body to be found.

“Looks like we were too late,” Xylia said, her voice heavy. She leaped onto one of the giant trees and picked up a scrap of fabric woven from plant fibers. A piece of a sleeve. Her heart sank. Only Wood Elves wore clothes of this material.

“Captain,” one of her scouts reported, his face grim as he presented his findings. “We found two crossbows and two standard-issue daggers.” He pointed to an inscription on one of the hilts. “Based on the markings, they belonged to the Fifth Elder’s squad.”

“We...” Xylia started to say, but the words caught in her throat.

“This isn’t the time for grief,” Caesar cut in sharply, pointing deeper into the forest. “Your people are still alive, and they’re just ahead.” Before Xylia could fully process his words, he was already moving, a blur of motion disappearing into the trees.

A jolt of surprise and hope shot through her. “Stay with him!” she commanded her elves, immediately giving chase.

Meanwhile, in another part of the forest, Tangere was taking a stroll. Unlike Caesar’s frantic pursuit, Tangere moved through the woods with the easy confidence of a man walking through his own backyard. After sending Caesar the coordinates for the three locations where Wood Elf tracks had been spotted, he had wandered off to find some rare herbs for his plague cultivation vats.

He had just finished carefully harvesting a glowing magical plant when he paused, looking up. A frown creased his brow. So, they’ve finally noticed us.

Far in the distance, he could feel the arrogant, unrestrained aura of another lord. If he could sense his enemy, he knew the enemy could likely sense him.

“Fine,” he muttered aloud. “Might as well go say hello. Let’s see what the master of these demonic monsters is really made of.”

With that thought, he launched himself into the air, rocketing towards the hostile presence.

Outside the Forest of Nature, in a trampled clearing, the Cyclops lord Hebika chuckled. Strewn around him were the forms of eight Wood Elf women. Their clothes were torn, their bodies still, their eyes vacant. They had been utterly broken.

Hebika thought with a disgusting surge of pride. Heh heh heh... perfect little broodmares. My offspring will grow strong inside you.

The Cyclopes’ method of reproduction was horrifically cruel. Once violated, the Wood Elves lost all self-awareness. Their bodies, now little more than incubators, would instinctively begin to absorb elemental energy from the air to nourish the larval Cyclops within them.

And a Cyclops's seeding was always, one hundred percent, successful. After giving birth to one monster, the unfortunate Wood Elf's body would immediately begin the process anew, a tireless, mindless cycle of horrific incubation. For the Cyclopes, elves were the perfect vessel: long-lived, attuned to nature, and capable of surviving without food or water.

Suddenly, Hebika looked up, his single massive eye narrowing as he stared towards the Forest of Nature.

Heh heh heh... that old fool Rize was right. Something unexpected is happening in that forest. A Legendary-level powerhouse managed to evade the High Priestess's purge.

A wide, cruel grin split his face. Excellent. A Wood Elf lord as a vessel... just imagine the powerful children she could birth for me. Hahaha!

With a triumphant roar, the Cyclops lord Hebika leaped into the sky, streaking towards the presence he had just sensed.

Back at The Stillness, inside the fortress.

Orion stood on a balcony, gazing into the distance. By chance, he was looking in the exact direction Tangere was flying, the same direction from which Hebika was now approaching.

"Is there an enemy?"

It was his sister, Clymene, who spoke. Her own senses weren't as vast as Orion's; she couldn't yet feel the threat. But Orion had abruptly left his desk to stare intently at a single point on the horizon, and she knew what that meant.

"Yes," Orion confirmed, his voice calm and even. "A Cyclops. Legend-level, upper stage. It just appeared outside the Forest of Nature."

"Are they in danger?" Clymene asked, her voice laced with concern. They, of course, meant Tangere, Caesar, and Xylia.

## Chapter 1016: The future breadbasket of the stoneheart horde

These people were either allies of the stoneheart horde or had become its vassal races. Clymene understood that when invading a new world, if you didn't have the power to just steamroll everything in your path, you needed to make as many friends as possible.

"They should be fine," Orion said, shaking his head. He thought for a moment, then added, "Tangere has already moved to engage. He and that Cyclops are both on the upper end of the Legendary level. There shouldn't be any major issues."

Clymene fell silent. If their strengths were equal, she knew Orion's friend would likely have the upper hand. Her time on the Dusk Continent, surrounded by the powerhouse allies Orion kept, had set a very high bar.

"Orion," she asked, her voice low, "can we trust them?"

Her real question was unspoken. Can we trust them the way we trust the Champions Alliance?

"That's hard to say," Orion admitted, shaking his head again, which only confused her more.

"Sister, this invasion has another purpose. It's a test for these three new allies. Their power is one thing, but the very fact that they come from different worlds is incredibly significant for the stoneheart horde. If we build a strong relationship, we can gain access to the unique resources of their home realms through trade or exchange."

Orion gestured towards the city walls, where a Wood Elf was chanting softly, her hands glowing with green light. "Look there. That Wood Elf can accelerate plant growth, cultivate Treants to serve as sentinels... she is already an asset. Now her entire race is a vassal of the horde. That's one of the benefits of this alliance." He lowered his hand. "Besides, the Wood Elf race prefers peace and excels at agriculture. Subjugating them gives us a massive, self-sustaining granary."

At the word "granary," both Orion and Clymene fell quiet.

The current stoneheart horde was a logistical nightmare to feed. Setting aside the races with famously huge appetites—giants, succubi, bear-men, gnolls, ogres—the swarms that followed Soraya and Lorelia alone were colossal engines of consumption.

The horde's war machine could never stop, because it had to constantly pillage new lands for food and resources. Only through endless war could the stoneheart horde sustain itself.

"Sister, our goal in this realm isn't necessarily to rule it," Orion said, his voice firm with conviction. "But we absolutely must seize control of the Forest of Nature and the Wood Elves. In my plans, this place... this is the future breadbasket of the stoneheart horde."

He had another plan for securing their food supply, one that involved bringing the Scarecrow into the fold. But with Scarecrow incommunicado during his own ascension to lord, that alliance would have to wait.

"I understand," Clymene said, her jaw set. "I will do everything I can to help you."

With that, she turned and walked towards the necropolis. If this is to be our granary, then we'll need more than just a few skeleton warriors to secure it against all the unknown enemies to come.

As she walked, a chorus of ancient voices stirred within her, awakened by the talk of strategy and sustenance. They were the six souls bound to her own—Vargrum, Mordak, Zorn, and the others.

Our granary, they whispered in her mind, a single, unified thought. We must take it. Not just take it, but guard it, so that our children and their children's children will never know hunger.

We will need bodies. So many bodies.

Desdemona, Clymene projected inwards, I know you have reserves. It is time to call them forth. For the horde!

The chorus within her roared in agreement. Summon! SUMMON!

.....

Emerald Dream Realm, Lorelia City.

Inside the baptismal chamber of the Dragon Crucible, a mysterious light enveloped Lilith. It emanated from the intricate pattern on her forehead—the mark of the God-touched. When she and her sister Delilah had slain the traitorous Weeping Banshees, they had received the initial blessing. Now, having absorbed the power of a Banshee Crystal, Lilith was receiving the high-tier benediction.

In that moment, her innate talent and potential exploded. The thick, cloying mist that had always barred her path to the next level of power finally burned away.

Without hesitation, she retrieved the Lord's Stone she had long held in waiting and pressed it to her forehead. The God-touched mark flared, consuming the stone whole. A mysterious alchemy took place within her, forging a new Lord's Stone that was not an object, but a part of her very soul.

.....

Titanion Realm, Lilith City.

Years ago, when Orion had first consolidated his power in the south and launched his Ten-City Plan, this great city had been constructed. As a reward for their early and loyal service, Lilith City and the neighboring Delilah City had been granted to the succubus race as their domain.

Today, a gentle, inexplicable breeze swept through Lilith City. It rippled outwards like a current of clear water, brushing over every inch of the surrounding land.

In Stoneheart City, Orion sat upon his throne. He felt the ripple, and his eyes snapped open. A slow, pleased smile spread across his face. After all this time, Lilith. You finally broke through. You've become a lord.

His mate, second in status only to him in the entire stoneheart horde, had finally reached the Legendary level. From this day forward, no one could ever again question her place or whisper insults behind her back.

He closed his eyes again. Now I wonder, how are the Prophet, Delilah, and the others doing? Have they found their own moment?

He was certain this venture into the Dragon Crucible would yield more than just one pleasant surprise.

Back in Lorelia City, a flash of light appeared in the heavily guarded plaza. A graceful figure materialized from thin air. It was Lilith, freshly ascended.

Confusion clouded her eyes for a second before understanding dawned. She looked up at the immense structure of the Dragon Crucible.

A pity, she thought.

If she could have stayed inside longer, she might have been able to consolidate her newfound power even further. But the Crucible was designed with a failsafe: anyone who reached the Legendary level was immediately ejected. The amount of life energy a new lord could absorb was exponentially greater than what the youngling and Alpha-level warriors could handle.

The Crucible's purpose was to strengthen the core of the allied forces, not to hyper-charge its high-end combatants.

Lilith clenched her fist. The Banshee Crystal her sister had given her was more than half-spent. She wanted nothing more than to give the remainder back to Delilah, to help her ascend as well.

I owe her more and more every day, she sighed, the weight of that debt settling upon her even as her new power surged through her veins.

Chapter 1017: We're allies

Damn it, it's a male lord?



The confrontation with Tangere was a bitter disappointment for the Cyclops lord Hebika. The Legendary-level Wood Elf vessel he had fantasized about had just materialized as a middle-aged man.

“Does my arrival displease you?” Tangere asked. He and Hebika hovered in the air, neither making a move, each sizing the other up. One was curious, the other crestfallen.

“It’s not just displeasure,” Hebika sighed, his brutish tone softening into something almost gentle. “It’s the death of a dream.”

Then, in an instant, the facade shattered, and the rage he’d been suppressing erupted.

ROAR!

“You goddamn piece of filth!” Hebika bellowed. “You’ve cost me so many of my children in this forest! I’ll tear you limb from limb! I’ll devour you piece by piece!”

He lunged. A torrent of Abyssal energy poured from his body, coalescing behind him into a colossal Cyclops phantom. The phantom formed a great axe of pure shadow and brought it crashing down on Tangere.

“Between the living and the dead,” Tangere said calmly, his voice echoing slightly, “there is a distance no attack can cross.”

A thick, green mist of pure plague coiled out from his body, enveloping the environment and swallowing the charging Cyclops lord. It was a bizarre, almost surreal effect. Hebika’s furious attack slowed, the phantom’s axe crawling through the air as if moving through tar, unable to reach its target.

This was one of Tangere’s trump cards: his Domain of the Sundered Veil. Any enemy caught within its plague mist found their attacks impeded, their trajectory warped and slowed to a crawl.

He seized the opening, deploying his finishing move. A curse whispered from his lips. “Your heart stops. Death arrives.”

Death Rattle.

The plague mist surged, constricting around Hebika, manipulating his very biology. But even as his heart seized in his chest, the Cyclops lord unleashed his final gambit. A beam of violet-black light shot from his massive central eye, ignoring the plague mist entirely. It slammed into Tangere, blasting him out of the sky.

Tangere hit the ground with a sickening thud, his body instantly wreathed in corrosive, dark flames.

But then, something even stranger happened.

He pushed himself to his feet. His body convulsed, the skin rippling as if a swarm of insects were moving beneath it. The burned and corroded flesh began to slough off in wet chunks, revealing a perfectly pristine, unharmed Tangere underneath.

He looked down at the pile of his own flesh as it rapidly dissolved into dust. "A power that can ignore my plague mist," he mused aloud. "How very strange." A newfound respect for the abilities of these demonic monsters took root. He looked up, his body now still, and glanced at Hebika's corpse lying on the forest floor. A small smile touched his lips.

"There are benefits to a cross-realm invasion," he said to himself. "You can kill Legendary-level opponents as you please, without any of those pesky arch lords getting in the way." He walked over to the body. "Now, let's see what prizes we have."

A moment later, he had retrieved the Lord's Stone from Hebika's corpse, along with a storage pouch.

Just as he was about to release the plague from his own body to consume the Cyclops's valuable biomass, a voice echoed clearly in his mind. "Bring the body back intact. I have a use for it."

Tangere froze. It was Orion. He raised an eyebrow, then gave a slight, subtle nod, saying nothing. In that single, impossible moment of communication, his understanding of the quiet, inscrutable man who truly led this team was completely redefined.

Deep in the forest, Xylia was overcome with joy. Following Caesar's lead, she had intercepted and rescued three separate groups of Wood Elves fleeing from demonic monsters. In all, they had saved over a hundred of her people. It was a happiness so profound it felt like a dream.

A babble of voices rose around her.

"Elder, are you really here to rescue us?"

"Do we... do we really have a new gathering place?"

"Is it safe? Is the gathering place safe?"

"Elder... sob..."

The flood of questions, the fear and anxiety in their eyes, the desperate hope in their voices—it brought Xylia to the verge of tears. These lost souls needed a home more than they needed air or water.

"Everyone, please, be calm," she said, her voice thick with emotion. "Follow me back to our camp. Elder Aerin is waiting for us there." She raised her voice, letting it ring with newfound conviction. "The Wood Elves have a new home. You are all safe now!"

After calming her people, she found Caesar standing watch, his sword resting on his shoulder. She approached him quietly. "Thank you," she said, the two words carrying the weight of a hundred lives.

Caesar watched the emotional reunions, the way the Wood Elves clung to one another, a quiet satisfaction in his eyes. "We're allies," he said simply. "This is what we do."

His unwavering attitude, his decisive action from the moment he entered the forest, gave Xylia a deeper understanding of the alliance from The Stillness. To have allies like him meant that their powerful, enigmatic leader couldn't be an evil being.

With that realization, the knot of doubt and fear she had carried in her heart finally loosened.

A fragile hope bloomed in her chest. Backed by a faction like this, maybe the Wood Elves truly have a future.

Emerald Dream Realm, Lorelia City.

The moment Lilith stepped out of the plaza, her ascension complete, Lorelia sensed it.

“Mistress!”

Lorelia burst from her Nest and, like a child, threw herself into Lilith’s arms.

“You’re a Warden now,” Lilith laughed, hugging her back. “Still acting like a little girl.”

“Hee hee... your arms are the warmest place in the world, Mistress!” Lorelia beamed, looking up at Lilith. She could feel it instantly. The subtle barrier that had existed between them, a chasm created by their vast difference in power, was gone. It felt just like the old days, back in Moonshadow Valley in Blackstone City.

“This is your fiefdom now, isn’t it?” Lilith asked. “Aren’t you going to show me around?”

The truth was, with her ascension to the Legendary level, a mountain of pressure had been lifted from Lilith’s shoulders. For the first time in a long time, she felt utterly at ease. She would never normally have made such a leisurely request.

The suggestion was music to Lorelia’s ears. “This way, Mistress! Let me show you everything! I built Lorelia City from the ground up!” Brimming with pride and a desire to show off, she took Lilith by the hand, chattering excitedly about all the new things she had to share.

As they walked away, a faint, maniacal laugh echoed from the direction of the Dragon Crucible.

“Hahaha... so much life energy... Mine... ALL MINE!”

## Chapter 1018: Theory

Unconscious, Dirtclaw’s body gave in to raw instinct. His hellhound true form had become a vortex, furiously drawing in the life energy being channeled by the Dragon Crucible. In the process, he absorbed an immense number of draconic runes. They etched themselves into his hide, covering his demonic form in a lattice of shimmering gold, creating a bizarre fusion of hellish power and barely contained majesty.

The baptism of the Dragon Crucible was meant to empower, not endanger. But Dirtclaw was an exception. His unique hellhound bloodline, now saturated with draconic power, had pushed him to a dangerous precipice. His consciousness was beginning to fracture. Lost in the surge of new strength, he no longer knew if he was a hound or a dragon.

Fire... the fire of Hell... it burns with my pain... it is despair... it is...

ROAR... I am Dragon... I am a searing light in the darkness... I soar across the heavens... and look down upon all creation...

I am... the emissary of hell... the guardian of fear... the source of all darkness... I will spare you... but only if you beg me...

The glory of the dragon... all living things... will burn in my flames... all will tremble... at the sound of my roar...

Awooo...

Inside the baptismal chamber, Dirtclaw’s body began to twist. His form elongated, his four paws cracking and reshaping into draconic talons. Even his skull began to shift, his hound-like muzzle stretching into the nascent shape of a dragon’s maw. All the while, the golden runes on his skin flared with brilliant light, warring with the hellfire that erupted from between the cracks.

On the western sea, at Leonidas Palace.

Orion, lounging on a sun chair, suddenly opened his eyes, a flicker of surprise in their depths. The Dragon Crucible was his creation, a special structure he had personally reinforced with a Lord's Stone. He could perceive every fluctuation within it as if it were happening right before his eyes.

"Something wrong?"

Orion's sudden movement instantly alerted Kraken and Makareth, who were relaxing nearby. Kraken's presence made sense; he was coordinating the war against the dragons. Makareth was there out of sheer boredom, waiting for the Crucible's baptism to finish so he could take his newly empowered subordinates back to the Abyss and start a few wars of his own.

"A minor glitch in the Dragon Crucible," Orion said, his composure returning as quickly as it had been lost. He raised his goblet, clinking it against theirs. "Nothing serious."

"How are the men I sent?" Kraken asked, taking a sip of wine through his captain's avatar.

"Doing well. One of your offspring is on the verge of becoming a lord."

"Really?"

"Mm," Orion confirmed. Compared to his own few children, Kraken's progeny were innumerable. A giant's whelp might take fifteen years to reach adulthood; a member of Kraken's massive octopus race took only three. His lineage was vast, and his true power in the deep seas was far greater than he let on.

"With so many offspring," Orion asked, voicing a question that had long been on his mind, "why hasn't the overall quality of your bloodline improved?"

Kraken sighed. "We massive octopus race aren't as prolific as you might think."

Seeing that Kraken was about to divulge some secrets of the Sea Race, Orion and Makareth fell silent, leaning in with undivided attention.

"Here's a bit of trivia for you," Kraken began. "Ninety-nine percent of all octopus species? The females only breed once in their entire lives."

A look of genuine surprise crossed Orion's face. That was a fact he truly hadn't known.

"Don't be fooled by my numbers," Kraken continued. "Most of my children were sired before I reached the Legendary level, with lesser beings. Their bloodlines are... impure. The batch I sent you this time is actually the best of the lot, and that's only because their own blood resonated with mine when I became an arch lord."

A strange, complex expression settled on Kraken's face. His consciousness was that of a human from a past life, but his body was a massive octopus. Every time he looked at the soft-bodied, tentacled creatures who shared his blood, a wave of contradictory emotions washed over him. It had taken him a very long time to get used to it.

"I have a theory," Kraken said after taking another sip of wine. "The higher your level of power, the higher your life essence becomes. And the harder it becomes to produce offspring."

"How so?" Makareth asked.

This was a subject Orion understood all too well. Of his few children, only Kronos had been conceived naturally. Caelus, Pallas, and Kaelen were all the result of special circumstances, created using a unique secret technique or powerful artifacts.

"While the females of my race only breed once, a single clutch can contain hundreds, even thousands of eggs," Kraken explained, his tone growing more philosophical. "That was the norm, at least before I became a lord. But after my ascension, the females I coupled with rarely conceived. And when they did, they never laid more than three eggs, and the incubation time was significantly longer. It was as if I had... broken the natural limits of my own species."

He looked at Orion, searching his face for a flicker of recognition. Orion's brow furrowed slightly. He said nothing, but Kraken knew he understood.

"After I became an arch lord," Kraken said quietly, "I stopped siring children altogether."

"So, my theory is this: for beings at the Legendary level and above, while we may look the same as our kin, our very life essence has changed. We have become so different on a fundamental level that it's actually harder for us to procreate with beings of a lower tier." It was a conclusion born from his own long, strange experience. And it felt undeniably true.

"I'll admit," Orion said, breaking his silence, "since my own ascension, I have only fathered one child through normal means."

Kraken nodded. Orion had walked the same path.

"So," Makareth interjected, cutting straight to the logical conclusion, "the more powerful the being, the more powerful a partner they must seek? To ensure the offspring's talent and bloodline are superior? So they inherit more of their parents' innate gifts?"

"Yes," Kraken said, nodding in firm agreement with Makareth's deduction. "That is my other theory."

But as Orion heard Makareth's words, his mind wasn't on theory. A fragment of a memory surfaced, and with it, the face of a single person.

Chapter 1019: Hell-Drake Hound

That person was Leonidas.

Did Leonidas's success in converting the female dragon Daize have something to do with this? Orion fell into deep thought. Since becoming an arch lord himself, he hadn't fathered a single child.

"Oh, crap!"

The sudden outburst came from Makareth, the Demon lord. He had applied Kraken's theory to his own situation and suddenly felt like he was getting a raw deal.



"I don't have any kids yet! Does that mean my line dies with me?!"

"From what I know," Kraken said, looking at Makareth skeptically, "the Demon race has plenty of special secret techniques for reproduction. Is that not true?"

"Barnacle, you misunderstand!" Makareth shook his head, correcting the sea lord. "Yes, Demons have many techniques to assist with breeding. I know of at least seven or eight myself. But the offspring from such methods... they aren't truly recognized. They're just a means to expand our numbers for a war. Cannon fodder. The heirs we truly acknowledge must be True-Demons, or even Prime-Demons. And creating one of those is next to impossible."

After saying this, Makareth looked over at Orion, his expression complicated.

"If you have something to say, say it," Orion said, his composure fully restored. He met Makareth's gaze, his own face unreadable.

"Brother Hulk," Makareth began, a sly grin spreading across his face. "You come from a giant tribe, right?"

"Yes. The Stoneheart race."

"Heh heh heh... well, Brother, in the Abyss, giants are considered one of the demon-kin."

Orion was silent for a moment, then gave a slight nod, acknowledging the claim.

"I won't lie to you, Brother Hulk," Makareth continued, leaning forward conspiratorially. "The giants I've seen in the Abyss... they don't look like you. They're massive, with tusks and monstrous faces. They're savage. Any enemy who crosses them gets eaten."

Orion didn't speak, but Makareth's words brought to mind the other two branches of the giant tribe: the Starveil and the Shadowabyss. They represented the more bestial, demonic side of the Titan god, their forms closer to the original source, their inherited power more suited for pure combat.

As the king of the giants, Orion's territory was still missing the Shadowabyss branch. The giants Makareth was describing had to be them.

According to Makareth, perhaps only giants who have awakened their Titan Form are considered True-Demons. It gave him a new perspective on the ancient traditions of his tribe. He also suspected that the Starveil and Shadowabyss branches could probably awaken their Titan Form far more easily.

"So, you see, Brother Hulk, you belong in the Abyss," Makareth said, his voice dropping to a persuasive murmur. "We're the same kin. Come back with me. We'll join forces, and together, we could steamroll the entire second layer of the Abyss!"

Orion suddenly laughed. After all that buildup, Makareth had finally revealed his true motive.

"The time isn't right, and I don't have the time," he said simply. "But when I do go to the Abyss, I'll let you know."

"Alright! Heh heh, that's all I needed to hear, Brother!" Makareth leaned back into his lounge chair, satisfied. The fact that Orion was technically demon-kin gave him a strange sense of affinity for the giant lord. It wasn't a feeling he had for all demons, of course. Orion was special because they had both come from the same world in their past lives, as humans. And now, in this life, they were kin once more.

"By the way," Orion said, changing the subject. "Are there any Shadow-fiends on the second layer of the Abyss?"

"You mean those sneaky bastards who stick to the shadows?"

"Them."

"Yeah, lots of 'em. They're a pain in the ass to catch, though. What, you want to enslave some?"

Orion nodded. His sister Clymene's undead armies were lacking that kind of specialized unit, and Shadow-fiends were an excellent choice.

“Don’t you worry, Hulk,” Makareth said confidently. “They might be hard to catch, but you can always buy them from another Demon’s territory. I’ll pick up a batch for you next time I’m over.” He took the ‘mission’ from Orion without hesitation.

“Ahem,” Kraken interjected, his voice dripping with acid. “Did you two get sidetracked? I thought we were talking about having kids. When did this turn into a family reunion?”

“Hahaha! Barnacle, don’t be like that!” Makareth laughed, turning back to the sea lord. “We’ll get back on topic. Let me tell you about Prime-Demons. If you ever meet one, you need to be damn careful. They are incredibly rare, and every single one...”

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Lorelia City, inside the Dragon Crucible.

While Orion, Kraken, and Makareth discussed lineages and the nature of life itself, one dog’s life essence was being fundamentally rewritten.

I am the dragon! With my wings, I will master the sky and command the elements! No living thing can stand in my way!

I am the hellhound! I come from Hell! I will devour the soul of my enemies and drag them into the bottomless pit, where they will never escape the darkness!

I am dragon...

I am hellhound...

Dirtclaw’s mind was still lost, but his body had completed its metamorphosis. He had become something that was neither hound nor dragon. He possessed the horns, dragon scale, talons, and tail of a dragon, but the head and hellfire of a hellhound. His entire body was the color of polished obsidian, but etched

across it were countless, intricate draconic runes that glowed with a soft, golden light. It was as if he'd equipped a new skin, his entire aesthetic transformed into something terrifying and beautiful.

Just as his consciousness was about to be completely extinguished by the warring torrents of power, a voice cut through the chaos. It reached him not through his ears, but through the bond of a contract, speaking directly into his fractured sea of consciousness.

"You are Dirtclaw."

The voice was rich and alluring, laced with absolute command.

"You are Dirtclaw. The gnoll lord. The most inspiring elder of the stoneheart horde."

"You are the one who clawed his way up from the very bottom. You are the renowned Dirtclaw of the stoneheart horde!"

It was Delilah. At the most critical moment, just as his sense of self was about to shatter, the slave contract he once thought of as a shackle had become his lifeline.

He had started as a gnoll with a weak bloodline. When he reached Alpha-level, a trace of impure hellhound blood had awakened within him. Now, he was on a completely new path. He had evolved. He was a Hell-Drake Hound. This was his path, a fusion of hellhound and dragon.

The process had been agonizing, his body burned, stretched, melted, and reforged. His mind had been lost between the two powerful inheritances, on the verge of annihilation.

But Delilah's voice had saved him.

I am Dirtclaw! his mind roared, finally finding its center. I am a Hell-Drake Hound!

Chapter 1020: We are needed

Silverwood Realm, The Stillness.

In the eastern quarter of the stronghold, inside the newly raised wooden walls, a small grove of trees had been left to flourish. Tucked within the canopy, a series of treehouses had been constructed, built by Aerin and a small team of Wood Elves as a sanctuary for their own.

Now, Aerin stood before the hundred or so survivors they had just brought back to camp. Xylia and Angel flanked her, their expressions a mixture of relief and exhaustion.

"Everyone," Aerin began, her voice carrying through the quiet grove. She had meant to offer a simple greeting, but looking into their haunted eyes, she changed course. "You're safe now."

Safe.

The word hung in the air, a promise more precious than gold to this ragged band of refugees. If this place could truly offer them that, they would cherish it with everything they had left.

"This is the new home of the Wood Elves," she continued, gesturing to the homes woven into the branches around them. "These treehouses are for you."

Her next words were a gentle command. "Get some real rest. Sleep soundly. When you wake, we will begin to rebuild."

Aerin had a list of rules and camp protocols to review, but she bit them back. The raw, skittish fear in their eyes was a clear warning. Her gaze softened. The rules can wait. They're still running in their heads. Don't push them.

After a meager meal, the exhausted elves didn't claim individual homes. Instead, they huddled together in a few of the largest treehouses, finding solace in proximity as they finally succumbed to a deep, dreamless sleep.

"They haven't processed it yet," Xylia murmured, her eyes fixed on one of the overcrowded dwellings. "They're still not letting their guard down." Her voice was laced with a profound sadness. By tradition, a

Wood Elf's home was a private, solitary space. That they would choose to cram together like this spoke volumes of the terror they had endured.

"They will," Aerin said, though her expression was more complex. A quiet satisfaction simmered beneath her concern. With every Wood Elf we bring in, our voice in this place grows stronger.

She was no longer a general without an army. More numbers meant more influence, more resources directed their way.

She turned to her lieutenant. "You can't blame them. The world outside these walls is crawling with demonic monsters. A little paranoia is what keeps you alive out there." She paused, placing a hand on Xylia's shoulder. "Our people value peace, but we can't afford to lose our edge. Or our teeth. Thank you for bringing so many of them home."

As the highest-ranking elder, it was on her to rally her people, to thank them, to give them purpose.

"It was my duty, Elder," Xylia replied, shaking her head. There was no pride in her voice, only the weary frustration of a soldier who knew the war was far from over. "But I can't cover enough ground. We need more search parties." A Wood Elf was always the best choice to find another, to build the instant trust needed to convince a terrified survivor to come out of hiding.

"Tomorrow," Aerin said, her tone firm and decisive. "When they've rested. We'll pick out the ones who can still fight. Half of them will go with you to expand the search. The other half stays with me. We fortify our new home."

The Stillness had erected a basic wooden palisade against the demonic hordes, but it was just timber. It was the task assigned to the Wood Elves—their first official duty—to truly harden it with their nature-binding rites.

"Xylia," Aerin said, her voice dropping slightly. "My lord has officially ceded this entire eastern quarter to us." She swept her arm out, indicating the open land and the surrounding forest. "Any of our people who complete their duties to the settlement can claim a plot here. They can build a home, plant magical herbs, grow their own food."

She let the words sink in. “The days of peace and security are within our grasp again.”

Xylia’s eyes went wide. “Elder... is that true?”

“My lord gave me his word.”

“That’s... that’s incredible.” Xylia was stunned. She knew they’d have to earn their keep, but she never imagined they would be granted their own territory, their own autonomy, so quickly.

“You need to understand something, Xylia. We are not useless refugees here.” Aerin’s voice was sharp, cutting through the evening chill. “We aren’t front-line fighters, but we can communicate with the earth. We can make it yield. My lord’s armies and his people need to eat. The demand for food will be immense. That is why we were welcomed. We are needed.”

The cold, pragmatic logic of it—a relationship built on mutual need rather than charity—was more reassuring than any empty platitude. Being useful was the surest path to being safe.

Aerin knew this was the message Xylia had to spread. It was the emotional rations her people needed, just as vital as the food and shelter she provided. It was the first step to making them feel safe enough to sleep in their own homes again.

Beyond the Forest of Nature, the Black Tower, a demonic nest.

On the fourth floor of the tower, inside a vast, cathedral-like space shrouded in shadow, the Mist Wraith lord Rize stared at a shattered statue, his expression unreadable.

Dead, then?

The thought slithered through his mind. The statue had been a likeness of Hebika, the Cyclopes lord. Like all the tower’s masters, a sliver of his life essence had been bound to it.

“Predictable,” Rize murmured to the oppressive silence. The bigger the brute, the faster they fall.

His gaze shifted from the rubble on the floor, turning towards the distant canopy of the Forest of Nature, where his demonic hordes continued to pour in and vanish.

Something is happening in that forest. Something I wasn't prepared for and am in no hurry to confront myself.

He had his answer. Now came the careful calculation.

I'll escalate this. Report it up the chain. Let them know the asset has been lost. He considered his next move. Only when the High Priestess returns to the Black Tower will it be safe enough for me to venture into that forest myself.

Rize was no fool. When he first sensed the anomaly in the forest, he hadn't charged in. He had used a few choice words to provoke the arrogant Cyclopes, needling Hebika's pride until the brute had volunteered to investigate himself.

Now Hebika's death served as a valuable piece of intel: the enemy was not to be trifled with.

The conniving bastard had played his pawn perfectly.

"Send out the scouts," Rize commanded, his voice a disembodied hiss in the darkness. "Continue reconnaissance of the forest's depths. I want to know exactly what broke my toy."