

Titan King 941

Chapter 941: A Grand Opportunity for Plunder

If Orion were to ascend to demigod, the bloodlines of his children would resonate with his power, their potential elevating even further.

In Orion's eyes, a mere arch lord wasn't worthy of his Elara. To marry the first daughter of the Stoneheart Horde, the absolute minimum requirement was demigod—even for his own son.

With that thought, Orion led Lilith back into the depths of the castle.

After a passionate, possessive reunion on the throne itself, Orion held Lilith close, inquiring about what had transpired in the three days he was away.

"The army the human kingdom sent to eliminate the traitors has been almost completely annihilated."

Getting down to business, Lilith sat up, her expression turning serious as she relayed the latest intelligence. She had been utterly shocked when she first received the report. It meant the enemy on the kingdom's eastern flank was terrifyingly powerful.

"Aside from Prince Theodore, who managed to escape, everyone else was killed. Grand Duke William was captured. His status—whether he's alive or dead—is still unknown."

"The three-way summit in Soaring Bird City has also been changed to a four-way summit. The dragons have sent an envoy."

Orion leaned back against the throne and closed his eyes, savoring the feeling of Lilith's soft breath drawing near again.

"Orion," she whispered, her lips brushing against his as she spoke. "You don't seem shocked at all."

As the acting head of the horde, she was grappling with a thousand unanswered questions.

"You're right," he murmured. "I'm not shocked at all."

He wrapped an arm around her, his hand stroking her back, still damp from their exertions. "On the contrary. I'm pleased."

"With the human kingdom suffering this defeat, the Stoneheart Horde will now receive a formal invitation to join this North-South War. We can participate openly and harvest everything we desire."

His voice was a low, predatory rumble. "Territory, resources, slaves, magical plants... whatever we lack, we will take."

"And besides," he added, "Don't you think the Horde's stockpile of Lord's Stones is getting a little... thin?"

Lilith pulled back, staring up at him with wide eyes. A shiver of pure awe ran through her. This mountain of a man could now steer the currents of the entire continent with ease. A war that threatened to engulf nations was, in his eyes, merely a grand opportunity for plunder.

"Orion..." she began, her voice thick with emotion, wanting to say more.

But he was already leaning down to kiss her again. Just as she was about to lose herself completely, he pulled back slightly, a smirk playing on his lips as he gave her more instructions.

"Send a message to that little rascal Lorelia. Tell her to stop sleeping in and get her ass from Blackstone City to Stoneheart. It's time to prepare for war."

"And little Elara. The girl loves a spectacle. Organize a celebration for her new dragon. Invite all the most talented younglings in the horde. I think she's in the market for a few followers. Use the opportunity to officially announce the formation of her personal guard and guardian armies."

The only reply in the cavernous hall was Lilith's soft, breathy hum of assent.

Human Kingdom, Soaring Bird City.

In the fortress's conference hall, the four-way summit officially began.

Ava, Delilah, Lireesa, and the Glacial Dragon Jorik sat around a circular table, their faces grim as they reviewed the reports coming from the human kingdom.

"According to the intelligence provided by the Saint and Prince Theodore," Ava began, her voice heavy with solemnity, "the Avenger Armies are backed by an unknown arch lord. Including Torin, they possess seven Legendary-level combat units. A force of that size is equivalent to a super-faction."

This was the highest-stakes meeting she had ever been a part of. She wasn't just representing herself; she was the voice of the entire human kingdom.

"Now that our forces have been defeated, the northern clans will swarm to the cause like beasts to the scent of blood. They will join the Avenger Armies and sweep across the entire southern continent."

"Ladies, Lord Jorik, I regret to inform you that this is no longer an internal affair of the human kingdom. The safety and the very fate of the entire South are at risk."

She wasn't being alarmist. As she spoke, she passed a new dispatch to Delilah, Lireesa, and Jorik.

"This just came in. Four more northern lords have joined the Avenger Armies. The news is spreading to the farthest reaches of the north. A new North-South War is imminent. As members of the five-race alliance, we must stand united."

Silence fell. No one responded. The representatives of the other three factions kept their heads down, reading. Ava held her tongue, waiting.

"I am willing to lead twenty thousand of my people's finest archers to lend our aid," Grand Elder Lireesa said finally, breaking the silence. "We all signed the pact in the dragon city of Whitecliff. Now that the

dwarven Tribe has been twisted by evil and the humans have suffered a grievous blow, we must unite. If we do not, we could very well be the next to be corrupted or driven from our homes."

It was the position of the blood elf race. In truth, Lireesa hadn't wanted to be the first to commit, but the current standing of her people forced her hand. The dragons and the stoneheart horde both had arch lords. They were the real powers the human kingdom needed to court. By committing now, she was simply bowing to the inevitable.

Jorik, the dragon envoy and a peak Legendary-level warrior himself, had finished reading the intelligence long ago. But he remained silent, staring at the parchment.

Before he left, Frostsire's instructions had been clear: the dragons' position was to remain perfectly aligned with that of the Stoneheart Horde. It was the only way to avoid suspicion from the humans, and the only way for the two factions to extract the maximum benefit from the kingdom.

Besides, the entire human kingdom stood between the dragons and Torin's Avenger Armies. The dragons were indifferent to the war itself. They would not enter the fray without a guarantee of sufficient profit. And so, Jorik said nothing, waiting for Delilah's move.

Unconsciously, the eyes of Ava and Lireesa also shifted, settling on the Horde's envoy. The entire summit now hinged on her.

"My, my, you mustn't all look at me like that," Delilah said after a long moment, finally looking up. She broke the tension with a light, melodic laugh. "The intense gazes of a princess and two peak Legendary-level lords are more than a delicate woman like me can bear. I'll become quite flustered."

The air in the room eased slightly.

"Before I came to Soaring Bird City," she continued, her playful tone shifting to one of steel, "my lord spoke on this. The Five-Race Alliance is bound by a common destiny. It is our duty to seek justice for the fallen dwarven race."

Her gaze hardened. "And at the same time, we will have vengeance for our own Tribe members who were wrongfully slain in this very city."

Relief washed over the faces of Ava and Lireesa. If the Stoneheart Horde was in, the dragons would surely follow, and the southern alliance would hold.

Chapter 942: The World Dragon Eggs

By the same token, if the dragons agreed to enter the war, the Stoneheart Horde would be unlikely to refuse and lose face.

"However," Delilah continued, her tone shifting from righteous to pragmatic, "before we go any further, we must be clear on the matter of logistics and the division of spoils."

"To mobilize our armies and cross such vast distances will be... troublesome. And extremely costly."

She turned her gaze to the silent dragon. "Wouldn't you agree, Lord Jorik?"

Jorik was familiar with Delilah. During the last North-South War, on the western front, it had been this very succubus who directed most of the campaign.

"The distance is too great," Jorik stated flatly, picking up his cue. "The cost in supplies and materiel would be immense. My ancestor will not agree to fight a war for zero gain."

"I want to know what the dragons stand to acquire from this conflict. Resources? Or territory?"

If Delilah's approach had been subtle, Jorik's was a battering ram. The moment she had deferred to him, they had fallen into a perfect rhythm—good cop, bad cop.

Grand Elder Lireesa remained silent. Though she had already stated her position, she was ideologically aligned with Delilah and Jorik. The blood elf race also expected to gain something from this war. No one fought for free.

Just as Ava was struggling with how to respond, the shimmering form of King Harold appeared beside her.

"King Harold can make this promise to you all," the king's will projection announced, his voice echoing with authority. "If we win this war, the North-South dividing line will be pushed three hundred thousand miles to the north. The territories of the dwarven Tribe and the other northern clans will be divided equally among our four races."

His eyes seemed to pierce through them. "Don't you all agree that there are far too many lords in the north?"

The loss of a Grand Duke and two earls had struck a deep blow to the kingdom. They had to win this war, and they had to use the spoils to compensate for their losses.

Delilah, Lireesa, and Jorik all rose and bowed respectfully to the king's projection. Harold was now the voice of a great faction with an arch lord at its head. He commanded their respect.

"Your Excellency Delilah, Lord Jorik," the king continued, "as for matters concerning the arch lords, the Saint will discuss them personally with His Majesty the Giant-King and His Majesty the Dragon Emperor."

Delilah and Jorik both nodded. Bargaining between arch lords was far above their station.

"Then it is settled," King Harold declared. "I hope you will all return to your people with haste and lead your armies to the dwarven lands, so that we may defend the honor of the Five-Race Alliance together."

The North, Blackstone City.

A wave of Lumi's energy swept through the city. Deep within an underground fissure, Lorelia, who had been fast asleep, snapped awake.

A moment later, she was clinging to Lumi's arm, beaming. "Sister Lumi! I haven't seen you in forever! Look, look! Mistress sent me a new dress! Isn't it pretty?"

Lorelia let go and twirled, the red dress with its gold-thread embroidery creating a blur of dangerous beauty.

"Lilith sent me to tell you," Lumi said, her voice its usual cool monotone. "It's time to report to Stoneheart and prepare for war."

Lumi was naturally aloof, but Lorelia was one of the very few in the Stoneheart Horde who was openly affectionate with her. She was fond of the girl. Lorelia's personality was the polar opposite of her own, and she often found that she gained new insights and understanding just by being around her.

"Aww, is the war starting already?" Lorelia pouted for a second before her face broke into a massive grin. "Hahaha, awesome! Finally, something to do! It's my turn to go on a rampage!"

Hearing the command, she shot back into the underground fissure like a bolt of lightning to retrieve her Nest and gather her children. During her time back in Blackstone City, she had fulfilled many of her childhood wishes, exploring every last inch of her old home. She was especially fond of the lord's tent Orion had left behind and the familiar comfort of the fissure. She hadn't been idle, either. With a wealth of resources at her disposal, she had successfully hatched several new broods of cave spiders with superior bloodlines.

I can't believe she reached Legendary level on her own, Lumi thought with a sigh. As an elemental being, her senses were exceptionally sharp. Lorelia's aura was far purer than that of a typical lord. Though she was newly ascended and hadn't yet perfected concealing her power, Lumi could see the signs clearly.

Orion truly has a good eye.

Lumi dissolved into a flurry of wind and snow, heading for the inner keep behind the Horde Hall. With Lorelia being redeployed, she would now be the guardian of Blackstone City.

Emerald Dream Realm, Dragonflame Island.

Deep within the island's largest Dragon Nest, seven spectral phantoms were gathered.

"You wished to know why I guided you to this world," a proud, imperious voice echoed in the darkness. "Beyond the fact that the Emerald Dream Realm is an evolving world, there is another reason."

If Orion were present, he would have recognized the voice instantly. It was the Great Dragon King of Light, Mondusath.

"I am at the sixth stage of demigod," he announced. "Though my physical form has decayed and died, my essence has already passed through the stages of divine power, divine fire, and divine soul. I am on the cusp of the fourth stage: the divine calling."

"I need only condense my Divine Kingdom to answer that call and be reborn. To that end, I prepared for myself a clutch of six World Dragon eggs within my tomb."

As he said this, his gaze swept over the other phantoms. He could almost hear the greedy, hitched breathing of the other demigods.

"However," Mondusath's voice was heavy with regret, sorrow, and a profound sense of loss. "All six of the World Dragon eggs were stolen. And the thieves are the very same people now occupying the Dusk Continent."

As things stand, he knew, there was no way for him to recover the eggs himself. So, he had changed his plan. He would first retake the Uynting Realm, using the dragons there to incubate a new clutch of World Dragon eggs. But before that, these fools were obstacles. He would use the promise of the eggs to bait them, to deplete their strength. Ideally, they would be grievously wounded, forced into slumber to recover their divine power. That would buy him the time he needed.

"It is impossible for them to assimilate the eggs in a short time," he continued aloud. "I can sense the eggs are in this world, but I cannot pinpoint their location, which means they have been hidden. I no longer want them. Whoever finds them can keep them."

"All I ask now is that you help me utterly eradicate that faction and its people. Can you do this?"

Chapter 943: A signal

"The Emerald Dream Realm is an opportunity we cannot miss. The dragon race must have a foothold here. Once we are established, it is only a matter of time before we unite this entire world under our rule."

"By the Dragon God, the sacred eggs have been desecrated by outsiders! This is a disgrace! We must reclaim them!"

"Those thieves who stole the eggs... I will twist off their heads! I will peel their skin from their bones like an orange!"

"Your Majesty, Great Dragon King of Light! You should have told us of this from the beginning!"

"I want to know what gives these enemies the audacity to provoke a war they are destined to lose."

Mondusath watched the hypocritical demigods with a blank expression. If they weren't his kin, he would be tempted to use a forbidden secret technique to sacrifice every last one of them.

For the sake of the World Dragon eggs, these creatures had instantly flipped from detached indifference to fervent, impatient zeal, spouting all manner of self-righteous justifications for a full-scale war with the Champions Alliance.

Now, at least, they would take this war seriously.

Fight, then, Mondusath thought, a new plan already forming. Fight and bleed. Perhaps in the chaos, I'll have a chance to reclaim the eggs myself.

He was not without resources in the Uynting Realm; many of his descendants still lived.

He recalled the blade flashes he'd encountered upon his first arrival in this world and felt a surge of confidence in the strength of the faction from the Dusk Continent. His brief test with the white dragon avatar had told him all he needed to know: this faction had depth. Its members were not to be trifled with.

Three arch lords had worked together to slaughter his avatar—an avatar that, due to the laws it commanded, could have escaped from an ordinary demigod without breaking a sweat.

Who are these people? he wondered. And the one hiding behind the scenes... what stage of power have they reached?

It was precisely because of these unanswerable questions, this deep-seated caution, that Mondusath dared not descend with his true soul to pressure the three shameless bastards who had stolen his future.

Titanion Realm, Stoneheart Citadel.

No one was happier about Lorelia's arrival than Elara and Pallas. Lorelia had a child's heart, and because Elara and Pallas were Orion's children, she was more than happy to dote on them. She had even gifted each of them two Alpha cave spiders as personal guards.

The gift had elevated the status of the two royal children to its absolute peak among the other Tribe younglings.

"I can't believe that out of all our Alpha-level elders, Lorelia was the first to reach Legendary level."

"Everyone used to whisper about her behind her back. They called her timid, lazy... a drain on the horde's resources."

"It seems our vision was too narrow."

A fond, maternal smile graced Lilith's face. She had raised Lorelia from a young age. Before Pallas was born, the vast majority of Lilith's affection had been poured into the young spider-kin. It was only after Lorelia advanced to Alpha and moved into the underground fissure to guard the bottomless abyss that Lilith had shifted some of her focus to the Whitefur.

Now, Lorelia had surpassed everyone, becoming one of the Stoneheart Horde's two great broodmothers. Within the horde, her status was likely second only to Orion himself. And because she had been nurtured since birth with the collective effort and resources of the entire Tribe, her bond of intimacy and trust with her people was something an outsider like Soraya could never hope to match.

With Lorelia's ascension, a great weight had been lifted from Lilith's shoulders. The moment Lorelia had teleported in and thrown herself into Lilith's arms, she had unleashed her new lord-level pressure, her voice ringing throughout Stoneheart Citadel.

"Mistress! Lorelia is a lord now! If anyone ever bullies you again, I'll send my endless little spiders to wipe them out!"

It was a true reflection of her heart. She was, in her own way, simply showing off for the woman who had been a mother to her. But while the speaker was innocent, the listeners were not. Lorelia's words spread like wildfire through the city, and then through the entire Stoneheart Horde.

Orion had no objections whatsoever.

"Any broodmother who can reach Alpha-level should have the potential to become a lord," he mused, pulling Lilith into his embrace. His voice was a low, gentle, and deeply satisfied rumble. "The spider queen who used to live north of the black forest never advanced because she lacked the resources and nutrition to realize her potential."

"Lorelia is different. From the day she was born, she has been fed on the strength of our Stoneheart Horde. The potential was always there."

"Her ascension to lordship is a credit to all of us."

"You should have seen Rendall back in Kadira when he heard the news," Lilith said, her voice filled with warmth. "He was blind drunk for three days and three nights. Even in his sleep, the old elder kept muttering, 'This life was worth it... the status of the four races is secure.'"

Lilith leaned against Orion's chest, gazing out at the plaza where Lorelia was playing with Elara and Pallas, her face a mask of pure happiness.

"I imagine the prophet Onyx will be greatly pleased when he emerges from his seclusion and hears the news."

Orion nodded. The four founding races of the Stoneheart Horde had followed him from the very beginning, through continental wars and battles in the otherworldly realms. Lorelia was the ultimate combatant they had collectively raised. Her ascension was a symbol, a testament to their depth.

But more than that, it was a signal. It was a signal that boosted the confidence of their people, a signal that the foundation of the four races was now strong enough to produce Legendary-level powerhouses on its own. Where there was one lord, there would be a second, and then countless more.

That was the true reason for the smile on Lilith's face.

"Speaking of good news," Lilith said, the thought striking her. She looked up at Orion, her playful demeanor vanishing, replaced by a look of serious purpose. "We have finished collecting the sacrificial materials for the Heroic Altar. We have enough."

Orion's eyes lit up.

"Set the quota at fifty for now," he commanded. "Ten slots go to the elders of the four races who need their potential unlocked. Give one of those directly to Rendall."

"Put another twenty slots in the horde treasury, to be redeemed by those with sufficient battle achievements. Let them earn it."

"The remaining twenty," he said, a look of hope and expectation in his eyes, "are for the younglings in the youth camp."

"Tell the instructors to organize a tournament. Let the younglings fight for the honor themselves. Have Elara and Pallas participate as well. The First Daughter and the Prince of the Stoneheart Horde can't just be figureheads."

Lilith nodded, eagerly accepting the task.

"Word came back from Soaring Bird City," she said, her tone shifting back to that of a tactician. "King Harold has agreed to an equal four-way split of all territory and spoils. With that on the table, is sending only Lorelia and her cave spider armies truly going to be enough?"

Chapter 944: Vanished Over the Horizon

Lorelia was the darling of the Stoneheart Horde, and to Lilith, she was as precious as her own child. The thought of sending her into a continental war tightened a knot of worry in her chest.

"Relax," Orion soothed her. "I'll have her go to Soaring Bird City, but she'll be riding the abyssal dragon, Xalathar. As long as she's not an idiot and has a basic grasp of combat tactics, she won't stray far from Xalathar's protection."

Besides, given Lorelia's personality, she was hardly the type to foolishly abandon the cover of a melee powerhouse like an abyssal dragon. Orion was confident on that point.

Furthermore, to coordinate with Alexander's plan to bait and kill Ogu the Clown, Orion had also entrusted the nearly-restored Deathly Soul-Reaper to Lorelia's care. After investing so much in raising Lorelia, Orion was watching over her very closely.

Hearing that Xalathar would be accompanying her, Lilith immediately relaxed. By dispatching two lords and a sufficient number of cave spider armies, the Stoneheart Horde was more than showing its respect to the human kingdom's cause.

"Will there be any trouble from our northern territories?"

This was a North-South War. The northern tundra, the Abyssal Chasm, the black forest, and Thunderwood Forest were all northern territories. If war broke out, it was highly likely that ambitious lords with ulterior motives might get ideas about the Stoneheart Horde's northern borders. As the acting administrator, Lilith naturally had to consider this.

"Don't worry. Lumi is guarding Blackstone City. If anyone with a death wish makes a move, we can teleport back to support her at any time."

In truth, Orion had already secretly stationed another mirrored avatar in Blackstone City. Ever since he learned that Ogu the Clown had his claws in the Titanion Realm, Orion had been on high alert. He would not allow that creature to destroy the foundation he had fought so hard to build. Not one stone of it.

Lilith looked up, gazing at the face she knew so well. This was her man. In his features, she saw nothing but calm confidence and unshakable resolve.

"What is it?" Orion asked, noticing her stare and looking down with a questioning expression.

"It's nothing," Lilith shook her head, her eyes shining with pure adoration.

The North, Swamp.

Ever since news of the war had drifted up from the south, the lords of the north had been restless, itching for action. Khan Ironhoof of the centaurs, who roamed the Desolate Plains, was no exception.

As a veteran of the last North-South War, he knew better than anyone the immense spoils that came with victory.

But for all his ambition, he valued his own life more. Before making any moves, Ironhoof decided he needed to clarify a few things first. He traveled to the edge of the Poison Dragon Swamp, hoping to attract the attention of his neighbor.

He didn't have to wait for Orion.

"Are you planning to invade the Stoneheart Horde?"

After a flurry of wind and snow, Lumi's form materialized high in the air, her cold gaze fixed on Ironhoof below.

"No, no! This isn't an invasion!" Ironhoof waved his hands frantically, shaking his head as he felt the chill of her power. "Look, I have no armies with me! Not a single bloodline warrior!"

"Then what do you want?" Lumi's stare was hard.

She had no fondness for him. They were both northern lords and had known each other for years; they had even been on the same side in the last war. She had personally watched him abandon his allies to save his own skin. If Ironhoof hadn't fled at the last moment, the Stoneheart Horde would have had more than just the ogre Tribe as a steadfast ally in the south. He had made the wrong choice.

"This new war," Ironhoof asked, getting to the point. "Are you participating?"

This was what he needed to know. He had seen Orion's ferocity firsthand. He'd heard rumors that Orion had already advanced to arch lord. While he didn't fully believe it, he knew Orion was a powerhouse he couldn't possibly face.

"We are," Lumi stated, her gaze unwavering. "We are fighting on the side of the southern coalition."

Perhaps it was a moment of kindness, or perhaps she just didn't want to see an old acquaintance march to his death in the south. Whatever the reason, she told him the truth.

"Ah... but... how..." Ironhoof stammered, at a loss for words. His plan had been simple: if Orion joined the Northern Coalition, he could ride his coattails to conquer more territory in the south. But the Stoneheart Horde's stance completely baffled him.

"The centaur tribe," he declared after a moment of shocked silence, "will not be participating in this war."

He wasn't an idiot. Antagonizing the Giant-King was a spectacular way to get killed. Ironhoof was self-aware enough to know that much.

"I have no further business. I will take my leave."

He instinctively raised his bow in a gesture of salute, then immediately thought better of it, worried it might be misinterpreted. He awkwardly lowered the weapon, gave a short, stiff bow, and retreated back into the depths of the Desolate Plains.

Lumi hovered in the air, unmoving. As a Warden of the horde, Lilith shared all major intelligence with her. During such a sensitive time, she could not afford to be blind.

"The turmoil has already reached this far north?" she murmured to herself, before dissolving into a swirl of snow and heading farther north.

There was a mammoth lord on the great mountain to the northeast. She needed to see if he had any designs on the tundra.

Emerald Dream Realm, Leonidas's Palace.

When Isabella and Makareth returned, laden with spoils from their latest mission, they were destined for a shock. Kraken's advancement meant they had lost a peer in their little clique.

Makareth lamented dramatically, standing before Kraken and raising his goblet. "Barnacle, my man! I knew this day would come! I knew you'd eventually leave us behind in the dust!"

His relationship with Kraken was excellent.

"It was a stroke of luck," Kraken said, clinking his goblet against Makareth's. "And you make it sound like I'm about to die."

"Never! The last time we sparred, I knew the gap between us was huge. Now that you're an arch lord, it just means there's one more Big Boss watching my back, heh heh!"

Makareth's smile was genuine, and his words were sincere. His base of operations was in the Abyss, a place of endless slaughter and competition.

Of course he wanted as many powerful patrons as he could get. That was how he could secure more resources, more trump cards. He knew that with the backing of the big bosses, his own path to power would be faster and easier. Only a fool would throw away an opportunity to network and build rapport with the powers that be.

"You people are just monsters."

It was Isabella who spoke, rising to congratulate Kraken. It wasn't an insult or a curse. It was a statement of pure, unadulterated awe and respect for both Orion and Kraken.

When she first joined their group, Orion and Kraken were on her level, Legendary-level warriors. Back then, she could at least still see their backs as they moved ahead.

Now, even their backs had vanished over the horizon. Isabella was struck by a disorienting sensation—it wasn't just that she hadn't progressed; it felt like she had actually gone backward.

Chapter 945: The Dragon Crucible

You know that old saying? Some things are pointless to talk about, but not talking about them doesn't help either.

That's exactly where Kraken found himself.

Faced with Isabella's congratulations—laced with a jealousy so sharp it soured the air—he had no idea what to say.

He couldn't bring himself to flex on her, not when his win was so clearly her loss.

Just as the silence was stretching into truly awkward territory, Alexander's form materialized in the Leonidas Palace.

That was unusual.

As the crew's spymaster, Alexander usually operated in the shadows, a ghost perpetually wrapped up in a dozen different secrets. For him to show up in person meant something was up.

"Alexander. A situation?" Leonidas asked, pushing himself up from his lounge chair and pulling an identical one from his inventory right next to him.

"Intel just came in," Alexander said, skipping the pleasantries. "The dragons are massing forces on Dragonflame Island. We're seeing an exponential increase in troop deployment. Their intent to escalate is getting more blatant by the day."

He took the goblet of wine Leonidas offered, downing a good portion before continuing.

"The next phase is going to be messy. We're looking at a massive expansion of the conflict. Even if it's not the final showdown, this is going to be an all-out war."

Alexander's gaze settled on Kraken. "It's time to unleash those armies you've been building up in the rear. We can't let the enemy, or anyone else watching from the shadows, think we're a pushover."

Kraken nodded grimly. He knew what he had to do.

Alexander's eyes then swept over Orion and Isabella, finally landing on Orion.

"The Deputy Commander set up a solid defensive magical formation on Dusk Continent, but once the war kicks off, don't expect things to stay quiet. Forget the dragonkin who might send a few raiding parties for shits and giggles; the local heretic factions alone are going to be a massive headache."

He then glanced at Isabella.

"Isabella's faction is too new. She doesn't have the resources. She'll be struggling to play defense, let alone go on the offensive."

If Kraken's promotion to arch lord had been a gut punch, Alexander's blunt assessment was like him grinding salt into the wound.

Isabella just bowed her head, looking crushed.

"Patrolling the continent and mopping up the heretics will fall to your people," Alexander said to Orion. "Arthas will have the undead armies from the two graveyards support you."

Orion nodded. The plan was already in motion.

Clymene had been pulled back from the front lines specifically to lead the stoneheart horde's armies in a full-scale purge of the continent's remaining rogue factions. Her mission was to eliminate any internal threats and defend against any incursions that came during the war.

Of course, Clymene wouldn't be enough on her own. Arthas would be sending undead armies to back her up, including more than a few Legendary level powerhouses.

Orion technically had another Legendary at his disposal—Soraya—but she would never leave the city of Lorelia unless it was a dire emergency. The cross-realm teleportation array in Red Moon Valley was simply too critical to the stoneheart horde.

"Alexander, you coming here yourself... does this mean something big is about to drop?" Leonidas asked, his instincts sharp.

Alexander drained his goblet, the silence hanging in the air for a moment before he looked at Leonidas and Orion.

"Brace yourselves. The next wave won't be as easy as the last one."

He knew about the six demigod phantoms that had appeared on Dragonflame Island. He knew, but he couldn't say it out loud. Not with Kraken, Makareth, and Isabella here. Announcing an enemy force of that magnitude would crush their morale before the fight even started.

So, he opted for silence. But for veterans like Leonidas and Orion, that silence was a warning in itself.

Harder than last time, Orion thought. Harder than the white dragon avatar of Mondusath, the Great Dragon King of Light. That can only mean one thing: demigod phantoms. Or maybe even a demigod's true form.

"Hah! So what if it's dragons?" Leonidas boomed, breaking the tension as he flopped back into his chair. "It's not like we haven't slayed them before. What's the big deal?"

He suddenly sat bolt upright again, as if a thought had just struck him. He turned to Alexander.

"Hey, I remember you had the Building plans for a 'Dragon Crucible' or something, right? The enemy is literally a faction of dragons. Why haven't you built one?"

Alexander shrugged, his tone deceptively casual. "Not my territory."

It wasn't a cop-out; he genuinely didn't hold any land on Dusk Continent. The city he was currently operating out of still officially belonged to Isabella. Then again, with Blade Hall establishing branches in every major gathering place, owning territory was almost a technicality.

"Isabella's out," Alexander continued, his words sharp. "She doesn't have the resources, the foundation, or the manpower. If you want a Dragon Crucible built, talk to Hulk."

As he spoke, a wooden box flew from his hand, landing softly in Orion's grasp.

Under the burning gazes of Kraken, Makareth, and Isabella, Orion opened the box.

Inside lay a stack of parchments covered in dense, intricate script. He picked up the top sheet, his eyes widening as he scanned the contents.

"This is... insane," Orion breathed. He placed the blueprint back in the box and handed it to Kraken for him and the others to see.

The Dragon Crucible was a unique structure. It could process the corpses and blood of dragons, stripping out their essential power and infusing it directly into bloodline warriors.

A warrior enhanced by the Crucible could awaken new bloodline abilities, with a chance to upgrade their entire bloodline, boosting both their innate talent and their ultimate potential.

For any faction relying on bloodline warriors below the Legendary level, it was a game-changer. For Kraken, Makareth, and Isabella, it was a path to rapidly leveling up their entire race. For the stoneheart horde, it was a godsend.

"Fuck, all those dragons we turned into undead..." Kraken muttered, his voice thick with regret. "What a waste!"

"Kill them all..."

"We're gonna farm them into extinction!"

"Besides my personal colossal dragon, you guys can slay every single dragon you see!"

Reading the blueprint's description was like a shot of pure adrenaline. Kraken, Makareth, and Isabella were completely fired up, their eyes glinting with a newfound bloodlust for all things draconic.

"Bro," Orion said, ever the pragmatist. "There's a catch, isn't there? A structure this OP can't be easy to build."

"You can't just slap it together with common materials," Alexander confirmed. "The foundation requires ore with extremely high elemental energy concentrations. Then you need a mage who's an expert in magical formations to inscribe the runic arrays. Even then, there's only a chance it will succeed."

He paused.

"This isn't like the schematics we get from survivor chests. This tech was most likely incubated by a powerful Awakened from another world. I stumbled across the complete dataset by pure chance. We tried building it a few times before... the results were promising."

Chapter 946: The New Warden

Orion nodded, not pressing further.

No wonder these guys have such an insane power curve, he thought. They've already been reaping the benefits of a Dragon Crucible for who knows how long. It'd be weird if they didn't have a stable of elite talent.

"Bro," Leonidas said, shoving an inventory pouch into Orion's hands. It was heavy with supplies. "This is from my personal stash. Use it. Try to build the Dragon Crucible as big as you can. I'm gonna run a batch of my own people through it this time, too."

The pieces clicked into place. Leonidas had clearly been waiting for this opportunity for a long time.

Orion accepted, nodding. Even though it would cost him a significant amount of his own materials, gaining a unique, large-scale structure that could fundamentally upgrade his Tribe was more than worth the price.

With the deal struck, the mood sobered. No one dared get too relaxed. War was on the horizon, and every one of them could feel the tension tightening in their chests.

Human Kingdom, Soaring Bird City

When the war sirens blared, a wave of panic washed over the entire city.

Inside the palace, Princess Ava felt a knot of pure dread tighten in her stomach as two powerful, undisguised lord-auras swept over her city from the outside.

Most of the kingdom's lords were already deployed to the eastern front, preparing for war. If Soaring Bird City were attacked now, no support would arrive in time.

But just as her anxiety peaked, Delilah and Lireesa arrived together.

"Princess Ava," Delilah said, a confident smile playing on her lips. "The visitors outside are two of the stoneheart horde's Wardens. I hope they didn't alarm you?"

Her tone was friendly, but it carried an unmistakable undercurrent of pride and subtle superiority. She'd received intel long ago that Lorelia and Aldous were on their way.

"Two Wardens of the stoneheart horde?" Ava was so stunned she couldn't control her expression, her shock and confusion plain for all to see.

"Yes," Delilah confirmed, beaming as if bathed in a halo of her faction's glory. "Two of our horde's Wardens."

"Lady Delilah," the Grand Elder of the blood elf race, Lireesa, spoke up, her voice measured and cautious. "I recognize one of the lords outside as the Ogre. Might I ask who the other is?"

The true number of Legendary level powerhouses within the stoneheart horde was a complete mystery to outsiders. If internal rumors were to be believed, there could be as many as seven or eight. But the only ones who had ever made a public appearance in the southern territory were Soraya, Xalathar, and Aldous.

"That would be our horde's newest Warden, Lady Lorelia."

Honestly, even Delilah felt a little strange calling her that. She never imagined that the timid, sneaky little thing she remembered would be the first of the inner circle's new generation to break through to the lord level. It was a complete shock to the four core races, a surprise that filled them all with a fierce sense of pride and motivation.

ROAR!

As they spoke, the guttural roar of an ogre echoed from outside the city walls.

There, Lorelia stood on Aldous's shoulder, staring with undisguised envy at the massive earring he wore.

"This was a gift from my lord, little sister Lorelia," Aldous rumbled, his voice a deep bass. "It is very important to Aldous. I cannot give it to you."

Aldous and Lorelia were an odd couple, to say the least. But somehow, the fun-loving Lorelia and the simple, life-loving Aldous got along perfectly, and they'd formed an unlikely big-brother-little-sister bond.

"Hehe, I'm just looking! I didn't say I wanted it!" Lorelia chirped, tearing her gaze away.

Since ascending to lord, she had awakened the Dreamscape series of transcendent power. An artifact that amplified mental power, like Aldous's earring, was incredibly attractive to her. Orion had already given her several similar pieces of gear from his personal collection after her promotion, but it was just her nature. As a girl who loved pretty, shiny things, her first instinct upon seeing one was wanting it for herself.

"Heh heh... when we get to the battlefield, Aldous will find you other nice things!" To an ogre, the solution was simple: if you wanted things, you took them from your enemies.

"You promise? And they have to be good things!"

"I promise!"

While Aldous and Lorelia were cheerfully plotting how to loot their future enemies, Ava, Lireesa, and Delilah emerged from the city.

"Sister Delilah!" Seeing her riding the Abyssal Dragon, Xalathar, Lorelia channeled her transcendent power and leaped gracefully through the air, landing lightly on his massive head.

"The master sent me to get you," Delilah said, a fond, indulgent smile on her face. "We're heading to the eastern front to claim new territory for the Horde."

Looking at the strange yet familiar girl before her, the whole situation felt surreal.

Is this really the same little spider who spent all that time guarding the underground fissure?

"It's been too long. You've changed so much." Delilah reached out and straightened the butterfly-shaped clip in Lorelia's hair, which had been knocked askew. She treated her almost like her own daughter. In a way, she was.

With the exception of Lilith, the Tribe's four elders—Delilah, Rendall, Onyx, and Thundar—and even Earthshaker had all practically raised Lorelia. During the dark beast tides, they had risked life and limb to build their fortunes, and they had poured most of it into this one kid.

"Hehe, Sister Delilah, do you like my dress?" Lorelia asked, spinning in a circle on Xalathar's head. The motion earned her a low, annoyed growl from the Abyssal Dragon.

"Hey now, big guy," Lorelia said, crouching down and tapping him between the eyes, communicating with the dragon effortlessly. "The master said I get to ride you into battle, and you have to protect me!"

As Orion's bonded creatures, they shared a natural affinity.

"Just as I suspected," Delilah sighed, turning to Lireesa and Ava with an apologetic look. "It seems we'll have to head out first."

The moment she saw the chaotic duo of Lorelia and Aldous, she understood why Orion had sent her to the front lines. This expeditionary force had two powerhouses, but it lacked a true commander. If Lorelia and Aldous were the muscle, Delilah would have to be the brains—handling logistics and coordinating with the allied forces.

Under the dark, unreadable gazes of Lireesa and Ava, the Abyssal Dragon joined the mixed army of cave spiders and ogres.

With a deafening roar that shook the very ground, the horde turned and departed from Soaring Bird City.

Tens of thousands of cave spiders and ogres moved as one, a black torrent of chitin and muscle flowing down the road.

The sheer presence of the horde was a crushing weight, silencing the very wildlife in its path.

A tide of hissing and roaring, they moved forward.

Chapter 947: Puppets and Pawns

On the walls of Soaring Bird City, the human spectators who had gathered to watch the spectacle felt a chill run down their spines whenever the gaze of a passing cave spider or ogre swept over them.

As the reinforcement army vanished into the distance, Lireesa and Ava shared a silent, loaded look.

Their understanding of the stoneheart horde had been completely redefined. With that spider broodmother holding down the south, their flank was secure. The threat of the Northern Coalition suddenly seemed less insurmountable.

"Grand Elder Lireesa, I must return," Ava said, giving a slight, formal bow. "This news about the stoneheart horde's reinforcements must reach the rest of the kingdom immediately."

The arrival of this army was a massive shot in the arm for the kingdom's morale. It was critical.

"Go with peace of mind, Princess Ava," Lireesa replied calmly. "Our own blood elf race reinforcements are scheduled to arrive in Soaring Bird City shortly."

The North, Northern Coalition

The camp of the Avenger armies had swelled to several times its original size. Deep within the sprawling labyrinth of tents, Torin's command post was buried, heavily fortified, and nearly impossible to locate.

"Yi," a voice drawled. "More and more of the northern lords arrive every day. You should be pleased."

The speaker was Grand Duke William, slouched in a chair across from Torin. Or rather, it was the thing that wore his face.

The clothes were the same, the body was the same, but the eyes were vacant, devoid of all life or spirit.

If you looked closely, you could see the tell-tale signs: faint, web-like lines, almost invisible unless you knew where to look, traced the contours of his face—from the corner of his eye to his neck, from his mouth to his ear.

The subtle, horrifying seams of a puppet. The Grand Duke of the human kingdom had been turned into a plaything for the clown, Ogu.

"Yes, it's certainly something to be happy about," Torin snarled, his temper growing more volatile by the day. His face was a thunderous mask of rage. "So why don't I feel happy at all?"

"You must understand, Yi. These northern lords are nothing but pawns on our board," the Ogu-puppet said, its voice unnervingly calm. "For pawns, there is a simple rule. If they are useful, we use them. If they defy us, we discard them."

"Now that they have entered the game, their lives are no longer their own to command. They are a show of force, nothing more. Why are you so obsessed with making them submit to you?"

Ogu, speaking through William, stared at Torin with those dead eyes.

Torin looked up, locking his gaze on the puppet. It had no expression, but Torin could vividly imagine the real entity behind it, Ogu, watching him with a mocking smirk. Watching his powerlessness. Watching him sink deeper and deeper into the trap.

"Hah! Easy for you to say!" Torin shot back. "If I don't forge these northern tribes into a unified force, what are we going to fight the southern armies with? Your handful of Dark Dwarves and puppet armies?"

Torin was no fool. He had been ecstatic when he'd first ascended to the lord level, but after the initial rush wore off, he realized something was terribly wrong. He could feel it in his gut: he was caught in a death spiral, a vortex he couldn't escape.

Even if he managed to lead the northern tribes to victory against the south, he would still have to face the unfathomable creature before him—Ogu, another survivor, and a powerful one at that.

That was why Torin was so desperate to bring the northern lords under his direct command, to build his own power base, to give himself a fighting chance.

But the lords he was trying to recruit were all sharks. Every last one of them was a cunning, selfish bastard. They had come south to feast on the spoils of war with Torin, not to become his grunts. They simply ignored his commands.

Their insolence infuriated him.

There were times Torin wanted to make an example out of one of them.

But as more and more of them arrived, their combined forces soon dwarfed his own, and he no longer had the power to carry out his threats.

What drove him mad was that Ogu offered no support, refusing to help him suppress the unruly lords. Torin felt like he was being sidelined, a commander in name only, slowly being roasted over a spit. It was infuriating.

This was nothing like what he had imagined.

What happened to helping me conquer this world?

"You don't trust me, Yi. That's not a good sign," Ogu's voice purred from William's throat. "The quickest way for a faction to collapse is for it to rot from the inside. Our interests are aligned. You and I both want territory of our own. Once we win this war, we can sit down and negotiate the details. I promise, you will get the share you deserve."

Torin said nothing. He didn't believe a word of it.

By the time that happens, I probably won't even have the strength to fight back.

"Think about it, Yi. Those lords outside your tent... we have no history with them. They aren't even true allies." Ogu's voice grew deeper, raspier, threaded with a filament of killing intent. "At best... they are a temporary convergence of interests. They won't listen to you, and they won't listen to me. So why not use the promise of spoils to make them bleed for us? To pave our road to victory with their bodies?"

The puppet's voice turned to ice. Ogu could feel Torin slipping from his control, and that was a dangerous development.

"A single victory is built on a mountain of corpses. Did you really think carving out a foothold on this continent—snatching a piece of the pie from the major powers—would be easy?"

Torin ignored the lecture. He felt like a caged beast.

He stared at the puppet and demanded, "Tell me. What do you really want?"

But he received no answer.

Emerald Dream Realm, Gloomwood Forest

The sun beat down, but its light was swallowed by the deep woods, where the sound of snarling and barking echoed through the trees.

A demonic wolf and a hellhound were locked in a furious battle, a whirlwind of snapping teeth and burning fur.

Dirtclaw, the hellhound, was a beast of thick muscle and brutal intent. He fought with a suicidal abandon, a berserker's fury that ignored his own wounds.

He lunged, his jaws locking onto the wolf's neck, his face a demonic mask, radiating an aura of death.

"Dirtclaw is the strongest gnoll on Dusk Continent!" he roared in his mind, the thoughts a savage litany. "And the strongest hellhound! All canine creatures who do not submit to Dirtclaw should be ripped apart! They will lose the right to breed!"

After a desperate struggle of rolling and tearing, the demonic wolf's strength finally gave out, its body going limp from blood loss.

Only then did Dirtclaw release his jaw lock.

With a final, vicious bite, he ripped open the wolf's chest, tearing out the crystal core hidden within.

He swallowed it whole.

"The weak," he growled, blood dripping from his maw, "are just meat for the strong."

Chapter 948: The Unyielding Fury

Meat for the strong.

Dirtclaw had learned that phrase from his lord.

Just then, a howl echoed from the dense forest behind him.

This time, however, Dirtclaw didn't tense up. A look of ease washed over his grizzled face.

A moment later, Dace emerged from the trees, mounted on his frost wolf.

"That's the last heretic in this sector," Dace said, dismounting. He walked over to the corpse and, out of habit, prodded the demonic wolf to make sure it wasn't playing dead.

He jabbed his trident under its head, lifting it to reveal the deep puncture wounds in its neck. A clean kill. "We should continue the sweep north."

"Brother Dace, your aura is almost as strong as mine now," Dirtclaw growled, a hint of respect in his voice. "Nothing like constant warfare to make you grow stronger, right?"

Dace nodded. Since arriving in the Emerald Dream Realm, he had thrown himself into training and combat, finally reaching Alpha peak and earning the right to challenge for the lord level. But he had no confidence he could actually make the leap.

"At our level, I think talent might matter more." Reaching Alpha peak had given Dace his own insights into the nature of power, and he didn't entirely agree with Dirtclaw's kill-to-level-up philosophy.

"Hehehe, you're not wrong," Dirtclaw chuckled. "I mean, if someone like Lady Lorelia can make it to the Legendary level, talent has to be the most important thing there is."

At the mention of Lorelia, both of their eyes lit up. Among the stoneheart horde's Wardens, she was the one they knew best, the one they'd watched grow up. Her ascension to the Legendary level had given all the Alpha peak warriors like them a huge confidence boost.

Before, the Legendary level had seemed like a distant, impossible dream. But Lorelia's success gave them a sliver of hope.

Maybe, just maybe, if we push a little harder, we can make it too.

That was the thought simmering in all their hearts.

"You hear the news?" Dirtclaw asked, shifting back to his gnoll form. He slung the Alpha-level demonic wolf over his shoulder and leaned in closer to Dace. "My lord has opened the Heroic Altar again. You were one of the first to follow him. Did you get a slot?"

"I did," Dace confirmed. "Once we've cleared the heretics from the continent, I'm heading back to receive the Legacy."

The Legacy of the Heroic Altar was a secret known only to the horde's upper echelon. Rendall, Onyx, Earthshaker, and Delilah were the first to receive it, and their power and talent had skyrocketed as a result, a fact that made the other elders deeply envious. Now that Orion was opening it again, the available slots were the hottest ticket in town for the horde's command staff.

"Hahaha! I didn't get assigned one, but I used my battle achievements to buy a slot from the horde's Vault," Dirtclaw boomed. "We'll go back together, brother."

As one of Delilah's lieutenants, he'd gotten the news first and had been the first one in the Emerald Dream Realm to redeem a slot. A battle-maniac like Dirtclaw was never short on battle achievements, and he'd been hoarding them, waiting for something good to show up in the allied forces' vault. Now, with more than enough points saved up, he'd cashed them in instantly.

The thought of raising his potential again made him feel even more certain he could reach the Legendary level.

"Heard there are thirty slots reserved for the younglings in the horde," Dirtclaw added, his voice dropping to a gruff, fatherly tone. "I already pulled some strings with an elder to get my two pups into the youth camp."

He puffed out his chest. "Hope they make their old man proud and earn one. If they do, I won't have to worry about their future."

At the mention of younglings, the murderous glint in Dace's eyes softened into a look of warmth and longing. "My youngest is in the youth camp too. I imagine he'll be in the running this time. It's going to be a madhouse. All the elders who got wind of the news are probably rushing to get their own kids in."

Dace mounted his frost wolf, and the two warriors rode side-by-side, heading towards the sounds of the next skirmish.

"I also heard a rumor that one of the Wardens who just returned is preparing to build some kind of special structure," Dirtclaw said. "They say it can raise our potential, too. No idea if it's true."

"Hope it is."

"Yeah, that would be something else."

The West, Kasenna Sea

As the horns of war sounded, a new round of slaughter began.

Countless Sea Race warriors from a dozen different species surged through the dark waters, clashing with the enemy in the bottomless depths.

Streamlined bodies flashed and vanished in the gloom. Every other moment, a cloud of blood would blossom in the darkness, and a shimmering rain of dislodged scales would drift towards the surface.

But before they could break the waves, they were obliterated by stray water cannons and wind blades crisscrossing the churning sea, forcing the remnants back into the deep.

In the sky, dragons beat their massive wings, gliding and roaring. They were met by swarms of rotting, undead exotic beasts, their bodies wreathed in necrotic energy. Among them were even the skeletal forms of bone dragons.

The war raged from the depths of the sea to its surface, and from the surface to the sky. Both sides had committed their main forces, locked in a brutal stalemate of mutual annihilation.

The sheer intensity of the battle shocked the hidden powers observing from the shadows.

"Looks like they're out for blood."

"More than that. Feels like there's some serious bad blood between them."

"We knew the faction that took Dusk Continent was strong, but I never expected these newly arrived dragons to match them."

"This is getting more and more interesting..."

"What do these dragons even want?"

On the front line, Isabella stood atop her colossal dragon as it flew low over the water, her voice amplified by magic, ringing out across the battlefield.

"This is our home! We will defend this land with our courage and our steel, with our swords and our shields, with our fangs and our claws!"

"We will meet this challenge with unyielding fury and kill every last invader!"

"We will make our enemies drown in their own blood and fear, and cast them into the abyss of their nightmares!"

Leonidas Palace

Watching Isabella's performance on a projection, both Leonidas and Orion looked stunned.

"Hey, Alexander," Leonidas said, turning to the spymaster who was casually sipping his wine. "Did we totally misread this girl before?"

He was genuinely impressed, and Orion felt the same way. He had never seen this side of Isabella.

"What's so surprising?" Alexander replied without looking up, his tone matter-of-fact. "The world Isabella comes from uses a different combat doctrine. It's centered on armies acting as a single, devastating unit. Besides knights and their mounts, their warfare is all about large-scale battle formations and massive, overlapping auras."

Alexander had expected this all along. To him, it wasn't a surprise at all. It was simply a fact.

Chapter 949: Hit the Jackpot or Die Trying

"Isabella's faction is still new, so she can't leverage her greatest strengths yet," Alexander explained. "Her auras are designed for the battlefield. The more she's in the thick of it, the more people benefit. Or did you two really think she was a total liability?"

He narrowed his eyes, his cold gaze sweeping over Leonidas and Orion.

"Did you really think I would pull strings for a useless pretty face and bring them into the Champions Alliance?"

He felt like his judgment—his very character—was being called into question, and he was insulted.

"It's just... she always gave off that arrogant princess vibe," Orion admitted, slumping back into his chair. He had to concede he'd completely underestimated her. "It must have been hard for her, having to hide her real strengths like that."

"A queen should act like a queen. She has every right to be proud," Alexander stated flatly. "When she met you lot—a bunch of Big boss monsters—that pride made her restrain her true nature. In her own world, on her own territory, she is the queen."

It was the first time Alexander had ever truly defended Isabella. The people he vouched for were never just decorative vases. They had their own unique, and deadly, skill sets.

"Uh, guys," Kraken interjected, a confused look on his face as he pointed towards the distant battlefield. "Something's not right."

Orion, Alexander, and Leonidas all turned to him.

"This is supposed to be an all-out war," Kraken said, "but I'm not sensing a single enemy arch lord on the field. Not one. Is that normal?"

Of course, it wasn't.

Alexander's brow furrowed in thought, his eyes distant as if he were communicating with someone far away. Leonidas stood and walked over to Kraken, peering into the distance alongside him.

Orion, however, tilted his head back, his eyes fixed on the sky where the clouds were growing unnaturally thick. His eyebrows shot up.

"I have a really bad feeling about this," he murmured. "But I can't put my finger on what it is."

The words had barely left his mouth when three mighty auras erupted from the direction of Dragonflame Island, streaking towards the battlefield at incredible speed.

The sudden development made both Orion and Alexander jump to their feet.

But the reaction from their side was just as swift. The demigod phantoms of the Deputy Commander and Arthas rose from Dusk Continent, teleporting instantly to the airspace above the battle. At the same time, the demigod allied with the Champions Alliance materialized beside them.

"Bro," Leonidas said, turning to stare at Orion with wide eyes. "Were you a crow in a past life or something? Are you a jinx?"

Orion just shook his head, his brow still furrowed. He wasn't disagreeing with Leonidas; that gut-wrenching sense of crisis hadn't faded.

"The feeling's still there," he said grimly. "I don't think it's this simple."

BOOM!

BOOM!

BOOM!

As if summoned by his words, three more demigod phantoms—three colossal dragons—appeared in the skies directly above Dusk Continent.

They instantly fell into a Twilight Trident formation, their voices chanting in an ancient, powerful tongue. A moment later, a storm's eye of cataclysmic proportions formed above them, and a hurricane began to coalesce, aimed squarely at the continent below.

But as the hurricane descended, dozens of Mage Towers scattered across Dusk Continent lit up in unison. A pale golden barrier shimmered into existence, rising to meet the storm and holding it at bay.

"Hmm... a demigod-level defensive formation?" one of the dragon phantoms mused.

"Impressive. I didn't expect this faction to have such resources."

"Their champions have been lured out. If we work together, we can shatter this barrier."

The three phantoms conferred, preparing to force their way through and destroy the Champions Alliance's entire foundation on the continent. With their enemy's base in ruins, the war of attrition would be over. The dragons would win.

Then, they could finally begin the search for the prize the Great Dragon King of Light Mondusath had spoken of: the World Dragons' eggs.

"They built a defensive formation of this scale on this continent," one of them growled. "The dragon eggs must be hidden here."

"World Dragons... how can we allow such a treasure to fall into the hands of outsiders?"

"Let's begin."

Back in the Leonidas Palace, the ambush had happened so fast that Alexander, Leonidas, and Orion were momentarily stunned into silence.

After a heavy pause, Alexander was the first to speak. "Six demigod phantoms. So, the intel was right."

He summoned his spirit sword avatar and gave Kraken a final look. "This is on you now."

With that, he vanished.

Leonidas chugged the rest of the wine from his goblet, slammed it down, and let out a wild roar. "Today, this bro is going god-slaying!"

And he was gone.

"Are the dragons going all-in?" Kraken asked, the reality of the situation finally crashing down on him. He turned to find only Orion still there.

"It seems they're done playing games," Orion said. He took out the urn containing the ancient giant-horned whale and tossed it to Kraken. "Don't get it killed. I have big plans for that thing."

With his trident held in a reverse grip, Orion disappeared.

All at once, the pressure of the entire war fell on Kraken's shoulders. It was a weight unlike anything he had ever felt before. Crushing.

For a paralyzing second, he had no idea what to do.

He was snapped out of it by two new arch lord auras rising from Dusk Continent and heading his way. It was a storm avatar at the peak of the arch lord level and a bone dragon in the latter stages.

"Damn," Kraken muttered, finally opening the urn and summoning the colossal whale. "So this is the pressure the top guys are under."

He had to move. From the direction of Dragonflame Island, several enemy arch lord auras were now racing towards the front line.

On that front line, the dragon-slaying crew—Demon Makareth, Isabella, and Gustalon—were busy harvesting the dragons' Legendary level elites. The sudden appearance of demigod auras, followed by the approach of multiple arch lords, terrified them.

"Is this the final battle? What do we do now?" Demon Makareth blurted out, not knowing if he was asking himself or his teammates.

"This area is about to become extremely dangerous," a voice whispered on the wind—the elemental perception of Gustalon.

"Ignore them," Isabella snarled, her voice sharp and clear. She stood proudly atop her colossal dragon, brandishing her lance.

"As long as an arch lord isn't targeting us directly, we keep hunting. The Dragon Crucible needs more corpses, and after a battle this big, both sides might call a truce."

"This is our one and only chance to get stacked. We hit the jackpot on this run, or we die trying!"

She stared towards the approaching arch lord auras, and her eyes weren't filled with fear, but with the gleam of a lunatic who saw a bloodbath as an opportunity.

The keywords—'get stacked,' 'hit the jackpot'—sent a jolt through Demon Makareth. He was an opportunist at heart, and he'd risk anything for a score like this.

"Kill! Kill! Kill!" he roared, his fear replaced by avarice. "I don't care if an arch lord shows up! Nothing stops us from hunting dragons!"

Hoisting his scimitar, Makareth transformed into a blade aura and shot back into the fray.

Chapter 950: Only One Can Leave

The colossal dragon let out a roar and charged after him. The air shrieked around it, with wind blades flickering in and out of existence in its wake.

Strangely, at this critical moment, it was Isabella, a woman, who had become the decisive leader for the three of them.

Perhaps this was the true authority of a queen.

Dusk Continent, Above the Skies

The figures of Orion, Alexander, and Leonidas appeared one after another, materializing to face the three demigod phantoms in the distance.

"Three arch lords," one of the phantoms sneered. "Are you here to stop us?"

"Stop us?" another scoffed. "I think they're here to get themselves killed."

“Interesting, interesting,” said the third, its voice laced with mockery. “Two of them are even peak arch lords.”

The three demigod phantoms stared at the newcomers with a mixture of amusement, curiosity, and contempt. An arch lord challenging a demigod? It wasn’t unheard of, but it was the kind of legend you never expected to witness firsthand. Besides, any being that powerful wouldn’t be a complete unknown.

“That’s right,” Alexander said, his voice flat. He looked directly at the first phantom who had spoken. “We’re here to stop you.”

He produced a dark, metallic token etched with a single, brutal sigil for ‘Slaughter’. He tossed it towards the demigod.

The token ignored the vast distance between them, phasing through the void and sinking into the phantom’s form. In the next instant, both Alexander and the demigod vanished without a trace.

“What? How is that possible?”

“What just happened?”

The two remaining demigod phantoms reeled in shock. That was a move far beyond the capabilities of any arch lord.

“What’s the matter, country boys? Never seen this trick before?” Leonidas jeered. “Guess your grandpa Leonidas will have to play with you today!”

He produced an identical Sigil of Slaughter and tossed it at one of the remaining phantoms. Just like Alexander, they both disappeared from reality.

“Don’t ask me,” Orion said, as the final, bewildered demigod phantom started to speak. “I don’t know either.”

He flicked his wrist, sending his own token spinning through the air.

The Slaughter Space

Orion and the last demigod phantom appeared simultaneously in a strange, unknown void. Neither made a move, instead taking a moment to survey their new surroundings.

The Slaughter Space was a world painted in shades of gray, choked by a constant, blood-red mist. It felt like a brutal, desolate purgatory.

There was no day or night, no light or shadow, only the oppressive grayness. The only landmark was a colossal mountain range in the distance that didn't scrape a sky, but pierced the endless, starless void above. The ground beneath their feet was a carpet of countless skeletons from a thousand different species, most of them decayed into dust.

From beyond the mountains, a mournful, keening wail drifted towards them, an eerie and constant funeral dirge.

So this is the Slaughter Space, Orion thought. It wasn't as over-the-top or terrifying as he'd expected.

In truth, this was his first time using the Sigil of Slaughter, a gift from Alexander.

He remembered Alexander's words as he'd handed it to him. The battle can't happen on Dusk Continent. Three demigods fighting at once could shatter the landmass. Remember, once you use the Sigil of Slaughter, only one person can walk out.

He and the demigod phantom. One survivor.

Orion let out a long, slow breath and looked at the phantom a short distance away.

“Do you have any questions?” Orion asked calmly, making no move to attack. “I can answer them for you. Free of charge.”

“This is all your doing. Why would you be so kind?” the dragon phantom demanded.

“Sorry, it’s my first time using that thing, too.”

“Where is this place?”

“The Slaughter Space.”

“Hmph. Don’t think I’m an idiot. The Slaughter Space is a supreme world of its own.”

Orion just shrugged. “Maybe this is just a forgotten little corner of it.”

“Why did you bring me here?” the demigod pressed, sensing Orion was willing to talk.

“Simple. This place has a rule,” Orion said, his expression still placid. “Between you and me, only one can leave.”

“I admire your nerve,” the demigod said, a hint of respect in its voice. “To sacrifice yourself just to delay me. Your courage is commendable.”

Orion let out a soft, unreadable chuckle. “May I have your name, honored one?”

“Latychrenber,” the demigod announced, its voice booming as it stared down Orion. “The strongest dragon king of the Brass Dragon race from Uyting Realm.”

For a dragon to give its name like this was a rare sign of respect. “And you? What are you called?”

“Orion.”

“Orion. A short name. No history to it. No legacy. The brave are often stubborn... and the first to die—”

“Honored one,” Orion interrupted smoothly, cutting him off before he could work himself into a battle frenzy. That wasn’t what Orion wanted. Not yet. “Are you perhaps interested in the whereabouts of the World Dragons?”

He watched Latychrenber without blinking, tracking his eyes, his every subtle movement. It was a test. For six dragon demigods to attack at once, they had to know about the World Dragons.

Sure enough, at the mention of the name, Latychrenber’s massive form went rigid.

“How do you know of the World Dragons?” he demanded.

Orion grinned, a wide, triumphant, and utterly infuriating smile. “Because the one who robbed the tomb of the Great Dragon King of Light Mondusath... was me.”

“Meaning if I kill you, I can get the World Dragons?” Latychrenber’s words came faster now, laced with an urgent greed.

“I’m afraid I have to disappoint you, honored one,” Orion said, his smile widening. “I cooked and ate them.”

“You—! You DARE!” Latychrenber roared, his composure shattering. Raw killing intent exploded from him. “You damned worm! You are courting death! Did you think I didn’t know you were stalling for time?”

The dragon laughed, a terrible, grinding sound. “I’ll let you in on a secret. I was stalling for time, too. And now, it’s over!”

The Brass Dragon demigod raised a claw. Clouds of thick fog instantly billowed into existence, blanketing the area. This was Cloud Mist, a spell that saturated the air with water elements, creating the perfect combat environment for a dragon.

“Where the mists settle, all things grow heavy, as if carrying a mountain, as if wading through a swamp.”

This was a deeper application of the spell: a Gravitic Mist. The air grew thick, heavy, suffused with the metallic tang of the brass dragon’s own essence.

Latychrenber had allowed Orion to talk for so long because he had been preparing this regulatory domain. Once it was in place, even in the Slaughter Space, this would be his home turf.

Latychrenber was a demigod, not an idiot. He never believed for a second that three arch lords would be brave enough to challenge demigods without some kind of trick up their sleeves. To be safe, he had been exceptionally cautious, choosing to establish his domain first.

A terrifying pressure slammed down, so immense that Orion’s feet sank several inches into the bone-strewn ground.

But his expression remained perfectly calm.