

Titan King 281

Chapter 281 Two identical crystal cores

"WAAAGH!"

Rockwell let loose a furious roar and charged headlong into battle.

The strange wormlike creature snarled deep in its throat and lunged forward, colliding with him. In a flash, Rockwell and the creature were locked in a tangled struggle.

Despite the frantic melee, Rockwell kept his head: he focused every strike on the tear he'd made earlier with his whirling slash.

But the worm wasn't stupid. It tried to keep its wound covered and even used that weak spot like bait, gradually luring Rockwell into the crushing snare of its coils.

Screeeech!

Rockwell swung his stone axe, hacking squarely into the old wound and splitting the worm in two.

"Gotcha!"

That was Rockwell's first thought, but he felt a surge of alarm as the beast continued its death grip, refusing to let him break free.

"Lorelia!"

In desperation, Rockwell shouted for Lorelia, hoping she'd fire off some support.

Whoosh!

An arrow coated in corrosive poison streaked through the air and struck the worm's single eye, gravely injuring it. Rockwell seized the opening, shifting his weight to dodge the gaping jaws that had been certain to clamp down on him.

Even with its lone eye half-destroyed, the worm still refused to abandon its effort to crush Rockwell. Its body kept contracting, closing its coils tighter.

At that moment, an even stranger sight occurred. After the worm's agonized roar echoed through the cave, the severed back half of its body suddenly bulged and writhed.

A moment later, its tail-end split open. Two horns, a single eye, and a huge maw appeared on that new edge, forming a second, smaller worm right where the tail had been severed.

This new worm immediately shrieked and lunged toward Lorelia.

"Hold it off!"

Lorelia's voice rang out, anxious but firm, and she momentarily stopped worrying about Rockwell. She commanded her four spider guardians to intercept this newly formed creature. Meanwhile, she moved closer to the passage exit, fully ready to make a run for it if things went south.

"WAAAGH!"

Rockwell saw Lorelia wasn't coming to his rescue and realized he was on his own. He grit his teeth, refocusing on taking down the worm before it could finish him.

Suddenly, another eerie roar sounded. This time, though, it came from the opposite direction of the bottomless abyss, at the far side of the underground fissure.

Lorelia glanced over her shoulder and spotted a giant Dark Fiend barreling straight toward the abyss. Her face went ghost-pale.

"Dark Creatures...? How the hell did one get here?"

Her voice shook so hard she could barely get the words out. The small bow in her hands trembled right along with her.

Escape.

Her master had told her that as long as she could get back to the lair, she'd be safe. Lorelia was about to ditch Rockwell and flee when she heard a voice call out from behind the Dark Fiend.

"Lorelia, it's me!"

It was Thundar's unmistakable voice. Right away, Lorelia paused mid-retreat.

In the distance, Thundar hopped off the Dark Fiend's back. Moments before, the creature had been bounding forward so fast that Thundar had to flatten himself against it, which was why Lorelia hadn't noticed him.

"Elder of Combat... that's really you? Then... what's that big thing?"

Looking mighty proud, Thundar gave a booming laugh and offered a brief explanation.

"It's my newly tamed mount! Gimme a minute to kill this underground beast, then we can talk!"

With that, Thundar hefted his greatsword and rushed the second worm pinned down by the four spider guardians. As for the Dark Fiend, it planted all four limbs against the ground and lunged over to the monster constricting Rockwell, biting fiercely into it.

"Warden Rockwell, team up with my Dark Fiend and finish off these underground monsters!"

Hearing Thundar's familiar voice, Rockwell spotted a sudden glimmer of hope.

He could feel the worm's coils losing their deadly tension. Seizing the moment, he raised his stone axe once more and hacked away.

Meanwhile, on the outside, the Dark Fiend sank its teeth into the creature's body, trying to drag it off Rockwell. That action freed Rockwell from the crushing stranglehold.

With its snare broken, Rockwell caught sight of the Dark Fiend tearing away at the worm's flesh. He gawked, looking about as stunned as Lorelia had moments earlier.

"Hey, big oaf, cut the damn thing already!"

Lorelia's shout rang out as an arrow thudded into the monster's head, drawing another guttural screech. Jolted back to reality by her words, Rockwell raised his stone axe and brought it crashing down on the worm's neck.

A few moments later, Rockwell, Lorelia, and the Dark Fiend joined forces to dispatch the first worm. Then, working together with Thundar, they also destroyed the second one that had split away.

Thundar dug a crystal core out of the monster's corpse and compared it with the one Rockwell was clutching. They were identical.

"What a weird underground beast—it had two identical crystal cores!"

Thundar marveled, taking both cores from Rockwell and stowing them away.

"Maybe there are more than two," Lorelia said in a hesitant tone. When the two men turned to look at her, she pointed at a section of the worm's body that was still twitching.

Thundar and Rockwell both scowled. Following Lorelia's gesture, they saw swathes of the two worm sections were still writhing, showing faint signs of regenerating.

"What the..."

"Eat it!"

Thundar cut himself off midsentence and swiftly ordered the Dark Fiend to swallow one of the worm parts. Lorelia's eyes lit up, and she immediately instructed her nearby spider guardians to devour the other half.

During that earlier scuffle, two of those guardians had been badly injured—one nearly had its entire abdomen crushed. Strangely enough, as soon as the four spider guardians consumed the worm's remains, their wounds began healing at a speed visible to the naked eye.

"How wild is that?"

Lorelia's eyes went wide. "Oh, crap—I should've saved some for my master!"

Hearing her startled cry, Thundar and Rockwell both tensed, thinking another threat had appeared. When they realized what she actually meant, they exchanged a wry smile.

"Elder Thundar, how'd you end up here?"

Rockwell strode toward the edge of the bottomless abyss, lopping an emerging subterranean creature in half with his axe mid-question.

"The fighting at Blackstone City has settled for now. We scored a decent victory. The Elder of Stewardship caught wind that something was brewing at this underground fissure and dispatched me to back you up."

Standing beside Rockwell, Thundar gazed at the bottomless abyss, frowning as he answered.

In truth, Orion had declared this place off-limits. Thundar wouldn't have come here without a solid reason. He never expected that the one time he did, he'd run into such a bizarre worm with freaky powers.

"So, what's the story with that Dark Fiend?"

"Taming collar," Thundar said matter-of-factly. "It's under my control."

"That's... something else," Rockwell murmured, falling quiet. After a thoughtful moment, he gave the Dark Fiend a long, serious once-over. Finally, he sighed.

"Elder Thundar, I can't lie. I'm jealous."

"Hahaha, don't worry—your day will come too!" Thundar chuckled, clearly satisfied with his new Dark Fiend mount.

"Oh, and by the way, the prophet also got a little reward in this battle."

Thundar let that tidbit slip but didn't reveal what exactly Onyx had gained.

Chapter 282 Waiting for reinforcements

Deep beneath an unknown region in the Emerald Dream Realm, inside a maze-like cavern, Loska slowly opened his eyes.

"Dark Worm is dead!

Has the teleportation array I left in the Titanion Realm been exposed?"

Loska narrowed his eyes, and a mix of regret and hatred flickered across them.

Loska, current lord of the Red Thread Clan, was a Legendary-level figure.

A thousand years ago, he had followed his grandfather into the Titanion Realm, only to be crushed by a demigod and forced to flee. His grandfather died in that defeat, and the Red Thread Clan had never recovered since.

And just now, he sensed that his companion beast—Dark Worm—left behind to guard his teleportation array in the Titanion Realm had been killed.

"Is Grandfather's legacy about to be wiped out entirely?"

After his grandfather fell, the enemies of the Emerald Dream Realm attacked the Red Thread Clan's territory, demolishing every structure in sight. Loska had managed to lead a portion of his people out of a hidden escape route, wandering from place to place.

Thankfully, his grandfather's influence still lingered; through sheer luck and resources, Loska had managed to scrape his way to Legendary level.

He was a freshly advanced lord and could not yet build his own territory. Besides, the territory he held now was worlds away from his ancestral land of a thousand years ago.

With Dark Worm dead, there was nothing Loska could do.

"That teleportation array was hidden deep. Maybe someone will come through it from Titanion Realm.

I need to think carefully... If I play my cards right, maybe I can ambush a lord..."

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Blackstone City, outer walls.

It had been seven days since the last great battle. During this time, the Horde's bloodline warriors had resupplied and were well-rested in both body and mind. Even the fighting at the underground fissure had wound down since Thundar arrived, making further support unnecessary.

"Lorelia reports the Dark Creatures outside the city haven't left," Lilith announced. "Ninety-eight percent of the little spiders who ventured out got wiped out."

The Alpha-level powerhouses present all looked decidedly grim when they heard that.

"It's obvious they're not afraid, but are just biding their time, waiting to launch another attack."

"My guess? They're waiting for reinforcements," Slagor said, eyes fixed on the darkness beyond the walls, face drawn tight.

Slagor had never seen so many Dark Creatures attacking at once back in the Poison Dragon Swamp. Sure, sometimes an Alpha-level Dark Creature would show up.

But a whole squad of them? And not to mention the countless lower-tier Dark Creatures? It was nuts.

All at once, the scale of conflict the Stoneheart Horde was facing now made it clear to Slagor how they'd managed to grow so fast and produce so many Alpha-level powerhouses.

Fights on this scale meant more chances for glory—and if you didn't get yourself killed, the Horde would dole out Alpha-level resources afterward.

Thinking about that set Slagor's heart on fire. He had family, too—descendants who needed a future. Those Alpha-level resources were that hope.

In the Poison Dragon Swamp, whenever Dark Creatures of that level would invade, Slagor simply led his people deep underground to hide.

If beasts that tunneled through the swamp threatened them, Slagor would hold his own—after all, the swamp was his domain. As long as multiple Alpha-level monsters didn't show up at once, Slagor could handle it.

But the swarm now threatening the Stoneheart Horde was something else entirely, far beyond anything he'd ever imagined.

"We can't send our broadskull ravens out scouting anymore," Delilah said with a weary sigh. "We've lost too many—at this rate, we might not have any left to hatch those new eggs. And we really need those potential reinforcements."

In a situation like this, it would be ideal to use flying beasts for reconnaissance. But the Horde had precious few, and they were dropping one by one.

"At least we've got those arrow towers," Onyx reminded them. "We can just wait behind our walls for the Dark Creatures to strike. No need to stress yourselves out. You've seen how deadly those towers are. The invisible butterflies would get shredded if they flew too close. It's just that things on the ground would heat up."

Rendall nodded. He didn't have any better suggestions, but he agreed with Onyx's outlook.

"The prophet's got a point," Rendall added. "As long as we rely on our walls and the arrow towers, we'll hold Blackstone City. And Orion said we should never sally out to start a fight, so that's where we stand."

Just then, the city's alarm bells clanged.

"That's the western alarm!" Rendall snapped to attention—the moment he heard it, he knew exactly which part of Blackstone City was calling for help.

"Get to your positions," Delilah commanded, standing up and leaving the meeting room with her team in tow.

At the western wall, the alarm kept ringing. Once Delilah, Onyx, and Slagor arrived, they saw immediately why the Dark Creatures had chosen that particular area to attack.

That section was out of the arrow towers' range, plus it had only recently been completed.

Back when they built the Horde Hall, Orion ordered the ridges on either side of Moonshadow Valley to be torn down to free up space for the outer arrow towers. The spot the Dark Creatures were now attacking happened to be that unsettled zone.

At the time, the Horde didn't have any extra arrow towers to spare. Although they'd put up a few watch towers there, they were more for show than actual defense. Sure, the arrow towers outside Horde Hall could just barely cover the city walls themselves, but they wouldn't reach beyond them.

In other words, to bring the Horde Hall's arrow towers into play against this threat, the Dark Creatures would have to actually breach the walls. Of course, the elders had no intention of letting that happen.

"Clever jerks scouted out our one weak spot," Rendall muttered, cussing under his breath as he hefted his spiked club and headed for the frontline.

"Why didn't they go for the eastern side? There aren't any towers there either," asked Slagor, still new enough to Blackstone City not to know all the nitty-gritty of its defenses.

"Because the east side is crawling with cave spiders," Earthshaker said in a rumbling, sincere tone. "Any Dark Creature that dares to climb the walls over there will just be devoured on the spot. These enemies clearly know the east is a death trap, so they're hitting us here instead."

All the Alpha-level elders knew that fact. Even if the rest of the city fell, the eastern underground fissure would still stand firm—Lorelia had her entire cave spider army holed up down there. The small spiders she'd sent to aid Blackstone City or collect intel were just a fraction of the massive force under her control.

"They're coming!"

Out of all the elders, Lysintha's senses were the sharpest.

The moment her voice rang out, a flood of Dark Creatures burst through the misty darkness, surging right at the west side of the city wall.

Chapter 283 They're coming

War is on the verge of breaking out!

"There aren't any Alpha-level dark creatures!"

Lilith frowned. It was unusual that no Alpha-level creatures were attacking the city.

"Let's wait a bit!"

"We need to be on guard against these sneaky bastards trying to draw our attention. They might strike the south gate walls at any moment."

Delilah stood atop the city wall, hands folded behind her back, staring at the wave of dark creatures swarming in from the distance. Her face remained unreadable.

Far off, deep in the darkness, there came a strange low roar, buried beneath the chorus of ordinary dark creatures—so well hidden that it was almost impossible to notice.

Enchanted butterfly, the butterfly-assassin, and that invisible butterfly's leader all twitched their antennae. It seemed they'd received some sort of signal. All three stopped where they were and fell silent.

In the shadows, a tentacle monster and two newly arrived Alpha-level dark creatures watched the surge of dark creatures assaulting Blackstone City, as if biding their time. In reality, this wave was only a test—to see whether there was an arrow tower in the west of Blackstone City.

As the dark creatures approached the city, spears, bolts, and rolling boulders showered down, but there were no bright, devastating bolts—no sign of a tower.

"There's no arrow tower here. This is their weak spot!"

The one speaking was none other than that surviving tentacle monster. Its voice was raspy, layered with echoes. It had nearly been killed by Rendall before slinking back into the darkness, then devoured a large number of dark creatures to recover.

"Just wait. Let's send in a few more waves. When the cannon fodder climbs those walls, we'll see what's really going on."

Of the two new arrivals, one was a Four-Winged Blood Bat and the other an eight-armed Night Stalkers. The speaker was that eight-armed Night Stalkers, whose voice was sharp, almost grating.

Meanwhile, the Four-Winged Blood Bat kept quiet, covertly sizing up the other three Alpha-level powerhouses from Butterfly Ridge. By rights, they were all supposed to lead this invasion.

Before descending, the Bat had also received Sophia's instructions to obey the butterfly-assassin's commands. But now, that butterfly-assassin was still hidden away, not making an appearance or even sending a transmission.

Having survived countless slaughters, the Four-Winged Blood Bat found this situation suspicious.

"Leader, when are we going to attack?"

After some thought, the Four-Winged Blood Bat spoke, directing its question to what seemed to be empty air.

"As soon as we get the results of these tests, we'll begin."

Although the butterfly-assassin still didn't appear, its voice echoed through the darkness. Hearing this, the Four-Winged Blood Bat let out a quiet sigh of relief. At least the Phoenix Butterfly Ridge side hadn't abandoned the invasion.

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On the western wall of Blackstone City, the enemy numbers were ballooning. Some dark creatures had already broken through the covering arrow fire. A few leaps later, the more powerful among them landed on the city walls.

Crack!

A giant blade whistled through the air, striking cleanly and beheading a Night Stalkers. Scenes like this played out repeatedly across the battlements, especially in the zones guarded by Alpha-level fighters.

In a flash, the walls were drenched in blood; limbs were scattered everywhere. The slaughter raged on, and lives were snuffed out one after another.

"They're coming!"

Lysinthia's warning rang out again. The other elders felt a cluster of Alpha-level auras approaching from afar.

Just then, a piercing hawk screech sounded over Blackstone City, tinged with urgency.

"Lilith, you're in charge!"

High above Blackstone City, a flock of invisible butterflies appeared. Trailing behind them was a Four-Winged Blood Bat. Thunderhawk Rayden's cry wasn't about claiming territory or intimidating opponents—it was a distress call.

Delilah took a horn from her belt and blew it. This was her private signal with Thunderhawk Rayden, their agreed-upon cue.

Moments later, Thunderhawk Rayden dove down from the sky. After Delilah nodded at Lilith, she leapt onto the thunderhawk's back in a single bound.

Two Alpha-level dark creatures had appeared in the sky, and Thunderhawk Rayden needed backup—otherwise, there was a real chance it could die in battle.

As if on cue, the arrow tower on the far west side of Horde Hall lit up and fired a glowing arrow into the sky.

Boom!

The moment the invisible butterflies flock approached Blackstone City, just entering the arrow tower's range, they were hit. One invisible butterfly was instantly shot down, and two more got caught in the blast, plummeting to their deaths.

Hovering in the air, Delilah spread a pair of fleshy wings behind her, rising steadily on Thunderhawk Rayden's back with a razor-sharp glare.

She held spider silk in her right hand and a taming collar in her left, guiding Thunderhawk Rayden as it swooped after the Four-Winged Blood Bat. As for the invisible butterflies, they had already flown into the arrow tower's kill zone, so they could be ignored for now.

On the ground, besides the butterfly-assassin and the enchanted butterfly, the tentacle monster, and the eight-armed night stalkers had already joined the fight.

"I'll take on the tentacle monster!"

Onyx's tone was casual but radiated confidence. He didn't bother asking any other elder to partner with him. Onyx leaped off the city wall, and the ground cracked beneath him. A crimson Dark Armored Beetle burst upward, catching him neatly. That beetle was Onyx's Blood Spirit.

"Earthshaker, come on! Let's chop down that eight-armed Night Stalkers!"

"Got it!"

Not to be outdone, Rendall shouted at Earthshaker, then jumped off the wall himself.

"You guys can't handle that enchanted butterfly. I'll go."

"Lysintha, have Twilight Viper come with me!"

"Slagor, you manage the battle. Order reinforcements whenever there's a gap in our defenses!"

Concern darkened Lysinthia's face. Out of everyone in the Stoneheart Horde, aside from Orion, Lilith was the one who treated her the best.

"If you're not on these walls watching over him, I'm worried that damned butterfly-assassin might take him down," Lilith said, pointing at Slagor. She smirked, then leapt over the parapet.

Lysinthia wanted to say something else, but it was too late. With no other options, she had to rely on Twilight Viper to help Lilith.

In the blink of an eye, the only Alpha-level fighters left on the city wall were Slagor and Lysinthia. Lysinthia drew the slender sword at her side. Her hair turned into writhing black serpents, each one poised to strike. She stood atop the wall without expression, silent, her senses stretched to their limits.

Slagor glanced at Lysinthia, then at the handful of succubus bloodline warriors awaiting orders behind him. For a moment, he was at a loss for words.

"I'm a fighter, too—you don't have to protect me like I'm defenseless."

Even as he sighed, Slagor realized something else: aside from Orion, anytime an elder served as the Stoneheart Horde's commanding officer, they were pretty much a sitting target.

"The fact that command's in your hands means you're up to it," Lysinthia said calmly. "Stay focused on the battle. Reinforce weak links right away. Minimize casualties."

Her cool voice made Slagor pause. Then he nodded in silence and directed his attention to the edges of the battlefield, keeping watch on every corner.

Chapter 284 What is she really getting at?

Void passage. Sophia appeared once again.

"My dear Orion, you've got quite an impressive group of subordinates," she said in a soft, motherly tone.

Orion's answer was a swirl of lightning flashing around the void passage. This time, he was fully confident that if Sophia tried to cross over, his powerful lightning could blast her to pieces.

"Hee hee hee..."

Sophia couldn't hold back a mischievous laugh at Orion's somewhat dramatic response.

"Orion, are you scared of me?"

Orion kept his eyes shut and said nothing. Deep down, there was indeed a flicker of fear—but not because he was afraid of Sophia herself. He was worried about her using that particular method to have sex with him again.

Although Sophia had never once harmed him during sex—if anything, she was extra gentle—he still felt uneasy.

"It looks like I'm going to suffer a big loss from this invasion," Sophia sighed, her voice sweet and tinged with sorrow, enough to stir anyone's sympathy.

"Orion, aren't you curious whether I'll be the one leading an invasion against your territory again when the dark beast tides come next year?"

The question made Orion lift his head, but he still didn't open his eyes.

"Alas... it won't be me," Sophia went on. "Otherwise, I wouldn't be so eager to have a child with you... hee hee!"

Her first few words sounded regretful, but the teasing tone at the end was clear. She wore a mix of shyness, excitement, wistfulness, and disappointment on her face, creating a magnetism that was hard to resist. Unfortunately, with Orion's eyes closed, he didn't see a thing.

He frowned, sensing hidden meaning in her words, as if she were both warning and tempting him.

"What is she really getting at? Does it mean that next year, the dark creatures who invade my territory won't be her troops anymore?"

Orion mulled over the implications. After a moment, he looked up, finally opening his eyes toward the void passage. Yet on the other side, Sophia was already gone.

"If her troops aren't the ones invading next year, then whose are they? Maybe this means something else—that the void passage opened by the Emerald Dream Realm doesn't appear in a fixed location."

"But why would the gods prevent the void passage from being fixed in one place? Are they protecting themselves from something? What could it be...?"

A sudden thought made Orion's pupils tighten for a second before returning to normal.

"Looks like I've got a long way to go before I can become a god. Becoming a Titan is a distant goal."

After a while, Orion understood that the shifting location of the void passage was meant to stop private deals between the lords and arch lords of the two worlds—specifically the smuggling of each world's essence.

Put simply, the gods of both worlds wouldn't tolerate traitors or black-market deals. If anyone turned traitor, they would be hunted down to the very end.

"Why would Sophia tip me off like this? If no one's allowed to make secret trades, why did she use that as bait to tempt me before?"

Orion stared into the void passage, growing more serious by the second. Ever since he became a lord, he'd realized that his path was riddled with obstacles.

More importantly, he had noticed a sort of boundary set by the gods—their collective decree. In many ways, this boundary held back the growth of lords and arch lords. If he couldn't break through it, becoming a true Titan would be nearly impossible.

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Blackstone City, western wall.

While Orion's thoughts ran deep, blood and fire were already colliding on the western ramparts.

All of a sudden, Lysinthia raised her slender sword and aimed it straight at a dark corner on the wall. At the same time, her aura swept across the area. But the darkness in that corner remained still, with no sign of the butterfly-assassin.

"Is that butterfly-assassin lurking nearby?" Slagor asked at once, quick to guess the truth since his own life was at stake.

"Yes."

"In the shadows?" he whispered. Lysinthia shook her head but kept her sword leveled.

"It's there, and yet not quite there."

Remembering Delilah's earlier report, Slagor immediately understood: the butterfly-assassin was hiding in the shadowed void.

"I'll keep an eye on him. You handle the bigger picture."

"All right."

Encouraged by Lysinthia's calm confidence, Slagor turned to watch the other elders, ready to send help if they needed it.

"Break for me!"

Onyx's furious roars thundered across the battlefield. Wielding his stone axe, he made sweeping attacks, clearly relishing his fight like never before since reaching Alpha-level.

He and his Dark Armored Beetle tag-teamed the tentacle monster from front and back, pressing their advantage until each strike flowed more easily than the last. The tentacle monster, meanwhile, was at a

clear disadvantage: most of its tentacles had already been cut off. Judging by the state of things, Onyx would soon finish it off.

Elsewhere, Rendall and Earthshaker were pushing the eight-armed Night Stalkers to the brink of defeat. Rendall stood forward, bearing his blood shield under the creature's unrelenting assault, while Earthshaker seized gaps from the side and rear. It was a fierce and chaotic fight.

Clang! Clang! Clang!

The Night Stalkers' weapons slammed repeatedly against Rendall's blood shield, each impact strong enough to make him stagger.

But Earthshaker used the opening to slice off several of the creature's extra arms. As long as Rendall held out, victory was practically guaranteed.

A short distance above ground, Lilith was still locked in a struggle with the Enchanted Butterfly, blinking in and out of the fray so quickly that Slagor couldn't help feeling envious. He envied their ability to fly, even if it was only low-altitude flight—something he himself couldn't achieve.

Looking higher up, Slagor noticed the fight between Thunderhawk Rayden and the Four-Winged Blood Bat was nearing its end.

Delilah, riding on Rayden, had steered the thunderhawk into melee so that the Bat's fury would stay fixed on Rayden. Once that happened, Delilah's left hand could slip the taming collar onto the Bat without being repelled.

Thunderhawk Rayden unleashed lightning as it pressed in. The Four-Winged Blood Bat, cornered by its pursuer, gave a savage roar and lunged at the thunderhawk head-on.

Squish! Squish! Squish!

That was the sound of claws plunging into flesh, as Thunderhawk Rayden and the Four-Winged Blood Bat tore into each other with lethal intent.

Seizing that moment, Delilah spread the fleshy wings on her back, swooped onto the Bat from behind, and pressed the taming collar against its body. It was not thrown off. The device fused into the Four-Winged Blood Bat with no resistance.

Chapter 285 X really did mark the spot

Moments later, Delilah's voice rang out from atop the Four-Winged Blood Bat.

"Rayden, you can let go. I've tamed it!"

Thunderhawk Rayden didn't release its grip right away. Only after the Four-Winged Blood Bat pulled its own claws free did Rayden grudgingly loosen its talons and beak.

To be fair, it hadn't gained much of an advantage in this aerial battle. A nearby swarm of invisible butterflies was waiting to launch a fatal strike at any moment, so part of Rayden's focus had remained on them.

Still, once Delilah subdued the Four-Winged Blood Bat, Rayden ignored its wounds and let out an excited series of chirps before bolting off toward the invisible butterflies, which had just escaped the arrow tower's firing range.

Delilah, handling her first tamed flying mount, hesitated for a second. But the instant she saw Thunderhawk Rayden dive, she urged the Four-Winged Blood Bat to chase after it.

However, the invisible butterflies were cunning. After leaving the arrow tower's kill zone, they paid no attention to the thunderhawk or the Four-Winged Blood Bat, fleeing instead into the depths of the dark countryside.

Meanwhile, at low altitude, the Enchanted Butterfly still tangled in battle with Lilith suddenly slammed into her, then used the force of its backward push to flee the scene as well.

On the city wall, Lysinthia, who'd been fixed on a shadowy corner, abruptly furrowed her brow and gave a soft "huh."

"What is it? Something up?" Slagor, who was quite jumpy about staying alive, had most of his attention on Lysinthia and the butterfly-assassin, even while scanning the battlefield.

"Mm. That butterfly-assassin seems to have left."

"Seriously?"

"I'm not sure. From what I can sense, it's gone."

"You mean, it could be using some kind of hidden skill that even you can't detect?"

"Yeah, it's possible."

Lysinthia's expression grew grim. She retracted her sword, adopting a guarded stance. Seeing this, Slagor didn't dare relax, summoning a watery shield around himself.

But nothing happened, no sudden attacks. The threat on the city wall never materialized.

Outside the city, a fierce clash still raged. The tentacle monster and the eight-armed Night Stalkers cried out in misery before each was cut down, lifting the siege on Blackstone City for now.

Even so, regular dark creatures still swarmed the walls, so the horde bloodline warriors weren't letting up.

While Blackstone City was locked in that struggle, the underground fissure battle was winding down.

On the surface, this was because the spider population near the crevasse was huge, plus Rockwell and Thundar's strength presented a serious threat.

Another big factor was that no Alpha-level subterranean creature emerged from the bottomless abyss—there was no real leader among them.

Deep down, however, the real reason was that after the last dark creature invasion, Lilith had placed the pink seed in an ice coffin. The strange fragrance wafting throughout Blackstone City had been fading ever since.

"Looks like the numbers of those underground beasts are dropping so fast that we don't even need to lift a finger anymore!"

Rockwell and Thundar stood by the bottomless abyss, listening to the screeches and howls of the subterranean creatures and little spiders tearing each other apart. They wore expressions of cool indifference.

"The more they wipe each other out, the better. Once those creeps are all gone, whatever's down there will be paradise for us."

Rockwell, who'd been standing guard from the start, knew quite a bit. Orion hadn't always bothered to keep him in the dark.

"Rockwell, are you saying that down there..." Thundar turned, looking spooked by what seemed like a pretty big revelation.

"It's a safe haven our mighty Lord discovered for us. But I won't lie to you, it's a nasty environment, and it won't be easy to survive."

He nodded toward the bottomless abyss. "And as you can see, a whole bunch of subterranean monsters are living down there."

...

"Down there belongs to me, too!" Spider Queen Lorelia called out, scuttling to the edge of the abyss while joining the conversation with a playful tone.

"I've got lots of my kids already building nests below. Soon as Master agrees, I can head down there and take a look! But from the looks of it, it's still pretty dangerous."

Rockwell and Thundar kept quiet, guessing at what truly lay behind that seemingly endless pit—and feeling a sense of awe at Orion's foresight.

The bottomless abyss stretched downward into the underworld.

At the moment, no more monsters appeared near the passage. Clymene and five giant elders rested near the arrow tower, absorbing the aura of death that lingered there.

"Those damned subterranean creeps, you barely see them around most of the time, but now they suddenly swarm up like crazy!" grumbled Vargrum. He'd picked up a few injuries in the earlier fighting, and some broken bones to boot.

"Clymene, should we send a few little spiders up top for intel?"

"Yeah, I'm feeling uneasy without any word on whether Blackstone City's okay."

Clymene didn't answer right away. She just shook her head, her expression serious.

"Elders, right now, Orion is the one commanding the horde. We need to trust him. My brother is a lord, and our worrying is unnecessary."

Her tone was both low-pitched and proud.

"Our job at the moment is to explore this underworld and claim it as new territory for our tribe."

That declaration made the five giant elders realize X really did mark the spot.

"So everything we're doing now is for Orion?" Mordak, Zorn, Balgor, and Grendel murmured, and the mood suddenly grew heavy.

"In a way, yeah. But it's also for our old tribe and for the strongest horde we hope to become," Clymene said, giving them a meaningful look.

"I figure we've still got years—hundreds, maybe thousands—to live in our current state, and our power will only get stronger."

Once again, Clymene spoke, drawing the attention of all five elders.

"You'll all reach Alpha-level eventually!"

Clymene tapped her own breast, then pointed at the other five elders.

"Once you all advance to Alpha-level, do you really think Orion will let us stay down here? Besides, the death energy here is bound to get thinner over time, and when that happens, this place won't be suitable for us anymore."

Clymene lifted her gaze toward the underground passage. Through the darkness, it was as if she could see the young giantlings playing around in their tents, the bloodline warriors just rotated off duty from the city walls, and even her brother Orion himself.

After a moment, Clymene looked away and glanced at each of her five subordinates in turn.

"Orion has opened a far bigger door for us. All we need to do is wait."

Clymene knew that while these five giant elders explored the underworld, their hearts were growing restless. She sensed it, as an Alpha-level Shade Valkyrie.

"When I was little, my mother taught me a saying: 'If you can pick it up, you must also be able to put it down.' I used to be the giant chieftain, but that honor now belongs to Orion. He's done far better at it than I ever did, and now he's our lord."

"So as for your identities as giants, it's time to let them go."

In a strange way, this was a shift in mindset. Because Clymene was Alpha-level, she could sense certain things on a deeper level.

Vargrum, Mordak, Zorn, Balgor, and Grendel—these five Skeletal Knights—had to shake off their old selves. Otherwise, they'd never break into Alpha-level or grasp the unique powers reserved for Skeletal Knights.

"We should head to that portal area now!"

Clymene stopped trying to persuade them. Some truths needed only a gentle nudge. Whether they could truly let go and gain new insight was up to their own wisdom. She grabbed the warhammer Orion had given her and started walking deeper into the underworld.

The five giant elders stayed where they were, leaning against the arrow tower in silent thought.

...

The void passage fell completely quiet. Sophia didn't show again.

Orion remained on alert at first, then gradually relaxed and withdrew a portion of the supernatural power crowding the passage.

As that force receded, the void passage exuded a boundless, solemn presence that captured Orion's attention. Inside, a membrane-like layer—transparent as glass—stretched from the other world to Orion's.

The sight overwhelmed him. Whenever he concentrated on that membrane, he seemed to hear a chorus of foreign voices praying, along with countless demon deities whispering and snarling.

"So this is the rule-based power of a deity?"

Getting no real result, Orion withdrew his focus. Muttering quietly, he returned part of his mind to the Survivor's Platform.

He had questions.

Hulk: "Everyone, why doesn't anyone sell 'World essence' on the Survivor's Platform?"

This had bothered Orion ever since he got his first dark source crystal. After learning that a dark source crystal was essentially one manifestation of World essence, he'd been really curious.

By all logic, there should be plenty of such items—surely the Emerald Dream Realm and Titanion Realm weren't the only two realms locked in divine war.

Leonidas: "It's not that nobody's selling it. You just don't have permission to see those listings."

Hulk: "No permission? The Survivor's Platform has permission settings?"

Orion was stunned. That revelation made him suspect his own Survivor's Platform might differ from others'.

Arthas: "Demigod-level and above enjoy certain special privileges."

Arthas added this comment when he saw Orion's message.

Leonidas: "As for what those privileges are, don't ask. We'd like to know too."

Reading Leonidas's message, Orion deleted the query he'd been typing.

Arthas: "Basically, if someone puts an item containing World essence up for sale, anyone below demigod-level can't even see the listing."

Arthas: "Of course, crystal cores are an exception, since they're a common commodity!"

Arthas: "And that's the real reason crystal cores can serve as a stand-in currency."

Orion frowned, deep in thought. He picked out one key detail from Arthas's explanation: evidently, compared to crystal cores, dark source crystals were far more valuable.

Why more valuable? Because a dark source crystal can directly boost your power, whereas a crystal core requires all sorts of secret techniques to extract energy. That was Orion's best guess.

Leonidas: "Enough talk about World essence. Once you're around it long enough, you'll figure out why it's special."

Leonidas: "You all seem a little too idle. Any interest in joining me for an invasion on a land forsaken by the gods?"

All at once, his message silenced the Champions Alliance channel. Neither Orion nor Arthas said a word.

...

Necro Realm, Bone Throne.

Arthas abruptly sat up, his hollow black eye sockets emitting a profound aura.

"What are you planning?"

He sent a private message to Leonidas.

"Heh heh heh... I discovered a godforsaken land. The strongest presence there is only a veteran Legendary-level entity. With you and me teamed up, we should be able to wipe them out and raze that place entirely. We might even refine part of its world core. So, how about it, you undead skeleton—interested?"

Arthas wanted that world core badly, but he remained silent.

"So why bring Hulk along?" he finally asked. "He's still only at Legendary-level. Running into an arch lord could be lethal."

"Hah! Seriously, you think someone who can kill Legendary-level creatures while only Alpha-level is weak? Besides, Hulk can build territory. Aren't you the slightest bit curious about what this Hulk can really do? Don't forget, you're the one who told me about his feats. Don't pretend you were lying."

Arthas gave no response, popping a crystal core into his mouth and chewing. When he was done, he messaged Leonidas once more.

"You think he'll agree to this?"

Leonidas's reply came immediately, and it was downright cheeky.

"If he's in, great. If he's not, who cares? Question is, are you in or out? Besides, pushing someone into things is basically your specialty, right?"

Done reading, Arthas ignored Leonidas and returned to the Champions Alliance channel to speak again.

Chapter 286 World's core

Arthas: "godforsaken land sounds hella interesting. I'm in!"

Arthas: "Hulk, what about you?"

void passage. Orion glanced upward but didn't notice any movement whatsoever.

Leonidas's invitation was something Orion initially wanted to refuse. Yet, after seeing Arthas agree to join Leonidas, Orion hesitated.

Between Leonidas and Arthas, Orion trusted Arthas more.

"Hey bro, got any advice?"

After some thought, Orion still decided to ask Arthas for help.

"Go if you get the chance. You might score a piece of the world's core—real World essence, the kind that directly powers you up."

Arthas offered his opinion. Orion didn't immediately say yes, though. He asked one more question:

"Bro, what exactly is this godforsaken land?"

"It's a catch-all term for worlds that got discarded by demigods or gods for various reasons."

"Usually these worlds are pretty small and home to all sorts of abandoned races."

"In most cases, an old-school Legendary-level being is their top dog."

Necro Realm, Bone Throne.

The moment Orion asked about the godforsaken land, Arthas knew Orion had taken the bait. So Arthas explained a bit more, subtly hinting and egging Orion on.

Before long, Orion messaged the channel again.

Hulk: "We're in the middle of a war. I'll need at least another month before I'll know if I can go!"

In a bit over a month, the dark beast tides should have died down. At that point, Lord Jorik of the ice plains might or might not invade Orion's territory—no one could say for sure.

Plus, whether Gareth decided to move south or lay low, she would let Orion know. After all, they were currently allies on paper, and they were supposed to check in with each other.

Leonidas: "Hahaha, no worries. Both that bag of bones and I need some time to prep. That godforsaken land isn't as weak as it sounds."

Leonidas: "Orion, let me know in advance when you decide."

Leonidas: "If you're in, make sure you prepare, too. The more of us there are, the stronger we'll be!"

Leonidas's messages raised Orion's eyebrows. He was starting to feel Leonidas was a bit unreliable. But recalling the two gifts Leonidas had given him, Orion's wariness eased.

"We'll see when the time comes," Orion muttered to himself. He gained a bit more insight into his Champions Alliance allies.

Truth be told, Orion really wanted to go—he was dying to broaden his horizons. Still, to be safe, he managed to secure a month of breathing room.

Once the channel quieted down, Orion withdrew his consciousness from the Survivor's Platform and got back to guarding the void passage.

Unknown realm, deep sea.

Kraken watched the discussions in the Champions Alliance channel and felt nothing but envy toward Orion.

Kraken also wanted to join the invasion of a godforsaken land, but Leonidas hadn't invited him, and he wasn't about to tag along uninvited. Besides, interrupting his allies out of nowhere would just be rude.

A while back, Leonidas had indeed invited Kraken to invade a water-heavy world. They succeeded, and Kraken scored some of the world's core. His strength soared from lower Legendary level to middle in one shot. So, he really envied Orion now.

Plus, with Leonidas and Arthas—two arch lords—leading the way this time, Kraken figured it was practically a guaranteed win.

"What a lucky bastard," Kraken mused.

"Hulk might catch up to me real soon."

While feeling jealous of Orion, Kraken grew a bit unhappy with his own situation.

He awakened among the massive octopus clan in the deep sea, ruling over those waters. Any world he fought in basically had to be water-based, or his power would take a hit. That limitation kept people from taking him along, so he lagged a whole tier behind the other Champions Alliance members.

What Kraken didn't know was that past invitation had been Leonidas's way of evaluating him. Clearly, Leonidas wasn't all that impressed with Kraken's performance.

...

Blackstone City, western wall.

The battle had raged for three days straight, and at last, the endless dark creatures from afar began to dwindle.

Once again, the Stoneheart Horde had seized the victory.

"The smarter dark creatures are quietly backing off. What's left are mindless beasts that only know how to kill!"

Ever since the Alpha-level creatures on the dark side had high-tailed it, the outcome was pretty much set.

Eager for more battle glory, the Horde's own Alpha-level powerhouses joined the fray, hopping down from the walls with blades at the ready.

Even Lysinthia couldn't resist; she sent Twilight Viper into the fight.

Right now, only Delilah and Lilith remained on the wall. Lilith's line just now had been her reaction to the retreating dark creatures.

"We're well over halfway through winter. The dark beast tides will subside soon. Even though we took some losses, we got plenty out of it."

Delilah glanced at Lilith beside her. Ever since they'd come of age, it was rare for them to stand together like this. Their relationship, once so chilly, had gradually thawed as the succubus clan merged into the Stoneheart Horde.

"I didn't think you'd trust that quirky-haired girl so much," Delilah remarked suddenly, shifting the topic to Lysinthia.

Even though Delilah had been on the thunderhawk's back, she'd kept part of her attention on the overall battle. She definitely noticed Lilith letting Lysinthia use Twilight Viper to guard her.

Lilith said nothing. She couldn't exactly talk in public about her connections with Lysinthia and Orion.

"In any case, the succubus clan is your backbone," Delilah continued. "I want to remind you to guard your position carefully."

Backbone and a reminder—this was a sister's concern. Though indirect, Lilith understood it came from Delilah's care and the succubus clan's support.

"Orion's advancement to Legendary level opened up a whole new world for us," Delilah went on. "But remember, Legendary level may not be his limit."

"Do your best. Whether it's your own cultivation or making sure Orion stays fond of you, don't slack off."

With that, Delilah stood up and walked away.

Delilah reached the top of the city wall as a black shape streaked in from the sky. She leapt lightly and landed on the Four-Winged Blood Bat.

Then the sharp cry of a thunderhawk rang out above.

Having both the Thunderhawk and the Four-Winged Blood Bat by her side, Delilah was ready to survey the area around Blackstone City to prepare for the days ahead.

Lilith stayed on the wall, watching as the thunderhawk and Four-Winged Blood Bat vanished. A hint of pleasure flickered in her gaze.

Under the long night sky, time slipped by quickly.

The fiercest wave of dark creatures had already been crushed. From here on out, any attacks on Blackstone City would be small and scattered, probably no more than a thousand at a time.

Chapter 287 Orion is back

Orion sensed a sudden disturbance near the void passage.

The energy fluctuations were complicated—divine power, faith energy, and void rules all churned together, making the void passage unstable.

"My darling Orion, this might be the last time we ever meet!"

Sophia appeared on the opposite side of the void passage. Her voice was soft and brimming with a motherly warmth. Yet Orion heard not the slightest hint of regret.

That is to say, neither Orion nor Sophia had taken their sexual encounter in that dream too seriously.

Sure, Sophia was gorgeous, but Orion felt no fondness for her, nor would he treat her kindly.

If anything, Orion regarded Sophia with hostility.

Yes, the sex had felt nice, but he hadn't been in control at all. Orion definitely didn't want to experience that again.

Orion looked up and gazed into the void passage. The next moment, his figure blurred as he teleported back to Blackstone City.

Blackstone City, atop the city wall.

Raindrops pitter-pattered down onto snowdrifts that hadn't fully melted yet. With this spring rain, everyone in the Stoneheart Horde was overjoyed.

Boom...

Thunder rolled in the distance as Orion landed on the wall, transcendent power coursing through him.

Hearing the commotion, Delilah, Thundar, and Rendall—who were currently on watch—emerged from the meeting room. Their faces lit up when they saw Orion's return.

"Lord, you're back!"

"It's Orion!"

"Our lord is back!"

When the lightning subsided, Orion's transcendent power disappeared, and all the force emanating from him settled to a calm.

"Thank you for your hard work."

Delilah, Thundar, and Rendall each shook their heads, implying this was simply their duty.

"Spring rain is here; the dark beast tides have ended, and winter is almost gone. Pass the word to the council members to gather at the Horde Hall."

With that, Orion headed off toward the Horde Hall.

Delilah, Thundar, and Rendall exchanged glances, then followed in his wake.

As soon as Orion showed up in Blackstone City, the other elders of the horde quickly got the news.

By the time he reached the grand stone doors of the Horde Hall, Lilith and Lysinthia were already waiting outside.

"Well done."

Lilith and Lysinthia had both performed admirably in this latest dark beast tide.

Especially Lysinthia—she'd displayed a keenness of perception even Orion hadn't anticipated, prompting him to offer a rare word of praise.

Talking as they walked, Orion, flanked by the two women, made his way into the outer fortress's main hall.

Once inside, the three of them separated. Their positions in the horde hierarchy were not the same.

Orion, with Lilith by his side, proceeded toward the throne, while Lysinthia took her place in the Warden's seat.

Twenty minutes later, all the elders had arrived.

"Thank you all for your efforts."

This was Orion's first statement. It was the first time the horde had claimed victory through collective might without him present.

"These are the spoils our horde collected during this dark beast tide."

Beneath the throne stood a small table, on which sat six wooden boxes.

Two boxes contained strange giant insect specimens from the bottomless abyss; the other four came from a Dark Armored Beetle, a tentacle monster, a Phantom Spider, and a Night Stalker.

Once Orion was sure everyone's attention was focused on him and the boxes, he extended his hand. Transcendent power flared, and he drew two of the wooden boxes—those holding dark source crystals—into his grasp.

"Six Alpha-level resources, and I'm taking two."

In the blink of an eye, the two boxes vanished into Orion's storage ring.

But that wasn't all. With a flick of his right hand, the wooden box containing the strange giant insect crystal cores flew straight toward Elder of Stewardship Delilah.

"These two go into the reserves, as part of the horde's treasury."

No one spoke up in the meeting chamber. Not a single person dared challenge his decision.

Even the Alpha-level fighters who had contributed heavily in the war showed little concern about how the spoils were divvied up, as if it had nothing to do with them.

Then Orion gave a slight shake of his hand, and another wooden box appeared—one he'd previously displayed to motivate everyone. It also held Alpha-level crystal cores.

"This fulfills the promise I made before the battle."

The box floated onto the table. Now there were three wooden boxes there in total.

"I've entrusted the distribution order of Alpha-level resources to our four senior elders. They'll announce which three among you will receive these."

As soon as Orion said that, the meeting room erupted in chatter—buzzing conversations overlapping all at once.

Unfazed, Orion let them talk. He delegated the final details to the four senior elders.

He was already splitting the pie; who got the cherry on top or the swirl of whipped cream was not something he had to personally decide.

Gathering in a corner, the four senior elders pulled out a small record book and began cross-referencing entries.

Eventually, the most level-headed among them, Elder of Prophecy Onyx, stepped forward with the results.

"Fellow elders, after comparing war contributions, verifying combat strength, and assessing loyalty, the top three in the resource order are Vespera, Slate, and Samson.

"You should have at least some idea of your own ranking. I won't belabor the point.

"If anyone's unsure, you can work with the Elder of Stewardship to confirm your number."

Before Onyx finished speaking, most of the elders had already turned to look at Vespera, Slate, and Samson.

The three of them were seated, unable to hide how excited they felt. Their bodies subtly trembled in anticipation.

Up on the throne, Orion, too, shifted his gaze to these three elders.

Vespera was an elder of the succubus clan. Besides fighting on the front lines, she belonged to the Sentinel Corps strategy team.

She ranked just behind Lilith, Delilah, and Desdemona in terms of potential within the succubus tribe.

"Vespera joined us back when the black forest was still divided. Through all the minor wars I've led the Stoneheart Horde through, she's hardly missed a single one."

"Elder Vespera, this is your due."

Orion waved a hand, and one of the boxes on the table floated gently into Elder Vespera's hands.

Vespera's long record of war contributions made her a natural fit among the council's eight elders.

As for loyalty, that was beyond doubt—she'd signed a contract with Delilah.

With Delilah's support, Vespera had advanced swiftly despite previously lagging behind in power.

Next were Slate and Samson, both giants from the blackstone tribe.

Even before Orion was of age, they had already served as giant elders.

Since the Stoneheart Horde's founding, the council had undergone several restructures. Slate and Samson still managed to climb higher every time—clear proof that their achievements and abilities had been solidly tested.

Chapter 288 Cross-realm invasion

"Elders Slate and Samson have been defending our tribe ever since my father was chieftain. Their accomplishments speak for themselves."

"After I took over, they followed me on our southern invasions, building up more and more victories along the way."

"They've fought in every major clash—from the dark beast tides to our reprisal campaigns—never missing a single front line."

"These rewards are well-deserved."

With a wave of Orion's hand, the remaining two wooden boxes landed in Slate and Samson's hands.

"For my Lord, I, Slate, am willing to die on the battlefield, giving every last drop of blood!"

"So am I," Samson chimed in.

Orion raised a calming hand, gesturing for the two elders—who had stood up in their excitement—to sit back down. They were giants from the Blackstone tribe, and Orion was genuinely pleased to see them receive Alpha-level resources.

Someone else, however, seemed even happier than Orion. Since the moment Onyx announced Slate and Samson's names, Rendall had worn a smile that stretched from ear to ear.

Though Slate and Samson were relatively young, they'd served as part of the select few elders from the tribe in years past. They had once hunted side by side with Rendall, fought back-to-back against dark creatures, and accompanied Orion into battle. Watching the rise of Elder Slate and Elder Samson gave Rendall a special kind of joy.

As the wooden boxes were handed out, the discussions in the room gradually faded until falling silent. Orion remained seated on the throne, taking in the calm. After a few moments, the hush was almost unbroken.

"The dark beast tides are over, but we're now facing two new possibilities: either we invade or defend ourselves against an invasion."

"In other words, my fellow elders, we can't afford to let our guard down."

"Effective immediately, all our armies are to reorganize, bolster armed readiness, and stay alert for any potential fight."

As lord, Orion knew his people and these horde bloodline warriors had only one road ahead: perpetual battle or preparing for it. Of course, children, the elderly, and civilians of every race in the horde would remain protected, their basic needs guaranteed.

"Also, get the damaged sections of the outer walls repaired as soon as possible."

"And on the ridge in Moonshadow Valley, build some towers and watchposts!"

"... .."

Orion rattled off a series of urgent tasks, then handed the rest of the meeting over to the four senior elders. It was not until evening that the discussions concluded and everyone began filing out of the Horde Hall.

Only the Alpha-level powerhouses stayed behind—or, more precisely, had the right to remain.

Orion usually saved the biggest matters for last, to give these heavyweights some advance notice. Even Spider Queen Lorelia didn't hurry back to her underground fissure this time; she quietly waited for Orion to speak.

Looking around at his core leaders, Orion's expression softened.

"This year, I won't be heading south to invade."

"We still need time to develop and build our strength."

As soon as Orion said that, Onyx, Thundar, Slagor, Earthshaker, and others—those who relished a good fight—looked deflated. They had been all-in on the idea of another invasion.

"As for that Glacial Dragon in the northern ice plains, we're not sure whether it'll attack us or not. We'll have to wait and see."

"I've already sent the thunderhawk to scout our borders, so we'll have news soon."

"Regardless of whether Lord Jorik invades our territory, we need to be battle-ready."

"Because I plan to take some of you on a cross-realm invasion."

A cross-realm invasion was a whole new concept to the elders. They frowned in unison, each looking deeply puzzled.

Orion scanned them but didn't elaborate just yet. Instead, he started talking about the winter invasion of dark creatures.

"My disappearance this time was to defend the void passage."

"Our world is called the Titanion Realm, but how vast it truly is, I'm not sure yet."

"What I do know is that this realm definitely has demigods, and possibly even gods."

"Our world is locked in a divine war against a place called the Emerald Dream Realm, and the dark beast tides are part of their invasion strategy."

"That's the real source of the dark beast tides."

This shocking revelation was something Orion had carefully decided to reveal. Because of his connection to the Champions Alliance, he'd be interacting more often with them.

He needed his subordinates to broaden their horizons too. Otherwise, when they eventually invaded other worlds, they might miss out on precious resources and artifacts.

Orion looked around. Most elders remained speechless; some muttered under their breath, seemingly trying to process it all.

"Lord, are you saying these dark creatures really come from another realm?"

Onyx was the first to snap out of his shock enough to speak.

Orion flipped his hand, revealing an Alpha-level dark source crystal.

"The reason dark source crystals can power us up is, in my understanding, because they hold a trace of world essence."

"The dark creatures' invasion of our realm is fundamentally about stealing that essence."

As Orion spoke, the other elders refocused on him.

"So, resources like dark source crystals are the very things we're going to steal for ourselves during future invasions. They're our most vital and valuable prizes."

"They don't just strengthen you—they strengthen me as well."

Having set the stage, Orion moved on to the matter of the cross-realm invasion.

"While guarding that void passage, I made some friends. We agreed to invade a certain godforsaken land together."

"The enemies there will be powerful—mostly unknown to you, and likely all hostile."

"It's high risk, high reward. You have to be ready to die far from home."

Orion himself wasn't sure just how dangerous that godforsaken land might be. But the fact that Leonidas wanted to bring Arthas along at least suggested it wouldn't be a stroll in the park. Still, that meant there was a decent shot at success.

"Lord, for this cross-realm invasion, are you going to lead the charge personally?"

Rendall was concerned about Orion's safety—and, by extension, the horde's.

"Yes. I'm going myself."

Rendall's brow furrowed, his face darkening noticeably.

"In that case, Lord, what if Jorik and Gareth attack us the moment you leave?"

Orion wasn't sure how to respond. That question loomed over his own thoughts.

What he did know was that, during Gareth's two southern invasions, Lord Jorik in the north had never once tried to raid Gareth's lair—a puzzle Orion still hadn't solved.

It wasn't until he reached Legendary level that a certain theory had begun to form in his mind, one he would need to confirm by speaking directly with Gareth.

Chapter 289 I'd love to claim the ice plains for myself

Five days later, Orion didn't see the thunderhawk, but he did see Gareth's messenger.

Three kilometers outside Blackstone City, Arden was intercepted by a Four-Winged Blood Bat.

Looking at the Four-Winged Blood Bat with its sharp roar and fierce eyes, Arden almost thought the dark beast tides hadn't ended.

It wasn't until he heard Orion's telepathic message that Arden breathed a sigh of relief. The Four-Winged Blood Bat also turned and went to patrol elsewhere.

Arden had no choice but to land his Storm Vulture and walk to Blackstone City.

This was the difference. Two years ago, Arden would fly right over Blackstone City, acting all high and mighty when delivering messages.

But this year, facing the Legendary-level Orion, he had to adjust his attitude. Big time.

In the Horde Hall, Orion met Arden in the reception hall.

"Messenger Arden greets Lord Orion!"

Arden adopted a very humble posture, immediately prostrating himself on the ground to salute Orion.

Previously, Orion had harbored murderous intentions towards Arden.

However, after his promotion to Lord, Orion simply ignored small fries like Arden.

"Gareth sent you with a message?"

Orion's face was calm, betraying no emotion. He was the picture of cool indifference.

"Yes, Lord Orion!"

Arden spoke submissively, not daring to show any disrespect.

"What's the message?"

Orion's expression remained neutral, giving nothing away.

"Lord Orion, Gareth said she awaits you at the border of Half-Moon Lake!"

Orion raised an eyebrow, his voice still calm, showing no change in emotion.

"Did she say what it's about?"

"No!"

Orion remained silent, and Arden continued to lie prostrate on the ground, not daring to raise his head.

The feeling of being oppressed by Orion's aura and words made Arden extremely uncomfortable.

"You may leave."

Arden's face showed a hint of joy, but when he looked up at Orion, the Lord had already vanished from the reception hall.

"Mr. Messenger, you best be on your way. You're not welcome here."

It was Dace, the guard, speaking. He knew very well that Orion didn't care for Arden one bit.

So, his tone was dripping with sarcasm as he showed Arden the door.

Being in Blackstone City, Arden had no choice but to swallow his pride. He didn't react at all.

However, before leaving, Arden glanced at Dace, his eyes filled with coldness and hatred.

A mere hero-level guard daring to give him attitude? Arden was *fuming* inside.

Only after leaving Blackstone City by a kilometer did Arden summon his Storm Vulture and ascend into the sky.

Arden looked at Blackstone City, which had expanded more than tenfold, his eyes filled with astonishment.

"This city is much larger and more magnificent than before!"

"They've developed so quickly in just one year?"

Roar!

The roar of a Four-Winged Blood Bat came from afar. Arden's expression changed, and he quickly urged his Storm Vulture south.

In the Horde Hall, at a window...

Lilith let out a soft moan, collapsing into Orion's arms.

Orion held Lilith's hips, kissed her hair, and whispered, "Tell Rendall and the other elders that I'm going to Half-Moon Lake to patrol the territory. I'll be back soon."

Moments later, lightning flashed, and Orion landed on the back of a Four-Winged Blood Bat.

Orion's sudden appearance startled the Four-Winged Blood Bat, causing it to tremble and struggle to maintain its balance.

"You spineless creature!"

"Take me south! Chop chop!"

After complaining, Orion withdrew his aura and supernatural power, standing firmly on the bat's back.

On the city wall, Delilah, who was inspecting the progress of the wall's repairs, sensed the Four-Winged Blood Bat's anxiety and shook her head.

In the sky, after receiving Delilah's instructions and reassurance, the Four-Winged Blood Bat flapped its wings, regained its balance, and flew towards Half-Moon Lake.

On the ground, Lysintha and Slagor, escorting the Twilight Viper to Half-Moon Lake with a team of soldiers, heard the roar of the Four-Winged Blood Bat and looked up.

"If only we could fly, we wouldn't have to go through all this trouble!" Slagor sighed, glancing towards Half-Moon Lake before continuing on.

"There will be a day," Lysinthia said confidently, her faith in Orion unshakeable.

Several days later, near the eastern border of Half-Moon Lake...

Roar!

Roar!

Low roars echoed through the nearby forest, followed by the cracking and crashing of giant trees being toppled.

Two abyssal dragons stopped on opposite banks of a river, roaring at each other.

On the backs of the dragons sat Orion and Gareth.

"I thought it would take you two more days to arrive!" Gareth looked at Orion, sensing the undeniable aura of a Legendary-level being.

"It was Lord Gareth's summons. I wouldn't dare delay," Orion replied, his voice flat, using the honorific but conveying no respect.

"Are you joining the southern invasion?"

"Nope."

Orion's reply was swift and decisive, almost cutting Gareth off.

Gareth was momentarily taken aback, then chuckled. "Straight to the point, I see. Why aren't you going south this time?"

"I need more time to build up my strength. My foundation isn't strong enough."

Orion's answer was flawless, and even Gareth found it reasonable. If she were in his shoes, she wouldn't go south either.

"I'm going."

"I want to see how powerful Lokiviria's insect lord really is."

Orion narrowed his eyes, studying Gareth. She wasn't what you'd call beautiful, with her bulging muscles and defined physique. She looked more like a man.

"Lord Gareth, aren't you worried that Lord Jorik will take advantage of your absence and seize the Abyssal Chasm?"

Honestly, this was the real reason Orion had bothered to come.

Gareth laughed softly at his question. Now she understood completely why Orion wasn't going south. Building strength was one thing, but fear of Jorik's backstabbing was another.

"Orion, if you went south and found out your black forest had been taken, what would you do?"

"I'd kill them."

Gareth chuckled again, a hint of amusement in her voice. "See? You would choose to retaliate. Don't you think other lords would do the same?"

"Besides, wouldn't you want to take the opportunity to conquer the northern ice plains?"

"The ice plains may be harsh, but they're home to many races and some unique life forms, like that wind elemental, for example."

"I'd love to claim the ice plains for myself!"

Orion remained silent, acknowledging the validity of Gareth's points.

Chapter 290 Lord's Pact

"Heh... I know why you're so worried!" Gareth chuckled again, not to mock Orion, but amused by his cautiousness. "Orion, you might not know this, but there's a sort of Lord's Pact on this continent."

"Lords in the far north aren't supposed to invade other territories while those lords are away on southern invasions."

The Lord's Pact. This was the most valuable piece of information Orion had heard all day.

"So, no lord would willingly break this pact unless they have a death wish, want to be universally hated, or are looking to donate their territory to someone else."

Orion's face remained expressionless, but his mind was racing. Before hearing about this pact, he'd felt constrained. Now, he felt a sense of liberation.

This pact was essentially the lords of the far north banding together for mutual protection. With this pact, as long as he was strong enough, Orion could launch a southern invasion without worrying about his own territory being attacked.

"What happens if the pact is broken?" This was Orion's primary concern. He needed to know the consequences and whether he could handle them.

"The surrounding lords can then invade the offending lord's territory under the banner of upholding the pact. They carve it up amongst themselves."

"Orion, breaking the pact comes at a steep price."

Orion nodded. The price was indeed steep, putting the violator in a desperate situation. And it would completely destroy their reputation. No other lord would ally with a pact-breaker.

...

"Thunderwood Forest is in turmoil. Looks like your Half-Moon Lake has benefited quite a bit!" Gareth changed the subject to Half-Moon Lake, seeing that Orion had fallen silent.

The previous Lord of Thunderwood Forest, Ariel, had died, and the harpies had scattered. Gareth had spent considerable time and effort reorganizing the area.

During this reorganization, many races had migrated to Half-Moon Lake, including the Garland Tribe.

"Orion, the Garland Tribe has pledged allegiance to me. I've heard there are members of the Garland Tribe in Half-Moon Lake. May I bring them back?"

The corners of Orion's mouth turned up in a slight smile. Only now did he understand that Gareth's invitation and inquiry about the southern invasion were merely a pretense.

Her true purpose was to retrieve the enchanting Garland Tribe members and bring them back to her territory.

"Lord Gareth, there are no Garland Tribe members in Half-Moon Lake!"

"If you don't believe me, you can search Half-Moon Lake yourself."

Orion shook his head, feigning ignorance and avoiding a direct refusal. He wasn't technically lying. At this moment, there were indeed no Garland Tribe members in Half-Moon Lake.

Thundar had brought those women to Blackstone City last year. They were confined within the city, enchanting buildings and the city walls.

And, it should be mentioned, the Garland Tribe women were quite attractive. Apart from a few who were chosen by Lilith and Delilah as subordinates, the rest were allocated to the elders. Now, they have become the women of the elders, and some are even bearing their offspring.

Gareth understood. She wasn't getting those Garland Tribe members back. And she wasn't stupid. If she actually entered Half-Moon Lake to search, she'd be guilty of invasion.

"Lord Orion, I await your messenger next spring!"

The abyssal dragon let out a low growl and turned, slowly disappearing into the forest. Only Gareth's words lingered in the air.

"My messenger next spring, huh?"

"I suppose I should get a messenger of my own!" Orion muttered to himself, urging his own abyssal dragon into the opposite side of the forest.

...

Half a month later, in the Horde Hall of Blackstone City...

The council meeting concluded. The horde's alpha-level elders, hearing about the Lord's Pact for the first time, were filled with mixed emotions. They hadn't realized such an unwritten agreement existed among the lords.

Of course, after Orion explained the pact, the elders, in their discussion, identified several loopholes. However, exploiting those loopholes wasn't worth the risk of provoking a lord's wrath.

...

That day, Orion sat alone on his throne, immersing his mind in the Survivor's Platform.

Champions Alliance, internal channel.

Hulk: "Mr. Leonidas, the fighting here is over. I'm ready to tag along and see the world with you guys."

Leonidas: "Hahaha, no problem! I'll chat with you later!"

Edward: "Leonidas, Arthas, don't get yourselves into too much trouble!"

Leonidas: "Deputy Commander, don't you worry. This invasion of the godforsaken land will be a piece of cake. No danger at all."

Seeing Deputy Commander Edward's message, Orion felt a sense of unease, like he'd been tricked. But he'd already committed, and he wasn't one to back out.

Besides, the thunderhawk had returned with news that the northern ice plains were quiet. Lord Jorik showed no signs of wanting to invade.

In other words, if Orion didn't participate in the cross-realm invasion this year, he'd have nothing to do but stay in his territory, making love with his women.

"Bro, what do I need to prepare?" Orion messaged Arthas, still feeling a little apprehensive.

"Gather your troops. The more, the merrier!"

"Just wait. Leonidas will have everything else sorted out in three days, tops."

"This is mainly a land-based operation, so don't bring any navy, alright?"

Arthas replied quickly, telling Orion what he needed to do.

Not long after, Leonidas sent Orion an invitation to a public channel.

The channel had four members: Leonidas, Arthas, Kraken, and Orion.

Leonidas: "Kraken reached out to me, said he wants in too. I figured since that godforsaken land has a couple of big islands, his deep-sea armies might actually come in handy."

Leonidas explained in the channel. Arthas and Orion remained silent. Kraken hadn't been able to resist the temptation and had contacted Leonidas, expressing his desire to join the invasion.

Leonidas had initially refused. However, after discussing it with Arthas, he'd surprisingly agreed to Kraken's request.

Arthas's reasoning was that by comparing Kraken and Orion, they could gauge Orion's true strength.

This operation was Leonidas's initiative. Orion and the others had no decision-making power.

Just as Orion was hesitating about whether to type "No objections," Leonidas initiated a trade with him.

Leonidas offered two gleaming golden scrolls, tied together with ribbons.