

Titan King 801

Chapter 801: Hayden

Orion had just ascended to the rank of Archlord; avatar-related skills and techniques were exactly what he needed. And now, Caesar had handed one to him on a silver platter. The scroll was only of the Hero-tier, true, and its limitations were significant. But for Orion, at this moment, none of that mattered.

Without hesitation, he opened his own vast inventory and began to transfer the items Caesar had requested. As for the adult mounts, he sent over five thousand cave spiders, all neatly packed into a shimmering Containment Sphere he had acquired from Leonidas.

Hulk: Next time you have need, come to me directly. Do not be a stranger.

Orion suspected Caesar had been hesitant to bother him, and wanted to put that notion to rest.

Julius Caesar: Boss, I am truly grateful. If there is ever anything you need done, anything at all that you cannot attend to yourself, I swear I will see it handled.

Orion smiled and closed the channel, saying no more on the matter. In Caesar's eyes, Orion had done him a massive favor, and he had gotten the better end of the deal. But in Orion's view, that rare avatar skill was worth more than the entire shipment of goods. Then again, the value of any object was a matter of perspective. A trade that served a purpose in the present was always a good trade.

Hulk: One more thing. A gift. You might have a use for this.

Orion retrieved another item from his collection: a glass jar containing a single, disembodied eye. It was the third eye of an Alpha-level Silver-Eyed person. In the escalating skirmishes with the Silvermoon Empire, a number of such grim trophies had fallen into the hands of the allied forces. Caesar had lost an eye; perhaps this could serve as a replacement.

Unknown Realm, Sacred Sword City.

In the private meditation chamber of his palace, Julius Caesar opened his eyes. He stared at the large supply satchel and the glass jar in his hands, his mind reeling. For months, he had done nothing but train

and haunt the Survivor's Platform, trying to scrape together what he needed to secure his new city. And with a few words, Orion had provided it all.

He knew the value of what he had given in return. The Ice Phoenix Palace was useless to him, and he would never have used the avatar scroll.

As the Sword King, a man who prided himself on walking a righteous path, the dark and insidious nature of the Devouring Avatar skill was anathema to his very being. But this eye... this was a finished object, not a corrupting rite. The moral burden was far less.

He has helped me so much, Caesar thought, a wave of frustrated gratitude washing over him. I don't know how I can ever repay the debt. He shook his head. I must grow stronger. Then, perhaps, I will be of use to him.

Caesar carefully stored his new acquisitions, his resolve hardening. With these arms and armor, he was confident he could repel any foe and hold his city fast.

Meanwhile, Orion finished his business with Caesar and opened a channel to Scarecrow. It was the off-season in Scarecrow's world, a time of rest. As was their custom, they first completed a large trade of grain.

Just as Orion was about to sign off, Scarecrow initiated a new trade, gifting him a batch of magical grain and a significant number of small, golden scarecrows.

These were not the same as his friend.

[The Cursed Scarecrow]

Type: Death-Ward Artifact

Quality: Hero

Inherent Skill: This Cursed Scarecrow is an outcast from the Scarecrow race. When carried, it will absorb a single fatal blow meant for the wearer.

Evaluation: This is only a Hero-level artifact. Do not assume it can substitute for any death.

Orion held one of the small effigies, examining it closely. After a moment, he shook his head in slight disappointment. Against the transcendent power of an Archlord, this curse would offer no protection. It was only useful for those below the Legendary tier.

And yet... for his Alpha-level warriors, for the pillars of his tribes, this was an exceptionally valuable trump card. While he personally had no use for it, for his faction, it was a treasure. And judging by the quantity Scarecrow had sent, it was mass-producible.

Even with his limited social graces, Orion understood. Such a gift was not given without reason.

Hulk: This is a precious gift. I will not be polite; I accept it. We have known each other for some time now. Is there something I can help you with?

He put the question to his friend directly, ceding the initiative.

Unknown Realm, a World of Endless Snow.

In a house built entirely of straw, a lone figure stood at a window, gazing out at the sweeping white drifts. Scarecrow had been waiting for Orion to ask, but now that he had, the words caught in his throat.

The Cursed Scarecrows... they were artifacts he created from the enslaved members of his own race.

In his world, to be a low-tier scarecrow was to live a life of misery, with the constant threat of being burned for fuel or bound into a fetish. He desperately wanted to ascend to a higher rank, to escape that fate. To that end, he had spent his life forging friendships, showing kindness, hoping his good relationships would one day grant him the opportunity he needed.

He had now reached the peak of the Alpha-rank. If he could just become a Lord, some of the restrictions on his existence would be lifted. He needed a Lord's Stone.

But in his circle of acquaintances, the stones were treasures of unimaginable rarity, almost never traded or sold. The reality was cruel. Orion himself possessed many Lord's Stones, but he had never considered selling them, not even after his own ascension. For Scarecrow to find one on the open market was a near impossibility.

After a long pause, a message appeared.

Scarecrow: You can call me Hayden. Scarecrow is just a trade name.

He had decided on the truth.

Hayden: I need to acquire a Lord's Stone. I will pay any price you ask, if it is within my power.

His words were direct and sincere. He knew this wasn't a negotiation. It was a plea, both blunt and deferential. Only now, when he needed one so desperately, did he truly understand how precious a Lord's Stone was.

Stoneheart City, upon the Throne.

"Hayden," Orion murmured, slightly surprised that his reclusive friend had offered his true name. He could feel the sincerity in the message, the raw desperation for the Lord's Stone. He knew the truth of it. For those without a powerful patron, a Lord's Stone was more than just a barrier. It was a chasm, wide as the sky.

Chapter 802: A Demon is at Work

In all his campaigns, from the northern wastes to the southern shores, from the Godforsaken Lands to the worlds beyond, Orion had seen only one man, Blademaster Grommash, forge a Lord's Stone through sheer force of will and talent.

He had seen no other. He knew just how difficult it was to obtain one without the backing of a great power. Even for Awakened survivors like Caesar and Aerin, the path to the Legendary tier was all but impassable without a patron to lend a hand.

After a long moment of consideration, just as Hayden was about to succumb to despair, Orion initiated a trade.

Hulk: Since you consider me a friend, then let this Lord's Stone be my gift in return for yours.

To give it freely—that was Orion's decision. On the one hand, he wanted to deepen his friendship with Hayden, and to give something of value to a friend was only natural.

On the other hand, he coveted Hayden's ability to produce endless grain, and the food stores of his entire world. He wanted to change the nature of their cooperation, and this was the way.

"This..." Seeing the Lord's Stone in the trade window, Hayden accepted it on pure instinct.

Hulk: If you feel you owe me, then let us change our arrangement. From now on, all the grain you produce, and all artifacts like the Cursed Scarecrows... I will buy them all. The price will be the market standard. You have to sell to someone. Is it not better to sell to a true friend?

The offer was more than fair. And through the ordeal of trying to acquire a Lord's Stone, Hayden had learned the difference between a true friend and a hundred drinking buddies. He knew, with bitter certainty, that without a shared baptism of fire, without a common interest, friendship was a hollow word.

In the small straw house, as the snow fell ever thicker outside, Hayden clutched the stone that made his own non-existent heart pound with a fierce, joyful rhythm.

Hayden: Done. We will cooperate as you say.

With the Lord's Stone in hand, he did not hesitate. The past weeks of begging and pleading had shown him the true nature of the world. Since Orion was the one who could produce such a treasure, he was a friend worth more than all the others combined.

Hulk: Then it is a pleasure doing business. The old rules apply. If I am not online, send it through a delayed trade.

Hayden was decisive. He opened his own inventory and transferred everything—all his grain, all his stored artifacts—in a single, massive transaction.

On this day, the grain merchant Scarecrow had officially cleared out his warehouse.

Stoneheart City, as night descended.

Orion opened his eyes, looking out over his silent fortress. He was pleased. To have secured such a vast quantity of food and so many death-ward artifacts was a great boon for the Horde.

A Legendary-tier grain merchant, he mused. I wonder what his combat prowess is like? If he is capable, I could truly consider bringing him into the Champions Alliance.

The idea took root, but he knew he needed to confirm some things first. He would have to meet Hayden in person. But there was no rush. Even with a Lord's Stone, it would take more than a day or two for his friend to ascend.

He walked out of the fortress. Stoneheart City was ablaze with light, its streets a thriving river of people, the sounds of revelry even greater than during the day.

"Daddy!"

His daughter, Elara, sensed his presence and teleported directly onto his neck.

"Are you having fun in Stoneheart City? Do you like it here?"

"It's fun! I like it very much!" she chirped. "But... it's a tiny bit less grand than my Flame Dragon Fortress."

Orion smiled, gently stroking her head. "This is your home as well now, little one. This is all the territory of our Stoneheart Horde."

The Flame Dragon Fortress was the citadel Soraya's scorpion legions had built for Elara in the Grey Mountains of the Valkorath Realm. It was her fiefdom, a place of dense elemental power with an active volcano, where the dragon egg he had gifted her still incubated in the deep heat.

"Where is Pallas?"

"Mama put him to sleep. My brother is so silly. But he's fun to play with!"

Orion just smiled and said nothing, carrying Elara toward the inner city walls to look out upon the night view of his capital. With Elara and Kaelen in the Emerald Dream Realm, he now had five children.

All of them were healthy and strong, except for Caelus, his firstborn with Violet, who was born first but would be the last to truly live.

Thinking of him, a familiar weight settled in Orion's heart. He had the Spring of Life now, but the World Fragment and the Abyssal Springhead were still out of reach.

The fragment might be obtained when the Emerald Dream Realm finally shattered, or by conquering another large Godforsaken Land. But the Abyssal Springhead... that was a thing that existed only in the deepest parts of the Abyss itself.

I am an Archlord now, he resolved. When matters in the Dream Realm are settled, it will be time to prepare for a journey into the great darkness.

Emerald Dream Realm, Marshlight Sanctuary.

While Orion's true body stood watching over his peaceful, lamplit city, a storm was brewing in another world. On this day, both Leonidas and Orion's avatar emerged from their respective palaces.

"The Silver-Eyed People are on the move," Leonidas said, his voice a low growl. "They are launching a full-scale offensive. When something seems out of place, it is because a demon is at work."

"This is... interesting," Orion's avatar replied, his own gaze fixed on the north. For some time, small skirmishes between their scouts had been commonplace, a tacitly agreed-upon way of testing each other's defenses.

But this was different. The main army of the Silver-Eyed was pushing forward, showing every intention of crossing the mountains in force. Their Archlords were also on the move.

"What are they planning?" the avatar wondered aloud. "The longer they delayed a major battle, the more time they had to prepare. This move goes against their own strategic interests."

He stood clad in his blood-red Ghostbone Armor, a grim sentinel staring into the coming storm.

"It seems they wish to begin the great war," Leonidas said, and then a wide, predatory grin split his face. He could feel the enemy advancing, and the warrior's spirit within him was awakening.

"Come, my friend. Let us go and meet these two Silver-Eyed Archlords together. Their third eyes... are you not curious to see what powerful abilities they hold?"

Chapter 803: The Deathly Summons

"Gustalon!"

Orion's voice rang out in the open air. In an instant, Gustalon's form materialized beside him.

"My Lord, your command?"

"Send word. Tell Soraya, Vexis, and Rumbold to muster their legions. The great war is about to begin."

"As you command!" Gustalon dissolved into a gust of wind and vanished.

Soon after, the call of war horns echoed across the region. Skeletons clawed their way from graveyards, and great sand scorpions burrowed up from beneath the dunes. From the skies above came the answering cries of dragons and eagles. The horde was mobilizing.

"Let's go, my friend," Orion said, a grim excitement in his voice. "I have yet to truly unleash my power as an Archlord."

He hefted his trident. "This will be a good opportunity to grow accustomed to the storm raging within me."

In response, Leonidas let out a deafening roar and transformed into his colossal dragon form. Orion leaped onto his back, and the two of them soared north toward the front lines.

As they flew, they both entered the Champions Alliance public channel. The enemy's sudden and bizarre aggression was something neither of them understood; they hoped the others might have some insight.

Leonidas: Edward, Alexander, the enemy to the north on the Dusk Continent is making a move. Is anything happening on your end?

In his haste, Leonidas had dropped all formalities.

Alexander: All is quiet in my immediate vicinity. The usual two enemy forces are keeping their watch. However, further north, two other factions have begun fighting each other. I do not know if it is related.

Alexander was the first to reply. When it came to matters of war, their usual banter was set aside.

Kraken: Bosses, something is definitely wrong. I'm sensing terrifying fluctuations in the seas off both continents. I think a major war has broken out in the deep. The power... it's definitely Archlord-level.

Following Alexander's report, Kraken added his own discovery. He had been keeping a constant watch on the deep seas and was highly sensitive to any changes within them.

But strangely, Deputy Commander Edward did not immediately respond. On matters of such gravity, he would never be silent. Unless... unless a battle of the demigods had also erupted.

The thought settled like a shroud of ice over Orion, Alexander, and Leonidas. A shared, deep sense of unease began to stir within them.

Edward: A war has begun between the demigods. My true form has been sealed within a mysterious ward. Do not be concerned. It is only a matter of time before I break free.

After a long pause, the Deputy Commander's voice finally came through, though it was clearly his storm avatar speaking.

Edward: Be careful. The situation has changed. I do not yet know why this has happened so suddenly. The native factions of the Emerald Dream Realm are the instigators. Be cautious. Proceed as you see fit.

In the skies above the Dusk Continent, Orion and Leonidas reeled from the news.

"My friend," Orion said grimly, "the enemy's intentions are not good."

The intelligence from the Deputy Commander pointed to a long-planned, sudden strike.

"To the Abyss with them!" Leonidas roared. "They are at our doorstep! We will meet them head-on! Are we to abandon the armies we have arrayed on the front line?"

That was an impossibility. After the losses to his wyvern armies, Leonidas had moved two more of his large beast armies to the front. He would not abandon his people without a fight.

Nor would Orion. The main strength of the Stoneheart Horde—the Sand Scorpion legions, the Cave Spider armies, the Skeletal Knights, the Cavalry Regiments, and the three guardian armies—they were all there, filled with his kin and his people. To abandon them was unthinkable.

This war, initiated by the Silver-Eyed People, had to be met.

"Brother," Orion said, his voice low, "prepare your true form, or an Archlord avatar, for descent. I feel a great sense of unease."

"I feel it too," Leonidas agreed.

For two Archlords to feel a sense of crisis before a battle had even begun... it could only mean one thing. This would be a fight of unimaginable difficulty.

Titanion Realm, at the World Tunnel.

A low, humming drone suddenly filled the chaotic darkness of the tunnel. It was a sound like an electromagnetic wave, a vibration that seemed to be a deathly summons. The first time the Giant King avatar heard it, even he felt a chill of terror.

"An attack! The enemy is coming!" Seadragon King Neptor's voice was sharp with alarm.

It was not the disturbance itself that panicked them, but the fact that the demigod guardian within the tunnel had sent no warning. That could only mean their own demigod had been trapped... or had already fallen.

"Let's go," Orion's avatar said, his grip tightening on his trident as he stared into the tunnel, which was now twisting like a vortex, growing increasingly unstable. "Prepare for battle."

The very space and time within the tunnel were distorting, sometimes blurring as if the passage itself were about to vanish.

"Neptor, Orion," Saint Noel commanded, his voice a steady anchor in the chaos. "Two in front, one in the rear. We guard each other's backs."

"Agreed!"

"Agreed!"

Noel's proposal was sound. Orion and Neptor were melee combatants, while Noel himself was a holy light mage, better suited for healing and support.

"By the Sacred Light, repel the unknown foe! Aegis of self, aegis of all we love!" Saint Noel intoned, his staff glowing. A shimmering, divine shield enveloped both Orion and Neptor.

"The Sacred Shield. It can withstand three blows from an Archlord."

The three warriors shared a determined glance, nodded, and stepped into the world tunnel.

Immediately, Orion felt a disorienting change. His body grew unnaturally heavy, not from gravity, but from a terrifying pressure squeezing him from all sides, a force so great it felt as if it were physically compressing his form.

But worse was to come. Their very thoughts grew confused, their spirits felt as if they were being shredded, their souls on the verge of dissolving.

The tunnel was catastrophically unstable. Orion could not fathom why the denizens of the Emerald Dream Realm would choose to invade through such a treacherous passage.

At that moment, a spike of pure danger lanced through his senses.

"Look out!"

BOOM!

The Sacred Shield, rated to withstand three Archlord-level attacks, shattered in a single, explosive instant. Orion's instincts screamed. He activated his Instant Impact, throwing himself backward a great distance into the chaotic energies of the tunnel.

Chapter 804: The Third Eye

The moment he regained his footing, Orion saw them emerge from the chaotic darkness ahead: two figures and a beast. One was a Silver-Eyed warrior, another a great mage shrouded in a white cloak, and with them, a sea monstrous. Its back was lined with jagged dorsal plates that pulsed with a malevolent, deep-sea luminescence as it rose from the churning energies of the tunnel.

ROOOOAAAARRR!

A piercing, draconic cry echoed. Seadragon King Neptor reacted instantly, his form swelling into that of a colossal seadragon. He unleashed the power of his domain, and in the space of two breaths, an elemental ocean flooded the tunnel. Tides, waves, undertows, and storms surged into being, crashing against their foes.

"By the Sacred Light, be scattered!" Saint Noel raised his staff, and his body became a font of brilliance. A world of holy light bloomed, banishing the tunnel's oppressive gloom and mist.

A battle, once begun, cannot be so easily ended by the one who started it. And Orion, having been the target of an ambush that had nearly annihilated him, would not let this go unanswered.

BOOM!

The instant he was stable, he launched himself at the nearest foe—the Silver-Eyed warrior. Orion's speed was a blur of motion, but his target was no slower. The third eye on the warrior's forehead blinked open, its gaze fixing on the charging giant.

Orion's trident, wreathed in fire and lightning, struck home.

But the Silver-Eyed one's body dissolved like a dream-bubble, vanishing without a trace. Orion knew some special art had been used to evade the blow, but its nature was a mystery. With no time to think, he activated his Ghostly Steps, weaving through the void to conceal himself. He would not remain hidden for long.

"Die!" he roared, reappearing and launching another Instant Impact, this time at the reptilian behemoth that was wrestling with King Neptor. The beast was a massive target, the easiest from which to draw blood for his rite.

Pshk!

He struck true. His trident punched through the creature's armored scales. The sea monstrous bellowed, a world-shaking roar that tore through the elemental tides, its dorsal plates flaring with a violent, blue-green light as its body arched and swelled. The concussive force threw both Orion and Neptor back.

"Sacred Pressure!" a voice thundered from behind them. "Sacred Judgment!"

It was Saint Noel. While Orion had been attacking the sea monstrous, the other two had changed targets. The Silver-Eyed warrior and the white-cloaked mage had ambushed the holy man.

Noel's Sacred Pressure erupted from him as a defensive wave, resisting the mage's binding spells, while his Sacred Judgment—an irresistible bolt of holy power—blasted the Silver-Eyed warrior. And just as before, the target dissolved into a phantasmal duplicate and vanished. Saint Noel's shouts were not just expressions of fury; they were a desperate call for help.

To turn back and hunt the elusive Silver-Eyed one was a fool's errand. So Orion changed targets again. He vanished, reappearing an instant later behind the white-cloaked mage as his Eightfold Spear Barrage materialized in the air around them.

"When light shines into darkness," the mage chanted, his voice distorted, "the darkness still exists."

Forced to abandon his assault on Noel, the mage was enveloped by shadow, his form collapsing into a perfect black sphere. Yet, paradoxically, that sphere of absolute darkness was surrounded by a halo of blindingly pure light.

Orion's trident and spears struck the halo and stopped dead, unable to advance a single inch.

"BREAK!" Orion bellowed.

They were both Archlords. In a contest of equals, he refused to believe any defense was unbreakable. His Titan Form blazed into existence, his power increasing exponentially.

Raw lightning and churning blood-energy coiled around his trident, building into a world-breaking force.

"I care not if you are darkness or light! You will shatter before me!"

His trident became a bolt of sky-punishing judgment. It struck the halo, and with no sound of cracking or breaking, it simply began to sink into the mage's defense, like a drop of ink falling onto white paper.

The sheer power of the attack was a beacon in the chaotic tunnel. The Silver-Eyed warrior, seeing his companion about to fall, abandoned his attack on Noel and flashed through the void, appearing just in front of the white-cloaked mage an instant before Orion's trident struck home.

The mage was thrown clear as the trident plunged deep into the Silver-Eyed warrior's chest. This time, the body flickered violently for a moment before dissolving, but it left behind a slick of dark blood on Orion's weapon.

Orion's face was a mask of cold fury. He glanced at the blood on his trident, and a slow, grim smile touched his lips.

I have the blood of the saurian titan and the Silver-Eyed one. Now, which shall be the sacrifice?

He activated his Ghostly Steps again, his gaze falling upon the reptilian behemoth, still locked in a desperate struggle with Neptor. The greatest variable in this fight, the greatest threat, was the elusive Silver-Eyed warrior. If not for his desperate attempt to save his friend, Orion might never have had the chance to even wound him.

"Spectre of Dragons, sleeping in endless night," Orion's voice echoed through the tunnel, cold and strange, "hear my call! Through this blood, I offer a tribute you hunger for..."

A ghostly dragon materialized behind him. It opened its spectral jaws and seized upon the hidden Silver-Eyed warrior, yanking him from the void and pinning his body, mind, and soul.

Forced from his evasive state, the warrior appeared, paralyzed and helpless.

Orion turned. His left hand became a talon. He plunged it into the warrior's face and ripped the third eye from its socket.

The Silver-Eyed one could not even scream.

Orion secured the Archlord's eye, then thrust his trident forward, plunging it into the raw, empty socket. A storm of lightning erupted. Electricity poured from the warrior's eyes, nose, and mouth.

A moment later, Orion withdrew his trident. The Ghost Dragon descended, and the body of the Silver-Eyed one was consumed, turning to dust.

An Archlord had fallen.

It had all happened so fast that the white-cloaked mage and the saurian titan had no time to react.

"TE'AIR!" the mage shrieked, a sound of pure, soul-shattering anguish. "No..."

He and Te'air had been the closest of friends, their bond forged through countless wars and endless centuries. And now, that bond had led Te'air to his doom, abandoning a tactical advantage to save the friend he could not bear to lose.

Chapter 805: The Archlords' Gambit

"Raguth, it all falls to you now!"

The Archmage in white robes roared, his hair whipping about his face in a wild frenzy. The death of his friend had ignited a fury in him, forging his grief into a terrible resolve.

"Let the Light purge the dark! Let all shadows be unmade!"

As the words left his lips, the clinging shroud of shadow that had clung to him was violently blasted away by an eruption of pure, internal luminescence. The Archmage was consumed by it, transformed into a figure of blinding radiance.

But this was no gentle, warming light; it was an oppressive, suffocating glare. A world with no shadow is a world of madness, a world of zealotry.

"By Light's artifice, a phantasm born. By Light's decree, a sanctum sworn. Whilst this flame burns, this cage shall hold."

Vwommm.

Orion heard a sound he shouldn't have been able to hear. He heard the sound of the light itself.

A blinding flash incinerated the world. Orion squeezed his eyes shut against the searing wave, as did King Neptor of the Sea-Drakes(seadragon) and Saint Noel of the Order of Man beside him.

When Orion dared to open his eyes again, the world he knew was gone. Before him loomed monstrous, reptilian behemoths, their silhouettes like that of the god-lizards from forgotten myths.

He, the Sea-Drake King, and the human Saint were trapped, caught within a new reality forged from slaughter and overwhelming light.

Without a word of consultation, the three warriors converged, their backs meeting to form the defensive triangle, their weapons facing out at the legion of shimmering beasts.

Three breaths later, the battle began anew.

The Emerald Veil, within the Ashenfang Traverse.

The lines were drawn as if by ancient treaty. Orion and Leonidas stood on one side of the clearing. Facing them were Grand Sage Merrick and Grand General Dorian of the Silvermoon Empire.

These were the two Archlords whose arrival had heralded this new, bloody Chapter. Whether they were here in their true flesh or as avatars of their power, Orion could not discern, though he wagered on the latter.

"I must admit to some curiosity," Leonidas began, a wide, mocking grin spreading across his face. "What could possibly possess you to shatter the peace? Were you not enjoying the quiet twilight of your empire?"

"We do not wait for the wolves to heal their wounds and grow stronger, only to become their prey," retorted Grand General Dorian. His voice was like stones grinding together, worn smooth by a thousand battles.

These two Silver-Eyed lords did not even bother to ask their names. Before Orion and Leonidas, they stood as embodiments of pure, unadulterated hostility. This was not a contest for territory or a squabble between rivals, as his conflict with King Neptor had been—a conflict that could be tempered, even resolved.

No, this was a war for survival. In their eyes, Orion saw the chilling, final promise of a fight to the death.

"Wolves?" Leonidas chuckled, a rasping, wicked sound. "You flatter yourselves. You mistake me for some common predator, little elf. I am a Dragon. A true Dragon!"

His laughter echoed, carrying a dark swagger that painted them both as the grand villains of this epic.

"Enough talk, brother. One for each of us!"

"Agreed," Orion said, his voice flat.

He and Leonidas broke apart, each man choosing his opponent. Orion moved towards the General, Dorian, while Leonidas stalked toward the Sage, Merrick.

A familiar, dreadful sight unfolded. The third eye on Grand Sage Merrick's forehead split open. From its depths, a silver chain of ethereal light unspooled. It was without substance, a thing of pure spirit, yet its power was absolute.

Leonidas threw up a series of shimmering defensive wards, but the silver chain permeated them as if they were mist. It plunged into Leonidas's body, snagging onto something deep within his soul, and held fast.

"If you would be so kind, join me for a private audience in my domain of nothingness," the Sage's voice echoed, devoid of inflection.

And then, both he and Leonidas vanished without a trace, their very presence scrubbed from the world.

Orion's heart went cold. A severing strike. The oldest tactic in the book.

They were hell-bent on dividing them, on killing them one by one. He never thought he'd see the same strategy he, Alexander, and the Deputy Commander had so often employed used against him with such brutal efficiency.

"Your determination is... impressive," Orion said, his gaze locked on Grand General Dorian.

The General raised his trident, its three tines gleaming as he pointed them at Orion's heart. A warrior who favored the trident. A curious coincidence.

"Thank you," Dorian said, accepting the statement as the compliment it was. "I will take that as praise. This realm was chaotic enough. Your arrival has bled it, scarred it, and brought it to its knees. Do you see it? The very earth weeps blood."

"Countless lives have been extinguished in this pointless war you have brought to our doorstep. I will kill you. I will kill all of you. And I will end this. I believe, with every fiber of my being, that we will be victorious."

Orion was almost moved. The speech nearly brought a tear to his eye. The only problem was, he knew he wasn't the villain of this story. He was simply fighting for a space for his people to exist, to prosper.

"You talk too much," Orion finally said, the words sharp with contempt. "And it all boils down to the same selfish creed: what is best for the Silver-Eyed. I guarantee, if sacrificing your entire race would bring true peace to the Emerald Veil, you would not do it. You would ask yourselves, 'What good is a world without us in it?' Am I wrong?"

He let out a short, harsh laugh.

Orion was no master of rhetoric. But sanctimonious posturing in the face of a naked struggle for power disgusted him.

And those who disgusted him, he had a simple policy for.

He would kill them.

Fwoosh!

He who strikes first, strikes best. Locking his entire being onto the General, Orion unleashed his explosive momentum, his body a blur as he shot forward.

Yet, in the face of this deadly charge, Grand General Dorian stood as immovable as a mountain.

The third eye on his forehead opened. It blazed with silver light, but no projectile, no beam of energy, erupted from it. Instead, the world itself changed.

Orion's eyes widened, a flicker of true fear finally taking root.

Slow.

Everything had gone impossibly slow.

His trident, which had been a streak of deadly lightning an instant before, now crawled through the air, inch by agonizing inch. It was caught, suspended just three inches from Dorian's chest in a localized field where time itself had been turned to sludge.

Because it was so slow, it was as if the world had been paused.

"I have never feared assassins," Dorian snarled, a cruel grin spreading across his face. He himself was unaffected by the temporal distortion he commanded. "And I have never shied from a direct confrontation. That is why I am the Grand General who guards the borders of the Silvermoon Empire."

While Orion was trapped in the time-mire, Dorian moved with fluid grace. He raised his own trident and thrust it viciously toward Orion's heart.

It was a bizarre, horrifying tableau: Orion frozen in his attack, and Dorian's counter-strike moving at normal speed within the same space. It was in that moment that Orion gained a new, profound respect for the power of the Archlords of the Silver-Eyed.

Screeeech!

The tines of Dorian's trident shrieked as they punched through the spectral plates of Orion's Ghostbone Armor. The points dug into his skin, but there, they stopped.

Beneath the surface, a layer of shimmering scales materialized, catching the tips of the trident and holding them fast.

It was the Dragonscale Leather Armor—a gift from the Commander himself, and it had just saved his life.

Chapter 806: A War of Attrition

Whoosh!

The impact sent Orion hurtling backward through the air.

Far below, on the slopes of the mountain range at the rear of the battlefield, Clymene witnessed the entire exchange.

"What power is that?" The voice of Desdemona, the succubus elder, echoed in the shared space of Clymene's mind. "It repelled even My Lord's attack! And he is an Archlord now!"

"The enemy is also an Archlord," came a second, more cautious voice. It was Vargrum. "We should not stare too long at such a terrifying being. His gaze might find us in the crowd."

"What is there to fear?" a third, bellicose voice boomed. Grendel, the most hot-tempered of the souls, scoffed. "My Lord is there! He won't let that bastard in the sky get away with it."

The battle between Archlords raging in the heavens had cast a pall of fear over the entire battlefield. The Legendary-tier champions on both sides kept their distance, none daring to even fly at low altitudes, lest they be annihilated by the collateral fury.

"The enemy Archlord is Orion's to handle," Clymene, the primary consciousness, asserted, forcing their shared body to pull its gaze away and focus on the tide of Skeletal Knights surging before them. "He is the King of Giants. We must have faith in him."

"The lady is right. The battle above is beyond our influence."

"Yes. Our task is to hunt the Silver-Eyed, to harvest more of their eyes for the Tribe."

"With those eyes, the very foundations of the Stoneheart Horde will grow deeper, stronger."

"My Lord, look ahead! The cavalry regiments are in danger! We must support them!"

Seven voices in total, speaking in rotation within one mind. Each with a different personality, a different tone, a different thought. It was the volatile but potent fusion of these seven souls that had allowed the body Clymene now controlled to ascend to the Legendary tier.

Be strong, Orion, Clymene thought, a fleeting, private prayer.

She then directed her legions of skeletal warriors forward, a tide of bone to screen the beleaguered cavalry.

High in the sky, the fight continued.

The failed assassination told Orion everything he needed to know: this opponent was trouble. Grand General Dorian was, without a doubt, the most formidable foe Orion had ever faced at a comparable level of power.

His ability was a near-perfect counter to Orion's fighting style—and to almost any warrior who relied on close-quarters combat.

Was it a time stop? he wondered, his mind racing. No, not quite. I could feel the trident still moving, just... crawling.

A wave of pure fighting spirit flared to life around him, forming a psychic aegis. His Battle Will. He should have activated it sooner; that lapse had nearly allowed Dorian to bypass his defenses entirely.

With the immediate threat mitigated, Orion switched tactics. A storm of phantom tridents, the Eightfold Spear (Trident) Barrage, erupted into being, swarming Dorian and trapping him in a vortex of attacks.

It looked as if Orion had seized the offensive, but he knew the truth. He was the one on the back foot.

If a direct charge was impossible, he would have to fight from a distance. Fortunately, his skill with a thrown trident was second to none. By combining that with the suppressive fire of the Barrage, he was confident he could force a stalemate.

The plan was simple. If he couldn't kill the Silver-Eyed General quickly, he would drag out the fight. He would wait for Leonidas to deal with the other Archlord. Surely, Leonidas would have a solution.

It wasn't that Orion was without options. He had trump cards—the Rite of Blood Sacrifice, the Forbidden Curse Scroll—both of them killer moves of the highest order. But this wasn't the moment to reveal his hand.

Perhaps when Leonidas returned, he would have a simpler, more elegant way to kill their foe.

Orion had that much faith in Leonidas. After all, that wily bastard had been a peak Archlord for years; the number of tricks hidden up his sleeve had to be staggering.

On the blood-soaked earth below, the allied forces and the army of the Silvermoon Empire had fully collided.

The Legendary champions on both sides exercised restraint, holding back from direct engagement and instead commanding their troops in a brutal war of attrition. Every lord, every commander, was waiting. They were all watching the sky, waiting for the Archlords to determine the course of the war. Their victory or defeat was paramount.

The armies of the Silvermoon Empire were terrifyingly effective. It wasn't just their third-eye abilities; their equipment was of a superior make, and their discipline was ironclad.

Ranks of their cavalry, after weathering volley after volley from massive ballistae, would charge forth, systematically smashing through the front lines of skeleton soldiers.

They never overextended. The moment they gained an advantage, they would wheel about and retreat, a disciplined, intelligent, and deadly fighting force.

"Ugh, those cavalrymen are so slippery!" Spider Queen Lorelia clenched her fists, glaring at the retreating riders with undisguised fury. "Don't let me get my hands on them, or I'll grind their bones to dust."

She had been directing her swarms of smaller spiders, hidden amongst the skeletons, to lay traps of web and silk. It was a wasted effort. The enemy was too sharp, pulling back before the traps could be sprung. Only the occasional unlucky rider, whose mount stumbled or panicked, became a target for Lorelia's wrath.

"Pull your children back, Lorelia," Soraya said with a gentle smile. She and Vexis flanked the Spider Queen, a protective cordon around her.

Over their time together, Lorelia had managed to earn the affection and trust of these twin engines of the ground war. "I've already buried a portion of my small scorpions in the earth. The next time they charge, they will not find it so easy to leave."

"Fine, Soraya," Lorelia pouted. "You have to catch them. Avenge our skeleton warriors for me. Vexis worked so hard to summon those beloved little toys, it's a shame to see them broken."

Vexis merely glanced at Lorelia, saying nothing.

With Soraya taking over the bulk of command, Lorelia found herself free to gaze up at the celestial battlefield. The sky was filled with suspended, blood-red tridents, and the constant boom of distant explosions signaled the ferocity of the duel.

"Aah, poor, poor Lorelia!" she sighed dramatically. "The Master has already ascended to become an Archlord, a being for all to look up to. And what am I? Still stuck at the peak of the Alpha tier. It's simply unbearable!"

Her faith in her master wasn't just confidence; it was a burning, fanatic devotion. The possibility of Orion being defeated was a concept that her mind could not even formulate. In her eyes, Orion was the strongest, mightier even than a god.

"Lady Soraya, can you teach me your secrets for advancing to the Lord level?" Lorelia asked, her tone shifting to one of earnest pleading. "I truly want to advance. I want to be of use to the Master, and to both of you."

Soraya offered a wry, helpless smile. To be honest, she wasn't entirely sure how she had broken through herself.

She just remembered a day when Orion had suddenly appeared and stuffed her hands with an endless stream of arcane resources. At one point, she'd had three distinct Essences of Legendary Souls in her possession at once, free to study and absorb their truths at her leisure.

Chapter 807: A Broken Dragon

Soraya knew, even then, that it wasn't just Orion watching her. An entire host of allied lords and Archlords had their gazes fixed upon her, waiting.

Back then, all she could think about was breaking through, about not squandering the resources, not failing Orion's trust, and not disappointing the esteemed patrons of the allied forces. Under that colossal pressure, the cocoon around her soul had finally shattered.

Now, with Lorelia asking her for the secret to that transformation, Soraya was genuinely at a loss for words.

"Your Lord's Stone was a gift from Lord Orion. The resources came to you too easily. Deep down, you do not know how to cherish them, how to seize a true opportunity."

Soraya couldn't find the words to teach, but Vexis, the lich who stood beside them, had no such difficulty.

"You live a life of comfort, sheltered under our protection. You are timid, content to scheme from the shadows," Vexis's voice cut through the air, sharp and cold as ice. After fighting alongside Lorelia for so long, she had come to understand the Spider Queen's nature completely.

And because a bond of sisterhood had formed between them in the crucible of war, she did not hold back.

"You wish to advance? The path is simple. Shatter these shackles, and you will become a Lord."

"Lady Vexis... I think you may be right," Lorelia said, taking the harsh words to heart. Then, a sly grin spread across her face. "But I have discovered something strange. You used to refer to the Master as 'Lord.' Now, you call him 'My Lord.'"

She leaned in close to Vexis, tilting her head up. Her scarlet eyes, which could be so terrifying, now held a disarming glimmer of playful curiosity.

"You have not yet reached the Lord-tier," Vexis stated, her voice taking on a flat, mechanical tone. "You cannot comprehend the gulf between a Alpha and a Lord, let alone an Archlord."

"You must remember this, little Lorelia: every Archlord is a being of absolute terror. With a flick of their wrist, they could turn us to ash. Not just you. Me and Soraya as well."

The words were so devoid of emotion that they made Lorelia feel, for the first time, as small and fragile as an ant.

"To not know true fear," Soraya murmured with a sigh, "is sometimes a form of bliss."

Orion's ascension to Archlord was a blessing for his subordinates, a shield against their enemies. But for the women in his life, it was a source of immense pressure. Soraya felt a deep uncertainty in her heart, wondering if she would truly be able to walk beside him to the very end.

At least I am not the one under the most strain, she thought, a grim consolation. The pressure on those succubus sisters must be a thousand times greater than my own.

She felt a subtle shift in the air between herself and Vexis. In the past, knowing that the lich served a terrifying peak Archlord, Soraya had always been cautious, wary of causing any trouble for Orion. But now, things were different.

Now that her lord and lover stood among the Archlords, Soraya felt her spine straighten, an unconscious assertion of newfound equality.

In the sky above, watched by countless lords, Orion was making no progress.

The storm of phantom tridents he unleashed was relentless, yet each one halted inches from Grand General Dorian's body, caught in the temporal mire before being contemptuously swept aside.

"It's useless," Dorian's voice boomed, amplified to carry across the entire battlefield. "You cannot wait for reinforcements. Your partner, I assure you, is in a far more desperate state than you are now!"

The General was deeply frustrated. Since Orion had discovered his near-invincibility in close combat, the giant had refused to engage him directly. Worse, this unending barrage of tridents, while unable to harm him, was infuriating. It created the public perception that he, Dorian, was on the defensive.

He had no ability to close the distance in an instant, leaving him to passively endure the assault. If his own troops began to believe he was losing, it would be a blow to their morale. His taunt was a calculated gambit to control the narrative.

"You are far too confident!" Orion's reply thundered back, equally loud and clear. "While I may not be able to crack your turtle shell at this moment, that does not mean it cannot be broken. My partner is stronger than you can possibly imagine."

He let his own forces know, with unwavering conviction, that this was merely a stalemate, a mutual checkmate. There was no need to worry.

"Rather than play these word games," Orion continued, his tone shifting, "I am more curious as to why you Silver-Eyed launched this war so suddenly. We have reached this point; surely you wouldn't mind indulging my curiosity?"

The situation was deadlocked. Orion hoped to pry some useful intelligence from the General. To this day, neither he nor Leonidas knew what had plunged them into this realm-spanning, seemingly baseless war.

But Dorian was a veteran of a hundred campaigns. He saw the linguistic trap and the intent behind it instantly.

"You want to know?" He let out a booming, cathartic laugh filled with all the pent-up hatred of a general who had watched his people die in wave after wave of senseless conflict. "I will not tell you! I want you to die in ignorance and fear! HAHAAAAHA!"

"We are the Eye-Race!" he roared, spurning the outsider name. "And you will not defile our world any longer!"

"You will not be laughing for long," Orion's voice dropped, becoming flat and cold with deadly promise. "When you and your partner lie dead at my feet, I will personally lead my armies across the mountains."

"I will slaughter every man of your race. I will take your women and children as plunder, spoils for my soldiers to enjoy."

"We will erase your people. We will make your women breeding tools for new generations of warriors."

"I will seize your technology, burn your histories, and shatter your heritage, until not a single trace of the Silver-Eyed remains in this realm or any other. Your entire race will become a forgotten speck of dust in the annals of history."

It was a vile threat, a string of words crafted with surgical precision to enrage Grand General Dorian. When faced with the promise of total genocide, Orion believed, even the most disciplined mind would crack.

"You think you can do that?" Dorian bellowed, his voice trembling not just with rage, but with a strange, ecstatic excitement. "The ones who die will be YOU! IT WILL BE YOU!"

BOOM!

As if summoned by his furious cry, a cataclysmic rupture tore through the sky at the very spot where Leonidas and the Sage had vanished.

A transparent, crystalline tesseract materialized with the sound of collapsing space.

And inside it, a figure was suspended.

It was Leonidas.

His dragon wings were shattered, his four mighty claws severed from his limbs. All that remained to shield his broken body was the tattered half of his tail.

Chapter 808: The Void Dragon's Debut

Orion had never seen Leonidas in such a wretched state.

"You damned mongrel... you hurt me!"

"Son of a bitch! I'll see you in the Abyss before I let you have an easy death!"

"You want to play? Fine! I'll play with you until the bitter end!"

Orion maintained his assault on Grand General Dorian, but a part of his focus was locked on the Leonidas.

He could hear every curse Leonidas spat, and within them, he sensed a hysterical agony, a madness born from unbearable pain.

"A mere broken vessel... to hell with it!" Leonidas roared, his voice cracking. "By my true name, Alaron Kassadin, I offer this flesh! I sacrifice this avatar for the power of unending rupture! For me, BREAK! BREAK! BREAK!"

Inside the tesseract, Leonidas's body became a canvas of blood-red runes. They glowed, searing themselves into his flesh like a master artisan's tools, carving his very being into a living bomb—a dragon-shaped magical warhead.

A light that eclipsed the sun bloomed into existence.

In that instant, every champion watching felt their vision bleach into pure, searing white. The most terrifying explosions are the ones you cannot hear. There was no sound, only an oppressive, scorching radiance that washed over the heavens.

Only after the light subsided did the sound finally reach Orion, a low, keening thrum—the dying echo of an apocalypse.

A terrifying wave of pure energy radiated outward, shattering space itself. The crystalline tesseract disintegrated into glittering dust.

Leonidas's dragon avatar, after a final, defiant roar of pain, had chosen to self-destruct.

It was an end Orion had never imagined.

Just then, a figure tumbled out of a rip in the void nearby. Its life force was a flickering ember, its form that of the Silver-Eyed Grand Sage, Merrick. He was in a state of near-death, his third eye clamped shut.

"KILL HIM!"

There was no time for grief. Leonidas had bought him this chance. Orion launched himself forward, a bolt of pure vengeance aimed at the dying Sage.

"Grand Sage!" Dorian cried out, his face a mask of joy at seeing his comrade alive. But that joy turned to sheer terror as he saw Orion's killing charge.

In that critical, heart-stopping moment, Dorian made his choice. His third eye blazed, its focus shifting from himself to the distant figure of Merrick. His pupil spun at an impossible speed, projecting a shimmering field of slowed time around the fallen Sage.

It was a move of incredible risk. In doing it, Dorian had transferred his own impregnable defense, leaving himself exposed, his own defenses critically weakened.

Tragically, Orion didn't notice.

His world slowed once more. The trident he thrust forward, a blur of righteous fury, was caught again in that temporal mire, frozen as if in amber.

Rage. Helplessness. A bitter, choking despair. Negative emotions flooded Orion's heart.

Leonidas's sacrifice... was it all for nothing?

As disappointment washed over him, he knew that if this attack failed, if Merrick had a moment to recover, he would be the one trapped in a battle for his life.

"Brother, I do believe that is my prey."

Suddenly, a voice echoed in the void. It was a voice he didn't recognize, but the tone—that arrogant, swaggering cadence—was achingly familiar.

"Keep playing. Let's see how you play now."

A silvery-gray dragon, perhaps thirty feet long, materialized from the void directly behind the helpless Grand Sage. Its form was sleek, ethereal, its scales shimmering with the light of distant stars. It was a Void Dragon, and with a snap of its jaws, it swallowed Merrick whole.

"Spatial lock!" Grand General Dorian shrieked, realizing with horror that Leonidas had somehow bypassed the temporal ward entirely.

"Brother?"

The time-slowing effect vanished. Orion stood before the Void Dragon, his mind reeling.

"Hahahaha! Impressive, isn't it? Dashing, even," the dragon's voice boomed with laughter. It shimmered, its form collapsing inward until it reformed into a man.

"You didn't really think your brother only had that one, single fire dragon avatar, did you?"

"This is my Void Dragon form. I only finished refining it recently. An Archlord, isn't it? Pretty damn cool, eh? Perfect for showing off."

Leonidas stood before him, completely human in shape, though a good head shorter than Orion. This new avatar was clearly that of an Archlord, and a powerful mid-tier one at that.

"This one's a little... chewy," Leonidas said, letting out a loud burp and rubbing his slightly distended stomach. He had devoured the Grand Sage in a single bite, and the Archlord was now putting up a final, futile struggle within his personal digestive dimension. "Well, that old bastard was an Archlord, after all. A bit rich for my blood. I'll need a moment to digest."

Orion didn't reply. He turned his gaze back to Grand General Dorian.

"Brother, this one's third eye. It slows time, stops any attack that gets near him. I can't break through." He kept his focus locked on Dorian while explaining the General's ability.

"Time-slowing?" Leonidas mused. "Ah... no wonder that old goat is giving me indigestion." He looked up, and his new, slate-gray eyes fixed on Dorian, projecting an immense, suffocating pressure.

"You... you swallowed the Grand Sage?" Dorian stammered, his voice a mixture of fury and raw terror. "You actually swallowed him? No! Spit him out! Let the Grand Sage go!"

In his panicked mind, a desperate plan formed: if he could kill Leonidas now, quickly, perhaps Merrick could still be saved. He raised his trident and, with a roar of desperation, charged. He had not lost his mind entirely; he re-established the time-slowness field around his own body first.

"You started this war, but now you're angry that someone got eaten?" Leonidas sneered, his face hardening as he analyzed the temporal ward around Dorian. "Can't afford to play, or just can't afford to lose? Did you think a fight with us was some kind of children's tea party?"

Suddenly, his voice sharpened. "Brother. Attack. Don't think about anything else."

Orion didn't question it. He unleashed his momentum, his form vanishing in a blur.

"Don't worry," Leonidas said, a cruel smirk twisting his lips as he looked at the charging Dorian. "Your turn is next."

A complex, mysterious rune—one of Orion's own design—flared to life on Leonidas's bare chest. It pulsed with an arcane light, but Leonidas himself remained perfectly still.

Across the battlefield, Orion didn't hesitate. He thrust his trident, channeling into it an overwhelming torrent of lightning and blood-red energy.

There was no sound of impact.

The instant the trident touched Grand General Dorian, a portion of his avatar's body was not pierced, but simply... carbonized. Then, it was annihilated.

Orion didn't know what Leonidas had done, but he knew his attack had worked. All the frustration, the helplessness, the suffocating pressure of the battle erupted in that single moment. A savage grin spread across Orion's face as he lunged forward, thrusting out his gauntleted left hand.

Before the Grand General's terrified and disbelieving eyes, Orion's claws plunged into his forehead and ripped his third eye from its socket.

The eye that could command the flow of time, the eye Orion had coveted from the start of the fight, was his.

"Aaaargh!"

With a final, agonizing scream, Grand General Dorian's avatar dissolved into motes of light and died. But as his essence dissipated into the void, it left behind no spoils of war, no soul-crystal to mark his fall.

Chapter 809: The Skeleton King Returns

"These bastards," Leonidas growled, materializing at Orion's side. "When they get serious, they're even worse than the dark races we've fought before."

He didn't elaborate on what had transpired within the crystalline prison, but he didn't need to. Orion understood. For Leonidas to be forced to sacrifice an avatar... he must have been pushed to the absolute brink, with no other recourse.

"Brother, what do we do with the ones down below?"

On the battlefield carved into the mountainside, countless soldiers of the Silver-Eyed army remained. In the eyes of Orion and Leonidas, they were no longer an army, but spoils of war. A cake to be carved and distributed.

"Simple," Leonidas said, his voice devoid of pity. "Enslave any who willingly surrender. For those who resist, kill them, take their eyes, and we'll bestow them upon the allied forces as rewards for their service. After that, we sweep across the northern continent."

In his worldview, mercy toward an enemy was a fatal flaw. This war, a war the Silver-Eyed had started, had cost him an avatar. It was more than just a loss; it was a wound to his pride. To have his dignity so thoroughly trampled in front of his own student was something Leonidas could not accept. A humiliation of this magnitude could only be paid for in blood.

"Are all invaders so direct, so cruel, so brazen in their convictions?"

A new voice spoke, seeming to come from everywhere and nowhere at once. It was not a voice of anger, but of cold, supreme judgment.

"To openly manufacture such slaughter, to revel in such sin... it seems you cannot be allowed to remain."

Orion's senses reeled. He felt a sudden auditory hallucination—the distinct tick-tock of a clock's second hand in a silent room. In the face of such an anomaly, he felt a primal dread grip his soul.

A pillar of incandescent light descended from the highest point of the heavens, engulfing both Orion and Leonidas. Within its radiance, their movements turned to sludge, their very consciousnesses rattling in their skulls. They were pinned, immobilized by a power far beyond their own.

A phantom projection of a demigod coalesced within the light. He glanced down at the battlefield of the Ashenfang Traverse, and with that single look, the entire war ground to a halt. Every combatant froze, not bound by a spell, but stunned into submission by a terrifying, overwhelming presence.

The weakest among them collapsed, their minds lost in horrifying illusions of their own insignificance.

The demigod appeared as a young man, bearing the signature silver hair and silver eyes of his people, but his forehead was smooth, lacking the third eye of his lesser kin. He stepped forward, his posture radiating a serene elegance, his stride unshakably firm. With every step he took, the pressure crushing Orion and Leonidas intensified.

"The... cage... is closing... old friend..." Leonidas forced the words out, each one a monumental effort. It was their code, the signal they had long ago agreed upon to summon their true forms for a battle of last resort.

The demigod's pace was deliberate. With each footfall, his aura swelled, and a crushing wave of intent washed over the two Archlords—a will that demanded they fall to their knees in reverence. His eyes were clear, as tranquil as a mountain lake, yet they seemed to pierce through the veil of the world.

He wore a simple white robe, his expression one of placid dignity, but beneath that magnificent facade, Orion saw only ice-cold killing intent.

On the battlefield below, the soldiers of the Silver-Eyed army prostrated themselves upon the ground, their voices rising in a chorus of reverent praise.

"The Divine Lord descends to grant his aegis!"

"The Divine Lord descends to grant his aegis!"

"Divine Lord" was their most hallowed title, reserved only for their demigod protectors. His arrival, they believed, was a sign that the war would end, that hope had been restored.

The phantom smiled, as if listening to the prayers of his devoted children. In the reflection of his eyes, Orion saw a chilling vision: countless figures kneeling before the demigod, submitting to be commanded, to be trampled.

Faith energy. The demigod was actively gathering the belief of his followers, using it to strengthen this projection.

"The old gods are sealed," the demigod announced, his voice calm and absolute. "You have no one to call upon. All your struggles are in vain. Surrender to me. Swear your faith to me. Seal it with a soul oath, and you may live."

He stood a short distance away, studying them. His gaze lingered on Leonidas, who could no longer maintain his human shape under the immense pressure and had reverted to his Void Dragon form.

The demigod recognized the creature for what it was—a being of a higher order than even the colossal dragons, a rare and special race among dragonkind, a lineage of the highest order. To gain the fealty of a Void Dragon would be an immeasurable boon.

"Hahaha... Surrender? Faith?" Leonidas roared in defiance. "To you? Are you even worthy? It is nothing more than a powerful will projection. You think I haven't seen your kind before?"

He was a cornered beast, but his spirit was unbroken. Once his true form arrived, the outcome of this battle was far from certain.

But as Leonidas roared, Orion made a decision. He exhaled slowly and chose not to begin the summons. Instead, he would use his own ultimate gambit. Blood Sacrifice. The rite that offered a fifty-percent chance of killing an enemy one tier higher than himself.

He wanted to see if the skill's power had grown or been constrained since his own ascension to Archlord. Besides, summoning his true form might not be as effective as this single, all-or-nothing blow. And if it failed... Leonidas would be his safety net. Surely his brother's full power could annihilate a demigod's projection, especially a damaged one.

"I truly despise enemies like you," Orion said, his voice a low growl, his eyes beginning to glow with a predatory, blood-red light. "Standing in the clouds, looking down on me as if from on high. Do you really think we become ants just because you view us as such?"

He would attempt a feat of legends: to slay the will of a demigod while still an Archlord. The killing intent and grim determination coalesced around him, his power beginning to climb, point by agonizing point. At Leonidas's feet, a shimmering ripple that even the demigod's power could not suppress began to spread. The summoning of his true body had begun.

...

"Leonidas. I haven't seen you fight this desperately in many years."

Another voice, this one achingly familiar, cut through the tension. A wave of palpable death energy, black and chilling, rolled forth, blotting out the demigod's holy light. The pressure vanished.

"Arthas!"

"Brother!"

Orion and Leonidas cried out in unison, their voices filled with shock and unadulterated joy.

Zing!

The sound of a sword being drawn. A simple, unadorned sword carved from white bone tore a rift in the fabric of the void, slicing through the light and carving a gateway before them. The heavy tread of armored boots echoed from the other side, a sound that made even the demigod pause his advance and watch.

Then, from the gate of shadow and bone, the Skeleton King, Arthas, emerged.

He was clad in bone armor that was both familiar and strangely new, wreathed in a clinging, inescapable aura of death—at once alien and profound.

"Wahahaha! You bastard, you're finally awake!" Leonidas instantly canceled the summoning ritual. He zipped over to Arthas's side, eagerly circling his old friend, who now radiated the unmistakable power of a demigod.

"Leonidas," Arthas said, his voice a dry rasp. He glanced at the Void Dragon. "You still haven't improved much."

Then his gaze fell upon Orion. "Very good. Very impressive."

The furious power Orion had been building, the half-recited words of his sacrificial rite, all of it vanished in an instant, replaced by overwhelming relief.

"Brother," Orion breathed, a grin spreading across his face. "Your timing couldn't be more perfect."

Chapter 810: The Ultimate Sacrifice

With a sigh, Orion moved to Leonidas's side, and together, they stood behind Arthas like disciplined soldiers.

A cold light flickered in Arthas's eyes, a light that seemed capable of freezing the very soul. He reached out and gripped his greatsword of bone. The runes etched upon it flared, and a ball of ghostly green fire ignited along the blade, lending his already formidable presence a deeply sinister air.

"You. Die."

Arthas spoke the words calmly, but his voice carried the crushing weight of a thousand crypts. In that moment, Orion could almost hear the whispers and howls of countless undead spirits swirling around their king, an aura of infinite dread and darkness made manifest.

The sky above them filled with spectral, phantasmal shapes, all bowing in silent homage to the Skeleton King.

On the mountain battlefield below, the Silver-Eyed soldiers, who moments before had been prostrate in pious prayer, now began to tremble uncontrollably, as if they were witnessing a horror beyond their comprehension.

The arrival of Arthas, this newly ascended demigod, was like the coming of a fatal plague—a plague against which they had no defense, and from which there was no escape.

Arthas swung his blade.

A river of black light, so absolute it seemed to devour the very concept of color, shot forth. The demigod phantom, the same being that had effortlessly imprisoned Orion and Leonidas, was simply erased, vanishing into nothingness within the black sword-light.

The pillar of holy radiance that had descended from the heavens was instantly extinguished.

Such was a casual blow from a true demigod. A mere projection was a thing he could snuff out with a wave of his hand.

Orion and Leonidas exchanged a look, their eyes filled with a mixture of astonishment and a bitter, shared understanding.

Orion could accept it; he was a newly minted Archlord, with a long road ahead before he could even dream of demigod status. But in Leonidas's eyes, Orion saw a distinct, painful sourness.

"Bloody hells," the dragon muttered under his breath. "The gap just keeps getting wider."

But after dispatching the phantom, Arthas did not relax. He lifted his gaze to the heavens, as if he could feel something there, watching him.

"Come, if you have the courage."

A tremor ran through Arthas's body. With a groan of shifting bone, his armor transformed, locking into a combat configuration. A dense web of golden runes blazed to life across its surface, flowing down his right arm and into his greatsword, where they coalesced into a single, mysterious golden sigil.

He swung his sword again. Two beams of light, one of gold and one of black, shot upward like twin dragons, streaking toward the heavens to deliver their judgment. A few moments later, a faint, tearing sound, like immense canvases being ripped apart, echoed from the sky.

Three minutes later, the heavens were calm once more. All was as it had been.

Arthas stood in the void, flanked by Orion and Leonidas. The three of them looked down upon the battlefield like gods. With just two swings of his sword, Arthas had completely reversed their fortunes.

"Arthas, when did you awaken?" Leonidas asked, his tone shifting from awe to urgency. "And the Deputy Commander—he's trapped within a sealing formation. Can you do anything to help him?"

"I have already communicated with the Deputy Commander," Arthas's dry voice replied. "He is unharmed. Merely contained. Their intention was only to restrict our key players, not to initiate open war."

Orion's ears pricked up. Arthas had said our key players, plural. It was clear the natives of the Emerald Veil had targeted more than just the Deputy Commander.

"Hahahaha! Well, now that you're here, it's just like the old days!" Leonidas boomed, his good cheer returning. "You take command. We'll all listen to you. You say jump, we ask how high."

With a demigod like Arthas leading them, the allied forces had never been in a stronger position.

But just then, the world changed.

In an instant, the Emerald Veil was plunged into absolute, perfect darkness. The sun, the moons, the stars—all vanished. Any source of light was extinguished. Even creatures that were naturally bioluminescent found their glow smothered, unable to penetrate the oppressive, ink-black shroud.

"Arthas, what's happening?"

"Brother!"

Orion and Leonidas both cried out, their voices sharp with alarm as they turned to their friend for answers.

"Stay behind me. Do not move." Arthas's voice was a steady anchor in the sudden chaos. "I do not know what this is. It feels as if the very rules of this realm are changing."

He waved his greatsword, and its ghostly green fire flared to life, pushing back the oppressive dark and casting the Ashenfang Traverse in its eerie, verdant glow.

"Annihilate them," Arthas commanded.

As if his words were a divine edict, the legions of undead on the mountain below roared as one. The stalled battle erupted anew, a fresh wave of slaughter unleashed in the sudden, terrifying night.

Orion and Leonidas asked no further questions. For Arthas to act so decisively, he must have seen or sensed something they could not.

In an unknown space within the Emerald Veil.

Here was the Source of All Things, the very heart of the world. At this moment, the world's core pulsed within a defensive barrier of absolute light, a fortress against which the encroaching, infinite darkness could not prevail.

"What do you think you are doing?" an ancient, evil voice echoed from the dark. It had no source, no form, no location.

"What am I doing?" A majestic, unyielding voice answered from within the light. "Can you not see?"

"I intend to give the Emerald Veil hope. I intend to shatter your mad dream of devouring everything. I will bring light to the darkness, and grant this world a new birth."

If Orion had been there, he would have recognized the voice as that of the demigod Valthor. The voice from the darkness belonged to his eternal enemy, the fell demigod, Tusha.

"It is useless," Tusha's voice was not filled with evil glee or insane rage, but with the calm, unassailable confidence of one who holds a winning hand. "Darkness will inevitably consume this world. The seeds of evil have already sprouted everywhere. This world's fate is to be destroyed."

"No. You are wrong," Valthor declared from within his sanctuary of light, and the light flared, pushing the darkness back once more. "I will become the light of this world."

"I burn my body!"

"I sacrifice my soul!"

"I merge my will!"

"With faith as the medium, and spirit as the guide, I shall become one with this world! Fuse!"

Valthor's fearless, defiant invocation thundered through the void. And in that moment, the evil demigod Tusha finally understood.

"You are insane!" Tusha shrieked, his composure finally shattering. "You would sacrifice yourself? Merge your own being into the fundamental rules of the world, all to empower those insignificant mortals? Your consciousness will be obliterated! You gain nothing from this! Don't you understand that?"

Tusha was panicking.

When Orion had taken the Spring of Life from this realm, he had inadvertently created a deficiency in its fundamental rules. Valthor, in his desperation, had seized upon this flaw. He had devised a plan to save the Emerald Veil through the ultimate sacrifice—a plan Tusha had never, ever conceived of.