

## **Titan King 981**

Chapter 981: The feast is about to begin

Stoneheart Horde, Stoneheart City.

Orion had signed a contract with Torin. While it wasn't a master-servant bond, it was enough that when Torin died, Orion felt it. He pulled out the scroll they had both signed. With one of the signatories gone, the contract was now void; half of the parchment had already crumbled into fine ash.

"So, if a survivor doesn't grow strong enough, they just die," Orion mused to himself.

It was a truth he had understood for a long time. Still, having witnessed Torin's rise and fall firsthand gave him pause, a stark reminder of the stakes.

"What a waste."

And it truly was. In Orion's grand design for the future, Torin was meant to be a stepping stone for his son, Kronos, in his eventual conquest of the human kingdoms. He was a pig being fattened for a specific purpose.

The clown's interference had ruined that plan, force-growing Torin so rapidly that he was destined to burn out.

"So where does the opportunity lie now?"

Orion leaned back on his throne, his thoughts drifting. Torin's death had affected him, if only slightly. Perhaps it was a classic case of the fox mourning the rabbit—a grim reminder of his own mortality.

Emerald Dream Realm, Dragonflame Island.

Three days and three nights had passed. The clash between the Champions Alliance and the Dragonkin was a grinding war of attrition.

On the distant coastline, the cries of whales, the roars of dragons, and the clang of battle between the Sea Race and dragon beasts were unending. From the depths, great whales would surface to unleash tsunamis or fire pressurized jets of water, but against dragons skilled in their ancient magic, the tidal waves would dissipate and the weakened water jets would glance harmlessly off their thick scales. In return, the dragons would spew torrents of flame, incinerating the Sea Race warriors who managed to gain a foothold on the beach.

If it weren't for the endless tide of undead units clawing their way out of the heaps of dead, the Kraken's forces would have been at a severe disadvantage.

"The Dragonkin's resources run deep," the Kraken commented to Orion, his telepathic voice grim. He was watching the same battle, seeing the sheer quality, not just quantity, of the dragon beasts holding the line.

"It's well known that dragons have... appetites," Orion replied, unfazed. "Many of the males who can't find a female dragon to mate with will turn to the females of other species. It's perfectly normal."

Within dragon society, the strongest males held priority mating rights, with a single powerful dragon often claiming several females for himself. This left the weaker or defeated males to vent their frustrations elsewhere.

That was the origin of most dragon beasts. While these mixed-bloods were looked down upon by pureblood dragons, the Dragonkin weren't foolish enough to waste such a vast military force. In any external war, the dragon beasts served as the perfect cannon fodder.

As Orion and the Kraken conversed, a deafening crack of thunder tore through the sky, a sound that carried for thousands of miles.

"The feast is about to begin," Orion said, his gaze turning upward.

The sky was now dominated by a crimson magical formation. From its center, the phantom of a celestial being began to rise, a god-form of pure energy. It raised a hand and pressed it down toward Dragonflame Island. A piercing shriek tore through the air as a meteor condensed from nothingness, blazing with blinding light as it began its accelerated descent.

The scene was apocalyptic, a star torn from the heavens.

"Fall back! Blockade the sea!" Orion's cold command cut through the chaos.

The Kraken, the skeletal dragon, and the ancient giant-horned whale immediately withdrew from the island's airspace, taking up positions over the ocean and unleashing hell upon the lower-tiered Dragonkin forces. The oppressive aura of an arch lord washed over the battlefield.

Every attack they launched was an incomprehensible cataclysm for the low-level creatures below. The raw, merciless power was enough to make the hearts of dragons and beasts alike burst from sheer terror.

After the first volley, the survivors scrambled, turning tail and fleeing back toward the Dragon Nest at the island's center.

They were met by a sealed ward... and a colossal meteor falling from the sky.

BOOM!

Dragonflame Island trembled violently. The dragons and dragon beasts closest to the Dragon Nest were vaporized instantly, obliterated into dust and ash by the impact's pressure and incinerating heat.

The dragons hiding safely inside the ward watched it all, clear as day. The doomsday spectacle was seared into their minds, a memory that would haunt them for the rest of their lives.

But it wasn't over.

The magical formation high above began to pulse, pulling in more asteroids from the void of space. They fell in a ceaseless rain, large and small, each one supercharged with magical energy as it passed through the formation, slamming into Dragonflame Island one after another.

The spectacle was terribly beautiful.

"What imaginable hatred could lead to this? This is a war of annihilation!" In the unknown void, a hidden observer gasped, a cold fear gripping it as it witnessed the carnage.

"A rain of stars, a fiery deluge... this is an amplified version of a forbidden spell!"

"This is the power of a demigod!" another recognized.

The storm avatar was indeed only at the peak of the arch lord level, but its main body was a true demigod. In practice, this magical formation was a demigod-level attack.

"Alas, in these already troubled times for the Emerald Dream Realm, two more unprovokable factions have appeared," a demigod on the distant Chaos Continent lamented, staring blankly from behind its own defensive ward in the direction of Dragonflame Island. "Where is the future of this world headed?"

"Kill them all!" Orion roared. He stood in the sky, an endless barrage of spider spears materializing behind him. In the sector he guarded, the storm of weapons rained down like judgment, tearing through the hordes of dragons and dragon beasts trying to flee into the sea.

It was a relentless, brutal slaughter.

The center of Dragonflame Island was being pounded into oblivion by the meteor shower, while its four cardinal directions were held by four arch lords who were systematically exterminating any who tried to escape.

"AAAAHHH! Unforgivable! UNFORGIVABLE!" Inside the Dragon Nest, a dragon could no longer bear to watch the massacre of its kin, its eyes splitting with rage as it shrieked.

"To the bitter end! TO THE BITTER END!"

The black dragon Rhonar's eyes were wide with fury, his pupils practically bulging from their sockets, a testament to the feral hatred boiling within him. He had predicted his forces outside the ward would be slaughtered, but he had never imagined it would be like this.

BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!

The number of meteors increased, the area of bombardment widening.

The countless dragons, beasts, and thralls rushing toward the Dragon Nest finally understood. They had been abandoned.

With guttural, desperate roars, they turned and charged back outwards. The tide of battle reversed in an instant. Where before the Champions Alliance had fought to break in, now the Dragonkin fought to break out. To escape, they had to fight for their lives. The coastline immediately devolved into a chaotic free-for-all, the defensive line threatening to buckle under the sheer desperation of the charge.

The pressure was most intense in Orion's sector—the area where the fighting had been thickest from the very beginning, and where the enemy's numbers were now greatest.

#### Chapter 982: Thunderclap Apocalypse

High in the sky, Orion unleashed the last of his spider spears. Then, he shot horizontally, positioning himself directly over Dragonflame Island.

"Thunderclap Apocalypse!"

His voice was cold, devoid of all emotion as he activated the forbidden-class spell bound to his Lightning Cloak. To wipe out the low-level Dragonkin in droves, it was the most efficient tool for the job.

The elemental lightning in the atmosphere began to coalesce, and jagged bolts of raw energy tore through the heavens. The lightning then condensed into massive thunderballs, crackling with immense power. Radiating intense heat and pressure, they plummeted to the ground and detonated.

But that was only the beginning. Upon impact, each thunderball spawned a massive electrical grid across the ground, which then pulsed outwards with an electromagnetic wave of unimaginable power.

This was a true Thunderclap Apocalypse.

The entire island was submerged in a world of lightning. Every dragon and dragon beast caught within the electrical field was instantly vaporized, not even leaving a corpse behind.

On the other three fronts, the Kraken, the ancient giant-horned whale, and the skeletal dragon—all colossal beings in their own right—unleashed their full power as the number of fleeing enemies swelled.

The Kraken summoned a boundless tsunami from which countless tentacles of pure seawater erupted, mercilessly crushing any who tried to break through. The ancient giant-horned whale activated its Gigantic Form, swallowing swaths of living creatures with every opening of its cavernous mouth. The skeletal dragon cast an ice-aspected domain, flash-freezing the earth and turning every enemy in its sector into a grotesque statue of ice.

The outcome was no longer in question. The Champions Alliance had won a crushing victory, delivering a brutal slap across the face of the Dragonkin. This was retaliation for the descent of the Dragonkin's gods on the Dusk Continent, and it was a declaration of power to all.

On the coastline, fires burned and smoke billowed. The Merfolk warriors, whale-back riders, and countless other undead units intercepted the fleeing enemy. With four arch lords holding the sky and an army of Sea Race warriors blocking the waters, the Dragonkin's armies finally broke.

Dragons were slain, dragon beasts were torn limb from limb... the battle for Dragonflame Island had become a one-sided slaughter.

The Human Kingdom, Soaring Bird City.

The war to drive the "barbarian" races from the north was still ongoing, with the main armies of all factions still at the front. However, the key figures had already begun to return. With the high-level conflict concluded, the Human Saint and King Harold had gone back to the capital.

Now, Prince Theodore, Delilah, the blood elf Lireesa, and the Glacial Dragon Jorik—the primary representatives of the four allied factions—were gathered in Soaring Bird City.

The time had come to divide the spoils of war, a negotiation of territory and resources that would drag on for weeks. There would be endless haggling, not just over who got which piece of land, but also the complex trades and sales that would follow.

The blood elves and the dragons faced the most significant logistical challenges. Squeezed into the southwestern corner of the continent by the human kingdom and the Stoneheart Horde, the new territory the blood elves had won was not contiguous with their homeland. The blood elf Grand Elder, Lireesa, desperately hoped to negotiate a land swap to create a corridor connecting her domain to the new acquisitions. That alone would be a monumental task.

The dragons, whose territory was in the far south, had a similar problem. To access their new northern lands, they would have to bypass the human kingdom entirely, which meant occupying the former territory of the dwarves. This, too, would require extensive negotiations with King Harold.

"With all the great nobles focused on the vast new lands in the north, no one will dare to question my father's decision to grant you Soaring Bird City," Prince Theodore said. He and Princess Ava stood on the highest balcony of the castle, looking down at the outer city, which was still under construction. This would soon be her domain.

With King Harold's backing internally and the Stoneheart Horde as a powerful neighbor, Theodore knew his aunt Ava's control over the city was a foregone conclusion.

"And I have your heroic efforts to thank for that," Ava said, turning to her nephew. His wounds, sustained during his defeat at Torin's hands, had finally healed. After King Harold's return, Theodore had been dispatched here to oversee the territorial negotiations.

"In the eyes of some, I'm just a deserter," Theodore said, his voice low. The loss to Torin and his Avenger armies had been a devastating blow to his pride. Worse, with the death of Grand Duke William, William's entire faction of nobles now held Theodore in contempt.

"These negotiations will draw the attention of every major power," Ava said gently. She reached out, straightening the collar of his tunic and brushing a speck of dust from his shoulder. "Perform well, and you may win back the prestige you lost."

"Compared to how things were, the situation is better than we could have hoped for, isn't it?" she continued. "While they're all focused on the northern territories, we can focus on consolidating our own power base. That's more important than anything."

Theodore nodded, a determined smile finally touching his lips. "When will you bring Kronos here, Aunt Ava? It's not far from the Stoneheart Horde. I'm sure he'd want to be here."

Princess Ava fell silent, looking thoughtful. It was a question she had considered many times. But the situation was too complex. She had to assist Theodore with the conference while also supervising the city's reconstruction. It wasn't the right time for Kronos to come.

"Let's wait and see," she said, sidestepping the question. "After the conference is over."

Sensing her hesitation, Theodore quickly changed the subject. "A new alliance is about to be formed. Every race will be jockeying for position, trying to connect their lands to the new northern territories. A whole new web of interests is being spun."

"These talks won't be easy," he continued, his strategic mind clicking back into gear. "The stakes are too high. It probably won't be long before my father has to come to Soaring Bird City himself."

It was an accurate assessment. The war in the north wasn't officially over, but everyone knew it was only a matter of time. Without their arch lord leaders, the Northern Coalition was a joke.

The southern alliance of four races was about to redraw the map, pushing the border far to the north. It was a chance to reshuffle the entire deck. Even defeated races would be forced to choose a side.

The four southern allies were partners, but they were also competitors. They were all there to slice up the same cake, but how they sliced it—and who got the biggest piece—was critical.



One wrong move could inadvertently propel one of the three major powers—the Stoneheart Horde, the human kingdom, or the dragons—to a position of absolute dominance.

Chapter 983: Who won?

"You're getting ahead of yourself," Ava said with a small smile. "How the spoils are divided is a matter for the great nobles of the kingdom. We are merely their representatives here in Soaring Bird City. Don't worry, a directive from the capital will arrive soon enough."

Ava could see the same political chessboard as her nephew. The challenge for them was not to decide the game, but to maximize their own position as the pieces were moved.

"I'll go and prepare, Aunt Ava. The delegates from the other factions will be here for the preliminary talks tomorrow."

"Go on, then."

Emerald Dream Realm, Dragonflame Island.

Under the relentless bombardment of meteors and lightning, the entire island—save for the area protected by the Dragon Nest's ward—had been reduced to a smoldering ruin. The sky was a bruised, violet-red canvas of fire and electricity.

On the ground, most of the Champions Alliance's combat units had ceased fighting, staring in silent awe as the storm above continued to methodically annihilate the enemy.

"What a waste, what a complete waste," the Demon Makareth lamented, folding his leathery wings as he landed on a colossal dragon next to Isabella. "All those dragon corpses would have made for some high-quality offerings."

"This is straight-up apocalyptic, right?" Isabella asked. It was the first time she had ever witnessed destruction on this scale. She knew with certainty that a force like this would have instantly killed her, and probably her father, too.

"I guess so. In the end, it's all just killing. A large-scale area-of-effect attack is just more efficient," Makareth shrugged. "If it were me, I'd have made the same choice."

The true decisions in this war were being made by the demigods and arch lords of the Champions Alliance. Makareth and Isabella were merely vanguards, a part of the mid-to-high-tier forces.

"Isabella, those lizards don't deserve your pity," Makareth added. "Have you forgotten when they invaded our Dusk Continent? If the big bosses hadn't held the line, the Dusk Continent would be under a new name by now."

Demons never felt pity for their enemies. Their minds were always on the next prize.

"Who said I pity them?" Isabella shot back, her gaze fixed on the two mighty figures in the sky: the Deputy Commander's storm avatar and Orion. "I was just thinking that, in a war of this magnitude, our own strength is still not enough."

It was those two arch lords, looming over Dragonflame Island like twin mountains, who had pinned down the entire Dragonkin race, forcing them to cower in their nest. That was true power. Those were the heroes she aspired to be.

Then there were the three behemoths guarding the perimeter: the massive octopus, the skeletal dragon, and the ancient giant-horned whale. Isabella knew if any one of them targeted her, she would die instantly.

"No," Makareth agreed, his voice uncharacteristically somber. "It's not enough. The world of the big bosses... it's something to strive for."

"Looks like we're not breaking through that ward or taking the island today," Isabella said, her tone shifting back to business. "According to the plan, the withdrawal order could come at any time. We should get ready to bug out."

The battle had escalated beyond the point where Legendary-level combatants like them could make a difference. All they could do now was use the chaos to pull back their main forces, leaving the cannon

fodder and undead armies to cover their retreat. As long as the six demigods from the Uynting Realm were not permanently dealt with, Dragonflame Island could never truly be conquered.

"Next time a war like this happens," Isabella muttered to herself, "I want to be one of the ones looking down from the sky."

With that, her colossal dragon banked and began the long flight back toward the Dusk Continent.

A few hours later, the forbidden spell finally subsided.

"The magical formation can hold for another half a day at most. It's time to evacuate," Deputy Commander Edward's voice echoed in the minds of Orion and the others.

Without a second thought, Orion directed the ancient giant-horned whale to pull back. The Kraken, the skeletal dragon, and the storm avatar all received their orders and began to withdraw, some via teleportation, others simply vanishing.

Even the Kraken's sea race fodder began a rapid retreat. Soon, only the undead armies remained, guarding the smoldering island—and without a steady supply of mana and mental energy, they too would soon dissipate into nothing.

"Big boss, we've gathered enough materials for the Dragon Crucible now, right?"

They were aboard Leonidas's Palace, which had fallen under Orion's command since its master went into slumber. The palace was already back in the waters near the Dusk Continent.

"More or less," Orion replied.

Activating the Dragon Crucible required immense quantities of dragon blood and dragon corpses. Gathering those materials had been a major secondary objective of the assault. Besides Arthas, nearly every faction in the Alliance—Orion's, Leonidas's, Alexander's, the Kraken's, Makareth's, Isabella's—had members who desperately needed it to break through their limits.

Orion himself had high hopes for the crucible. Within the Stoneheart Horde, a growing number of the Tribe's elders were stuck at the Alpha-level, their potential exhausted.

Without some external catalyst, they would likely live out the rest of their days at that rank. He genuinely hoped the old guard—Lilith, Delilah, Onyx, Rendall, Thundar, Dirtclaw, Earthshaker—would not be left behind.

"Send your chosen candidates to Lorelia as soon as possible. Once all preparations are complete, we will begin."

Getting direct confirmation from Orion, Makareth and Isabella were ecstatic. Among the Alliance leaders, they were the ones most lacking in powerful subordinates.

BOOM!

A cataclysmic explosion erupted from the direction of Dragonflame Island. The entire sky to the east was set ablaze.

"Did the Deputy Commander and the others get a result?" The Kraken, startled from its slumber in the great reservoir within the palace, manifested its avatar on the deck next to Orion.

Orion nodded, staring silently at the horizon.

"Who won?"

Orion remained silent. It wasn't that he didn't know. The Kraken knew the answer just as well as he did. He only asked out of a desperate hope for a different outcome.

But according to the plan, the explosion meant the magical formation had been shattered. It meant the Deputy Commander had failed. At the very least, his avatar had. As the core of the formation, its destruction could only mean that the demigod's will powering it had been extinguished.

West of the Dusk Continent, Dragonflame Island.

The great explosion was followed by a prismatic kaleidoscope of raw magical energy that flooded the sky. The shadow that had covered the island dissipated, and harsh sunlight streamed down, illuminating the full, horrifying extent of the devastation.

From within the rainbow of light, five phantoms shot out. Three descended back toward Dragonflame Island, while the other two streaked toward the Dusk Continent.

"This... this is an outrage! They've gone too far!" one of the three demigod phantoms roared in pure fury as it surveyed its home, now a cratered, smoldering wasteland.

"Let's go back," another said, its voice heavy with weary resignation. "This outcome was to be expected. The formation was never meant to kill us. It was meant to hold us here."

Chapter 984: They are our neighbors

The black dragon Monjebel was calm. As long as the protective ward held and the Dragon Nest was not destroyed, the foundation of the Dragonkin remained intact. And as long as that was true, they still had a future in the Emerald Dream Realm.

"In a way, this is for the best," said the other victorious dragon demigod, its mind unclouded by the sight of the ruins below. "This battle has saved us a great deal of future trouble."

"The elder is right," the bronze dragon Latychrenber agreed. "Sooner or later, we would have had to prove our strength to the other factions of this world. This invasion, while costly, was not without its benefits. After this, no one will dare to make a move on Dragonflame Island for decades."

"As for the sacrificed dragon beasts and thralls," Monjebel added, his gaze sweeping over the devastation, "as long as the Dragonkin survive, we can always breed more."

He looked down at the island, and honestly, he found the sight of the ruins more pleasing than what had been there before. Sometimes, destruction was not death, but a prelude to rebirth and reconstruction. Monjebel was certain that the new Dragonflame Island they built from these ashes would be far stronger and more fortified than the last.

“My lord, what are our next steps?” Latychrenber asked. Though they had broken the enemy’s formation, they all knew that only demigod phantoms had been destroyed on both sides. After a period of recovery, once their faith energy was restored, those phantoms could be re-formed.

Previously, the Dragonkin had believed only two demigods were stationed on the Dusk Continent, and that they could overwhelm them with superior numbers. They had been proven disastrously wrong. The faction from the Dusk Continent was their equal in every way.

“What is there to decide?” Monjebel said flatly. “An enemy is still an enemy. They butchered our people. Now and forever, they’ll remain our enemy. Still, even mortal foes sometimes lay down their arms.”

Latychrenber and the other demigod immediately understood the implication. The Champions Alliance had stolen their World Dragons from the Uynting Realm; they were unquestionably sworn foes.

But this foe was a behemoth, one that had to be treated with caution. An all-out war was not an option. The attack by the Alliance’s six demigods was a show of force, but it was also a signal: we are your equals, so let us coexist.

Of course, avoiding total war did not mean a true ceasefire. In the future, the western seas would become a hotbed of constant skirmishes and border conflicts between the Dragonkin and the Champions Alliance.

“And what of the Great Dragon King of Light?” Latychrenber asked. “How do we deal with him? My lord, I can sense that even without his dragon form, he is still a third-stage being. He cannot be underestimated.”

With their strategy toward the Champions Alliance settled, their other major problem was Mondusath. Their feelings toward him were a mix of love and hate. Love, because he had carved out this new territory for them. Hate, because he was ruthless enough to betray his own people.

“Hmph. He did not appear when Dragonflame Island was attacked. That is his answer to us,” Monjebel stated coldly. “His attitude determines ours. After he made such a powerful enemy for our race, I hardly think he is fit to lead us to greater heights.”

Monjebel was wary. When Mondusath failed to provide aid, he understood everything. In Mondusath’s eyes, the Dragonkin were merely pawns. That included Monjebel himself. Perhaps Mondusath had hoped they would all be grievously wounded or forced into slumber, giving him an opportunity to seize control of the race once more.

“Both of you be vigilant when you return,” Monjebel commanded. “The great ancestor still has some descendants living among us. They may try to stir up trouble. With a great enemy at our doorstep, we cannot afford chaos from within.”

With that, the black dragon descended, passing through the shimmering, now-faltering protective ward around the Dragon Nest.

Dusk Continent, the Western Sea.

Orion, the Kraken, Makareth, and Isabella all tore their gazes away from the horizon. A new figure had appeared, lounging casually in Orion's deck chair and sipping from a goblet. It was Arthas.

Orion had a fleeting, curious thought. As a skeleton king, where does the wine go? Does it just leak out through the gaps in his bones?

"Bro," Orion said, breaking the stunned silence. "Try this, it's a new brew."

Of those present, only Orion was close enough to Arthas to be so casual. The others were visibly tense, their postures rigid and respectful.

The ghostfire in Arthas's eye sockets flickered toward Orion. He held out his empty goblet, and Orion filled it with the new wine. After draining three cups in quick succession, Arthas set the goblet down and swept his gaze over the group.

"The Deputy Commander and Alexander have both chosen to enter slumber to recover their divine power," he announced, his voice a dry rasp. "My will projection will guard the Dusk Continent for the time being."

"Full command of the war in the western seas and all related affairs on the continent are hereby transferred to Hulk. Any issues you have, you take them to him."



No one spoke. They waited silently for the demigod's pronouncement to continue.

"While I will not be entering slumber, I will be entering seclusion to recover my own divine power. Unless a demigod attacks, do not disturb me."

He paused. "In the battle between demigods, the final score was three to four. We lost."

The news was a gut punch. A sense of helplessness washed over them. Even with the incredible power of the Champions Alliance, they had failed to completely crush the Dragonkin.

"You have seen the strength of the dragons to the west," Arthas continued. "From now on, they are our neighbors. The war in the west will not stop. It will likely become a naval conflict, defined by constant skirmishes." He turned his burning gaze to the Kraken. "You'll need to be vigilant."

In the Alliance, only the Kraken was a true creature of the deep sea. As long as it was in the ocean, no arch lord could touch it. While Orion was now in overall command, the war in the water would fall to the Kraken.

"Don't worry, big boss. I'll keep an eye on them," the Kraken said.

"Good." Arthas nodded, then looked at Makareth and Isabella. "You two need to step up. If you cannot reach the Deputy Commander or Alexander, you can seek me out in my graveyard."

With that, Arthas's form dissipated, the Skeleton King returning to his seclusion.

It took a long time—perhaps half an hour—for the oppressive aura of his presence to fully fade. Only then did the Kraken, Makareth, and Isabella finally relax.

“Well, that’s that,” Makareth said with a sigh. “I can finally go back to the abyss and get my house in order. All the Gargoyles I brought with me were wiped out. I’ll need to capture a new batch.”

Chapter 985: Nothing for now doesn’t mean nothing forever

Despite the griping, Makareth had a smile plastered on his face the whole time.

Even though his Gargoyles were completely wiped out, he’d taken down a ton of Legendary-level beings in the fight and raked in a load of Survivor Caches. Cracking those open was going to give him a serious power boost.

Isabella was in the same boat, but she wasn’t planning on heading back just yet. Her dad was keeping an eye on her home territory, so she was all-in on consolidating her new gains on the Dusk Continent. While managing her territory, she also wanted to keep grinding out combat experience on the western front.

With Orion and Kraken setting the pace, and Makareth nipping at her heels, Isabella felt a pressure she’d never experienced before. She was getting addicted to it, to this rhythm. It felt real, substantial.

“Kraken and I have got it covered here,” Orion said. “You guys can go take care of your own stuff.”

Makareth and Isabella were lords, not frontline generals. The smart play was for them to focus on developing their territories and their personal strength. But neither of them replied to Orion. Instead, it was Kraken who spoke up.

“This dropped from the dragon.”

He held out a rolled-up scroll. Orion didn’t take it.

“That was your kill, man. I...”

Orion cut him off, shaking his head. “Dude, don’t even. You slew the dragon, you get the title. This is the reward for the one who does the deed.” He looked at Kraken, his gaze serious. “If you really want to thank me, then help me build up my naval forces. As you can see, these Ocean Hunters are the only decent units I’ve got right now.”

Kraken met his eyes for a long moment before finally pulling the scroll back. Whatever it was, a drop from that dragon had to be Legendary tier. Orion turning it down told Kraken everything he needed to know. This is real. For the first time, he felt the solid foundation of his friendship with Orion.

“No problem,” Kraken said, his voice firm. “Let me get a handle on this power spike, and then I’ll cook up a batch of custom Sea Race units just for you.”

Orion just nodded, a slight smile on his face.

Nearby, Makareth and Isabella listened intently, knowing better than to chime in. It felt just like when Orion and Kraken had stood by silently while Arthas and Leonidas talked strategy. They weren’t there yet. Their relationship with the two powerhouses hadn’t reached that level. Some things just came down to the people and the history between them.

Far to the east of the Dusk Continent, across a vast stretch of ocean dotted with islands, lay the Dawn Continent—the same one Alexander had once invaded. Now, it was a paradise for the evil races.

Within a network of unknown underground caves, several phantoms flickered into existence, gathering together.

“Pollard, you’re looking a little weak,” a cloying, strangely feminine voice echoed from the darkness, dripping with mockery aimed at the Blood-Eyed Black Serpent demigod.

Pollard had allied with the Champions Alliance, and his demigod phantom had been obliterated by the draconic demigods in the great array on Dragonflame Island. It was only natural his projection here would be diminished.

“Are you mocking a hero who made a sacrifice for the greater good?” Pollard’s voice was calm, utterly dismissive of the taunt. “Or perhaps you had a better way of probing the enemy’s true strength?”

When he’d first teamed up with the Champions Alliance, he’d been careful not to truly anger the dragons; that wasn’t his objective. At the demigod level, most things could be negotiated as long as your life wasn’t on the line. But when the Alliance rolled out five demigods at once and pulled him into their spell formation, he saw just how deep their power ran.

And he knew those five weren’t even all of them. A true monster was lurking behind the scenes of this well-equipped faction. Pollard had personally witnessed the blade strike from Commander Thresh that had annihilated the Radiant Dragon King, and he hadn’t sensed a similar presence among the five demigods who descended on Dragonflame Island with him.

As Pollard and the unknown demigod traded barbs, the voice of the evil demigod Tusha echoed from the depths of the underground caves. “Valthor integrated the laws of light into this world, changing it irrevocably. Consuming this realm is no longer possible, and a forced takeover would trigger a massive backlash from the other factions. Perhaps Valthor saw this coming all along.”

“My lord, is there truly nothing we can do?” another demigod asked. They had been preparing to devour the Emerald Dream Realm for ages, pouring countless resources into the plan.

“Nothing for now doesn’t mean nothing forever,” Tusha replied. “The current situation doesn’t allow us to stir up more trouble. The natives on the Chaos Continent, the mystery faction on the Dusk Continent, the sudden arrival of the dragons on Dragonflame Island, and the Sea Race infesting the inner and outer oceans... there are too many demigod-level factions.”

“Can’t you see it?” Tusha’s voice continued. “The Emerald Dream Realm is evolving into a major world. The number of demigods nesting here will only increase.” There was no sadness or worry in his voice, merely a statement of fact.

“If we hold the Dawn Continent, we might reap some unexpected benefits down the line. However, a lone wolf in the dark forest doesn’t last long. It might not starve right away, but it’s only a matter of time before it becomes food for a bigger beast. Only the pack survives.”

It was this understanding that had led them to unite in the first place, forming a powerful, multi-world organization of evil. To face competition, individuals had to cooperate. It was the same for factions.

“My lord,” a demigod in the shadows spoke. “Are you suggesting... we form an alliance with the mystery faction from the Dusk Continent?”

“They are the most suitable partners,” Tusha declared. “The methods they displayed during the Dragonflame Island war... when it comes to being ruthless, backstabbing bastards, they’re not much different from us.

More importantly, their roster is incredibly well-rounded. Their top-tier players include a mage, an undead, a beast master, and warrior. With troops covering land, sea, and air—and even undead units for support—they were able to steamroll our entire setup on the Dusk Continent.”

Tusha was a demigod of evil, a survivor forged in the harshest environments. He knew better than anyone: a lone beast becomes prey; a pack becomes the hunter.

## Chapter 986: Wyrmsbane Gyre

Tusha understood better than anyone that if the Emerald Dream Realm continued on this trajectory, it was only a matter of time before even more powerful beings descended. Between standing alone and forming an alliance, he would choose the latter without a moment’s hesitation.

“My lord, I agree with your proposal!”

The one who spoke up was Pollard. When it came to understanding the demigods of the Champions Alliance, no one was more qualified to speak.

“Those people are chaotic neutral at best. They operate on their own code, don’t give a damn about outside factors, and they certainly aren’t held back by bullshit like ‘the light’ or ‘morality’.”

He continued, “Besides, their power is immense. Aligning with them is a solid strategic choice. And after this last war, I should have earned a measure of their trust.”

Truthfully, Pollard was one hundred percent on board with an alliance. The Champions Alliance’s strength was undeniable. If they didn’t make the first move, they’d be left out in the cold once those zealots from the Chaos Continent finally got their act together. And then, the Alliance wouldn’t be a potential partner, but a definite enemy.

Perhaps even Lord Tusha is wary of that blade flash that shattered the realm formation, Pollard mused.

“Pollard, you will be the point of contact for this,” Tusha commanded, his decision made. “I will make a personal visit when the time is right.”

Not a single demigod in the shadows objected.

“Remember this, all of you,” Tusha’s voice resonated in the darkness. “Our only goal here is to protect what we’ve built and secure our interests in the future.”

Titanion Realm, Stoneheart City.

The grand hall where Orion often meditated was usually silent, a sanctuary rarely entered by anyone except, on occasion, Lilith. Today, however, it was filled with laughter and cheers.

Orion leaned back on his throne, a smile playing on his lips.

Elara and Pallas sat perched on his left and right shoulders, respectively, waving their tiny fists and shouting encouragement for the two young dragons tumbling and wrestling in the air before them. The Black Dragon was Pallas’s, the Inferno Dragon Elara’s.

Though the black dragon was older, it was physically smaller and weaker than the Inferno Dragon. After several rounds of grappling, the black dragon was exhausted, pinned to the floor, and thoroughly dominated.

“Akdir, get up! Get up!” Pallas yelled, standing up on Orion’s shoulder as if to will his dragon back into the fight.

But it was no use. Pinned beneath the stronger Inferno Dragon, Akdir couldn’t move. All he could manage were a few pathetic whimpers directed at his master.

“Hee hee, see? My little dragon is stronger,” Elara gloated. She stood up, reached over Orion’s head, and squished Pallas’s cheeks with a triumphant grin. “Remember this. Next time you make me mad, it won’t just be you getting a beating—Akdir will get one, too.”

“Daddy... Daddy...” Pallas pleaded, turning to Orion for help, but his father remained a smiling observer. It was best to let kids sort out their own squabbles.

Orion took out a grape-sized orb of world essence and popped it into Elara’s mouth as a reward for her victory. Her eyes crinkled with her smile.

Just then, a succubus maidservant appeared in the hall. She bowed to Orion first before speaking.

“Your Majesty, the Mistress has requested the presence of the prince and princess for their lessons.”

Orion nodded, glancing at the two little faces on his shoulders, which had both drooped in an instant. It was almost comical. Both Elara and Pallas were bonded to dragons, and with Lilith being a beastmaster, their early education naturally fell to her.

“Go on,” Orion said. “Whoever does better in their lessons gets to ride Xalathar through the outer city when he gets back.”

At that, both Elara’s and Pallas’s eyes lit up. They reluctantly hopped off Orion’s shoulders, called their young dragons, and followed the maidservant out of the hall.

Only when his children were long gone did Orion take out a Survivor Cache. He pulled out a scroll, crushed it, and learned a new skill.

[Wyrmsbane Gyre]

Quality: Legendary

Description: Combines multiple, differing elemental forces into a spiraling vortex. By skillfully leveraging the fusion and repulsion of these elements, attack power is massively amplified.

Effect 1: Suppresses draconic targets. All hits against dragons inflict bonus damage.

Effect 2: Dragons slain by this ability have their dragon soul obliterated.

Effect 3: Weakens a dragon's body of faith.

Skill Evaluation: A reward fit for a dragon-slayer!

This was from a cache dropped by the dragon archlord his mirrored avatar had slain during the Dragonflame Island campaign. One of the downsides to the avatars was their inability to learn skills from scrolls directly; they could only inherit them after the main body learned them first.

"Wyrmsbane Gyre... heh," Orion murmured to himself. Funny, getting a skill designed specifically to kill dragons from a dragon. Very interesting.

With a final chuckle, he focused his mind and logged into the Survivor's Platform. Opening a private channel, he thought for a moment before typing.

Hulk: Alright everyone, you ready to drop?



He already had a good idea of Aerin, Caesar, and Tangere's situations, but it was always best to check for any last-minute emergencies.

Caesar: Ready when you are, boss.

Aerin: Please, you guys, get here soon. We had to put someone down today after they got corrupted and exposed our position.

Tangere: I'm good to go.

Orion was pleased. Aside from Aerin's crisis, which was expected, neither Caesar nor Tangere had flaked. The two he was vetting weren't the type to talk a big game and then fail to deliver.

Hulk: Okay. Caesar, Tangere, we drop in three days.

Caesar: Got it!

Tangere: Roger that. No problem.

Caesar: Hang in there, Aerin. I'll be there to help you soon.

Aerin: Thanks, Caesar. It means a lot to have you guys.

Orion closed the channel. He'd set it up to allow them to communicate freely with each other. Caesar, Aerin, and Tangere had no doubt already been talking, getting a feel for one another before they had to work together. Building that team cohesion was essential.

He then sent a direct message to Aerin.

Did you locate a suitable site for the camp?

I'm deploying my people tomorrow.

His sister, Clymene, was a Shade Valkyrie. She needed deadlands—a graveyard or a catacomb—to build her power. He had tasked Aerin with finding a location with a high concentration of death, a place with a lot of bodies.

Her reply came almost instantly. She never slacked on his instructions.

It's all set, sir. We buried the corrupted ones in the deadlands you specified.

Without him, Aerin felt, she wouldn't have even survived this long.

Chapter 987: You've ruined the mood

Getting to know Caesar and Tangere in the private channel had also given Aerin a new perspective on her own future. She made a quiet promise to herself: she couldn't just coast by anymore. No more being dead weight.

Good. Wait for my arrival.

On another corner of the Survivor's Platform, the Clown, who had fled the Titanion Realm, was in a conversation.

Witch, he typed. I've found a new world. It's rich with resources, teeming with life. We should team up and carve out a territory for ourselves.

His clash with the human Saint had taught him a hard lesson: he couldn't secure a foothold in the Titanion Realm on his own.

Not free.

The reply was blunt. A flat rejection. The Clown wasn't deterred. He knew she was currently helping some faction with a full-scale realm invasion.

You might have misunderstood me. I don't mean right now. I mean later, when you're free and looking for a new project. We could cooperate.

He was practically begging, so he kept his tone polite. Besides, he and the Witch had defected from the Champions Alliance together. They had both pledged themselves to a true Reaper—an actual god, a being beyond the demigod level. They knew each other inside and out, making them natural, if reluctant, allies.

Clown, do you even know yourself? she shot back. You only call me when you can't hog all the glory for yourself. When you come knocking, it means there's a massive risk involved.

Passing the buck to your 'allies' has always been your signature move. I decline.

Her words were a direct hit, but the Clown still didn't get angry. She knew how devious he was, and he knew how cunning she was. This wasn't an insult; it was just honesty. It wasn't infuriating; it was... comfortable. A dialogue between two people who knew exactly what kind of monsters they were.

Witch, it's a world where Survivors awaken. Interested now?

His reply was met with silence.

There was a theory floating around among Survivors: a world capable of awakening one of their own was a chosen world, selected by the Survivor's Platform itself. Conquering a place like that was rumored to yield an unimaginable prize. As for what that prize was, nobody knew. Or maybe, those who did know weren't talking.

You didn't kill the Survivor, did you?

She knew him too well. Her guess was dead on.

I sacrificed him to our master. So, what do you say? You in?

He had her hooked. He could feel it. The momentum was his.

Nope. And I'm not free. I'm not interested in being your next sacrificial offering. Hard pass.

The sudden reversal left the Clown speechless, all his prepared arguments stuck in his throat.

Heh... That's not a very funny joke.

Isn't it?

Silence. After that exchange, neither of them typed another word.

The Abyss. Unknown Layer. Unknown Region.

All that was known was the palace—an exquisite, decadent structure. There were no handmaidens here, only male servants, each one a specimen of masculine perfection. They were all proud, powerful, and devastatingly handsome. Every flavor of man imaginable could be found here.

“Harder... put some more effort into it. Didn't you eat today?”

“Or would you rather I fed you to my little Skitters?”

Behind a silk curtain, the Witch lay reclined on a chaise lounge, her voluptuous figure draped in little more than shadow. She had her legs propped on the shoulders of two kneeling male servants, her eyes half-closed in boredom. They knelt, bodies pressed in submission, as two more servants served her from behind with unrestrained fervor.

Of the four, one had black wings sprouting from his back—a Fallen Angel. Another was alluringly beautiful—a rare male Succubus.

The third had the pointed ears and silver eyes of a Dark Elf. The last, with two horns curling from his head and a powerful build, was a high-ranking Demon.

The Witch luxuriated in their service, her eyes half-lidded.

“That damned thing,” she muttered, her thoughts drifting. “It was his whispers that got me into this mess, hunted across the realms by the commander and his dogs. In an age without active gods, an unstoppable monster like the commander is basically a cheat code. How long do I have to keep hiding like this? If only I could go back...”

At first, her expression was serene, as if she were dozing off. But soon her brow furrowed, a painful memory surfacing.

CRACK!

“Useless trash!” she shrieked, her voice shattering the quiet hall. “You’ve been serving me all this time and still can’t get the rhythm and force of thrusting right? Drag him out and feed him to my Skitters!”

The angel who had been thrusting with his cock was violently kicked away, blood spraying from his mouth.

“Mercy, my Queen!”

“Mercy!”

The Fallen Angel’s pleas echoed through the hall, but the Witch was unmoved. The other three servants stood frozen, trembling, not daring to speak or even twitch. Whatever methods she had used to tame these powerful abyssal beings, they were brutally effective.

“You’ve ruined the mood,” she hissed. “All of you, get out!”

After they scrambled away, the Witch sank back onto her chaise. As the curtains billowed, her half-closed eyes and the shadowed curves of her body were visible one moment, gone the next.

“My avatar is about to secure a foothold in the Silverwood Realm,” she mused. “I’ll have to bring back a few Wood Elves to play with. Maybe I can even get them to grow some flowers for me in this hellhole.”

She sighed. “If only I had a man like the commander to serve me. Or even someone like Alexander or Leonidas... what a waste.”

Emerald Dream Realm, Lorelia City.

Deep within the catacombs, another of Orion’s mirrored avatars—this one on rotation—strode into the main chamber. The undead skeletons and Skeletal Knights, usually slumbering, were now fully assembled and ready for battle.

“Is it time to depart?” Grendel’s excited voice boomed from within Clymene’s armored form as he saw Orion approach.

“It would seem so!”

“Glorious! We are about to claim a new territory for the Tribe!”

“For the Tribe! For our people! For My Lord!”

“I never thought we would see the day we would conquer another world.”

“Prepare to march!”

After Grendel, the voices of Vargrum, Mordak, Zorn, Balgor, and Desdemona rang out in succession. They were clearly pleased with Orion's plan. After all, they weren't true undead, but giants and a succubus who had taken up this existence mid-life. They had grown used to the silence and slumber, but who truly wishes to be alone forever?

"Sister," Orion said with a slight bow, embracing Clymene as he always did.

"We are ready," Clymene's voice, calm and resolute, replied.

Orion nodded, saying nothing more. He produced a group teleportation scroll and, without hesitation, tore it in two.

Chapter 988: It's all my fault

Silverwood Realm, the Forest of Nature.

It was a dying forest, choked by a spreading corruption. Every living thing on this land was under threat.

The invasion of demonic monsters and the spread of a virulent plague were no natural disasters; they were deliberate acts of war. Barring some unforeseen miracle, this place was doomed to drown in endless fear and agony until nothing remained.

The only hope for such a miracle, a Wood Elf who had been forced to bury her heart, now stood atop the canopy of a great tree, watching a pillar of thick smoke rise in the distance. And smoke, more often than not, meant war.

"Elder, the scouts have returned. Another hidden settlement has been discovered," an elven archer said, her voice tight. She stood behind Aerin, her gaze also fixed on the horizon. In her eyes, hope and sorrow warred for dominance. "If we don't go now, they might not survive the day."

"Freyla, I know what you're thinking," Aerin said, turning to face the High Elf, the first to pledge her loyalty. Freyla was Alpha-level, nearly as powerful as Aerin herself. "But now is not the time."

"Elder..." Freyla's expression fell, and the last flicker of hope in her eyes was instantly extinguished.

"I'm sorry. It isn't that I don't want to save our people," Aerin's voice was heavy with a sorrow she could no longer show. "Our duty right now is to protect those who follow us, to ensure we remain hidden. The lives of the people behind us are more important than those who have already been exposed."

The future of the Wood Elf race was dwindling with every passing day. She couldn't afford to throw away the last ember of hope she held in her hands on a single, emotional impulse. Aerin could feel her heart growing harder, colder. She could see the confusion and the doubt in the eyes of her followers.

"Besides," she added, her tone softening slightly, "if we go to their rescue, it would be suicide. We'd be moths to a flame." She met the other elf's gaze. "Freyla, promise me you won't do anything foolish. If I don't have your help, I don't know if I can keep our people alive."

If her previous words had been an explanation, these were a plea. This war had forced her to grow, to become calm and calculating. Aerin knew that until her patron, Orion, arrived, she had to do whatever it took to hold this ragged group of Wood Elves together. Even if it meant playing the part of a heartless leader.

"Freyla, we have to endure. We have to hold on. The salvation of the Wood Elves is coming." As she spoke the last sentence, her face was a mask of grief, her eyes filled with such sorrow she looked as though she might break down at any moment.

"Elder, I... how much longer must we endure?" Freyla asked, her voice trembling. "What is our next move?"

It was the question on her mind, and on the mind of every Wood Elf refugee. They had not only lost their homes; they had lost their way.

"The next move... the next move..." Aerin murmured, looking down at the forest floor. What was the next move? She had no idea.

If Orion arrived successfully, she had a few ideas. But if his arrival failed... she was just as lost as everyone else.



But as Aerin and Freyla stood frozen by their own despair, a fluctuation of spatial energy rippled through a patch of nearby deadlands. With a shimmer of distorted air, Orion and Clymene appeared, leading a vanguard of undead troops.

“The ambient death energy is thin, but the world is saturated with raw elemental power,” Shade Valkyrie Clymene observed, her senses already assessing the new environment. “Building a proper necropolis here will require a steady supply of corpses and souls.”

“Don’t worry, sister,” Orion replied calmly. “Our whole purpose here is conquest. There will be no shortage of war, and no shortage of corpses.”

ROAR!

As Orion spoke, four massive Blight Wyrms of Alpha-peak strength launched themselves from the center of the undead army. Clymene had raised them from dragon corpses during the previous war.

“Sister, I’m going to scout the area and find a friend,” Orion said, leaping onto the back of one of the undead dragons. “I’ll leave things here in your hands.” With that, he and the four Blight Wyrms shot into the sky, heading in the direction of a faint signal he could sense.

As Clymene watched him disappear, the seven souls within her began to speak amongst themselves.

“So this is another world! The air itself feels alive!”

“This forest alone proves the land is fertile.”

“I can feel my soul humming. This will be our battlefield!”

“Does this mean we are the pioneers?”

“For the Horde! We claim these new lands!”

The voices of Vargrum, Mordak, Zorn, Balgor, and Grendel were a chorus of excitement, awe, and determination, all proud to be the vanguard for their Tribe.

“Lord,” a different voice, smooth and practical, cut through the zeal. It was the succubus, Desdemona. “Our first priority should be patrols. Then, a temporary camp for the Horde. After that, we gather the local dead and begin construction of the necropolis underground.” The three thousand elite troops they’d brought with them were just the beginning; they needed the necropolis to summon more skeleton warriors.

“Desdemona is right,” Clymene’s own voice affirmed. “We must establish a foothold before we can begin the conquest of this world. Desdemona, I’m giving you control of this body for now. We will follow your orders.”

It was a strategic decision. As a succubus, Desdemona’s mastery of illusions would be invaluable for gathering intelligence from any local creatures they encountered. With their plan set, Clymene’s forces immediately set to work.

Back at Aerin’s position, disaster had struck.

“Elder, you have to go! I’ll hold them off!” Freyla shouted, shoving at Aerin. Her right arm was wrapped in a special green bandage, a poultice from a plant root that could staunch bleeding and temporarily suppress the plague. But its effects were already fading.

Freyla’s face was a mask of desperation as she tried to push Aerin away, to save the one she saw as the Wood Elves’ only hope. After their homes fell, it was Aerin who had gathered the survivors. To Freyla, she was hope.

“It’s all my fault... I should have seen the signs. I should have moved us out yesterday...” Aerin murmured, her head hung low. She let Freyla push her but didn’t move an inch.

Yesterday, when they had stood in the treetops watching that distant smoke, she should have known the danger was already at their doorstep. That had been their window to escape.

But she had missed it. It was her first time in command, her first time being overwhelmed by the sheer weight of her people's lives, and she had overlooked it. And mistakes, more often than not, came with a price.

Chapter 989: Maybe there is, maybe there isn't

The demonic monsters had found them. They were swarming the forest, hunting them down.

"Elder, I'm begging you, please go!" Freyla pleaded, pushing at Aerin again with her uninjured left hand.

"It's too late, Freyla." Aerin looked down at her friend, the one who had stood by her through the absolute worst of it. The bond between them ran deep. "We're surrounded."

Aerin's shoulders slumped. "I'm so tired," she whispered. "I don't want to live like this anymore, always hiding, always on the run. I haven't had a single night of real sleep since the war began." She looked into Freyla's eyes, her own resolve hardening into something brittle and grim. "I'm staying with you. We fight to the death."

Her voice, once a leader's, was now just lost and helpless. Before this, before they were found, Aerin had been filled with a desperate hope. But seeing her people cut down, seeing Freyla wounded and bleeding at her feet... the last thread of hope inside her had finally snapped.

She still had a few sacrificial Scarecrows but had no intention of using them. Before, Aerin had been timid. She hated war. All she ever wanted was to be a homebody, to live under the protection of her people and just coast through a thousand years of peace. The war had turned her life into a waking nightmare of constant fear, sleeping with one eye open, never truly resting. Even as she grew, adapted, and forced herself to handle the intensity, her spirit was just... worn out.

This is fine, she thought, a strange sense of peace washing over her. I was awakened in darkness. It's only fitting I return to it.

Aerin wiped the tears from her eyes, drew her weapon, and offered Freyla a sad, broken smile. "You know it too, don't you, Freyla? Wood Elves have no home anymore. Not here. Not anywhere."

She lowered her voice. "I didn't say it, and you didn't say it. We didn't want to crush the spirits of the others, the ones who still wanted to live. But the truth is... there's no way out for us. There never was."

Freylla stared at her, stunned. They had both reached the same conclusion in the quiet of their own minds, but neither had ever dared to speak it aloud. Only now, facing certain death, could the truth finally be said.

"Elder... Elder... is there really... no hope for us?" Freylla's voice was a choked whisper. Aerin could face the answer, but her friend still couldn't.

Aerin reached out and gently tucked a stray strand of hair behind Freylla's ear. Her smile was faint, almost cold. "Maybe there is, maybe there isn't. I don't know for sure. But even if there is, it won't come without a price."

For a fleeting moment, she thought of Hulk. His arrival was supposed to be their hope. But what if he was killed by these monsters, too? She couldn't help but think it. From her perspective, the demonic monsters were an invincible, endless tide.

Grrrrrrr...

A low growl suddenly rumbled from the nearby woods, the deep, threatening sound of a predator. Without a second thought, Aerin drew her bow and fired an arrow toward the sound.

THWACK!

It was the unmistakable sound of a bolt sinking into flesh. But there was no cry of pain, no sound of a body hitting the forest floor.

Instead, after a rustle of leaves, over a hundred towering Plague Cyclopes lumbered out from between the trees. Vile, leering grins spread across their single-eyed faces. The Wood Elves' natural beauty and gentle nature only made them more appealing targets for the cyclopes' cruelty.

"Elder, run!" Freylla drew the longsword from her hip with her left hand and stepped in front of Aerin.

“No time!”

Aerin nocked six arrows at once, each one glowing with magical energy. This was no warning shot. The six bolts flew true, and six Plague Cyclopes exploded on impact, showering the ground with corrosive, red-green blood that sizzled and ate away at the surrounding trees.

ROAR!

Enraged that their prey was fighting back, the remaining hundred cyclopes charged, closing the distance in seconds. In the next moment, Freyla’s sword was a blur and Aerin’s bow was a constant hum. It was a desperate, final stand.

Fifteen minutes later, the fighting stopped.

Aerin was covered in wounds. She stood protectively over the unconscious form of Freyla, a bow in her left hand and a sword in her right, glaring defiantly at the demonic monsters that still surrounded her.

This is really it, then. The last of her sacrificial Scarecrows had been used up in the fight. With no more tricks up her sleeve and her body bleeding from a dozen gashes, there was no escape.

Godfater... Aerin can’t hold on any longer.

It was her final thought. She slowly closed her eyes, ready for the end. It wasn’t that she didn’t want to fight; she had no strength left. Her hands, still gripping her weapons, were completely numb.

SHINK! SHINK-SHINK-SHINK!

The instant her eyes closed, the air filled with a piercing whistle. Dozens of blood-red spider spears rained down from the sky, impaling every single Plague Cyclops, pinning them to the ground. They didn’t even have time to scream.

Feeling no pain, hearing no enemies advance, Aerin forced her eyes open. She stared, dumbfounded, at the scene before her. Every cyclops was dead, pinned by a single, perfectly placed spear. There were no explosions, no mangled limbs. The control of the attacker was precise, absolute.

It was impossible. A miracle.

Was it the Elven gods... are they protecting me? she wondered, bewildered.

AOOOOO!

Four deafening dragon roars ripped through the sky. Four massive Blight Wyrms circled high above her, their cries a declaration of dominance, as if marking their new territory.

And on the back of one, Aerin could just make out a human figure.

The figure stepped off the dragon's back and walked toward her through the empty air.

And then, her world went black.

Orion caught Aerin as she fell, saving her from hitting the ground. He held her limp form, looking down at her battered and bloody face.

So the kid's got some spine after all, he thought to himself. He'd actually arrived some time ago. The moment she had used her first sacrificial Scarecrow, its hidden marker had pinged her location for him. He'd tagged the batch he'd sent her, just in case she decided to pull a fast one on him after he arrived.

He hadn't intervened immediately because he wanted to see what she was made of. And he had to admit, she hadn't done too badly. At the very least, when death was certain, she hadn't abandoned her friend.

Her actual fighting ability, however... leaves much to be desired.

Chapter 990: You have to go now

"Drag these demonic monsters back," Orion commanded casually as he cradled Aerin in his arms. "We'll need them for the necropolis." He stepped back onto the Blight Wurm, preparing to head back.

On the ground below, several phantoms flickered into existence in the blood-soaked clearing. They were members of the shadow army, spirits of the fallen summoned by Clymene, now a permanent part of the undead armies. But for this mission, they answered to Orion.

The shadows silently gathered the corpses, and once the area was clean, they vanished back into the air.

Titanion Realm, Soaring Bird City

The Allied Forces had swept through the northern barbarian lands, conquering vast swaths of new territory. Before these spoils of war could be officially divided, all eyes were on Soaring Bird City, and on the Four Factions Summit that was still in session.

As a result, the city was flooded with merchant caravans and high-ranking figures from every race. The summit had made Soaring Bird City more prosperous and bustling than ever before.

In a blacksmith's shop in the western district, the forge roared. The iron waiting to be hammered glowed cherry-red. A bellows enchanted with wind magic huffed and puffed, sending flames licking high up into the flue.

The hearts of the dwarves Harbek and Dain were much like that glowing iron—searing hot and full of turmoil. Their future, like the unformed metal, was without shape or direction.

"Dammit all! What kind of Five-Faction Alliance carves up the territory of the fifth faction?" Harbek, a surviving elder of the dwarven race, was filled with a bitter rage. One of the main topics of discussion at the summit was precisely how to divide the lands of his people.

Furious, he lifted his flagon to his lips, but he'd already drained it dry.

"This is infuriating!"

With a loud clang, Harbek hurled the metal flagon to the stone floor, the impact denting its spout.

"Har...bek!"

The noise startled the dwarven prophet Dain from his coma. His voice was a frail whisper from the nearby bed.

"Prophet! Prophet, I'm here! Harbek is here!"

Despite his agitation, Harbek was a Legendary-level warrior. He heard Dain's faint call instantly.

"Where... where is this?"

"We're in Soaring Bird City, Prophet. In our people's old smithy."

"Soaring... Bird City... Still in the human kingdom?"

"Yes, Prophet!" Harbek reached out, intending to help Dain sit up.

But the prophet's gaze stopped him. For a prophet who had exhausted his life force and his very spirit to be awake and speaking now, it could only mean one thing: a final, fleeting surge of clarity before the end. The slightest touch from Harbek might be enough to extinguish the last flicker of life within him.

Dain was exhausted; those few words seemed to have drained him completely. He fell silent, gathering his strength.

Harbek wasn't a fool. Seeing the prophet's silence, he began to recount everything he knew.



"Prophet, the Alliance won. We've taken back the dwarven territories. Our king... was turned, and then he was slain. The one responsible, Torin, was taken by some unknown power. We don't know if he's alive or dead. The southern armies are pushing the border north, and the Four Factions Summit is deciding how to carve up all the new land... including ours."

"Those bastards, how could they..."

Harbek had stayed in Soaring Bird City with Dain for this very reason, waiting for the summit to conclude, waiting for a final verdict. A small, foolish part of him still held onto the hope that the human kingdom would help them reclaim the dwarven Tribe's lands.

He poured out his heart, and as Dain listened, he slowly regained a bit of strength.

"Harbek," Dain's voice was steadier now. "While the summit is still in session, you must leave. Leave Soaring Bird City."

His spirit seemed to rally, his speech becoming clear and urgent. "Go to the Stoneheart Horde. It's a faction built by giants, more accepting of other races. The dwarves can find a place for themselves there."

"But Prophet, our territory is still..."

Harbek tried to argue, but Dain's calm, knowing gaze silenced him.

"Don't be a fool, Harbek! The dwarven tribe is history. The Alliance is the one that reconquered our lands. If you try to take them back, you'll be declaring war on the entire Alliance. Do you have any idea what that means?"

The prophet's eyes grew preternaturally bright, as if he could see through the mist of the present into a future Harbek could not. "The dwarven race cannot die with us. While the summit is ongoing, before those vultures turn their eyes on us, you must get out of here."

Dain's voice grew louder, raspier, his breathing labored. "If you don't, you won't be able to leave at all!"

"You have to... you have to go... now..."

He repeated the words three times but couldn't finish his thought. The brilliant light in his eyes suddenly dimmed, leaving them dull and lifeless. The last spark of life in him was gone.

"Prophet... Prophet... Oh, Prophet..."

Dain lay motionless on the cot, utterly still. The hood on his head slipped back, revealing a hairless, skeletal frame, nothing more than skin stretched tight over bone. Harbek didn't know the exact price Dain had paid on his journey to the human kingdom, but he knew this: shortly after Dain's arrival, the kingdom's Grand Duke had marched to war. Dain had only made it back to Harbek by sheer force of will, running on his last breath before collapsing into a coma.

If Harbek hadn't smashed his flagon in anger, the prophet might have simply faded away in silence. In a way, that single act had vented his own rage and jolted Dain back from the brink of death for one last warning.

The West, Stoneheart City

While the dwarves mourned and the four factions haggled over every square inch of land at the summit, the Youngling Championship was kicking off in the Colosseum of Stoneheart City.

"Younglings!" Orion's voice boomed from the highest platform of the Colosseum. He stood clad in his Ghostbone Armor, a thick beast-pelt cloak draped over his shoulders, looking like a god of war as he gazed down upon the competitors and the roaring crowds.

"This is the Colosseum of the Stoneheart Horde! A place forged in the blood and sacrifice of countless races who fought for their freedom! It is also a place where glory is won with sword and shield!"

He surveyed the eager young faces below.

"I expect you to take up your weapons, defeat your rivals, and seize your honor! Seize your legacy! Let all our peoples know that you are true bloodline warriors! That you are the hope of the Stoneheart Horde!"

Orion didn't speak of bloodshed or slaughter to them. For warriors their age, raised on the heroic tales of their parents, glory was the most potent stimulant of all. Now, the chance to earn it for themselves would be the ultimate trial by fire.