

Titan King 791

Chapter 791: Hulk and the Giant King

Leonidas spoke with the gravity of a man who had survived centuries of war, his words landing with the weight of hard-won truth. When he finally finished, Orion understood.

"For us, my friend," Leonidas had said, his eyes clear despite the ale, "the rank of Archlord is only the beginning."

They had drunk until they were insensible, talking long into the night, the bonds of their friendship forged anew in the fires of shared experience and honest counsel. The next day, in a grand hall set aside as his private chambers, Orion sat upon a newly-carved throne and contemplated the paths that now lay before him.

First, Leonidas was right. He had to learn caution. His true body, the anchor of his soul, had to learn to evade risk.

Second, the power he had long nurtured within himself, the Triple Mirror Image, was ready. Now that he had ascended, the echoes of his soul born from that power had ascended with him, reaching the Archlord tier in raw potential, though they had not yet forged their own bodies of faith. It was time to give them form and purpose.

But before that, there was one last piece of business. With a wave of his hand, two chests appeared before him. One was the spoils from the Abyssal Devil Ray, Mokka, which he had not yet opened. The other was a team chest, a gift from the Deputy Commander on behalf of the Alliance, a reward for providing them with the Rite of the Serpent Trinity.

Though the Sigil of Substitution had been Edward's contribution, the opportunity had been Orion's to seize, and his part was graciously acknowledged. The chest was ornate and familiar, much like the one the Commander had gifted him when he first joined their ranks.

With no need for hesitation, he opened them. Two items floated into the air.

[Abyssal Devil Shield]

Type: Shield

Quality: Legendary

Inherent Skill:

Devil's Gaze

Description: The gaze of the devil sows unease in the hearts of your enemies. The devilish eye upon the shield will confound their sight, their senses, and their judgment, plunging them into a waking nightmare. At the same time, the devil is mighty, and its hide is nigh unbreakable.

Evaluation: The Devil's Gaze is both a judgment and a punishment.

The first was a Legendary shield, dropped by the Devil Ray. Orion frowned. A shield felt... limiting. In the past, he would have immediately sought to trade it. But now, with a body of faith that possessed eight arms, six of them were still empty.

He reached out and touched the shield. It vanished, reappearing in his mind's eye. There, the four-headed Asura Titan held his trident in one hand, the Commander's Blade Flash in another, and now, the Abyssal Devil Shield was held in a third. It was shaped like a leering demonic face with great tusks, its central eye pulsing with a malevolent light, ready to cast debilitating curses upon his foes. It was a terrifying, monstrous bulwark.

He turned his attention to the second item. It was a pair of exquisitely crafted boots, in an exotic, eastern style.

[Boots of the War-Tyrant]

Type: Footwear

Quality: Legendary

Inherent Skill 1: Tyrant's Bloodlight

Description: The Tyrant is a being of pure slaughter, whose power is fueled by rage and fury. Unleash a beam of wicked, crimson light to annihilate the foe before you.

Inherent Skill 2:

Precise Translocation

Description: Before the bloodlight annihilates your foe, it is best to have already left.

Note: These boots can only be attuned to a single translocation point. Choose your anchor wisely.

Evaluation: These boots were crafted by a demigod from the flayed hide and sinew of a slain Asuran tyrant. To wear them is to walk the path to the pinnacle of power. It is also to earn the eternal hatred and pursuit of the Asura race.

Another Legendary item. This one, with its incredible power and craftsmanship, had to be from the Commander himself. Such an artifact would be considered a treasure even by Leonidas and Alexander.

Setting the boots aside, Orion laid out the last of his new assets. Two masterfully crafted tridents, gifts from Alexander and Leonidas to mark his ascension. And a scroll from the Deputy Commander—a forbidden spell or a secret rite, Orion knew, another trump card for his arsenal.

Staring at the collection of power, he summoned his two mirror images into existence.

"From this day forward, you are Hulk," he said to the first.

"And you," he said to the second, "are the Giant King."

The names were a declaration of their purpose, the roles they would now play.

The two masterwork tridents were the most suitable weapons for them, as they had inherited most of Orion's skills. He gave one to each.

To the avatar named Hulk, he then bestowed the complete, blood-red Ghostbone Armor from Arthas, the Dragonscale Leather Armor he had flayed from his own hide long ago, and the new magic scroll from Edward. This avatar was now a frontline champion, equipped for brutal, close-quarters combat.

To the other, the Giant King, he gave the Lightning Cloak and the newly acquired Boots of the War-Tyrant. With the ability to attack and escape, and a forbidden spell as a final resort, this avatar was a mobile, unpredictable skirmisher.

After distributing the treasures, Orion was left with his trident, Flame of Will; his Titan Emblem; and the new Abyssal Devil Shield. He dismissed the avatars, his mind already moving pieces across a continental board.

Hulk would remain here in the Emerald Dream Realm with Leonidas's avatar, a steadfast guardian of their foothold. Should a full-scale war erupt, his true body would descend.

The Giant King would allow himself to be pulled by the demigods of his home world, Titanion, to the great two-realm battlefield. As an Archlord, the time had come for the secrets of his own world to be laid bare to him. He was a native of that realm; it was only right that he integrate himself into its circle of power, to forge new alliances—or make new enemies—for the Stoneheart Horde.

And as for Orion himself, his true body... he would return to his own domain. He would sit upon his throne in Stoneheart City, and he would finally, truly, begin to build his kingdom.

He sat there for a long time, his face unreadable, his gaze fixed on a future only he could see.

Chapter 792: The Roar of the Giant King

There was one last matter, a loose thread he could not yet pull. Sophia, and his fourth child.

When he had taken the Spring of Life, in that brief moment of contact with the world's fundamental rules, he had felt the pulse of his son's bloodline and had managed to project a sliver of information to

him. But the Chaos Continent was distant, a dangerous, unknown land guarded by its own Archlords and demigods.

He had no coordinates, no path to it. He knew Alexander and the Deputy Commander were searching for a way, but the continent was warded, its seas made impassable by enchanted Sea Folk patrols. For now, he could not retrieve his child.

As for Sophia... he thought of the absurdity of their encounter and could only shake his head with a wry, bitter smile. The child was a bond between them, and for the boy's sake, he could not treat her with cruelty.

But her own fate was yet unwritten. When the time came, he would see for himself what manner of woman she was, whether an ally or a threat. The child would be claimed, but she would have to earn her own place.

Chaos Continent, Phoenix Butterfly Ridge.

A single black butterfly fluttered in the air, its wings opening and closing with an endearing clumsiness. Its flight path was a series of awkward dips and rises, a wavering line that looked as if a single gust of wind could send it tumbling. Compared to the graceful of the Dark Butterfly race, it was like a toddler learning to walk.

With a final, determined effort, the butterfly stabilized its flight and landed in the mountain peak's pavilion, transforming into a human-looking child of about three years old. It was a miraculous sight, a testament to the diverse and wondrous races of the world. If Orion had been there, he would have recognized the boy instantly as a perfect image of his own childhood.

"Kaelen, you are so clever!" Sophia said, her voice filled with a mother's pride. "To master flight on your very first transformation."

The boy who had been a butterfly was Kaelen, Orion's fourth son.

"I have much to learn, Butterfly Mother," the boy said, his voice clear and steady. "I have not yet learned the Enchanted Butterfly Step, or the Phantom Shuttle, or the Shadowless Escape..."

Kaelen had been born looking three years of age, able to walk from his first moment, and he had known his own name innately. To Sophia, it was all beyond belief.

According to Kaelen, the name was a gift from his father, the Giant King, who had also told him of his bloodline and his heritage.

"Did you truly hear your father's voice?" she had asked him three days ago.

"Yes, Butterfly Mother," Kaelen had replied, pointing a small finger first to the sky, and then to the flowers in the valley. "Father was there. And there."

And he had been right. In that moment of communion with the world's rules, Orion had been, in a sense, everywhere. The thought filled Sophia with a deep and profound worry. Now that Orion was an Archlord, would he come for Kaelen?

If he tried to take the boy, what could she do? Would the Dark Butterflies resist, or submit? The questions were a constant, silent torment, a desperation she hid from her innocent son.

Looking at him now, her eyes were full of love and boundless hope. Kaelen had been born with his bloodline already awakened, a perfect fusion of Orion's giant heritage and the blood of the Dark Butterflies. At only three years old, he had already mastered his two forms, shifting between giant and butterfly with a fluid ease that made Sophia burn with envy.

He possessed the strength, endurance, and healing of a giant, along with the flight and magical aptitude of her own people. He had the fierce tenacity of the giants, and the eerie cunning of the butterflies.

"Don't worry, Butterfly Mother," Kaelen said, his small face set with a fierce determination. "When I am big, I will drive away all the enemies waiting outside our valley."

Sophia couldn't help but pull him into a tight embrace. "You must keep that promise, my brave Kaelen."

His earnest, protective expression made her heart both swell with joy and ache with sorrow. This child, born into a siege, already carried the weight of his people on his tiny shoulders.

"Are you hungry, Kaelen? Shall Butterfly Mother get you something to eat?"

"Meat!" the boy cried, his serious expression breaking into a wide grin. "Kaelen wants meat! Kaelen wants meat!"

Titanion Realm, Stoneheart City.

With a shimmer of void energy, Orion stepped from the teleportation array in the military barracks. Outside, Lilith waited for him, holding Pallas by the hand, flanked by a retinue of guards.

Orion strode toward them, his steps seeming slow and measured, yet he crossed the distance in an instant.

"Daddy! Daddy!" Pallas shouted, overjoyed. He let go of Lilith's hand and ran forward, his own arms outstretched, asking to be held.

A smile touched Orion's lips. He swept the boy up, and Pallas immediately scrambled up his arm to his favorite perch on his father's shoulders.

With his own bloodline now awakened, the boy felt an overwhelming sense of kinship and safety from Orion. He hugged the back of his father's head, giddy with excitement.

"Daddy, Colosseum! Pallas wants to go to the Colosseum!" Other than the market and the castle walls, it was his favorite place in the city.

"Alright," Orion agreed easily. "We'll go to the Colosseum."

Like most fathers, he doted on his children.

Lilith came forward and took his arm, her silence speaking volumes. A look of pure, blissful happiness was on her face as she prepared to follow them. Orion leaned down and kissed her forehead, then took a step toward the city.

At that exact moment, a mighty surge of void energy washed over Stoneheart City. It was the pull of a demigod. In the past, such a force would have been irresistible. Now, Orion could not only sense its approach, but he had a choice.

He felt the power, a summons without compulsion, and stopped, looking up at the sky.

"They are quick to react," he murmured.

With a thought, the avatar of the Giant King stepped out of his body. It stood tall, clad in the Lightning Cloak, wearing the Boots of the War-Tyrant, and holding a masterwork trident. The Giant King appeared, and without resistance, allowed the void energy to take hold, pulling it up and away into the heavens.

Watching his other self depart, Orion's eyes narrowed, a faint, knowing smile on his lips.

It was time for the continent to hear the roar of the Giant King.

ROOOOAAAAARRRRR!

High above, the departing avatar unleashed its full might. The unrestrained aura of a new Archlord washed over Stoneheart City, over the vast territory of the giants. It became a great tidal wave of power, crashing outward, over the lands of the blood elves, the human kingdom, the great sea, and into the farthest corners of the world.

The roar was the sound of primal fury, of a prehistoric behemoth, of a titan god.

It was a terrifying, soul-shaking proclamation, a promise and a threat, as if it could shatter the very hearts of all who heard it.

Chapter 793: Another, Similar Presence

That sound was a thing of power, a roar that shook the very foundations of the world. For all who heard it, hearts seized, marrow froze, and a primal instinct to submit rose from the deepest parts of the soul.

The peoples of Utessar had felt such a thing before. It was the same overwhelming presence they had experienced when the white dragon Frostsire had first awoken. In an instant, a continent-spanning realization dawned: another Archlord had been born.

On this day, the roar of the Giant King echoed under the stars, filling every corner of the land.

For a moment after the avatar vanished into the void, Stoneheart City fell into a profound silence. It was broken by a single, exultant shout from a giant on the street. Another joined in, and then another, until the shouts became a unified, earth-shaking chorus.

Soon, the succubi, the buffalofolk, the obsidian golems, the gnolls, the bear-men, and all the other vassal races of the Horde realized what had happened, and their own voices joined the roaring celebration.

Orion, standing on the street with his wife and child, felt the tidal wave of faith wash over him. In the sea of his consciousness, the Asura Titan Form was once again bathed in the adoration of his people. The cheers did not stop; they grew, layering one on top of another, becoming a force of nature, a testament to the Horde's newfound power.

In that sound, the people's loyalty was forged into a fanatical devotion, both to Orion and to the Horde itself. Anyone with a shred of political sense understood. From this day forward, the Stoneheart Horde was truly a great power.

The Western Coast, Ironveil Escarpment.

Delilah stood upon the cliff's edge, looking down upon the cheering masses. When the roar had washed over her, she knew. The Archlord of the Stoneheart Horde had returned.

"Your man ascends to the rank of Archlord and announces it to the world," she said without turning, a teasing note in her voice. "Such a glorious moment. Did those seer's eyes of yours catch a glimpse of it?"

She glanced back at Sylvana, who stood beside the scorpion tribe's High Priestess, Selenis.

"The future of the Stoneheart Horde," Sylvana replied, her voice as cryptic as ever, "is filled with hope."

"Your Majesty," Selenis interjected respectfully, "should we return to offer our congratulations to My Lord? This is a momentous event for the Horde."

The neighboring races and factions, if they had any sense, would already be dispatching envoys with tributes and felicitations. Stoneheart City would be overwhelmed with activity.

"In two days," Delilah decided, a smile she couldn't suppress playing on her lips as she gazed at the grand canal stretching into the distance. "Once I have settled matters here, we will return."

"If we leave, will the Sea Race not attack?" Selenis asked, a hint of worry in her tone. The grand canal was vital to the Horde's future; to leave it without its chief overseer felt like a risk.

"At a time like this?" Delilah laughed. "No one would be so foolish, especially not a great power. Just wait, Selenis. The Sea Race will not attack. On the contrary, I expect they will be sending an envoy of their own."

She turned and walked back toward the fortress. Sensing her approach, the Abyssal Dragon Xalathar, who had been leading the celebratory roars from his perch, fell silent, lowering his massive head to gaze at her.

"Lord Xalathar," Delilah said, her voice carrying both respect and command. "In three days, we return to Stoneheart City together. Our great lord should not be without his most loyal and imposing battle companion at his side."

The flattery worked perfectly. Xalathar's great chest puffed with pride. As the bonded mount of Orion, he felt his master's power more keenly than anyone.

"Excellent!" the dragon rumbled, his voice a happy earthquake. "Finally, I can leave this gods-forsaken rock and return to the master's side! For his sake, Delilah, I suppose I can bear to carry you back myself."

He was thrilled. Perhaps, when his master saw him, he would be pleased and grant him a reward—a few high-tier soul-crystals, perhaps?

The North, Ogre Territory.

The ogre lord, Aldous, sat leaning against a great tree, a haunch of roasted meat in one hand and a dandelion-like weed in the other.

"Listen here," he said to the larger of his two heads. "From now on, you do what I say. When I say it."

"Not happening," the other head grunted. "You can't beat me."

"My friend, the great Giant King, is an Archlord now. A terrifying, powerful being. If you don't listen, I'll have him beat you to death. Then I'll control the body all by myself."

The larger head fell silent, its brutish face scrunching up in thought. After a long moment, a flicker of fear appeared in its eyes. "Fine! I'll listen to you! But you have to feed me and let me sleep. No waking me up unless there are enemies."

A triumphant smirk spread across Aldous's face. He had won control. He was finally in charge.

My friend is an Archlord, he thought, already contemplating the politics of it all. What gift should I send? How best to approach Orion now? Submission? Or an alliance? An alliance was better, more proactive. It would yield greater benefits.

He glanced at the other head, which had already started to snore. Stupid creature. Pathetic. All it knows is eating.

The South, The City of Blessings.

Within the royal palace's forbidden sanctuary, Elf King Rommath and Grand Elder Lireesa approached the domain of the Guardian Tree. It was the dormant resting place of their guardian ancient, and the rise of a new Archlord was a matter that would undoubtedly shape the future of the continent.

After performing the ancient rites of respect, King Rommath looked up at the great, mist-shrouded tree. "Ancient Prophet," he called out. "Did you sense it? The aura of the Giant King?"

A voice, old as the earth itself, rustled through the dense branches. "That was a true Archlord. A mighty one."

The branches shifted, the mists parted, and on the massive trunk of the tree, two enormous eyes slowly opened, followed by a great, gaping mouth.

"And to the north of the blood elf lands... there is another, similar presence. Another Archlord."

Chapter 794: A Marriage Alliance

Elf King Rommath and Grand Elder Lireesa stood in stunned silence.

Two Archlords in the Stoneheart Horde meant the Giant King, Orion, possessed at least one Archlord-level avatar. Such power, such a deep foundation... it was a force the blood elves could no longer hope to resist.

"The situation is not as dire as you imagine," the ancient voice of the Guardian Tree rustled through the leaves. "My people on the wind have told me there are no armies massing on your northern border. The Giant King does not intend to start a war."

"Furthermore, the humans have their Saint, and the dragons have their White Dragon majesty. They will provide a balance to this new Archlord. The greater political landscape will not change overnight. But it has changed. And now, you must assess the new reality and make a decision."

The information was staggering, and its implication was clear. Some time ago, the Elf King and the Grand Elder had come here and, at great cost, had the Tree divine the future of the blood elves in relation to the Stoneheart Horde.

The prophecy had come to pass. The Horde had risen. And now, a decision they could no longer avoid had to be made.

“Since the dawn of time,” the Guardian Tree continued, its voice ancient and weary, “when two factions wish to soothe their enmities, beyond a pact of mutual defense, the surest path is a marriage alliance.”

“A marriage alliance?” Rommath frowned. “But I have no sons or daughters, nor a sister of suitable rank.”

It was a method he did not object to; it had been used before in the long history of his people. Among the many consorts of the human Saint was a blood elf woman, and that bond was one of the reasons the two races had coexisted for so long.

These ancient powers were all intertwined. Barring some unstoppable calamity or unforgivable hatred, even if one faction were to fall, its people would often find a way to survive through these tangled connections.

“Lycanor,” Grand Elder Lireesa said, her voice a soft, heavy whisper.

She said only the name, offering no further explanation. It was not needed. In all the blood elf race, only Lycanor, a warrior at the upper echelons of the Legendary tier, possessed the status and strength to be a worthy match for the Giant King.

“But... she...” Rommath started to speak, but the words died in his throat.

The survival of his entire race rested on his shoulders. If not for Orion, Lycanor would have, in the near future, become his queen, his wife. And now, for the sake of his people, he had to send her to the Stoneheart Horde. To wear the crown is to bear its weight. This was the price of his kingship.

"If the Stoneheart Horde and the blood elves become permanent allies," Lireesa said, her gaze fixed on her king, "then with our existing pact with the humans, our people may know another five thousand years of peace."

Peace. It was the one thing the blood elves had always yearned for.

"My King, if you cannot bring yourself to issue the decree, I will go to Lycanor. I will persuade her."

The Guardian Tree remained silent. It was their protector, not their ruler. Such matters of the heart and the crown were for them to decide. Power, for a guardian, could be a veil that blinded it to the needs of its people.

The South, the Human Kingdom.

In the royal council chamber, King Harold faced a magic mirror. Within its silvered surface were the images of two men: Grand Duke Richard and Grand Duke William.

"My lords," Harold began, his voice calm and steady. "The Saint's analysis has proven correct. Now, tell me, what is our course of action?"

With Orion's ascension, the rise of the Stoneheart Horde to become the third great power on the continent was unstoppable. Harold's face betrayed no emotion, but the two Grand Dukes were far too shrewd to misread the gravity of the situation.

They also knew a fact of which few others were aware: the child born to Princess Ava was of the Giant King's bloodline. Regardless of the grim circumstances of her abduction, regardless of the insults she had endured, in the cold calculus of statecraft, the Princess of the human kingdom and the Archlord of the giants had, for all intents and purposes, completed a marriage alliance. And they had produced an heir.

The process had been a thing of darkness, but the result... the result was politically perfect.

“Your Majesty,” Grand Duke Richard said smoothly, ceding the initiative. “We are currently engaged in a full-scale war with the Sea Race, expanding the kingdom’s borders. The internal affairs of the realm are for you to command. We will support your decision completely.”

He was, in that moment, deeply impressed by Harold’s foresight in protecting Princess Ava and her child.

“The King’s will is our will,” Grand Duke William echoed, his tone one of sincere loyalty.

“However,” William continued, changing tack, “our plans concerning the boy, Kronos, must now change accordingly. The goal of using him to seize control of the Stoneheart Horde has become... unrealistic.”

“I propose we now fully support Kronos in attaining status and power within the Horde. Let him become the face of a new, friendly relationship between our two peoples. After all, half the blood in his veins is of our royal line. He is one of us.”

To change with the times is a necessary quality for any man of power.

Grand Duke Richard was quick to second the motion. “I agree with Lord William’s proposal. And I further propose that Kronos be granted the full rights and allocations of an imperial prince. The son of an Archlord cannot be insulted, and nor should he be.”

Richard’s stance was firm. The sons of Archlords were not to be trifled with, for they were often the Archlords of the next generation. The human kingdom’s own line of Saints had been preserved for this very reason: through blood and heritage.

Furthermore, Richard had his own clandestine dealings with the Stoneheart Horde. If the two powers became allies for generations to come, the benefits he stood to gain were nearly as great as the king’s.

“So be it,” King Harold said, his voice finalizing the matter. He recognized the sharp political acumen of his dukes. “The plan is changed. We will elevate the status of Kronos.”

Chapter 795: Our Last Chance

“There is one more thing,” Harold said, his voice steady. “The Saint has confirmed that Orion maintains an avatar within the Stoneheart Horde’s territory. Who, then, is the most suitable emissary for our kingdom to send with congratulations?”

He paused, letting the question hang in the air before answering it himself. “It is my thought that Prince Theodore should go. And he should take Kronos with him.”

The images of the two Grand Dukes in the mirror fell silent. Sending Prince Theodore, who was of sufficient rank and already familiar with the Horde, was a logical choice. But to send the boy, Kronos... that was a gamble of a different order.

For years, Princess Ava had lived in her comfortable seclusion at Rose Manor, but her movements, and especially those of her son, were always under the watchful eye of the empire’s highest echelons.

For the boy to leave the human kingdom was a thing that, in the past, would have been utterly unthinkable. Even if Orion himself had come to take him by force, it would have resulted in a bloody, two-sided war.

But now... now things were different. To hold the son of an Archlord hostage? That was a responsibility not even King Harold could bear. More importantly, if Kronos went to the Horde and did not return, they would lose a giant prince who held a very real possibility of kinship with humanity. The potential loss was far greater than the gain.

“Kronos is a prince of the giants,” Harold stated, breaking the silence. “We cannot deny this fact. And in the future, we will not be able to stop him from leaving our kingdom to acknowledge his father and his kin. That being the case, is it not better that we release him willingly? Let this be a demonstration of our goodwill to Orion.”

To not confine, to not control Kronos—this was the baseline for any future relationship. To do otherwise would inevitably lead to war. Harold spoke with grave deliberation, his tone exceptionally serious.

“We need the leadership of the Stoneheart Horde to meet Kronos, to know he exists. We need them all to see that he, too, is a prince of the giants, and that his own bloodline has awakened with prodigious talent.”

This, of course, would need no announcement from the human kingdom. The moment Kronos set foot in their territory, the potent giant blood in his veins would be recognized by all.

“Furthermore,” Harold added, a flicker of cunning confidence in his eyes, “a child who has tired of playing will always return to his mother’s side. And who would dare stand in the way of a child seeking his own mother?”

To have allowed Ava to give birth to Kronos, to have given the boy a good life here... this, Harold knew, was one of his finest acts as king.

“With Orion’s new power, his new status, his new perspective... he would never prevent such a thing. In fact, he would likely wish for Kronos to experience more of the world, to grow into an even greater power in the future.”

Harold spoke from his own experience as a father who pushed his favored son, Theodore, into the crucible of war, hoping the trials would forge him into something stronger.

“But the most important point,” Harold said, leaning forward slightly, “is this: there are factions within the Stoneheart Horde who will not want Kronos to remain there.”

This was the crux of his plan, his greatest hope and his most conflicted thought. On the one hand, the political bloc represented by the succubi would surely not welcome a rival to Pallas, the official heir. That internal opposition, Harold wagered, would eventually ensure Kronos’s return to the human kingdom. On the other hand, Harold genuinely hoped Kronos would gain recognition and acceptance among the Horde, as it would benefit the boy’s future.

Only if Kronos held real power would the bond between the two great factions be truly sealed. Blood ties between the leaders of great powers were the surest defense against war, and the easiest path to a true alliance. And with the Stoneheart Horde as an ally, the dragons to the south would no longer be a dagger at the throat of humanity.

The king’s vision was vast, his plans laid out across decades to come.

Hearing his final point, the eyes of the two Grand Dukes lit up with understanding.

“Your Majesty,” Richard said, a new respect in his voice. “I have no objections to your plan.”

“Nor do I,” William affirmed.

And so it was decided. The three greatest leaders of the human kingdom, on the matter of Kronos, had reached a consensus.

The South, the Starfall Sea.

In the deepest parts of the ocean, the water is black. On the surface, the waves churned, rising and falling in great, layered mountains, a majestic and terrible abyss.

Suddenly, the black water roiled, and a great dragon broke through the waves, its tail sending a spray of dark water high into the air. It looked toward the continent, toward the distant lands of the Stoneheart Horde.

That Orion would ascend to the rank of Archlord is no surprise to me, the white dragon, Frostsire, thought. But that he would do it so quickly... he must have foundations in other worlds. This is... unfortunate. The situation grows ever more unfavorable for the dragon race.

With Orion’s ascension, the political calculus of the continent had shifted. The Waveborn Seadragons of the Trident Sea Region, who bordered the Stoneheart Horde, would certainly change their attitude. Barring some great, unquenchable hatred, no faction would willingly provoke a war with an Archlord. Frostsire could already predict their next move.

The seadragons of the Trident Sea will now send their fleets to reinforce the Starfall Sea, he concluded. This, now, is our last chance. Our offensive must be intensified.

Frostsire withdrew his gaze and sent a mental command to the Glacial Dragon, Jorik—a warrior at the peak of the Legendary tier, and an old acquaintance of Orion’s. He was the most suitable emissary to send to the Horde.

Then, with a thunderous crack of his tail that momentarily calmed the raging waves, the great white dragon plunged back into the black abyss.

In the depths of the Trident Sea, the seadragons, too, had sensed the aura of the new Archlord. But their king was away from Azurecrown Royal Harbor, and for now, they made no move.

Chapter 796: The Scent of Opportunity

Compared to the shock and astonishment rippling through the other great factions, the mood within the Stoneheart Horde was one of pure elation.

From the northern wastes to the southern territories, the many vassal races, upon receiving the confirmed news of Orion's ascension, began preparing gifts and planning their celebratory pilgrimages to Stoneheart City. A wave of ecstatic relief washed over every clan, large and small. From this day forward, they were members of a true power, a faction that need not bow its head or fear the bullying of its neighbors.

Stoneheart Horde, Stoneheart City.

In the southern sky, clouds drifted lazily in the sunlight, and great sun-hawks wheeled between them. But compared to the easy pace of the heavens, the city below was a whirlwind of activity.

The streets and alleys teemed with a diverse throng of peoples and exotic beasts, the avenues lined with bustling new shops. The storefronts of human, dwarven, and blood elf merchants displayed exquisite works of art and finely crafted weapons. Treasures from across the continent and the deep seas could all be found here. The city, already prosperous, now shone with a new, brighter luster.

With the news of the Giant King's ascension spreading like wildfire, a new flood of transients had poured into the city. Mercenary companies and enterprising merchants, like wolves scenting blood on the wind, had all converged on this new center of power.

And a new institution, the Assassin's League, officially sanctioned by the Horde, had sent shockwaves through the worlds of rangers and sellswords. Lone wolves who had long wandered the wilds now had a

place to call home. Combined with the Horde's liberal policies toward other races, Stoneheart City had become a paradise for many.

And in this paradise, the most popular establishment in the outer city was not the grand market nor the lavish inns, but the mysterious tavern run by Delilah. Each of its floors was open only to patrons of a certain level of power, a rule that catered to the tastes of many.

On the tavern's central stage, succubi and beastmaid performed dances of captivating skill and fire. Clad in vibrant, exotic silks, they moved with a primal, hypnotic rhythm that stirred the blood. They were a vision of fierce, untamed passion, and for a steep price in Blackstone coins, they offered companionship.

"My friend! It has been too long!" the giant warrior Brundar roared, raising his goblet to clash with that of his human companion, Godfrey. They were old friends, their bond forged in the crucible of battle.

"Your strength has grown," Godfrey noted, looking his friend up and down.

"Heh, you can tell!" Brundar grinned. "Fought the Sea Race in the south, earned my share of glory building that grand canal. The Tribe paid me well in cultivation resources. Even if I had to eat them all, I was determined to reach the peak of the Hero-tier."

The peak of the Hero-tier, but not yet an Alpha. It was a familiar story, a wall where countless bloodline warriors of the Horde found their ambitions checked.

The old record held by Dirtclaw—failing to ascend to Alpha eight times—had long since been broken by others. Now, those who had once mocked him spoke his name only with reverence. It was this wall that kept Brundar and Godfrey on the tavern's ground floor.

"Keep at it," Godfrey encouraged. "There are more opportunities for advancement in the Stoneheart Horde than anywhere else in the world."

Brundar's chest swelled with pride. "It's been a while since I was last here. The place is much busier. I don't recognize a soul." He gestured with his chin at the surrounding crowd of unfamiliar faces.

“Stoneheart City grows and changes every day,” Godfrey said, taking a sip of his ale. “The price of a shop in the outer city has tripled in the last two years. The scent of opportunity is thick in the air, so the merchants and mercenaries flock here. We’re even seeing more Alpha-level warriors these days.”

He nodded toward the second-floor balcony. In the past, they would have known everyone up there by sight. Now, it was filled with strangers.

“It seems my advice to you, to settle down and buy a storefront here, was a wise one after all,” Brundar said with a hearty laugh.

Godfrey smiled. In truth, he hadn’t stayed put. With the establishment of the Assassin’s League and the new auction house, he had formed his own mercenary company and spent much of his time leading expeditions into the wild territories, fulfilling contracts.

“Come, drink!” Brundar bellowed, clearly enjoying the tavern’s wild, intoxicating atmosphere. And, of course, the succubi.

“The tavern gets busier, and the dancers get more beautiful. Has anyone managed to win one of their hearts in the last two years?”

To take a succubus as a wife was a great honor among the giants, a trend started by their own lord, Orion.

“One, last year,” Godfrey replied, a wistful look in his own eyes. “A powerful giant warrior. She left with him, of her own free will.”

Though Godfrey was a knight, he was no monk, and he held a deep yearning for a pure and passionate love.

The nature of the succubi was famous across the continent. Once their fierce loyalty was earned, it was absolute. Any man who looked upon them believed himself worthy of that devotion.

“When I ascend to the Alpha-rank, I’ll try my luck here as well,” Brundar declared. It was another of his dreams. He was a fervent admirer of Orion, and by extension, of the succubi.

“And what about you?” Brundar asked, leaning in with a sly, conspiratorial grin. “With all these beauties around, has not one of them caught your eye?”

Godfrey shook his head. “My company is newly formed. I spend most of my time on the road. I cannot offer a partner a stable life. The time is not right.”

Brundar did not agree with such thinking. To a giant, a wife was a partner in all things. Whatever he ate, she would eat. Wherever he went, she would go. If he lived in a tent, she would share it. In the giant’s mind, there was no such thing as being a burden to the one you chose.

“Come,” Brundar said, changing the subject and draining his goblet. “Enough of this. Let’s go to the Colosseum. I hear they’ve brought in some new races. I need to sharpen my eye.”

If the tavern was a place to indulge the passions of the flesh, the Colosseum was where one went to unleash the passions of blood and battle. It was a game of life and death, where the crowd gambled its fortune and its fury.

Chapter 797: Call Me Sister

The Colosseum, in the private box reserved for the Giant King.

Orion stood on the high platform, watching the combat in the arena below with the same intensity as any other spectator.

"Daddy... Daddy!"

The child perched on Orion’s neck was not Pallas, but his adopted daughter, Elara. Pallas himself was relegated to his father’s broad shoulder, from where he repeatedly called out, trying to get Orion to remove the usurper. In Pallas’s young mind, Elara was occupying his throne.

Orion glanced at Pallas from the corner of his eye but said nothing, a faint smile on his lips. He wanted his son to learn to solve his own problems. Besides, Elara was his acknowledged daughter, the eldest, and with that title came all the rights and privileges thereof.

"Remember, Pallas," Elara said, her voice bright and teasing. "When your big sister is here, this spot belongs to me."

With the Deputy Commander preoccupied with the unfolding situation in the Emerald Dream Realm, Orion had taken the opportunity to bring Elara back to Stoneheart City. It was time his people came to know all his children. It wouldn't do for the eldest daughter and the prince of the Horde to walk through their own territories unrecognized.

Pallas, seeing his pleas to his father were having no effect, could only stare sullenly at Elara, his gaze eventually fixing on the fragrant, unknown fruit she was nibbling on.

"Call me 'sister', and I'll give you one," Elara said, her shrewd eyes crinkling like a little fox's as she began her gentle entrapment. "My mentor suggested I find these, you know. They help you grow big and strong, and let you feel the flow of magic."

The temptation was too great.

"The fruit is delicious," she cooed. "Don't you believe me? Have a bite."

She held the other half of the fruit to Pallas's lips. The two-year-old, having no sense of guile, instinctively took a bite.

Crunch.

The fruit was crisp and melted in his mouth with an exceptional sweetness. A warm current spread from his stomach through his entire body—it was a wonderful feeling.

"See? Delicious, right?" Elara asked. "Call me sister, and I'll give you the fruit."

She quickly pulled her hand back just as Pallas leaned in for a second bite, leaving him hanging.

Pallas looked at the fruit in her hand, then up at her smiling face, his little brow furrowed in thought and hesitation.

"Sister," he finally mumbled, the word soft and sweet.

Elara beamed, her victory complete. She handed the half-eaten fruit to Pallas, who took it and immediately took another large bite. As he chewed, a new thought formed in his little head: maybe this sister wasn't so bad. At least she kept her word.

But just as he had that thought, Elara's other hand flipped over, revealing a new fruit, this one much larger and perfectly whole.

"This one is mine, of course," she declared. "I already gave you the one I promised."

Pallas looked at the magnificent fruit in her hand, then down at the twice-bitten one in his own, a feeling of deep injustice beginning to dawn on him.

"Call me sister again," Elara said, taking a bite of her own perfect fruit and leaning close to him, "and I'll show you a magic trick."

"Sister!" Pallas said again, the promise of another reward overriding his nascent sense of being swindled.

"Good boy," Elara chirped. While still nibbling on her fruit, she stretched out her other hand and pointed a finger at Pallas. The boy watched, curious, and then suddenly found himself floating into the air, slowly orbiting his father's head.

"Flying... I'm flying!" he squealed. "Daddy... Sister!"

For Pallas, this first taste of flight was a novel and exhilarating experience. Under Elara's control, he giggled and spun with delight.

"Sister, sister, more! More flying!" he cried when she set him back down on Orion's shoulder. He now completely ignored his father, his eyes fixed on Elara, the word 'sister' spilling from his lips with sweet frequency.

Oh, my sweet, simple boy, Orion thought, watching them play with the smile of a proud father. So easily won over.

He was astonished by Elara's growth. Under the Deputy Commander's tutelage, her core personality hadn't changed, but her mind had been sharpened to a razor's edge. That wise old mentor certainly had a way with his disciples.

"Well done, Elara," Orion said aloud. He produced a piece of world essence, no bigger than a human fingernail, and popped it into her mouth. He then affectionately ruffled her long pink hair until it was a complete mess. She didn't mind in the slightest, leaning into his touch with a happy sigh.

As Orion enjoyed the moment with his children, the Colosseum's managers, Nico and Kadir, finished their duties and came to the VIP box to await his summons.

Just then, the current match ended, and the next combatant was led into the arena: a tall, tree-like creature. An Ashenveil Grove-Warden(Ashenveil Sprite).

Orion beckoned, and Nico and Kadir approached. He gestured toward the creature.

"My Lord," Fatty Nico began, ever the comprehensive source of information, "that is a spoil of war, purchased from the cavalry regiment."

Orion said nothing, indicating for him to continue.

"Those Ashenveil Sprites who surrendered willingly were sent to the front lines in the other realm. Those who refused... were sold to us. A shipment of demonic wolves, Windfoot Freaks, petrifying lizards,

and Bloodreavers came with them. Of the lot, the Grove-Wardens and the Bloodreavers are the strongest fighters. Many of them can be promoted to gladiators."

The word 'gladiators' caught Orion's attention. He knew that for a slave to earn that title, they had to win ten consecutive duels just to become a Novitiate.

"How many gladiators does the Colosseum have now?"

"Three hundred and two, My Lord," Nico reported promptly. "Nine Champion-tier, twenty-two Proven-tier, and the rest are Novitiates."

The numbers were impressive. Novitiates and Proven were one thing, but the Champions were typically Alpha-level powerhouses.

Orion looked away from the Grove-Warden in the arena and met Nico's eyes. The portly manager, ever perceptive, understood the unspoken question immediately.

Chapter 798: The Grand Princess

"Of the nine Champion-tier gladiators, my Lord," Nico began, his voice dropping conspiratorially, "five were sold to us by the Assassin's League."

Orion understood instantly. The Colosseum, for all the resources he had poured into it, could not have acquired so many Alpha-level fighters in just a few short years. Such warriors were the backbone of any faction.

But the Assassin's League, backed by Alexander's own organization, Blade Hall... they had other means.

Orion was certain that Blade Hall's agents were now spread across the continent like a spider's web. It was only logical that they would sell their captives—be they slaves or defeated targets—to the Colosseum, extracting one final drop of value from them.

It was a perfect, symbiotic relationship, a win-win that benefited the Colosseum, Stoneheart City, and the Horde as a whole.

"You two will prepare," Orion commanded, his voice now carrying the weight of his new station. "In the coming weeks, envoys from the great powers will arrive. I intend to host them here, in the Colosseum. When they arrive, I expect to show them the finest performance this establishment has to offer."

Fatty Nico's heart hammered in his chest. "My Lord, truly?" he stammered, his jowls trembling with excitement. "Nico guarantees it! We will put on a spectacle worthy of the occasion!"

He was no fool. He knew that a banquet for the esteemed patrons of the continent's great powers was an unprecedented opportunity for him and Kadir to expand their own networks, to elevate their own standing in the world.

"Flattery is pleasant to the ear," Orion said, cutting him off with a wave of his hand, "but a task done well is far more pleasing to the eye. Give me the details of the Colosseum's operations. And do not merely recite numbers."

If the first part had been a command, this was an examination.

This time, it was Kadir who spoke, his demeanor as calm and steady as Nico's was excitable. "My Lord, since its inception, after accounting for all operational costs and networking expenditures, the Colosseum has generated a net profit of 3,730,000 gold Blackstone coins."

"Sixty percent of the initial five-million-gold startup fund was spent on construction, furnishing, staff acquisition, and the initial purchase of slaves. The other forty percent was used to establish our supply channels, with the majority of that going toward securing patronage and smoothing negotiations."

The initial investment had been enormous; without Orion's backing, building such an enterprise would have taken decades.

"Our current profitability," Kadir continued with sober honesty, "is only possible due to the resources and priority channels supplied by the Horde. If we were relying solely on the networks we've built ourselves, we would still be operating at a loss."

"The good news, however, is that the Colosseum is now on a stable footing. The combat events generate a consistent daily profit of thirty to fifty thousand gold Blackstone coins. Additionally, our acquisitions department earns a secondary profit from the sale of body parts and souls from the slaves who fall in the arena."

Kadir paused. These were the two main revenue streams, but they were not the most important part of his report.

"My Lord, over the past few years, we have built our own channels, our own networks, and our own operational systems. The Colosseum can now function independently of any one person. And we have established our own Slaver Bands. In the future, wherever the armies of the Horde march, our bands will be there to follow in their wake."

Orion was satisfied. A daily profit of fifty thousand gold coins seemed small, but it was stable. As long as the Colosseum stood, it would contribute to the Horde's coffers.

"Send out the order," Orion declared. "The Grand Princess of the Stoneheart Horde, Elara, has graced the Colosseum with her presence. As a gift, she bestows two silver Blackstone coins upon every person in attendance. Tell them to enjoy the games!"

He would use this to spread his daughter's name throughout the city and the Horde.

Moments later, the entire Colosseum erupted. Tens of thousands of spectators who received the gift turned their eyes to the royal box, their gazes fixed on the mighty Giant King, and the small, pink-haired girl sitting on his neck.

"Grand Princess!"

"Elara!"

"ELARA!"

Little Elara beamed, thrilled by the unique sensation of thousands of people chanting her name. It was a feeling she could not describe, but one she knew she liked very much.

"Daddy, Elara is very happy!"

Orion smiled, rubbing the girl's head affectionately. He then signaled for her to release Pallas from his floating orbit, and the three of them left the box.

In the stands, Brundar tossed his two new silver coins in the air with a joyous whoop. "Praise to my Lord! Praise to the Grand Princess Elara!" he roared.

"My friend," he said, turning to Godfrey, "I tell you again, you should formally join the Stoneheart Horde. With the Lord's eye for talent, you would surely be given a high station."

Brundar felt he knew the knight well. Godfrey was broad-minded, a man whose loyalties were not confined by the borders of the human kingdom. He also possessed what Brundar considered a noble soul, for a human.

Godfrey just smiled, saying nothing. He had considered Brundar's offer, but he had other duties to attend to. He could not yet join.

He knew that if he did not integrate himself into the human kingdom's system of nobility, he would never be granted the territory and a flow of faith required to ascend to the Legendary tier. It was the great wall that stood before many of the human kingdom's greatest warriors, including the eight great knightly orders from which he hailed. They were knights, not lords. They had no lands of their own.

"My friend," Brundar said, changing the subject. "Tell me, this Ashenveil Grove-Warden and that berserk boarfolk. Who is the stronger?"

Brundar had never seen an Ashenveil creature before. He loved the Colosseum not just for the thrill of bloodshed, but because it was a place to learn, and to win a bit of coin on the side.

"The Ashenveil," Godfrey said without hesitation. "I've bet on it twice. Won a hundred and twenty gold Blackstone coins in total."

Brundar immediately placed his own pocket money on the Grove-Warden. "Damnation," he grumbled, returning to his seat. "Ten-to-one odds. It seems everyone already knows who to bet on."

"Be grateful they're taking bets at all," Godfrey chuckled. "That thing is a monster. The Colosseum is practically giving money away."

Chapter 799: The greatest secret

Worlds, like two straight lines, sometimes cross. And at their intersection, something new is born.

"The other side of this tunnel," a voice said, "is the Emerald Dream Realm."

Orion stood clad in his Lightning Cloak, his feet shod in the Boots of the War-Tyrant. This was his avatar, the Giant King, pulled across the cosmos to the two-realm battlefield. He stared, wide-eyed, at the shimmering portal before them—the greatest secret of the Titanion Realm.

"Inconceivable," the avatar murmured. "That a tunnel could form between two worlds." He turned to his two companions, the true bodies of the Archlords who guarded this passage. One was Seadragon King Neptor. The other was the human Saint, Noel. "Does this mean our worlds will one day merge?"

"Perhaps," said Saint Noel, a man with the white hair and weathered face of a great ancient. "But it is unlikely. The tunnel is neither strong nor stable. If they wished it, the great ones could destroy it." To one who has lived so long, such knowledge was commonplace, no great secret among the Archlord tier.

"Then why don't they?" Orion asked, playing the fool. He already suspected the answer, but he needed it confirmed.

"Why would they?" Seadragon King Neptor chimed in with a sly chuckle. His own avatar had met Orion before. "You are familiar with the dark beast tides, are you not?"

Orion nodded. To the weak, the tides were a catastrophe. To the strong, they were a feast, a harvest of resources.

"It is only by the pull of this world tunnel that we can open so many passages for the tides to flow through," Neptor explained. "Without the tunnel, there would be no great harvest."

Orion knew this was only the surface reason. The deeper truth was that the demigods of the Titanion Realm coveted the Emerald Dream Realm. This tunnel was their invasion route, and the fact that it could be destroyed was their escape plan.

Conversely, the demigods of the Emerald Dream Realm, their own world dying from corruption, saw the tunnel as their only path to a new home. They would never destroy their only road to salvation, even if it was guarded by wolves.

"Your Graces," Orion said, "surely this is not the only world tunnel?" He had not seen the white dragon Frostsire here, which led him to believe there must be others.

Both Archlords nodded.

"There are three," Neptor confirmed. As a lord of the Sea Race, the true masters of this world, he was privy to such knowledge. "Each is guarded by one of our world's three demigods—one human, two sea race—and between two and five Archlords."

The Titanion Realm was stronger than Orion had ever imagined.

"To fight your way from the north to the south, to raise the Stoneheart Horde into a great power, and now to ascend to the rank of Archlord..." Saint Noel said, his eyes appraising Orion with a quiet intensity. "You are a young man of boundless promise." He was trying to get a measure of this newcomer, to build a bridge with praise.

"Your Grace is too kind," Orion replied with a polite smile. "I have had my share of luck." It was not false modesty. Without the white dragon's intervention, the Horde would never have made it to the south.

"Luck?" Neptor laughed. "In the eyes of beings such as us, there is no such thing as luck. To reach the rank of Archlord is to be a creature of exceptional talent, profound vision, and indomitable will." He included all three of them in his praise.

They looked at one another, their smiles placid, a perfect picture of harmonious accord.

Is this an act? Orion wondered. He could not be sure. He knew that Archlords, having transcended the mortal coil, generally did not seek petty conflict with their peers.

But he was different. His rise had come at the expense of the human, dwarf, and blood elf lands. And he had personally slain Neptor's seventh son. He returned their smiles, but his heart remained guarded. It was impossible to know what a man was truly thinking.

Titanion Realm, Stoneheart City.

After returning from the Colosseum and entrusting Elara and Pallas to Lilith's care, Orion's true body sat upon his throne, his mind sinking into the public channel of the Champions Alliance.

Kraken: Commanders, I want to go home. The Emerald Dream Realm is not at all friendly to me.

Leonidas: What, no bounty to be had in the seas off Alexander's continent either?

Alexander: He invaded the deep sea and was promptly chased by two Archlord-level Sea Folk. If I hadn't pulled him ashore when I did, all you'd have left of your student would be his tentacles.

Leonidas: Spirits above! Squiddy, don't cry!

Kraken: This is humiliating. If I just had a partner, they wouldn't have been able to run me down like that!

Isabella: To be chased by two Archlords is a kind of happiness in itself. I don't even qualify for that kind of attention.

Orion read through the chat log, a wave of sympathy for his friend Kraken washing over him, followed by a quiet chuckle at Isabella's wry comment.

Hulk: Big bosses, I have discovered a secret of the Titanion Realm and the Emerald Dream Realm.

Orion posted his message. The response was not the immediate questioning he expected, but a wave of congratulations and good-natured mockery.

Leonidas: Well, well, look who it is! Our newly-ascended Archlord has graced us with his presence! A round of applause, everyone!

Edward: Welcome.

Alexander: Welcome.

Kraken: Welcome!

Isabella: Welcome!

It was as if they had all been waiting. The entire Champions Alliance was online.

Hulk: It was a stroke of luck. I hope you will all continue to guide me.

Leonidas:

You're an Archlord now! We can hardly bear the weight of you calling us 'big bosses'!

Alexander: +1.

Leonidas's teasing was relentless. When there was no great war to occupy him, he was monumentally bored. His only pastimes were sleeping and scouring the Survivor's Platform for deals.

Hulk: My friend, you jest. You know full well what I'm capable of. The very trident in my hand is a gift from you and Alexander.

Alexander and Leonidas didn't reply, but their friend Kraken was quick to jump in.

Kraken: Hulk, you've become a great lord now. Have you abandoned me? Here I am, all alone, getting chased across the sea... sob... my life is over!

Orion had never seen this side of Kraken before. The envy, the self-pity, the hint of genuine sourness... he could feel it even across the void between worlds.

Hulk: Squiddy, my friend, be calm. Never abandoned, never forsaken. We shall be as two swords in one sheath! A mighty tempest of arms and tentacles! When I am done here, I will join you in the deep, and we shall thrash our enemies together!

The public channel fell silent. Orion and Kraken had thoroughly grossed everyone out.

Isabella: Hulk... are you truly open to... all alliances?

After a long pause, Isabella's confused and suspicious message finally appeared, leaving Orion at a loss for how to explain himself.

Hulk: Isabella, can you not see we are merely jesting? Our brotherhood is pure!

Leonidas: The youths are so playful these days. I truly cannot imagine the scene... a giant, perched atop a massive octopus...

Hulk: Leonidas, my friend, I am officially informing you that you have now become my lifelong enemy.

Kraken: But Boss, my heart has always belonged to you!

With Leonidas and Kraken stirring the pot, Orion found himself sinking into a hole from which he could not climb out. Thankfully, the Deputy Commander intervened.

Edward: Enough. Let us speak of serious matters.

The channel went quiet, everyone waiting for Orion to continue.

Hulk: The Titanion Realm and the Emerald Dream Realm are connected by three world tunnels. My avatar is currently guarding the entrance to one of them. I am told that demigods can destroy these tunnels, and that the tunnels themselves can be used to facilitate the opening of spatial passages.

Orion shared his new intelligence, hoping to gain more insight from Edward.

Edward: So, world tunnels. That explains why the Emerald Dream Realm is so intent on invading. Three tunnels mean the intersection between your worlds is not yet deep; it is not enough to cause a natural fusion. By invading, they can accelerate that process. It may be the only lifeline for their corrupted world.

The information Orion provided had clarified much for the Deputy Commander. The demigods of both realms were staring at each other through these tunnels, each coveting what the other had.

Kraken: Deputy Commander, what is a world tunnel?

It was a new concept for Orion as well.

Edward: Are you familiar with the concept of a wormhole? That is one form a world tunnel might take. It could be a tunnel, a bridge, or even a door. Two different worlds possess different dimensions of time and space. To connect them is an immense undertaking. Not even a god can do so easily.

The explanation was abstract, and it was clear the others were still confused. Leonidas, as always, voiced the question on everyone's mind.

Leonidas: Sir, what's the difference between a world tunnel and a spatial passage?

Edward: They are not on the same level of existence. A world tunnel is a natural product of two worlds intersecting. Its ultimate purpose is to merge those two worlds. A spatial passage, however, is an artificial opening, created to allow the inhabitants of two worlds to cross over. A healthy world has a protective consciousness; under normal circumstances, a spatial passage could never form. Compared to a world tunnel, a passage is fragile. An average Legendary-tier powerhouse can destroy one.

The explanation was a revelation. Orion now understood the distinction, and it connected many things for him.

Hulk: Deputy Commander, the fungal creatures... did they invade the Valkorath Realm through a world tunnel?

To this question, Edward offered only silence. Sometimes, silence was its own answer. Orion understood the unspoken rule and did not press the matter further. After setting a time to meet with Kraken, he signed off the public channel.

Moments later, a private message from Edward appeared.

"You have successfully ascended to the rank of Archlord. It is time you understood some of the deeper responsibilities of the Champions Alliance. Memorize these two names: Ogu the Two-Faced Clown, and Barbara the Hex-Witch. They are traitors to the Alliance. If you encounter them, you are to either eliminate them on sight, or immediately notify myself, Alexander, or Leonidas."

Orion's eyes narrowed. It was the most shocking piece of information he had received since joining the Alliance. Traitors? It seemed impossible.

"Deputy Commander," he typed back, "what is the strength of these two traitors?" Orion was no fool. He would not charge into battle without proper intelligence.

"They are both at the peak of the Archlord rank."

Orion drew in a sharp breath. They were on the same level as Alexander and Leonidas.

"Sir," he wrote, a wry bitterness coloring his words, "you have a very high opinion of my abilities."

"That is why your primary duty is to notify us. Eliminating traitors is our burden to bear, and we do not shirk our duties."

It was a heavy task, but with a grim sense of resignation, Orion accepted it.

Chapter 800: Scroll of the Devouring Avatar

"Do you know where these traitors are?"

"No. They have gone to ground. The Commander and I have already destroyed their primary strongholds."

"Then where am I likely to encounter them?"

"When you eventually begin your invasions of the Godforsaken Lands. With their bases destroyed and their sources of faith severed, it is the most logical place for them to try and carve out a new territory."

"Understood. I will be watchful." Orion had no love for traitors. Though he did not know the reasons for their betrayal, he knew his brothers in the Alliance well enough to be certain the fault lay with the Two-Faced Clown and the Witch. Still, to betray an organization with the power and backing of the Champions Alliance... what could they have been thinking? The thought was baffling.

"One last thing," Edward's message continued. "As an Archlord, you now have the right to recommend new members to the Alliance. The criteria remain the same: they must be of good character, and they must have attained the Legendary tier."

A new permission unlocked in Orion's mind. Then, Edward sent one final sentence, one that gave Orion much to ponder.

"In most cases, talent that you cultivate yourself is more trustworthy."

It was both a suggestion and a warning. Orion understood perfectly. He and Kraken had been personally mentored by Arthas and Leonidas.

"I understand, Deputy Commander. You have my word. I will not bring anyone unreliable into our circle."

After sending the promise, Orion let out a long breath. The greater the power, the higher the station, the more one was exposed to the deep and complex secrets of the world. And the heavier the responsibilities one had to bear. The matter of hunting traitors... as a Legendary Lord, he wouldn't have even been qualified to know of it.

He refocused his thoughts, turning his attention to his own list of friends.

Aerin, Julius Caesar, Scarecrow.

They were the three he knew best, the three most worthy of trust. If he were to choose a disciple, Aerin was the most suitable; her character was an open book to him, and she would be receptive to his guidance. If he were to choose a teammate, Scarecrow was the best option; a being like him was a stable, valuable resource.

There is no rush, he decided. I will observe them for now.

He opened a private channel to Aerin. It had been some time since they had last spoken; she had likely amassed a good number of treasures.

Hulk: Elf-maid! It is time for the tithe!

He sent the half-joking message and waited. Three minutes passed with no reply.

Is she not online? he wondered. Or has war broken out in her lands as well?

He sent a trade request, but again, there was no response. She was definitely away. He didn't dwell on it. The Wood Elves were a peaceful race; she was surely safe, just occupied.

He opened another channel.

Hulk: Caesar, how fares the mercenary company?

The reply was almost instant.

Julius Caesar: Boss! The Holy Sword Mercenary Corps is established and running smoothly!

Hulk: Is the equipment I sent you serving you well?

Julius Caesar: Thank you, Boss! The gear is excellent! If not for what you gave me, I likely would have perished in my last battle.

Hulk: Is there anything you need of late?

Orion sent the message, a shameless attempt to see if Caesar had acquired any new treasures he might be willing to part with.

Julius Caesar: Boss, I need a massive shipment. Standardized equipment, potions, martial techniques, adult mounts, magic scrolls.

Orion's eyes widened at the list. This was far, far more than any mere mercenary company could ever need. This meant Caesar now had an army, a faction, a domain of his own. He was raising levies.

Hulk: What are the numbers, specifically?

He didn't ask why Caesar hadn't come to him first, instead scouring the Survivor's Platform for piecemeal goods. Caesar, for his part, did not waste time, immediately sending over a detailed list.

Julius Caesar: Forty-thousand sets of standardized armor and weapons, five thousand mounts...

Orion's eyes narrowed as he read the first two lines, his mind racing.

Hulk: You have your own territory now?

He couldn't restrain his curiosity.

Julius Caesar: I won a city in a life-or-death duel not long ago, Boss. But it cost me an eye. The city itself was stripped bare before I took it. I must arm it quickly if I am to hold it.

A world of sword and sorcery,

Orion mused, his thoughts drifting. Where a man can win a city in a duel? If I were to go there, could I not conquer half a continent?

Shaking himself from his daydream, he replied.

Hulk: I have what you need. What can you offer in exchange?

What Caesar was asking for couldn't simply be bought off the market, not in standardized sets.

Julius Caesar: Boss, these are the only two special items I have left.

He immediately initiated a trade.

The first item was a special building called the Ice Phoenix Palace. The other was a scroll.

Orion accepted, examining the palace first. It was a miniature construct of flawless crystal, shimmering with a cold, inner light. The entire palace was carved from a single ten-thousand-year-old glacier in the shape of a soaring phoenix, its beauty like a painting come to life.

It was serene, silent, and brilliant. Holding it, Orion thought of Lumi, of that quiet, steadfast, passionate woman. He had yet to give her a truly worthy gift. Looking at the Ice Phoenix Palace, an idea took root.

Next was the scroll. For Caesar to offer it, it could be no common thing.

[Scroll of the Devouring Avatar]

Type: Special Skill Scroll

Quality: Hero

Inherent Skill: Spirit Devouring

Description: Devour the infant form of a living creature, seizing it as an avatar and gaining a new life through its form.

Note: The success rate is 100% if the infant is non-sentient. If the infant possesses a consciousness, the success rate is no more than 30%.

Seeing the skill, Orion felt a wave of profound satisfaction wash over him. It was as if, having grown tired and wishing for a rest, someone had just handed him a pillow.