

Titan King 861

Chapter 861: A Disciple's Ambition

Orion lifted Pallas, who offered no resistance.

Though he had been plucked from his warm furs while still asleep, the mention of the youth camp made Pallas instantly excited. It was a place he had been looking forward to visiting for a long time.

"Daddy, does Elara have to participate too?"

"Elara, you're a mage. You can participate or not, but you must follow your mentor's teachings and practice meditation daily."

Orion doted on Elara. Besides, he knew the Horde's standard training methods for its younglings were not necessarily suitable for her.

After a moment's thought, Orion retrieved a fist-sized sphere of world essence from his storage ring and tucked it into Elara's arms.

"Ooh! It's a Source Fruit! Thank you, Daddy!" Elara chirped, planting a loud kiss on Orion's forehead, exceptionally pleased.

In her eyes, world essence was a type of edible fruit, and it was her favorite food.

"Daddy!"

Orion turned his head and saw Pallas staring at him with shining eyes.

"You," Orion said, giving Pallas a playful flick on the forehead. "Don't even think about it. That is your sister's snack."

World essence was a wonderful thing, but it was far too potent for a youngling like Pallas to consume. If not for Elara's special nature, no one below the Legendary tier would even have the chance to touch it.

Soon, Orion, followed by a retinue of guards, arrived at the military camp in the outer city.

Without hesitation, he walked inside with his two small children.

Before they even reached the training grounds, the grunts and shouts of martial practice could be heard from the youth camp, occasionally interspersed with the babbling squeals of the very youngest children, the newest batch to enter the camp.

Orion held Pallas out to the guard at the gate.

The guard saluted with fanatical devotion, then took Pallas in his arms and turned to enter the training grounds.

The bloodline warriors who guarded the youth camp were all hand-picked from the horde's most loyal members.

"Does Elara want to watch the younglings train with Daddy?"

Elara's gaze returned from the departing figures of Pallas and the guard. She draped herself listlessly over Orion's head.

"Yes, Daddy, Elara is willing."

Orion smiled, then carried Elara on his shoulders toward a high platform inside the camp. That spot was generally reserved for the elders when they came to inspect the younglings' training results.

When Orion stepped onto the high platform, his massive figure drew the attention of every youngling, guard, and training mentor.

The atmosphere in the youth camp visibly grew more serious.

The children here ranged in age from as old as twelve or thirteen down to as young as three.

After their initial training, the eyes of some of the older younglings already held a look of determination and strength.

Though their bodies had not yet fully developed, the youthful vigor they displayed during their training was like that of the Stoneheart Horde itself.

"Daddy, Daddy, it's little brother!"

Elara had sharp eyes and quickly spotted Pallas standing at the far left of a queue, mimicking the movements of a group of giant younglings.

Pallas's face was filled with a joy and excitement that only appeared when he was with children his own age.

Having lived for so long under Elara's oppressive shadow, he finally looked like a normal giant youngling.

Orion followed Elara's pointing finger and saw Pallas. He also saw Rolan, standing at the very front, leading all the giant younglings in their training.

Rolan was clad in leather armor, holding a trident, and every one of his movements was executed with serious precision.

Rolan has grown a lot taller, too.

Orion thought with a hint of melancholy. The disciple he had personally raised was becoming more and more outstanding.

After a period of group training, a battle-hardened bloodline warrior, retired from the battlefield, took over, shouting commands and teaching the children how to maintain formations and fight cooperatively.

Rolan, who had been leading the training just moments before, now stood before Orion.

"Mentor!" he said, his face alight with joy, his eyes shining with sincere fanaticism.

Rolan had grown up bathed in the legends of Orion. He had always been immensely proud to have Orion as his mentor and had vowed to carry on that honor.

"You've grown much taller," Orion said, reaching out a large hand to pat Rolan's strong body. "Have you completed this year's challenge?"

"I have, Mentor," Rolan replied, his voice firm and powerful. "Your disciple is now the strongest warrior among my peers in the Horde."

Orion nodded. He was not at all surprised by Rolan's achievement.

He himself had poured a great deal of resources into the boy's training. Whenever he acquired skill scrolls that duplicated effects he already possessed, he would give them to Rolan to learn.

In Orion's heart, before his own sons were born, Rolan had carried a part of the Stoneheart Horde's future on his shoulders.

Of course, with the arrival of Elara and his sons, the Horde's future was now even more prosperous.

The good thing was that Rolan's generation and Pallas's were perfectly staggered, avoiding any internal conflict.

"If you have any questions, you can always come to the castle to find me."

"Yes, Mentor!"

Rolan looked at Orion, his face hesitant. He wanted to say something, but the words wouldn't come out.

"You kid. If you have something to say, just say it."

Orion gave Rolan a gentle slap on the head, finding the situation both amusing and curious.

The little boy who had once stared wide-eyed, drooling at Lilith's roasted meat outside the lord's tent, now had troubles of his own.

"Mentor, your disciple has no more rivals in the Horde. Your disciple wants to go to the battlefield."

Hearing Rolan's words, Orion's eyes slowly narrowed.

"Is this your own idea, or did someone put you up to this?"

His tone became extremely serious.

"Mentor, this is your disciple's own idea."

Orion stared into Rolan's eyes, and Rolan met his gaze directly.

They were the same eyes as before. This was still the same Rolan.

"If I recall correctly, you're only twelve."

"Mentor, your disciple will be thirteen next month."

"Thirteen... thirteen..." Orion murmured the word, suddenly feeling how quickly time had passed.

"Why do you want to go to the battlefield?"

Orion's focus returned. He gazed at Rolan, and an imposing aura, stern without being angry, locked onto the boy.

"Mentor, your disciple wants to be like you, to grow in battle and become the Horde's strongest bloodline warrior."

Orion suddenly smiled, and the smile grew into a laugh.

This kid. He still remembers his dream from back then.

Chapter 862: Dark Nether Formation

Orion stopped laughing and looked at Rolan, his eyes glancing at the Bloodthirsty Trident slung across the boy's back. It had once been Orion's own favored weapon.

"You can go to the battlefield," he said finally. "But before you do, I want you to go and challenge every one of your peers among the humans, the blood elves, the dwarves, and the dragons. If you defeat them all, you can report to the Elder of Combat yourself."

It was a test, but also a way for Orion to indirectly increase Rolan's combat experience and broaden his horizons.

"Mentor, your disciple will definitely complete the task you have given me," Rolan said, placing a hand over his chest in a salute, his eyes blazing with passion.

"Alright, go on. Continue your training."

"As you command!"

Rolan turned, the trident on his back looking comically large for his frame. Watching him go, Orion suddenly had the strange feeling of a new generation rising to take the place of the old.

"Daddy, is that your disciple?"

As Orion was lost in thought, Elara, who had been perched on his head the whole time, suddenly spoke. Her tone held a strange, inexplicable depth.

"Mm. His name is Rolan," Orion said, shaking off his reverie and introducing him to Elara. "He is the most talented young genius of our giant tribe. Back in Blackstone City, in the north, he was always by my side, learning."

"He is very strong," Elara observed. "In his eyes, I saw not a single trace of fear or apprehension. Little brother Pallas is far behind him." When she spoke of Pallas, Elara's tone became slightly old-mannish, as if she were an elder disappointed in a hopeless student, despite the fact that she and Pallas were both still just children.

Orion smiled, not offering any judgment on Pallas. The situation now was completely different from how it had been in the past. The way of life and the values of each generation would naturally be different.

Rolan's generation had been born around the time of Orion's rise. They had caught the tail end of the Stoneheart Horde's hard times, when there wasn't enough food to eat or warm clothes to wear.

They had experienced the territorial wars in the Black Forest, the brutal dark beast tides, the migration from south to north, and even the great North-South War. Compared to the generations that would come after them, theirs possessed a unique sense of urgency. They were younglings who had personally lived through hardship and had only been enjoying a life of comfort for a few years.

Therefore, the temperament of Rolan's generation and Pallas's was entirely different. Talent, temperament, experience, style—each had their own strengths, and they could not be judged by the same standard.

"Mm... so Elara also thinks Rolan is impressive?" Orion asked, playfully patting her on the bottom, trying to understand his adopted daughter better through these small details.

"Very impressive. With the magic Elara knows now, I probably couldn't defeat him."

"Hahaha... then little Elara will have to work hard! You just heard him, Rolan wants to become the strongest in the entire Stoneheart Horde."

"Hmph... don't worry, Daddy. In the future, Elara will be the strongest!" Elara raised a small fist, cheering herself on. She decided then and there that she would skip playing with Pallas today. She would go back and meditate.

...

Time galloped like a horse, passing with each crack of the whip.

In the blink of an eye, more than a month had gone by. Orion sat on his throne, his consciousness immersed in the Survivor's Platform, scouring for goods, increasing his resources, enriching the horde's treasury, and expanding his own knowledge.

"Elf, are you dead yet?" he sent in a message. He hadn't heard from Aerin in a long time. Ever since he had given her the life-saving artifacts, she had seemingly vanished.

"Godfather, did you miss me? Can you give me some more of those Scarecrows you sent me last time?" This time, Aerin's reply was quick. At the very least, it meant she was living comfortably, free from the anxiety and fear that had plagued her before.

"Is the war on your side over?" Orion asked, completely ignoring her request for more Cursed Scarecrows. Those things were in short supply even for his own people; he had no intention of letting any more of them flow out.

"No, the plague mist is being held back outside the forest by a magical barrier for now, so we Wood Elves have found peace again."

Orion was somewhat disappointed by this answer. If her world wasn't in a state of crisis, she wouldn't seek his help, and he wouldn't get a chance to intervene in her world.

"Prepare more high-tier magical plants and alchemical birds. I have a great need for them over here," Orion said, stating his own demands before ending the conversation.

The opportunity to enter Aerin's world had not completely vanished, but he would have to wait patiently. He was certain that a plague capable of troubling the entire Wood Elf race had to have a powerful entity or organization behind it.

As Orion was pondering this, a message came in from Julius Caesar.

"Big Boss, thank you for your help! I successfully defended Sacred Sword City!"

Seeing Caesar's message, Orion's spirits lifted. Compared to Aerin, Caesar was a much more worthy investment. And in their repeated exchanges, Caesar had provided him with many good things in return.

"If you won a defensive siege, you must have killed a lot of enemies, right?" In war, death was inevitable. Caesar had fought a defensive battle. If the attacking army had been forced to retreat, their losses would have to have been several times greater than the defender's.

"Hehe, Big Boss, your eyes are like torches! We killed eight thousand enemies this time, the harvest was rich. Big Boss, you might be able to use these."

Caesar proactively initiated a trade, sending over a blueprint and ten miniature buildings. Orion was very interested in the blueprint. Based on its quality, it was not something that came from a survivor's chest, but rather looked like a hand-copied product.

"Nine-Revolving Dark Nether Formation?" Orion picked up the blueprint and began to read it carefully.

[Nine-Revolving Dark Nether Formation]

Type: Battle Formation Quality: Heroic (Copied Version; quality refers to the original blueprint) Description: This formation uses the totem of a Dark Nether Beast as its core. It requires nine individuals holding formation flags or statues to cast in unison. Aided by the totem, the nine can merge and transform into a Nine-Revolving Dark Nether Beast. The beast is savage and bloodthirsty, capable of flight and great speed. Its claws can tear enemies asunder, and it breathes a black flame that can incinerate all things. Note 1: Under normal circumstances, the merged Dark Nether Beast can reach the peak of the Alpha tier. If the formation is cast by nine peak Alpha-tier individuals who also sacrifice one Lord's Stone, the beast's strength can reach the lower Legendary tier. Note 2: The Dark Nether Beast persists until the life force of all formation members is exhausted.

After a long time, Orion finished reading the blueprint. He felt that Caesar truly had all the luck.

"Did this blueprint drop for you?" Orion sent a message to Caesar. He had never seen a small-scale battle formation like this before.

"Yes, Big Boss! I figured you could probably use it too, so I made a copy for you."

What more could Orion say? A battle formation like this was exactly what the Stoneheart Horde desperately needed.

Chapter 863: A Demon from the Abyss

"The items are excellent. I'll take them."

Not just excellent; they were exceptional.

Besides the blueprint for the Nine-Revolving Dark Nether Formation, among the ten miniature buildings was a special structure called an Academy.

This, aside from the formation blueprint, was the thing that surprised Orion the most.

To be honest, Orion's territory was no longer small, but in all its lands, there was not a single place like an academy to teach and guide his people.

With this building, after a period of accumulation, the tree of the Stoneheart Horde's civilization and technology might finally begin to blossom.

At the very least, the existence of an academy would accelerate the process.

"What do you want in return?"

Having received two such fine things, Orion was in high spirits, and his tone when he asked Caesar was magnanimous.

"As long as they are useful to you, Big Boss, that's all that matters. I'm not lacking for anything right now."

This kind of non-transactional gift was very much to Orion's liking.

Though he also bought and sold goods on the Survivor's Platform, he did not see himself as a pure merchant. He positioned himself as someone seeking partners and potential allies through a system of exchange.

Orion understood very well that a pure merchant would never earn another's true friendship.

Of course, to a certain extent, as long as a merchant had the right goods, they could trade for anything. But Orion firmly believed that the best things, the most important things for a survivor, could never be bought from a merchant.

Thus, he rarely used a purely mercantile approach when acquiring resources on the Platform.

"Alright then. When you feel you have a need, you can come find me."

Orion had originally intended to compensate Caesar with some equipment or grain. For a fleeting moment, he had even considered giving him a will-projection.

But he decided against it. The time wasn't right.

Caesar was currently at the Alpha-tier and had his own city. Relying on that city, his future development and strength would surely be rapid.

Before long, Caesar would likely face the bottleneck of advancing to the Lord tier.

And a Lord's Stone—that would be the perfect opportunity for Orion to both compensate Caesar and earn a significant favor.

"Understood, Big Boss!"

After ending the conversation with Caesar, Orion began to seriously re-evaluate their relationship.

Given Caesar's rate of improvement, he would reach the Legendary tier sooner or later. What Orion now had to consider was whether to introduce him to the Champions Alliance.

If he were to recommend him, he would have to make preparations in advance. And he would have to bear certain risks—namely, the risk that Caesar might one day betray them.

In the Emerald Dream Realm, Orion had spent a lot of time drinking with Leonidas since his own ascension. In those times, Leonidas had mentioned many of the team's unwritten rules.

For traitors, the one who typically carried out the execution was their own sponsor.

In other words, if Orion were to ever betray the Alliance, the first wave of hunters to come after him would be led by Arthas himself. Only if that first wave failed would he face the pursuit of the entire faction.

If he were to introduce Caesar to the Champions Alliance, Orion had to be prepared to hunt Caesar down himself.

You can know a person's face, but you can never know their heart. It was better to be safe than sorry.

"I'll watch and see. I'll observe him more," Orion finally decided.

However, as Orion was hesitating, the Champions Alliance public channel suddenly lit up. A new member had arrived.

Edward: Welcome to our new member, a demon lord from the Abyss!

Edward: Makareth, say hello to everyone.

It was clear that this new member had been sponsored by the Deputy Commander. Orion was surprised; there had been no prior notice about this at all.

Makareth: Hello, fellow students!

Before Makareth could say more, the other team members chimed in with welcomes.

Arthas: Welcome.

Leonidas: Welcome!! But are you really a demon lord from the Abyss?

Alexander: Welcome.

Kraken: Welcome to the new student!

Isabella: Welcome! Haha, I'm finally not the rookie anymore!

Truly, Leonidas was always the most mischievous one.

Hulk: Welcome.

Faced with a newcomer, Orion also extended his goodwill.

Edward: Makareth is from the Destruction Demon race. He specializes in melee combat and enjoys playing with people's minds.

For some reason, Deputy Commander Edward had made a point of specifically introducing this new member named Makareth. To Orion, this felt more like a warning.

Makareth: Hehe, fellow students, just call me Demon. The name Makareth is a bit of a mouthful. My territory is in the Abyss. You are all welcome to come visit me!

For a short while, no one responded to Makareth. Orion was also silent.

This Demon, Makareth, was from the Abyss. He was the first Awakened from the Abyss that Orion had ever met. This guy was definitely not simple. To have awakened in a place like the Abyss and grown to become a demon lord, Makareth had to be exceptionally capable.

Leonidas: Demon, which layer of the Abyss is your territory on?

Makareth: The second layer. Aha, it seems we have a fellow student here who knows the Abyss. We should chat more. Fellow student, is your territory in the Abyss as well?

Orion said nothing, quietly watching the exchange between Leonidas and Makareth. He himself was planning to venture into the Abyss in the near future.

He hadn't expected a native of the Abyss to join their team.

Leonidas: I have a territory on the third layer of the Abyss. Are you planning on making a move on my territory?

Makareth: Hehehe, why not?

Orion's brow furrowed slightly. The conversation between Leonidas and Makareth was already tinged with a subtle friction.

Edward: Demon, Leonidas is a peak-tier Archlord.

Without a doubt, this was a reminder from the Deputy Commander. In the Abyss, respecting a being more powerful than yourself was the most basic rule.

Makareth: Big Brother Leonidas, hello! This humble pupil was blind and failed to recognize a great mountain. I have offended you. It was just a slip of the tongue; this pupil had no such intention.

Leonidas: You must have some skill to have survived in the Abyss.

Just as Makareth was about to start sucking up, the Deputy Commander spoke again, cutting him off.

Edward: Arthas is a demigod.

Edward: Alexander is a peak-tier Archlord.

Edward: Hulk is also an Archlord.

Edward: Kraken and Isabella are both Lords. The former is at the peak of the Legendary tier and has the strength of an Archlord.

Edward: In the Champions Alliance, it would be in your best interest to put away your Abyssal style of doing things.

Deputy Commander Edward was Makareth's sponsor. That he had brought him into the Champions Alliance meant the demon was most likely not a problem. However, Makareth's personality and style were volatile and difficult to read.

Edward: Everyone, don't underestimate Demon. To become a lord in the Abyss, one must be very powerful.

Edward: And... this guy comprehended and condensed his own Lord's Stone to advance.

If the Deputy Commander had been educating and warning Makareth before, then his final sentence was like dropping a nuclear bomb on the relaxed group.

Chapter 864: The Welcome Gift

The Champions Alliance's public channel fell silent.

As Awakened beings, it wasn't impossible for any of them to condense their own Lord's Stone. But not only did it require a massive amount of time for accumulation, it also required a specific, opportune catalyst.

Most importantly, if a ready-made Lord's Stone was sitting right in front of you, who could resist the temptation of taking a shortcut with such seemingly minor side effects?

At the very least, Orion himself had not been able to resist. Besides, advancing to the Legendary tier as early as possible had been an urgent matter for both him and the Stoneheart Horde at the time.

Sometimes, one's choices are forced by the circumstances.

This wasn't just true for Orion; it was true for Leonidas, Alexander, Kraken, and the others as well.

The fact that Demon Makareth had condensed his own Lord's Stone had clearly shocked them all.

Arthas: That takes guts. Welcome to our ranks.

After a long silence, Arthas was the first to speak.

As demigods, both he and the Deputy Commander understood what it meant to condense one's own Lord's Stone. On the path to godhood, Demon Makareth was already ahead of Alexander, Leonidas, and Orion.

He had already taken the most difficult first step.

Not everyone who could condense their own Lord's Stone would become a demigod, but every demigod had, at some point, condensed their own.

Makareth: You flatter me, Big Boss! In the future, I hope Big Boss will take good care of this pupil!

Upon realizing he was speaking to a demigod, Demon Makareth's attitude became exceedingly respectful. A big shot of this level was someone he could never hope to interact with back in the Abyss.

Arthas: Of course.

Leonidas: Kid, if you get a chance to fight your way up to the third layer of the Abyss, maybe we can hang out.

Leonidas's tone had also softened considerably. While he might not have fully grasped the importance of self-condensing a Lord's Stone, he knew that anyone who could do it was a person of great ability.

Makareth: Hehe, just wait for me, Big Boss. The second layer of the Abyss can't contain a future great Demon-God like me!

Leonidas: You're certainly confident!

Makareth: It's not that I'm confident, it's that by being with you Big Bosses, my future is guaranteed to be bright.

Leonidas: Interesting. You're much cuter now than you were a minute ago.

Makareth: Hehe, my apologies, Big Bosses. I'm just used to how things are in the Abyss. You have to speak the language of men to men, and the language of devils to devils. When you meet a stranger, you have to push them down first, preferably peel off a layer of their skin to see what's underneath.

Truly, though Demon Makareth said it casually, as if it were nothing, an Archlord like Orion, who had experienced many wars, understood clearly that behind this personality lay a world of extreme cruelty and competition.

Leonidas: Just for that, I've got to arrange a little something for you. I'm talking to you lot, stop playing dumb! A new friend has joined our Champions Alliance. Show him what that means, and hurry up about it.

That was just Leonidas's personality. Once he decided he liked you, he wouldn't treat you like an outsider.

And with those two sentences, the slightly negative impression Demon Makareth had made upon joining the group vanished into thin air.

Isabella: Can I owe him one? I just realized I don't really have anything good enough to give!

This wasn't Isabella being dramatic. She had also only recently advanced to the Lord tier, and not long ago, she had spent all of her savings and resources recruiting troops to support Alexander's invasion.

Furthermore, she was still trying to build up her own large territory in the Emerald Dream Realm.

If not for Alexander's support, she wouldn't even be able to get her basic operations off the ground.

Alexander: Do your best. You enjoyed this same benefit when you joined the team. Now it's time for you to fulfill the corresponding obligation.

In reality, Isabella certainly had valuable items, but she truly had nothing she could give away as a gift. All of her valuables had been gifts from Alexander and the other brothers. Her own resources were not yet as robust as Orion's had been at that stage.

Orion exited the public channel, also contemplating what would be an appropriate gift for Demon Makareth.

The first consideration for a gift was that it should be something the recipient could use, preferably something they needed urgently. Such timely gifts were always the best.

For Orion, the only things that fit that description were Lord's Stones and world essence.

After a long moment, Orion initiated a trade with Demon Makareth, sending him a single, fist-sized sphere of world essence.

After the duel in the Crucible of the Gods, his own supply of Lord's Stones was running low. Besides, with his Titan Emblem, Lord's Stones were now the most suitable resource for him to use as a sacrifice; he didn't want to let any more of them go.

"Aha, thank you so much! Big Boss, this is the best gift I've received!" Demon Makareth sent his thanks after the trade was complete.

"Glad you like it."

Under normal circumstances, with an unfamiliar person, the conversation would end there. But Demon Makareth was different.

Unlike other survivors, who did their best to hide their origins, he did the opposite, immediately extending an invitation.

“Big Boss, if you have time, come visit my territory on the second layer of the Abyss! If you come, I guarantee I will personally capture a batch of hot-bodied, perfect-faced succubi and banshees to give to you as slave girls. Hehe, the Abyss doesn’t have much else, but banshees are everywhere.”

Even through the platform, Orion could almost hear Demon Makareth’s lewd laughter and see the lascivious smile on his face.

“There will be a chance,” Orion replied politely. He would have to interact with this new member more in the future to judge his true character.

He quickly ended his conversation with Demon Makareth because he had just received a private message from Leonidas. He exited the public channel.

In the Emerald Dream Realm, at the Marshlight Sanctuary.

This was Leonidas’s temporary palace. When Orion’s mirrored avatar arrived, Leonidas and Alexander were already drinking.

The Leonidas who appeared now was in a Beastfolk avatar, with the horns of a bull and sharp tusks, looking as rugged as could be.

“Bro, come on, we were just waiting for you!” Leonidas said, lifting a nearby wine barrel and pushing it toward Orion.

Orion caught the barrel and, after sharing a smile with Alexander, sat down unceremoniously at the low table.

“Bro,” Orion said, staring at Leonidas’s new form, “what a wild array of avatars you’ve got—a lot of them!”

Chapter 865: All of you must die

Orion raised his cup and clinked it with Leonidas's. Then, he grabbed a still-warm beast leg from the table and, while tearing off a piece of roasted meat, looked at Leonidas with a sideways smile.

"A lot? Bro, wait until you've been an Archlord for a few hundred years. You'll have plenty of avatars too."

"After all," Leonidas said, and the way he said it, so casually, stripped the words of their negative weight, "everyone is afraid of death."

"Hehe, bro, once you start losing your avatars to one accident after another, you'll never feel like you have enough," he continued, his tone turning wistful, filled with a bittersweet nostalgia.

He seemed to be speaking not just to Orion, but to himself and Alexander as well.

"At that point, you'll want to try making an avatar out of any race that shows even a little potential."

Thinking of how Leonidas had recently self-destructed both his fire dragon and void dragon avatars, Orion suddenly felt that his own stable of avatars was far too small.

If he ever found himself in Leonidas's situation, he would have no avatars left to use. His true body would be forced to run back and forth between the Valkorath Realm, the Titanion Realm, and the Emerald Dream Realm.

The thought alone was frightening.

"Bro, as it happens, there's a chance to get a new avatar right now. You want in?"

As Orion was lost in thought, Leonidas leaned in close, his voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper.

Orion looked at him, puzzled, then turned to look at Alexander.

Alexander just shrugged and took another drink.

“A chance to get a suitable avatar?”

That was a pointless question. If there was a real opportunity to get a suitable avatar, Orion would never pass it up.

“I don’t know about ‘suitable,’ but it will definitely be powerful. Like a Void Dragon, for example,” Leonidas said with a smug grin, the look of a fisherman who has just seen a fish take the bait.

“A Void Dragon? Bro, you’re going to get another dragon avatar? You have a way?”

When Leonidas mentioned the Void Dragon, connecting it with what he’d just said, Orion immediately guessed a few things.

“Mm. I know of a large world that hides a Dragon’s Boneyard. And in that Boneyard are plenty of dead eggs.”

“Dead eggs?”

The more Leonidas spoke, the more confused Orion became. By all logic, a dead egg could not possibly hatch a dragon.

“If we can steal these dead eggs, I have a secret technique to transform them into avatars, activating the eggs. And I can even bestow upon them an inherited legacy, allowing the avatar to have its own true name.”

A dragon with a true name was a true dragon. A dragon without one was merely a dragon beast.

Coming from Leonidas, Orion believed these words. Still, he glanced at Alexander for confirmation.

“That’s how Leonidas got his fire dragon and void dragon avatars,” Alexander said, his voice flat. “If our luck is good, we might even find a living egg in the Boneyard—the rarest kind of dragon egg, one that has undergone a transformation from death back to life in the heart of that necropolis. An egg like that is unique, even among the dragon race.”

That was it. Orion was completely convinced.

If someone as reserved as Alexander was interested in this Dragon’s Boneyard, Orion knew the venture was almost certainly legitimate.

He put down his roast meat and his drink, threw an arm around Leonidas’s shoulders, and said with the utmost sincerity, “Bro, the happiness of the rest of your pupil’s life is in your hands!”

Leonidas chuckled, nodding as he shoved a piece of meat into Orion’s mouth. “Don’t worry, bro. If I get to eat meat, you’ll definitely get to drink the soup.”

“Bro, your pupil wants to eat meat too.”

“Is that so? Well then, you’ll have to do more work. For example, can you handle a job like... picking up the soap?”

“I can start right now.”

“...”

With Leonidas, Orion could let himself go completely. This kind of raw, unfiltered enjoyment of life was a side of himself he could never show in the Stoneheart Horde, not in front of his women.

The palace echoed with the wild, unrestrained laughter of Orion and Leonidas, a picture of perfect harmony.

“Then it’s settled. Get yourself ready. We leave in seven days.”

“No problem.”

In the Titanion Realm, within the human kingdom.

Once again, at Orio’s Cabin in the Aisenna Forest. Once again, on a pitch-black night.

Ever since Henrik of the Holy Sword Mercenary Corps had been assassinated here, his Grand Duke patron had been furious. A high bounty had been issued for the killer.

Furthermore, this new caravan, escorted by Mateo of the Golden Apple Chamber of Commerce, was itself a lure, meant to draw the enemy out.

However, the guards from the Golden Apple and the accompanying mercenaries could never have imagined that their enemies were the ragged, discarded puppets scattered all around Orio’s Cabin.

The enemy was already in their camp.

It was a moonless, windy night—a night for killing.

Torin chose to make his move in the darkest hour, the moment just before the dawn. It was the time when the guards on watch were most likely to be drowsy, the time when the campfires were about to die out.

Crackle.

The last ember in the campfire extinguished. The cloud cover was thick, and a sudden, fierce wind swept through the camp.

A bone-deep chill filled the air, thick with a palpable killing intent. The silent camp was suddenly fraught with tension.

Three dark figures leaped from the shadows, swift and agile.

Mateo's group from the Golden Apple, though they had been on alert, were caught completely off guard by the puppets' attack.

"You've finally shown yourselves!" Mateo shouted, trying to stall for information. "Who are you people?"

But Torin gave him no chance. He and his two subordinates pressed the attack, their killing intent a palpable force.

Mateo was one of the two Alpha-level experts, along with Henrik, who had originally occupied Soaring Bird City.

Now, Torin was an Alpha-level expert himself, and he had the backing of a powerful patron from the Survivor's Platform. With this power and foundation, how could he continue to tolerate Mateo, let alone let him live?

Now that he had the strength, Torin was more eager than ever to reclaim full control of Soaring Bird City.

Every time he walked its streets, heard the citizens gossip about him, saw the lack of fear or respect in their eyes, he would suffer from sleepless nights, sometimes bordering on madness.

"Die! All of you must die!!"

Controlling the puppet, Torin's emotions and anger had reached their peak. Only slaughter could sate his hatred.

The tent flaps were slashed open.

Blood sprayed through the air.

When dawn arrived, the camp at Orio's Cabin was a scene of carnage.

All that remained was a series of deep, chaotic footprints in the mud, and the dismembered bodies of men, scattered like broken dolls.

The wind had not stopped. It now carried the thick, cloying scent of blood.

The surrounding area was desolate, and only the embers in the fire pit still glowed, their faint light a final, desperate struggle in the darkness.

Chapter 866: A Clown's Temptation

In Soaring Bird City, at the palace.

As dawn broke, Mike and Wyatt, supported by a squad of guards, walked out of the palace carrying the wine and food Torin had given them.

Soaring Bird City was awakening to another busy day.

In a secret chamber, Torin took out a mysterious scroll, sliced open his wrist, and let a few drops of blood fall upon it. A moment later, a voice emerged from the parchment.

"You were too hasty. Last night was obviously a setup, a trap to lure you out."

It was the voice of the Two-Faced Clown, Ogu. His collaboration with Torin seemed to have deepened.

"What if it was a trap?" Torin retorted. "You guaranteed me that it could be done without a trace."

The assassination of Henrik, a representative of an imperial Grand Duke, in Soaring Bird City was an act the empire could not possibly ignore. But surely, the Grand Duke's man, Richard, would never have guessed that the assassins were a group of uncanny, unstoppable puppets.

And that behind the puppets controlling them was a being with the power of at least a peak-tier Archlord.

"That's right. My toys can, of course, kill your enemies without a trace," Ogu said. "But have you considered who the suspicion will fall upon when your enemies are assassinated one after another?"

"Think about it. After those two pieces of trash are dead, who benefits the most? Isn't it you? Hmm? Hahahaha..."

The Two-Faced Clown's voice was deep and knowing, his laughter a complex mixture of mockery, disdain, and schadenfreude.

Torin's brow furrowed, his face gradually turning ugly.

He was right. With Henrik and Mateo dead, the primary beneficiaries in Soaring Bird City were him and, by extension, the Grand Princess Ava who stood behind him.

At the thought of Princess Ava, Torin's eyes brightened again. He was her man. The crime scene was far from Soaring Bird City. And he had an alibi.

The patrons of Henrik and Mateo would not necessarily focus their attention on him. It was more likely they would suspect Princess Ava, or even the shadowy giant lord who was vaguely associated with her.

Perhaps I can muddy the waters, he mused. I should send this month's dividends to Rose Manor promptly in the next few days.

The frown on his brow smoothed out, and a slow, thick smile spread across his face.

"You don't need to concern yourself with my affairs. Just focus on doing what I require of you," Torin said coolly, reaching out to roll up the scroll.

When he was halfway through, the voice came again.

"That Fire Stone mission you accepted... you could try being more creative. In a world like yours, as long as you can offer something good enough, they will surely trade with you."

At the mention of Fire Stone, Torin felt a wave of disappointment.

He had found a way in, bribing Delilah with a massive amount of resources and money, but the answer he received was that the Stoneheart Horde possessed no such thing.

It was obvious Delilah was lying to him.

"If they won't sell it openly, can't you acquire it secretly, or search for it?" the Two-Faced Clown's voice was laced with temptation. "If you find a Fire Stone mine and begin mining it in secret, you could trade it to me for even more unexpected artifacts and resources."

Torin did not respond. After a moment's pause, he finished rolling up the scroll and sealing it without hesitation.

He didn't know who the Two-Faced Clown Ogu truly was, but he was certain the creature harbored ill intentions toward him.

Torin was not a fool; on the contrary, he was very clever. He was constantly on guard against this Ogu, who kept providing him with benefits and trading goods with him.

There was no such thing as a free lunch in this world. That was a lesson he had learned the day he walked out of his father's territory.

But, that being said, the Two-Faced Clown had a point.

A Fire Stone

mine? That is something worth planning for. The Stoneheart Horde has so many cities. I could use the opportunity of opening up new markets and trade routes to properly explore their territory.

Heh, it's laughable, really, he mused. My own human kingdom has provided me with so few opportunities and resources. Instead, it is the Stoneheart Horde, a whole territory of ogres away, that has become the staging ground for my rise.

To be honest, Torin had a very good impression of the Stoneheart Horde and Stoneheart City. Although getting anything done required constantly bribing that greedy grand steward of the Horde, she did, for the most part, actually get things done, and he had reaped enormous benefits from it.

There were times when Torin even considered abandoning Soaring Bird City altogether. With his skills and his access to the Survivor's Platform, he was certain he could thrive in the Stoneheart Horde.

But then, the memory of the humiliation he had suffered in his own city would surface, and he couldn't swallow his pride.

"It's mine. It will all be mine," Torin whispered.

He walked out of the secret chamber and onto the highest balcony of the palace. He stood against the sun and the gentle breeze, gazing down upon Soaring Bird City, his expression impossibly dark.

In Stoneheart City, at the youth camp.

"Not bad. Those younglings of yours are all very talented," Orion said.

He stood on the high platform with Elara perched on his shoulders. Beside him was Thundar, and together they watched the younglings of the Horde training in formation below.

"They were all born in the last few years. The conditions in the Horde are better now, there's no shortage of resources, so their talent and potential have been fully unleashed," Thundar said, his voice filled with pride when speaking of his children.

He had other children before he submitted to Orion, but most had died on the battlefield. To Thundar, the most direct cause of death on the battlefield was a lack of strength.

He held no resentment over it; in fact, he felt a sense of honor. To die fighting for the Horde(tribe) was the ideal end for any bloodline warrior of the Stoneheart giants.

Fortunately, as the Horde had stabilized, Thundar's own status had risen, and he had acquired more wives and slave women. In recent years, a number of talented children had been born to him.

In the training grounds at this very moment were three of his most promising younglings: Ashe, Aran, and Degar.

"Send two of them to the Emerald Dream Realm," Orion suggested. "Let the elders there teach them properly. You might get an unexpected harvest."

This suggestion was made with Thundar's best interests in mind.

Ever since the demigod Valthor had merged his laws of light into the realm's own rules, the Emerald Dream Realm had entered a stage of self-evolution. During this period, any creature living there had a high chance of having its physical qualities and innate talents enhanced.

"That was my very intention, my lord!" Thundar said, raising his right hand and giving a slight bow, the fanaticism in his eyes deepening.

Chapter 867: I will be waiting for you all

Thundar was a giant. In the Stoneheart Horde, the giants were the race that stood directly behind Orion; their honor was inextricably linked with his.

"I am pleased that I see no discouragement or self-abandonment in you," Orion said calmly, looking at Thundar. "Keep fighting. I expect our giant tribe to produce several more giant lords."

As the Elder of Combat and the leader of the cavalry regiment, Thundar was a dedicated and battle-hardened warrior. His fighting spirit had not been extinguished; Orion could still see ambition in his eyes.

"I think that when that day comes, it will not only be your glory, but my glory as well," Orion continued, his gaze shifting to the training grounds, to Pallas and all the younglings of the Horde.

His expression turned solemn, his aura majestic.

"It is tiring to carry the entire giant tribe on my own."

Beside him, Thundar trembled slightly upon hearing his lord's expectations.

"Lord, Thundar will not disappoint you!"

"Mm. I will be waiting for you all."

One man can lead a tribe. But for an entire tribe to become strong, one man is not enough.

A prosperous horde must have a constant emergence of experts at every level. Talents of all kinds should blossom everywhere, an inexhaustible resource.

In Orion's eyes, the Stoneheart Horde was not yet truly strong, because its internal systems for cultivating talent had not yet formed a complete, self-sustaining cycle.

"Daddy, Elara wants guards too."

Perched on his neck, little Elara grabbed Orion's ear and gave it a firm tug, as if afraid he hadn't heard her.

Guards. Every giant prince was assigned them, including Kronos, far away in the human kingdom, though his guards had yet to overcome the obstacles to reach him.

Elara had found out from somewhere that her little brother Pallas was to have his own guards, and she had suddenly decided to pester Orion about it.

"Oh? And why does Elara need guards?" Orion neither refused nor agreed, but instead posed a question back to her.

"When Elara grows up, I have to conquer lands for Daddy and for the Horde," she declared. "You need a retinue for war, so Elara needs guards. And besides, little brother has them, so Elara has to have them too!"

Orion reached up and stroked the little girl's head as she grew more agitated.

"Guards... guards..." he said, drawing out the words.

He could feel the grip on his ear tightening. This little girl was surprisingly serious about the matter.

"Guards, hmm? That's an easy matter," he finally said with a chuckle. "Go ask your mother for them, and just say Daddy approved it."

"Oh yeah! Thank you, Daddy!"

With a smack, Elara planted a kiss on Orion's forehead and then burst into a fit of giggles.

Beside them, Thundar was inwardly stunned.

According to custom, only important figures of the giant's own bloodline were assigned guards. For Orion to agree to give Elara guards sent a very unusual signal to the giant tribe.

Many had considered her status as "Eldest Daughter" to be merely nominal. But if she were assigned guards, the meaning would be entirely different.

At the very least, her status in the eyes of the people would gradually change. In the future, if there were matters she could not speak on herself, her guards could speak for her.

And since her guards would be giants, their voices were ones the people would surely listen to.

"Don't be surprised," Orion said, sensing Thundar's thoughts. "Times are changing, and the system must also change. The future belongs to the young people. All we can do is hold up a sky for them that is big enough for them to grow."

In that moment, Orion's figure seemed to grow infinitely large in Thundar's eyes.

This is our lord, he thought with awe. The lord of the Stoneheart Horde.

In the Uynting Realm, near the City of Lube.

With a ripple of void energy, two figures appeared on a patch of flat ground in a forest.

"A familiar scent. That's right, this is the world!" Leonidas declared.

"Bro, what scent? I can't smell anything."

"The scent a dragon gives off when it's in heat," Leonidas explained with a lewd chuckle. "It's a musky, beautiful scent, hehehe..."

Hearing this, Orion felt a wave of revulsion, his mind conjuring countless bizarre and perverse images.

"That's disgusting," a cold voice said. "Every cell in your body radiates a sleazy aura."

Alexander's spirit sword avatar flew off Leonidas's back and came to a stop behind Orion, expressing its utter contempt for its former bearer.

"Ah, my darling sword, don't abandon me!" Leonidas cried dramatically, looking at the sword behind Orion with a wounded expression, rubbing at his eyes as if wiping away tears. "My little sword, my dear Swordy, we are true love!"

"Disgusting. Get lost," Alexander's voice retorted. "Stop playing around. It's time to get down to business."

After spitting out the words, he fell silent once more.

"Bro, which way do we go now?" Orion asked, taking the opportunity to pull the melodramatic Leonidas back to reality. "And what kind of world is this?"

"Sigh, my little Swordy, it doesn't want me anymore!" Leonidas let out a great sigh, but then his playful expression vanished. "To get to the Dragon's Boneyard, we first have to go to the nearby city of Lube. It's north of here, about a half-day's walk at most."

He pointed, then began to walk into the forest shoulder-to-shoulder with Orion.

"As for this world, it belongs to the dragons, of course. But besides the dragons, there are also many weaker races—humans, orcs, elves, goblins, the feathered folk... In reality, all these races are just food, raised by the dragons."

Orion didn't speak, a curious expression on his face as he walked.

"The dragons' main base of operations is in the sea; they occupy many large islands. The continent we're on now is just a medium-sized island."

"The civilized races on this island may seem to be developing well on the surface, but every so often, they suffer an invasion from the dragons."

Leonidas paused. "Er... it's less of an invasion and more of a hunting feast."

From what Leonidas was saying, Orion realized the truth of the matter. The dragons were simply raising livestock.

Chapter 868: One more person is one more bit of strength

"Bro, is it cruel?"

"A little."

"Hahaha, it's perfectly normal. In any world, once a dominant race emerges, the other races either become slaves or they become food. The end result is the same."

This conclusion, this rule of the world, struck a chord with Orion.

In his own Titanion Realm, there were three demigods—two from the sea race, one from the humans. He imagined that long, long ago, the humans and the Sea Race must have fought a great war unknown to him, one that ended in a kind of harmonious power-sharing arrangement that partitioned the world.

There was a hidden balance in the Titanion Realm, one that Orion was not yet strong enough to break. In fact, this was the very reason he and the Stoneheart Horde had been left to grow in peace.

"Where there is oppression, there is resistance," Alexander's voice cut in. "The races on this continent have united. They build cities, they seek out dragon nests, and they work together to drive out and kill the dragons."

"After killing a dragon in this world," he continued, "you are cursed. A Dragonslayer's Mark appears on your body. This mark radiates a powerful hatred. If it is sensed by any dragon, you will be hunted down and swarmed."

It was a rule of this world, a method the dragons used to keep the other races in check.

"So, we can't kill dragons?" Orion asked, a flicker of doubt in his mind.

Not being able to kill dragons didn't sound like his brothers' style at all.

"No. We have to kill one. We must kill one," Leonidas responded, his voice filled with a raw killing intent.

"Bro, if we don't kill a dragon, how do we get a dragon soul? And without a dragon soul, who's going to lead us to the Dragon's Boneyard?"

Orion guessed what was coming. "So our first mission is to slay a dragon?"

"You got it! My bro is so smart!"

"Heh." Orion shrugged, rolling his eyes at Leonidas's terrible joke.

"Bro, can our Champions Alliance invade this place?" Having understood the first step of their mission, Orion posed a new question.

"Don't even think about it. It's difficult. Very difficult," Leonidas said, his tone turning somber. "The Uynting Realm is a large world ruled by the dragons. It has a realm-wide protective formation."

"A small group like ours can teleport in without making any big waves; the dragons don't care. But if they detect a large number of enemies and feel threatened, they'll activate the realm formation, cutting off the teleportation passages. At that point, no matter how many warriors we bring, it won't be enough for the dragons to slaughter."

"And besides," he added, "there are always dragon demigods stationed here. Invading this place would be a huge effort, a massive drain on time. The gains aren't worth the cost."

Alexander and Leonidas had been here once before. They had considered invading this world, but after much research, they had abandoned the idea. Even now, with the full might of the Champions Alliance, including the Deputy Commander and Arthas, invading this world would be an arduous undertaking.

"Then why don't we just steal the living dragon eggs?" Orion asked, another question coming to mind.

"Don't even think about that either. Every living egg in this world is marked from the moment it's laid. An egg like that is a hot potato. Whoever takes it is doomed to be hunted."

Leonidas had no interest in stealing living eggs.

Orion had a feeling that the dragons' control over this world was absolute, overwhelming.

In the City of Lube, at the Mercenaries' Guild.

In most cities, the main hall of the Mercenaries' Guild was more like a grand tavern lobby than an office. Mercenaries posting and accepting quests could not only find plenty of lounge areas to wait in but could also order food and drink from the staff.

In a large lounge in the southwest corner, a group of three men and two women sat together, speaking in low voices.

"Commander, we've already recruited the three hundred members we needed. Why are we still waiting another day?"

The speaker was Aiden, a handsome young man. He was also a powerful Alpha-level lancer. As a core member of the Dragonslayer's Lance Mercenary Corps, Aiden was proactive and passionate.

He was also proud. Youth has the capital to disdain all else.

"Yeah, Commander. We've recruited practically every available mercenary in the area. We're not going to find any other powerful recruits by waiting," another voice added in agreement. "After all, Lube is a remote border city. High-tier mercenaries and hunters from other cities rarely come here."

The one who seconded Aiden's opinion was Alilien, a short, thin woman with two swords hanging at her waist. Though Alilien appeared slight, the body beneath her leather armor was clearly defined with muscle. She was a swordswoman.

"Aiden, Alilien, we are going to slay a dragon. The more people we have, the higher our chances of success," the corps' deputy commander, Neil, said, looking at their silent, wine-sipping commander before gently placating the two more active members of the team. "One more person is one more bit of strength."

"Right now, our team is lacking a high-tier tank. If we could just wait for a orc berserker or a human Shield Warrior to show up in the next couple of days, this operation would definitely go more smoothly."

"Perhaps fewer people would have to die."

Deputy Commander Neil was a Beastfolk, a clever male fox-person.

"You two should be more patient," a gentle female voice added. "The commander is never wrong. We just need to listen to him."

As she spoke, she passed two plates of delicious sweets to Aiden and Alilien.

"We know, Yala. We're just worried that peak Alpha-level dragon will get wind of us and fly away!" Alilien said.

She and Yala were the two women in the group; the former was mischievous and lively, the latter gentle and virtuous. Alilien took the opportunity to lean into Yala's embrace, and while enjoying her full figure, playfully reached for her fluffy cat-ears.

Yala was a cat-woman who served as the group's steward. She was also an assassin, and most of her duties involved protecting Deputy Commander Neil, the fox-tribe archer.

"That dragon won't run," the greatsword-wielding commander, Borg, finally spoke, his voice a low rumble. "That canyon has the crystals it loves most. Given a dragon's nature, it won't easily abandon its nest. Besides..."

He was about to say more when two powerful, oppressive Alpha-level auras approached from a distance, drawing his attention and putting the entire group on high alert.

"Hehe, I assume you all are the members of the Dragonslayer's Lance Mercenary Corps?" Leonidas's boisterous voice rang out.

He scanned the group, his gaze lingering on Commander Borg for a moment before finally settling on the human swordswoman, Alilien.

Chapter 869: Who care?

"My beautiful swordswoman, I am Leo, a berserker from the south!" Leonidas declared, having simplified his name.

"The mighty Leo missed this morning's rising sun, and he missed the sweetest juice in the east side of the city."

"My beautiful swordswoman, your beauty has moved Leo."

"Leo has discovered that you, and only you, are the most beautiful scenery I cannot afford to miss!"

This performance left not only the members of the Dragonslayer's Lance Mercenary Corps completely dumbfounded, but even Orion was momentarily stunned.

He has a thing for young girls? This is Leonidas's taste?

An unknown amount of time passed as Orion, Borg, Neil, Aiden, Yala, and Alilien all stared blankly at one another. Finally, Orion hurried to hand over their letter of recommendation and mission certificate.

"Hello, my name is Orion. This is my big brother, Leo. We're here to accept the quest," he said, his eyes sharp enough to tell from their positioning that the man with the greatsword was the leader. "Here is our letter of recommendation from the Mercenaries' Guild."

"Hello. We are the Dragonslayer's Lance Mercenary Corps. I am the commander, Borg," the man said, then glanced at Leonidas, who was completely oblivious.

Lost in his role-playing, Leonidas was now standing directly in front of Alilien, a lecherous grin plastered on his face. The normally lively Alilien was so frightened she had hidden herself behind the cat-woman, Yala.

"My apologies," Orion said, stepping forward to pull Leonidas back to his side, giving his shoulder a firm squeeze. "My brother has no resistance when it comes to pretty young ladies."

Snapping back to reality, Leonidas finally tore his gaze away from Alilien and looked at the other members of the corps.

"I am Leo, the strongest berserker from the City of Steel! I am Leo, I am the strongest! I am Leo, and I like this girl!"

As he spoke, he released his peak Alpha-level aura, pressing down on the members of the Dragonslayer's Lance—except, of course, for the little human swordswoman.

It was a bizarre scene. Everything Leonidas said made him sound like a lunatic. But his peak Alpha-level aura was undeniably, immensely powerful.

This contradictory existence—foolish yet strong—left a deep impression on the mercenaries.

"I am Orion, a powerful spear thrower," Orion added, releasing his own peak Alpha-level aura to join Leonidas's in pressuring the group.

The message was simple: we two brothers are extremely strong.

"We welcome you to our ranks," Commander Borg said, stepping forward and releasing his own peak Alpha-level aura to meet theirs. "With you two joining us, we can definitely accomplish the great feat of slaying a dragon."

Orion reached out and shook Borg's hand. At the same time, he and Leonidas retracted their auras.

Leonidas, however, merely glanced at Borg without any intention of shaking his hand. His attention had already drifted back to the girl, Alilien.

Orion just shook his head and offered the others an awkward smile. They had officially joined the Dragonslayer's Lance.

The next morning, the group gathered at the Mercenaries' Guild, preparing to set out.

"Bro, can we please be normal?" Orion asked.

He and Leonidas were sitting at a two-person table, each with a glass of fruit wine and a hard breadstick to chew on. In a remote border town like this, the guild's breakfast was nothing but cheap fare.

Fortunately, both Orion and Leonidas had strong teeth and weren't picky. A sip of bland fruit wine, a loud, crunchy bite of breadstick—it was oddly satisfying.

"You change too fast, you get too deep into your character. Your pupil can't keep up," Orion grumbled.

"Bro, this is life. We are here to enjoy life," Leonidas said sagely. "Listen to your bro. You have to blend in, become one of them. It makes doing the mission easier, you know."

Before Orion could retort, Alexander's voice echoed from behind Leonidas. "They are not as sleazy as you, nor as shameless. Was it the musky scent in the air that affected you? Or has your dragon avatar influenced you and made you a lecher?"

His tone was filled with disgust, sarcasm, disdain, and contempt.

"Tch, what does a sullen block of wood like you know?" Leonidas shot back. "This is my nature. Releasing my nature, expressing what I love—is there anything wrong with that? I love young swordswomen, I love Alilien, and I will protect her! This is my nature!"

He wanted to continue, but seeing that neither Orion nor Alexander was refuting him, he felt a bit deflated. Orion, in particular, was wearing a strange smile that made Leonidas very uncomfortable.

"Bro, do you agree with my thinking? One's nature should be released. If you like someone, you should express it. If you keep it bottled up inside, who will ever know? Who will care? Am I right?"

The strange smile on Orion's face deepened. Just as Leonidas was about to speak again, Alilien's timid voice sounded from behind him.

"Sir, Alilien doesn't like your type."

Leonidas's hand, reaching for his breadstick, froze mid-air. He shot a venomous glare at Orion.

Damn it, he cursed internally. Another dog who doesn't care about brotherhood and enjoys watching people fall into pits!

He realized that Alexander and Orion must have seen Yala and Alilien approaching and deliberately concealed their presence from him.

Slowly, Leonidas turned around, a confident and charming smile on his face. "Darling Alilien, you not liking me now doesn't mean you won't like me in the future. When you like someone, you must confess bravely. Just like me. Me liking you, and you not liking me, are not in conflict at all."

Orion felt as if he were hallucinating. He was watching Leonidas, in front of everyone, personally force-feed himself three large bowls of his own brand of poisoned motivational garbage.

"Sir, thank you. You're a nice person, but Alilien doesn't like your."

Orion wanted to laugh. He felt that this little girl, Alilien, had the potential to be a master of throwing knives. Every single one she had just thrown had landed squarely in Leonidas's heart.

"Sirs Orion and Leo," the gentle voice of the cat-woman Yala interjected. She seemed unable to watch any longer.

She pulled the naive Alilien back slightly and, with a professional smile, got down to business. "The mercenary corps is preparing to depart. The commander sent me to arrange a carriage for you and to brief you on the relevant details."

Chapter 870: A Funeral Procession

The horses neighed, and the carriage wheels rumbled on.

The city of Lube was a small border town. Beyond its walls lay endless wilderness and a sea of beasts. The very air of the city was thick with the scent of war and decay.

The people here spent their lives aiming to become mercenaries, because only mercenaries could hunt beasts, and only by hunting beasts could one acquire status and wealth.

Because life revolved around the mercenary trade, blades were often drawn, and life-and-death struggles were a common sight.

Orion gazed through the carriage curtain at the tall stone walls drawing ever closer. The walls were covered in scars; the claw marks of unknown monsters and the scorched traces of fire were still clearly visible.

"So, to find the dragon, we first have to deal with a dragonkin tribe?" Orion asked, pulling his gaze back inside and looking at the gentle, beautiful cat-woman, Yala.

Under his direct gaze, her own eyes darted away slightly. Facing Orion's stare, Yala felt as if she were being stripped bare.

"Yes, Sir Orion. That is why our commander organized a medium-sized team of three hundred," she said.

Despite her discomfort, she looked at Orion and Leonidas and relayed the intelligence she had.

"According to our information, the dragonkin tribe guarding the canyon numbers around one thousand."

"What is their strength?" Leonidas asked. "Are the people you organized up to the task?"

To be honest, the question sounded somewhat offensive to both Yala and Alilien.

"Sirs, please rest assured," Yala said confidently. "All the mercenaries participating in this quest have been strictly screened. Most of them are elite-class mercenaries with more than enough combat experience and wilderness survival skills."

She had been involved in the entire screening process herself and was very confident in the team's strength.

"Who cares about those mercenaries? We're only interested in the dragon," Leonidas suddenly interjected, putting on an air of arrogance.

Orion glanced at Alilien, sitting beside Yala. Under Leonidas's barrage of sweet talk, the young girl's eyes were already sparkling, and she was looking at him with unconcealed adoration.

Orion just shrugged and offered Yala a reassuring smile, indicating that he and his brother truly were not concerned.

"Yala, Alilien, the commander is looking for you. He wants you to report on the situation," the lancer Aiden said, riding up to the carriage on his beast-blood mount. He glanced at Orion and Leonidas before fixing his gaze on his teammates.

"Then, Sirs Orion and Leo, we will take our leave for now. If you need anything, you can have the outriders notify us."

Yala stood, gave a slight bow, and then pulled Alilien with her as she jumped down from the carriage.

Leonidas leaning his head out of the carriage and staring wistfully at Alilien's retreating back.

By now, Orion and Alexander had grown accustomed to Leonidas's role-playing.

"Their intelligence is not accurate," Alexander's voice suddenly came from the spirit sword, drawing the attention of both Orion and Leonidas.

"Dragons are greedy, lustful, and love shiny things. This isn't for no reason. Most shiny minerals and gems contain elements or spiritual power they need. I suspect the dragon this mercenary corps is hunting is preparing to enter a slumber to advance to the Legendary tier."

When it came to intelligence gathering, Alexander was a professional. From just a few clues, he had already guessed at the larger picture.

"Hehe, Alexander is right," Leonidas said, pulling his head back into the carriage, the look of wistful longing instantly vanishing from his face. "Dragonkin are the servitors of the dragon race, the lowest of all their vassal peoples. Under normal circumstances, a dragon only summons its kin when it feels insecure."

"The appearance of those dragonkin means that peak Alpha-level dragon is truly preparing to advance."

Having possessed two dragon avatars in the past, Leonidas was practically a member of the dragon race himself. His understanding of them was far deeper than Orion's or Alexander's.

"It's possible the dragon has already entered the stage of receiving its inheritance. If the situation is even worse, it might have already reached the Legendary tier," he said, then let out a low chuckle.

Orion's eyebrow twitched slightly. If what Leonidas said was true, then the Dragonslayer's Lance Mercenary Corps was nothing more than a funeral procession.

"Bro, does this affect our plan?"

"What f*cking impact could it have?" Leonidas tossed Orion a breadstick and began to gnaw on one himself like a snack. "Didn't we join this mercenary corps just to have them lead us to the dragon? What happens to them after we find it has nothing to do with us."

"As for possibly facing a Legendary-level dragon... bro, are you worried?"

Orion shook his head, unconcerned. A Legendary-level dragon? He felt he could kill one with a single spear thrust, like swatting a mosquito.

"So, we brothers will play when we want to play, drink when we want to drink, and pick up girls when we want to pick up girls," Leonidas declared. "Don't let such a rare and pleasant life go to waste!"

Orion didn't speak, but in his heart, he quite agreed with Leonidas's attitude toward life. Mixing business with pleasure—what was not to like?

"Someone's coming."

Just as Orion and Leonidas were quietly discussing how they might get Yala and Alilien into their beds, Alexander's disdainful voice cut in.

Orion and Leonidas both looked up toward the outside of the carriage. In the distance, the corps' commander Borg and deputy commander Neil were slowly approaching on mounts with deer-like antlers.

"Sirs Leo and Orion, may we come up and sit for a moment?" Commander Borg's personality was forthright, his tone polite.

"This is the mercenary corps' carriage; it is your property. You are too kind, Commander Borg," Orion replied, shifting his position to sit side-by-side with Leonidas, clearing the other half of the carriage for Borg and Neil.

"Your Excellencies, we are all mercenaries here, and none of us like to beat around the bush. We have some things we'd like to say directly," Neil, the fox-tribe archer, said as he entered.

His temperament was excellent; one look and you could tell he was a very wise man.

Leonidas closed his eyes, feigning sleep, completely unconcerned. Orion reached out, poured wine for Borg and Neil, and gave them a look that said, speak freely.

"Your Excellencies, to reach the dragon's canyon, we will need to travel day and night for half a month. The battle will have three parts: the beasts we encounter on the road, the dragonkin outside the valley, and finally, the dragon itself."

"According to the agreement you both signed with the Dragonslayer's Lance, the spoils from all battles along the way will be distributed by us."

"Of course," he added, "if you both feel that dealing with the beasts and dragonkin is too troublesome, or that the profits they bring are beneath your notice, you do not have to take part in those fights."

Neil was a master diplomat. As he spoke, his tone was gentle and slow, with no hint of aggression. And as he confirmed these matters, he would pause to observe Orion's expression and attitude.