

Titan King 811

Chapter 811: A grand gesture

In Tusha's experience, a demigod without selfishness simply did not exist. Every action, every word, was a coin spent in the currency of self-interest. He had witnessed countless beings wrap themselves in the banner of light, only to use it as a tool for their own avaricious ends. He himself was no different. Not even the gods were.

"Tusha, you will never understand," Valthor's voice resonated, no longer from a single point, but from the very air itself. "This is my home. This is the world that gave me life. It is the world where my family, my people, still dwell. As long as I draw breath, the Emerald Veil will not fall to ruin."

His voice grew stronger, more passionate, for he could feel the fusion nearing its completion.

"Tusha! Light and darkness, in opposition and fusion, in dependence and complement—the rules are about to be made whole! You have not won... and I have not lost! Hahahaha..."

Valthor's voice grew fainter and fainter, dissipating like smoke on the wind.

And the Emerald Veil was reborn.

The absolute darkness that had smothered the world suddenly receded. In its place was a world of pure, brilliant light. The sun, moons, and stars shone with an impossible clarity. Every living creature touched by the rules of the realm began to emit its own gentle luminescence.

Even Orion and Leonidas found their bodies glowing with a soft, inner radiance.

Only Arthas remained untouched, shrouded in his mantle of ghostly green fire, the new law unable to approach him.

"Light and darkness, good and evil... they still stand in opposition," Arthas mused, watching the change. "But now... they permeate one another. They can merge. The darkness still exists, but the light can now drive it back."

He sheathed his sword, and the green fire around him died down.

"Arthas, spare me the high-sounding philosophical nonsense that doesn't mean a damn thing," Leonidas's gruff, impatient voice cut through the air, shattering the pensive moment. "Just tell me what in the hells just happened."

Arthas turned, about to speak, but the world changed yet again.

Light and darkness began to pulse, like the inhale and exhale of a sleeping god. The world was no longer purely one or the other; it grew blurry, dim, indistinct.

A mist began to form, a roiling fog of an indescribable color that was nevertheless visible to the naked eye. It enveloped everything.

Within this mist, all opposites—light and dark, water and fire, truth and lies, right and wrong—seemed to war with each other, to merge with each other, to become dependent on one another. The rules had changed. Light and darkness were no longer absolutes; they could now transform into one another, be born from one another.

Every living being bathed in the mist felt a fundamental shift within their bodies. A new path of evolution had opened to them.

Valthor had succeeded.

From this moment forward, every creature in the Emerald Veil was granted a choice. The corrupting, evil influence on the realm still existed. But now, woven into the fabric of reality, was a new rule to oppose and repel it.

It was a Light. Valthor's Light.

And from this moment forward, the Emerald Veil was a dim, mist-shrouded world, pregnant with new and terrible possibilities.

"A truly grand gesture," Arthas said. He reached out a hand, dismissing the deathly aura that clung to his gauntlet to touch and perceive the new mist. "Evil and light, mutually repellent, yet each able to slowly alter and evolve the bloodlines they touch. The Emerald Veil has received a blessing from this disaster. This world... it will grow more prosperous, and more powerful, from this day on."

With a flick of his wrist, he cast the mist from his hand, and the aura of death settled over him once more.

"Though I do not know his name, I know this: a demigod has just sacrificed himself. By some unknown method, he has fused a sliver of his own law of light into the very fabric of this world. That law can dispel the evil corruption, without negating the evolutionary benefits the corruption provides."

"The Emerald Veil(Emerald Dream Realm)... is about to become a very, very desirable piece of property."

Orion, whose understanding did not reach such cosmic heights, found himself lost in the explanation. "Brother, just tell us what we should do now," he said, getting back to the point. "And those Silver-Eyed down there... they are of great use to us."

He held up the third eye he had torn from Dorian's skull and explained its unique power.

Arthas took the eye, examined it for a moment, then handed it back. "Kill every enemy combatant on this side of the mountain," he commanded, his voice leaving no room for argument. "Harvest their eyes. As for the rest of their people on the other side of the range... enslave them all."

Orion and Leonidas exchanged a look, then relayed the orders to their commanders on the field below. The allied forces, unleashed and with a clear objective, fell upon the enemy with renewed fury. A storm of slaughter and death swept across the battlefield.

With a demigod and two Archlords watching from the heavens, not a single Silver-Eyed soldier would escape.

But just as the final battle began, another change occurred.

The sky, which had seemed like a placid mirror, suddenly shattered. Visions flooded the heavens—light and darkness, raging tides and hurricanes, clouds of blood and shimmering silver. The demigods who had been sealed away had broken their chains. They were arriving.

In the void above, stars began to blink into existence. Each one was the light of a demigod, and their appearance brought with it a wave of infinite awe and terror. Thirteen of them, some as phantom projections, others in their true forms, filled the sky, bathing the world in a mysterious, divine glow.

Mortals looked up, and in the face of such sacred, majestic power, they felt a sense of utter powerlessness, of being adrift in a sea of fate they could not control.

The spectacle lasted only for a few seconds. Then, as one, the demigods scattered, streaking off toward the three continents and the vast oceans of the realm.

One of them descended, landing beside Arthas. It was Deputy Commander Edward. He studied the Skeleton King for a long moment.

"I was about to order a temporary withdrawal from the Emerald Veil," Edward said, his voice grim. "It is a good thing you awoke when you did—sooner than I had anticipated."

Arthas gave a slight, knowing nod. He had been given a rescue mission by the Deputy Commander's storm avatar the moment he awoke, but he still didn't know the full strategic picture. Edward did.

"The cake is gone," the Deputy Commander said, his words meant for Orion and Leonidas. "But the land remains. The fight to divide the prize has now become a scramble for territory. The Emerald Veil has been reborn, but it is also about to be plunged into a long, chaotic war."

He turned his full attention to them. "I have already notified Alexander, Kraken, and Isabella. They are to abandon their holdings on the Dawn Continent and teleport to the Dusk Continent immediately. Our new objective is to seize the entirety of the Dusk Continent and its surrounding seas."

His final words were for Arthas alone. "Demigods from other worlds will be arriving in force. For the foreseeable future, you and I are to hold this ground."

Chapter 812: A Reasonable Claim

The sheer speed at which the situation had evolved left both Orion and Leonidas struggling to catch up.

“Deputy Commander,” Leonidas blurted out, his usual swagger momentarily absent. “Are you saying we’re only invading the Dusk Continent now? The cake is gone?”

Truth be told, Leonidas’s enthusiastic participation in the invasion, beyond his loyalty to the team, was driven by the promise of a substantial share of world essence when the final prize—the ‘cake’—was divided.

Without that, the Dusk Continent itself held little appeal for him. Unlike Orion, Kraken, or Isabella, Leonidas had no need for territory or a flock of faithful worshipers. As a peak Archlord, his every ambition was focused on finding the catalyst that would propel him to the demigod tier, and on acquiring anything that might pave that road.

“Because of this great change, the Emerald Veil’s fundamental rules have shifted. It has begun a process of active evolution,” the Deputy Commander explained, his gaze steady. “This world will now be far more fertile ground for nurturing treasures and powerful individuals. It will hold more opportunities than other realms. Conquer the Dusk Continent, hold it, and the catalyst you seek for your own ascension may very well appear here.”

A fiery light ignited in Leonidas’s eyes. But before he could press for details, the moment was lost.

“Come,” Edward said, sharing a look with Arthas. “A demigod has descended on the other side of the mountains. We will go and expel them.”

With that, the two demigods stepped into the void and vanished.

Leonidas stood stunned for a moment, then turned to Orion.

“Brother, don’t look at me,” Orion said with a shrug. “You heard him right. A demigod has arrived. For all we know, they’ve already taken a liking to the lands we just conquered.”

The situation was changing too quickly, the world’s politics too chaotic for even him to unravel. The only silver lining was that their only remaining enemy on the Dusk Continent was the Silvermoon Empire.

“Well, in that case, what are we standing around for?” A manic grin split Leonidas’s face. “Let’s go grab our land, brother!”

With a wild howl, he shot down toward the Ashenfang Traverse below. Orion watched him go, his eyes narrowed in thought, before he too launched himself into the sky and followed.

Three days later, the allied grand army crested the mountain range and descended upon the second half of the continent.

With the overwhelming might of Orion and Leonidas at the vanguard, the power balance was hopelessly skewed. The Silvermoon Empire’s armies collapsed like a house of cards.

In a command tent far behind the front lines, Alexander, Kraken, and Isabella stood, their main forces having just arrived through a teleportation gate.

“Never thought your final home would be the Dusk Continent that my brother and I conquered for you, did you, Alexander?” Leonidas said, slinging an arm around Alexander’s shoulders and bumping a cask of wine against his.

Orion, Kraken, and Isabella wisely kept their distance, not wanting to get caught in the crossfire of Leonidas and Alexander’s unique brand of camaraderie.

“Isn’t there still half a continent left to conquer?” Alexander retorted, rolling his eyes.

“Tch. What do you know? Is that really half a continent?” Leonidas scoffed. “Haven’t you noticed we’re already at their gates? Wherever our armies go, the enemy is swept aside. Conquering the rest is just a matter of minutes.”

He wasn't wrong. Though Alexander, Kraken, and Isabella had arrived, they were too late to contribute much to the initial conquest. Their role would be in what came next: defending their new home.

The native lords of the Emerald Veil, in their desperation, had invited all manner of devils and monsters into their world. The continent was infested with dark creatures and races, constantly being corrupted, tempted, and turned to treachery. Purging this filth and heresy so they could build in peace would require all their efforts.

According to the Deputy Commander's new strategy, every member of their team would establish a foothold on the Dusk Continent, with Orion, Kraken, and Isabella as the primary lords—for they were most in need of faith—supported by himself, Arthas, and Leonidas.

"Can you even absorb it like that?"

On the other side of the tent, Orion was upending his own wine cask, pouring a stream of rich, dark liquid into a large glass tank on the table. Inside, a miniature octopus floated blissfully, enjoying a luxurious wine bath.

"You underestimate me! I can absorb fine wine in minutes!" Kraken's voice echoed in their minds, even as one of his tentacles snaked out of his satchel, a tiny goblet in its grip. It deftly caught a measure of the falling wine, which it then brought up to be savored properly.

"You are a truly remarkable race," Orion chuckled.

Kraken's tentacles shifted in a gesture that looked remarkably like a shrug, which sent Isabella, who was seated nearby, into a fit of laughter.

"What do you think the Deputy Commander and Arthas are planning?" Leonidas's voice cut through the revelry, his tone suddenly serious. The question captured everyone's attention.

It was, after all, the reason they were all sitting around drinking instead of fighting; half a day ago, a message had arrived from the front, ordering them to halt their advance into the Silvermoon Empire's core territory.

“My guess,” Alexander began, setting his drink down, “is that it’s incredibly difficult for demigods to kill one another quickly. Furthermore, it’s unlikely that one demigod would risk a full-blown, face-losing war with another over the personal grievances of their mortal subjects.”

“The most logical course of action is to allow a core contingent of the Silver-Eyed to leave in peace, in exchange for our undisputed control of the Dusk Continent.”

He took a sip of wine before continuing. “You have to look at it from their perspective. The Champions Alliance is now an undeniable power in this realm. We have two demigods, a peak Archlord, several other powerful Archlords, and a massive invasion army. Our claim to one of the realm’s three continents is perfectly reasonable.”

“Any other demigods, unless they are fools, will avoid a direct confrontation with a force this strong. Given that, the demigod backing the Silver-Eyed will likely accept a deal that allows him to save his core people so they can rebuild elsewhere.”

“So long as their demands aren’t outrageous,” Alexander concluded, “the Deputy Commander and Arthas have no reason to antagonize him. This realm is too chaotic right now, with too many factions stirring the pot. Pushing a demigod into a corner is a bad idea.”

“Even if you can’t kill their true form, they can send an endless stream of will projections to harass us. Imagine a demigod dead set on hiding and causing trouble on the Dusk Continent. We’d never be able to build anything. They could pick off our lower-level core members at will.”

“So you’re saying the big wars are over?” Leonidas grumbled, his enthusiasm visibly deflating. He felt that ever since the demigods had arrived, his own voice, the voice of an Archlord, had been greatly diminished.

“Large-scale wars, perhaps,” Alexander corrected him. “But the Dusk Continent will be anything but peaceful. There are evil, opportunistic demigods out there who will constantly be tempting and corrupting the local populations. Maintaining a stable environment for us to grow and develop. It won’t be nearly as simple as you think.”

To conquer a kingdom is easy; to rule it is the difficult part.

Alexander could understand Leonidas's sentiment. He too was a peak Archlord, and in the presence of demigods, he felt the weight of his own voice diminish. It was especially galling with their protégés right there beside them.

This wasn't about vanity; it was a stark reflection of their own insufficiency. There was nothing to be done for it. They could only clink their casks together and drink, hoping to wash away the bitter taste of their own limitations.

"I heard," Isabella began, tilting her head as she looked at Orion, "that you two killed another pair of Archlords?"

The question was sharp enough that even Kraken, luxuriating in his wine bath, lifted his head from the glass tank to look at Orion.

"It wasn't me," Orion said with a sigh. "It was Leonidas. He swallowed one of them alive. The other... the kill was only possible because of a switch he made. I was just the executioner holding the blade, the tool for the job."

He felt a pang of his own inadequacy. Even after ascending to the Archlord tier, he realized the gap between himself and his brothers—Leonidas, Alexander, Arthas—was far larger than he had imagined. In the recent battle, he had been completely powerless against Grand General Dorian. Yet the moment Leonidas appeared, Dorian was dead.

"A switch?" Isabella pressed, her curiosity piqued.

Orion paused, trying to find the right words for a concept he barely understood himself. "Think of it this way," he began, gesturing to his own armor and then to Isabella's. "I am wearing plate, you are wearing leather. Leonidas has an ability that can, in essence, swap our armor."

He went on to describe the battle with Dorian, the infuriating time-slowing ability, and the final, decisive moment. "So when I struck the final blow, the enemy's defensive ability had been swapped with Leonidas's own. I was just the headsman. Leonidas was the one who truly won the fight."

The battle had been a harsh lesson. Orion now saw with painful clarity the deficiencies in his own combat style.

First, there was a fundamental difference between his mirror avatars and Leonidas's dragon incarnations. His avatars were echoes, perfect copies of his own skills and bloodline. They were dependent on his main body for growth and could not truly evolve on their own. Leonidas's avatars, however, were distinct beings with their own unique powers and skills, their growth untethered from his own. One was not necessarily better than the other, but they had different paths and different limitations. He needed to study this field more deeply.

Second, he realized that while his own skills were powerful and fast, he lacked the experience and tactical variety to deal with highly specialized opponents. Brute force could not, in fact, solve every problem. He needed to enrich his arsenal, to develop abilities that could counter any foe, not just overwhelm them.

Finally, he needed to cultivate more avatars. He would send them out into the world to fight, to learn, to experience, and to gather the combat data and insights he so desperately needed.

"The last time I saw you, you were a peak Legendary being," Isabella said, staring at him. "Now you are an Archlord. I confess, it feels... unreal."

She remembered his arrival on the Dawn Continent, watching him fight alongside Alexander to slay an Archlord while he was still of a lower tier. Back then, she could still see his back, a goal that felt within her reach. She had believed that if she could just reach the peak of the Legendary tier herself, she too could perform such feats.

But now, learning of his ascension to Archlord, a sense of despair washed over her. It was the crushing, suffocating feeling of being utterly surpassed by a peer of her own generation, and it was a difficult pill to swallow.

Kraken felt it too. But unlike Isabella, his frustration was mingled with a fierce confidence. He knew he was not so far behind Orion. If Orion could become an Archlord, then so could he.

Besides, he knew that in this cross-realm war, he was poised to be the biggest winner of them all. Once the Champions Alliance secured the Dusk Continent, the vast oceans surrounding it would become his domain—a territory larger than Orion’s and Isabella’s combined.

Orion reached out and snapped his fingers in front of Isabella’s face. When she blinked, startled, he flicked her sharply on the forehead.

“You—!” she yelped, glaring at him.

“You can still feel pain,” Orion said with a grin. “That means this is the real world.”

He turned back to Kraken’s tank and resumed pouring, while Kraken deftly filled his goblet and raised it in a toast.

“Cheers!”

Titanion Realm—The World Tunnels

Within the Archmage’s shimmering prison of light, Orion dug the Lord’s Stone from the heart of the reptilian behemoth and pocketed the soul-gem the creature left behind.

With its anchor destroyed, the illusion shattered, and Orion, the Sea-Drake King, and the Saint of the Order of Man stumbled back into reality, all three of them bloodied and utterly exhausted.

“Orion, we owe you our thanks,” the Sea-Drake King wheezed.

“Orion, if you ever have the time, please visit my kingdom,” the Saint added, his voice strained. “I have the oldest, finest vintages on the continent in my cellars.”

Both of them were on the verge of collapse. They had nearly died in the light-illusion, hounded by an endless swarm of reptilian phantasms. It was only at the last moment, when Orion had finally located and killed the behemoth's true form, that they had been freed.

Without him, the true bodies of a king and a saint might have fallen that day. Their gratitude was immense.

In truth, Orion could have slain the behemoth far earlier. He had deliberately held back, using the opportunity to observe the combat capabilities of his two powerful neighbors.

The humans on land, the sea-drakes in the ocean—he would have to deal with both of them in the future. Know thy enemy, and know thyself, he thought, and you need not fear the result of a hundred battles. It was an invaluable intelligence-gathering opportunity, and he had no intention of wasting it, even if they never became enemies. It paid to be prepared.

"You two held the line against the horde," Orion said, his tone warm and friendly, betraying none of his cold calculations. "That's what gave me the time to find its true form among the thousands of illusions. We escaped with our lives because all three of us worked together."

He clapped them on their shoulders, a gesture of camaraderie. After all, they had faced life and death together, had they not?

Chapter 814: The Gaze of a Demigodess

Rumble...

CRACK!

Just then, from the deepest recesses of the world tunnels, a terrifying, grinding collapse began.

Orion, the Sea-Drake King, and the Saint of the Order of Man all snapped their heads toward the sound. In the distance, the tunnel was dissolving into a brilliant, indescribable vortex of multicolored light.

“Hurry! The world tunnels are collapsing!” A voice, crisp and clear but of an indeterminate age and gender, cried out from the chaos ahead.

In a fleeting glimpse, Orion saw a mermaid with a seven-colored tail swimming toward them at incredible speed, a streak of living rainbow fleeing the encroaching destruction.

“What?”

“They’re collapsing?”

Orion didn’t have time to think. The raw panic in the voices of the King and the Saint was all the confirmation he needed. Without a word, without a moment’s hesitation, he launched himself forward, a blur of motion aimed at the tunnel’s exit.

Behind him, the Rainbow Mermaid, the Sea-Drake King, and the Saint used every ounce of their power to keep pace. The fastest of them all was the mermaid; she shot past Orion, clearing the exit moments before he did.

A quarter of an hour later, all four of them were safe, back in the familiar reality of the Titanion Realm. They watched as the tunnels behind them imploded, a silent, strobing cataclysm of light and energy that sent a tremor of fear through each of them.

“My Lady, what happened in the tunnels?”

“Yes, My Lady, why did they collapse?”

It was the King and the Saint who spoke, addressing the mermaid with a familiar reverence that Orion, wary and out of his depth, did not share.

“A demigod in the Emerald Veil has mended their world’s rules, halting the advance of its destruction,” the mermaid explained, a lingering trace of fear still on her face. “Therefore, they no longer have need of our Titanion Realm. To ensure we can never reach them again, they destroyed the tunnels.”

Orion's mind raced. He wondered what this demigod, this magnificent being, could have possibly encountered in the depths of the tunnels to make her look so afraid.

Just then, a final, horrifying sound echoed from the collapsing void—a sound that was hollow, gloomy, and utterly desolate. It was the sound of a world unmaking itself.

Elements, runes, rules, faith, life force, darkness, light... all the fundamental components of reality manifested for a brilliant, fleeting instant before being consumed, returning to the endless cycle of the void.

The end of the tunnel, Orion realized, held the unknown, the future, and the engine of evolution itself.

With a final, grating shriek, the world tunnels blinked out of existence, leaving nothing behind.

"Ah... it is finally gone," the mermaid sighed. In her voice, Orion heard a complex mixture of profound loss and profound relief. Then, her attention shifted. "So, you are the newly ascended Archlord, the King of Giants."

Orion felt a gaze settle upon him. It was the appraisal of a higher being examining a lesser one. It was the gaze of a demigod. He was not unfamiliar with it, and he did not allow himself to feel nervous.

"You are very composed," she noted. "It seems you must have a demigod of your own standing behind you."

As she spoke again, the scrutinizing, distant quality of her gaze vanished, replaced by a tone that was gentle and approachable. The immense pressure Orion had felt lifted completely. He raised his head and finally looked at her properly.

She was the first female demigod he had seen on Titanion, and she was, without question, the most beautiful creature he had ever laid eyes on. Her skin was a pale, luminous alabaster, her hair a cascade of shimmering silver that fell to her waist. Her seven-colored, ribbon-like tail swayed gently in the void, a picture of effortless grace.

But her most captivating features were her eyes. They were deep pools of gentleness and wisdom, yet they seemed veiled in a hazy mist, impossible to see clearly. As he looked into them, Orion had the unnerving sensation that she was reading his very soul.

“Have you seen enough?”

The words were not an accusation, but a soft, melodic inquiry, tinged with a hint of smug satisfaction and a whisper of melancholy. Her tone seemed to say, At last, someone who knows how to appreciate such peerless beauty.

“Orion,” the Sea-Drake King interjected hastily. “This is Lady Seraphina, a demigod of the mermaid race. It was she who guided you into the world tunnels.”

At the mention of her name, Orion abruptly squeezed his eyes shut, forcing his gaze away from her face.

“Kekeke... what an interesting little one,” Lady Seraphina giggled. “Little one, would you care to tell me what you were thinking just now, as you looked into my eyes? I could sense... something strange, something rather wicked, and something quite joyful.”

Her voice suddenly shifted, becoming sultry and bewitching, as if a benevolent saintess had transformed into an insatiable demoness.

“My apologies, Your Ladyship,” Orion said, shaking his head and opening his eyes, though he kept his gaze respectfully lowered. “I was lost in your beauty.”

He had fallen into an illusion. He knew now it wasn’t a deliberate attack on her part. Her eyes themselves possessed a magical quality, an ability to ensnare the gaze of any male who looked upon them. If that man held any desire or impure thought in his heart, the eyes would amplify it, drawing him into a vivid hallucination.

The Sea-Drake King and the Saint had clearly known this, for they had carefully avoided her direct gaze the entire time. They had also, just as clearly, wanted to watch Orion make a fool of himself. Knowing he couldn’t hide his thoughts from a demigod, Orion chose honesty.

“Let it go,” she purred, the dangerous edge to her voice softening. “For the sake of the mermaid pearl you carry within you, I will not hold it against you. Hehehe.”

She had sensed the pearl Princess Marina had given him. Such a pearl could only be offered willingly; it could never be taken by force, even from a slain mermaid. Its presence in Orion’s body was proof of a mermaid’s favor.

“Everyone, return to your homes,” she announced, her tone once again regal and distant. “We have guarded the tunnels for so many years. With them destroyed, Titanion can finally know peace. As for me, I am going to have a nice, long sleep. Do not wake me for at least a century.”

She raised the crystalline staff in her hand, gave Orion, the King, and the Saint one last look, and then dissolved into a stream of rainbow light, vanishing from sight.

“Lady Seraphina is just like that,” King Neptor said, nudging Orion and giving him a look that was universally understood among men. “She’s the most good-natured demigod in our entire realm. Stunning, wasn’t she?”

“Stunning,” Orion agreed with a solemn nod, offering no hint of a jest. “And a bit playful.”

The Sea-Drake King and the Saint wanted to laugh, but they didn’t dare, for neither of them was entirely sure if the ‘playful’ demigod was truly out of earshot.

Chapter 815: The Last Laugh

In the South, at Stoneheart City.

While the fate of the Dusk Continent was being decided at a negotiating table and the world tunnels connecting two realms were being torn asunder, Orion stood upon the highest point of the Colosseum.

He carried Elara and Pallas, one on each of his broad shoulders, and accepted the focused adoration of his people and honored guests.

In that moment, Orion was the sun around which all other stars revolved, an object of reverence for thousands.

He wore a simple iron crown, a belt fashioned from the tusks of a great beast was cinched at his waist, and in his hand, he held a scepter that symbolized his power and station.

"I, Orion Stoneheart, King of the Giants, make this promise to all my people!" his voice boomed, powerful and resonant.

"From this day forward, the Stoneheart Horde will no longer know hunger! You will no longer suffer the cold! You will no longer be oppressed!"

"If any bring war to our gates, we will answer with the battle-axes and tridents in our hands, and we will destroy them in the cruelest fashion imaginable!"

"If any bring us peace, bring us trade, bring us technology and culture, I guarantee that their interests will have my protection!"

"My people! Let us strive together to build a mightier Stoneheart Horde! To build a glorious future that belongs to us!"

"May glory walk with me! May the Tribe's splendor be eternal! May my people know peace and health!"

The King's vow rolled across the city, reaching the ears of Prince Theodore and the young Kronos.

At just over two years old, Kronos did not understand the words. He only knew that this place was exciting, that it was filled with children who looked just like him. He loved the atmosphere here. He especially loved the way people looked at him—not with the sense of alienation he felt in the human kingdom, but with something more akin to awe and envy. As a youngling, he was sensitive to such a change.

Prince Theodore glanced at the boy, a flicker of envy crossing his own features before he carefully masked it. The journey from the human kingdom with his young cousin had been one of pure, unadulterated freedom.

The suffocating etiquette of the court was a world away, the bonds of his strict upbringing were loosened, and Kronos was blossoming, happier than Theodore had ever seen him.

"Cousin, I love it here!" Kronos said, his big eyes looking up at Theodore with a pleading expression. "Can we come back and play here every year? Please?"

"Do you like it here?"

"I love it!"

"You really want to come back?"

"Yes!"

"Then we will come back every year to play," Theodore promised, reaching out to ruffle the boy's hair.

A fearsome constitution, Theodore thought with a marveling sigh. A two-year-old giant youngling is already the size of a six-year-old human child. Stronger, and with no less intelligence. It's incredible.

He looked at his special cousin, then up at the two children laughing on the Giant King's shoulders, pointing out over his new domain. A wave of pity washed over Theodore. The future Kronos faced, he realized, would be infinitely more complex and difficult than his own.

"By the way, cousin," Kronos said suddenly, "where is that giant youngling? I promised Mother I would defeat him!"

Theodore froze, the words catching in his throat.

Are you that bitter, Aunt Ava? he thought desperately. You really do still care.

He could not fathom why his aunt would command Kronos to challenge Pallas, the legitimate heir of the Stoneheart Horde. Was she trying to parade Kronos before the Horde's leadership? Was she trying to prove to Orion that the son she had raised was superior? Or was it something simpler, something crueler? Was this just her form of revenge?

Aunt, are you not afraid that Kronos will never leave Stoneheart? That he will never return to the human kingdom?

Theodore was terrified for his cousin. He knew there were many factions within the Horde who would not welcome Kronos's presence. The boy was a threat—a threat to their status, their interests, their power.

I can only pray that Orion is not a cold and ruthless man.

"Kronos," Theodore said, forcing a smile. "Tomorrow, we will go to the castle for an audience with the Giant King. After that, I will take you to see the outer city. How does that sound?"

"Okay, cousin!"

Theodore gently ruffled the boy's hair again and handed him a slice of savory beast meat, having learned over the course of their journey just how profound a giant's need for meat truly was.

In the stands reserved for the blood elf envoy, Lycanor watched the man on the dais. She watched his children on his shoulders. She watched the women who stood behind him—Lilith, Delilah, Sylvana, and Lysintha. His women.

Is that what I am to become? One of them?

She asked herself the question over and over. As a warrior of immense power and beauty, Lycanor was proud. Her standards for a partner were exceptionally high. But when it came to the Archlord Orion, she possessed neither the justification nor the qualification to be so picky.

In a world without active demigods, Archlords were the apex predators, the absolute pinnacle of power, wealth, and status. Any number of races would eagerly offer their most beautiful daughters for the chance of an alliance with such a man.

"Your advantage is significant."

Seated beside her, the Grand Elder of the blood elves, Lireesa, spoke in a low, placid voice. She too was gazing at Orion, feeling the heart-stopping pressure of his Archlord aura. Her words were meant as counsel.

"Relationships are complex things, my dear. Feelings certainly play their part. But the Giant King is no god. He has his own desires. Power, beauty, the promise of children... these things can change a man's attitude. They can even make him feel things he did not expect."

Lireesa's gaze sharpened. "You are a warrior of the highest order. Your bloodline is purer. Compared to his other women, you will find it far easier to bear his children."

This fact had not changed just because Orion already had heirs. The union of two powerful beings would inevitably produce an heir of even greater talent and a stronger bloodline.

As the head of his race, the Giant King would surely demand such a thing. And even if he did not, the high-ranking members of his Tribe certainly would. In this, Lycanor held an undeniable advantage. None of the women behind the king could match her in sheer power.

"You are a blood elf, a Lord-level powerhouse in your own right. Your lifespan will be far longer than theirs," the Grand Elder concluded. "In the long, slow march of the years, you will be the only one left to walk beside him. And so, Lycanor, it is you who will have the last laugh."

Chapter 816: Big Sister is Always the Boss

Lireesa turned her head to look at Lycanor, the child she had watched grow into a formidable woman. To marry an Archlord like Orion, to secure his protection for the blood elf people... perhaps it was the best possible outcome. Perhaps it was Lycanor's ultimate destiny.

Time can change everything, the Grand Elder mused. It can build a bond between two strangers that reaches into the very depths of their hearts and souls.

The calculus was simple. By arranging this marriage with the Stoneheart Horde, though Lycanor would not be the primary wife, her status as a champion of the highest order(upper Legendary tier) would grant her a position of significant influence.

With that secured, so long as the blood elves did not display any untoward ambition or make any foolish moves, they could look forward to several millennia of peace. After all, they would be kin by marriage to both the Stoneheart Horde and the human kingdom.

Lycanor said nothing. She simply continued to stare at the man on the high platform, her thoughts a mystery.

The Next Day, at the Castle.

After the ceremony had concluded, the Colosseum had hosted one performance after another, ensuring every guest departed thoroughly entertained. This morning, the real work began. Envoys from the Sea Race, the blood elves, the human kingdom, and other factions arrived at the castle for an audience with the King. The most important gifts and trade agreements were not matters for a public festival.

"Your Majesty, the esteemed King of the Giants, my father sends this gift to honor you," a tall Sea Race woman announced. Her name was Nerida, and while she had not yet reached the Legendary tier, her station was high indeed. She was the Fourth Princess of the Sea-Dragon(Sea-Drake) Race, an eloquent diplomat with a peerless ability to read the mood of a room.

Orion gestured, and one of his succubus handmaidens gracefully took the rolled parchment Nerida was holding and presented it to him.

As he unfurled it, Orion's eyes narrowed slightly. It was a sea chart, detailing a large portion of the Trident Sea Region. More than that, it had a sizable island clearly marked for his claim.

The gift from King Neptor was a heavy one, but considering Orion had saved his life in the world tunnels, it was not entirely unexpected.

"This is a fine gift. I accept it," Orion declared. "Please convey my thanks to King Neptor. In return, the Stoneheart Horde's City of Guardians, Ironveil Escarpment, will be opening for trade in the near future. As a show of my gratitude, I will give instructions that a specific trade district be set aside exclusively for the Sea-Dragon Race."

This was his counter-offer, part of the cooperation he and Neptor had already discussed. The sea-dragons would cede an island to the Horde, and the Horde would become the primary trading hub between the sea-races and the peoples of the continent. It was a clear win for both sides.

As for the sea-dragon prince Orion had killed... in the face of such mutual benefit for both their peoples, the matter had been deemed utterly irrelevant. King Neptor had many children; one more or less was of little consequence.

"Princess Nerida thanks Your Majesty, the King of the Giants!" she said, offering a deep curtsy. A warm smile played on her lips, her eyes hinting at a personal interest in the King. But Orion's cool, professional reaction made it clear that her interest was not returned.

Nerida skillfully tucked her own feelings away. She had completed the mission her father had given her. She would return home and receive a Lord's Stone, a key that would open her own path to advancement. That was enough.

Orion waved a hand, and the princess took her leave. The next to enter the hall was Prince Theodore.

"Your Majesty, esteemed..."

Theodore began his formal address, but before he could finish, Orion had already descended from his throne and was walking past him.

"Come with me," Orion said simply.

Theodore frowned, confused, but followed without question. He and Orion were familiar with one another; they had negotiated, they had spoken. For Orion to act this way meant he had a purpose.

They emerged into the castle's main square.

There, two brothers who had never laid eyes upon each other finally met.

"You are Pallas. I challenge you!" Kronos declared with grave seriousness, already assuming the combat stance his tutor, Tarn, had taught him.

Defeating Pallas was the mission his mother, Ava, had given him. If he completed it, she would surely be happy.

Who Pallas was, he did not know. What their relationship might be, he did not know. Whether he could even win, he did not care. In his small heart, victory was the path to his mother's joy, which in turn would make him happy.

"You are Kronos?"

The first response, however, came not from Pallas, but from Elara.

"I am!"

Elara looked at the boy's face, a face that was a clear echo of her father's, and she felt the strong pull of his giant bloodline. She had already suspected who he was. "My name is Elara, and this is Pallas," she said. "Do you know what our relationship is to you?"

"I don't know, and I don't care!"

A slow smile spread across Elara's face, the corners of her eyes and mouth turning upward. Anyone who knew her recognized the sign immediately: Elara was getting a little angry.

"You don't know? Is that so," her voice, usually so bright, took on a teasing, manipulative tone. "Well, if you don't know, I can tell you. I am the First Daughter of the Stoneheart Horde. Pallas is the Giant Prince of the Stoneheart Horde."

A small, cold smile touched her lips. She had been looking forward to meeting this unknown brother of hers. Her daddy had told her she had three of them, and she had imagined they would all be great fun. But for this one to immediately challenge Pallas... it was a poor first impression. She decided then and there to teach this unlikable little brother a lesson.

"I am your older sister," she said plainly. "He is your younger brother. And you, an older brother, want to challenge your younger brother? By that logic, does that mean I, the eldest sister, can challenge my younger brothers whenever I please?"

The smile on her face became a dismissive smirk, a micro-expression she had learned from watching her father.

"Sister? Brother?" Kronos was stunned. His mother had never told him. His cousin hadn't told him. No one had. To hear for the first time that he had siblings was an unimaginable shock. "You're lying! My mother never told me I had a sister and a brother!" he retorted, relying on the only truth he knew.

"Kekeke..." Elara giggled, her eyes glinting with the same playful mockery Orion's often held. "Just because she never told you, little one, doesn't mean we don't exist. Has your mother truly never told you who your father is?"

She understood now. Kronos was being kept in a state of protected ignorance, shielded from both harm and truth. Elara decided, with all the authority of an eldest sibling, that she would be the one to tear open that protective film. She would show him the truth. She would let him know that there was always someone bigger and better in the world.

And that Big Sister was always the boss.

Chapter 817: Are you really my sister and brother?

"Pallas's father is the King of the Giants," Elara pressed, her voice taking on a strange, melodic quality. "So who might your father be? Can you not feel it? The same giant's blood that flows through him flows through you. Do you not feel a kinship?"

Her words seemed to possess a magical power. Kronos looked at Pallas, at the giant youngling who stood a little taller than him, and felt a growing, undeniable affinity. The boy's face seemed more and more familiar, more and more pleasing to his eye.

"Are you... are you really my sister and brother?" His own father was the Giant King; that much, at least, Kronos knew. As he spoke the words, he subconsciously relaxed his fighting stance.

"Brother is correct, and sister is correct," Elara said sweetly. "But whether you are correct, I do not yet know. And now, it is time for the sister to challenge the brother."

With a playful giggle, she waved a small hand. A thick, emerald-green vine, covered in sharp barbs, shot up from the flagstones. It coiled around Kronos, binding him tightly, before its tip lashed out and began to smack him smartly on his backside.

The sharp, rhythmic crack of the vine echoed across the square.

The surrounding guards and handmaidens acted as if they saw nothing at all. Not a single one moved to intervene.

The sound finally registered with Pallas, and he seemed to snap out of a daze, at last understanding what was happening. "Sister, is he really our brother?"

"Mm-hm. His name is Kronos. They say he was born in the human kingdom."

Pallas looked with concern at Kronos, who was trussed up like a holiday roast. He wasn't crying or screaming, but was struggling mightily against his bonds. Pallas believed his sister. He had, after all, experienced this exact treatment himself. Giant younglings were naturally defiant with one another. They had to be beaten into submission.

Elara had won Pallas's affection with a clever mix of coaxing and trickery. But whenever they had a true disagreement—when she tried to steal his meat, for instance—Pallas would stand his ground. That is, until Elara lured him into a quiet corner, summoned her vines, and administered a proper whipping. That was how Pallas had been conquered. Now, the same method was being applied to Kronos.

"Sister, that must hurt him!" Pallas said, his voice worried.

Elara turned and patted Pallas's head. "Look, he's not crying, and he's not begging for mercy. It must not hurt that much," she said with a grin. The truth was, with a giant's tough hide, even a youngling could endure such a thrashing. The pain, however, was unavoidable. Elara, for all her youth, knew her limits and was careful not to use any truly powerful magic.

From a balcony above, Orion watched the scene unfold, with Prince Theodore standing silently behind him.

"So," Orion sighed, "he really knew nothing."

He wasn't sure if that was a good thing or a bad one. The protective film of ignorance that had surrounded Kronos had now been ripped away by Elara. It was what Ava had wanted, and, he suspected, it was also precisely the outcome the faction behind Kronos in the human kingdom had hoped for.

Theodore dared not speak. He had no idea how to respond. The squabble between the three children was a family matter, the first step in forging their relationship. If one were to get technical about it, Theodore ought to address Orion as 'Uncle-in-law'. But the words felt impossible to say to a being of such power. It was all a tangled mess of family.

"Ava did not come?" Orion asked, his voice low.

"No."

"Did not wish to, did not dare to, or was unable to?"

Standing behind Orion, Theodore suddenly felt a crushing pressure descend upon him. Every word the King spoke was a test, and a wrong answer could have disastrous consequences.

"Aunt Ava is in Soaring Bird City," Theodore said at last, deciding on the truth. "She said she would wait for Kronos there."

"Soaring Bird City," Orion murmured, saying no more. His attention returned to the three children below.

"Do you know who I am now?" Elara demanded, stepping in front of the bound Kronos. She tilted his head up, saw the stubborn defiance in his eyes, and snorted.

Crack. Crack. Crack.

The sound of the vine striking his rear echoed again. Kronos grunted but remained silent.

"Call me 'Big Sister,' and I will let you go," she commanded. "If you don't, I will keep you tied up like this and whip you for three days and three nights. Even if Daddy comes, I will not release you. Hmph."

At this, it was Pallas who flinched. He knew better than anyone that Elara had their father wrapped around her little finger. In his mother's words, Orion was a complete 'daughter-slave'. As of yet, there was nothing Elara had ever wanted that Orion had denied her. Thinking of this, Pallas looked at his new brother with a deep sense of pity.

In the castle's magical gardens.

The gardens were quite lively today. Lilith, Lysinthia, Sylvana, Lycanor, Princess Nerida, and a host of other high-ranking women had gathered for a small, private party hosted by Lilith herself.

If Orion and his armies represented the hard power of the Stoneheart Horde, then this network of relationships, bound by the women of the court, was its soft power. As the King's wife, Lilith knew how to cultivate it. Such influence was often invaluable for handling private matters and other affairs that could not be settled on the battlefield.

The women were gathered amongst the glowing flowers, chatting idly about the various romantic scandals and affairs happening across the continent. Just then, a succubus approached Lilith and whispered a report of the scene unfolding in the castle square.

"Keep an eye on them," Lilith said with a serene smile, giving the handmaiden her orders. "Do not intervene, no matter what happens."

"Lady Lilith, what is this creature?" Princess Nerida asked, her attention captured by a tiny, cute creature peeking out from a nearby magical plant. "I can feel a faint elemental fluctuation from it."

"That is a faerie insect," Lilith explained, walking over and gently coaxing the creature onto her hand. She placed it in Nerida's palm, allowing her a closer look. "Keeping them in the gardens not only promotes the growth of the magical plants, but they also release trace elements that improve the quality of the environment here."

These were treasures unique to the castle, a part of her own personal resources.

"I had heard it was originally a species unique to the elves," Lycanor said, stepping closer. It wasn't her first time in the castle; she knew of the faerie insect's existence. "I apologize," she added quickly, "I only meant to say that it is exceptionally precious. The faerie insects vanished from blood elf lands thousands of years ago. Legend says that if they are properly nurtured, they can evolve into Faerie Dragons."

Chapter 818: A Pact of Vassalage

Lilith shook her head. She understood Lycanor's unspoken question.

"Orion brought it back with him from another realm. It is exceedingly rare; the Stoneheart Horde has only this one." She watched Lord Lycanor, a faint, knowing smile playing at the corners of her mouth. "If you desire it, I would of course have to consult Orion."

The hint of amusement in her eyes was enough. Realization dawned on Lycanor. The marriage alliance... they've figured it out?

She gave a curt nod, masterfully burying the flicker of awkwardness that rose in him. She broke eye contact with Lilith, turning his attention to a rare, luminous moss clinging to the nearby stones, a silent admission of her perception.

From a high window in the citadel, Orion watched as Prince Theodore departed, leaving the castle grounds alone.

Kronos, of course, remained behind.

For the next few days, the young giant was to live within the castle walls. By the traditions of the giant clans, the authority for Kronos's discipline now rested with Lilith, and so here he would stay. It seemed, however, that Lilith was content for the moment to turn a blind eye to the drama unfolding between Elara, Pallas, and their new charge.

Orion turned from the window, putting his three children from his mind. He was the unshakeable foundation of this place; their squabbles were but tremors on the surface. None dared truly test his authority.

Besides, his day was far from over.

In the Great Hall, a friend was already waiting for him. Unlike the envoys from the sea folk and the human kingdoms, the arrival of Aldous the Ogre was not a matter of state. It was a reunion fueled by feasting.

The ogre sat before a groaning board, piled high with roasted meats and overflowing flagons, a stream of servants constantly replenishing the platters.

"For an ogre like me, this is paradise." Aldous's main head boomed, the voice deep and resonant.

From the hulking shoulder of the main body, a second, larger head grunted in agreement, its mouth full. "And the food. This life of constant eating... it's a dream."

As Orion entered, Aldous made to stand, a gesture of respect that brought the feast to a halt. The larger head, interrupted mid-chew, shot the main head a look of pure fury. But then it registered Orion's presence, felt the immense, suffocating pressure of an Archlord's aura, and its demeanor changed entirely.

It gulped down its mouthful, lowered itself onto Aldous's chest, and began to snore with theatrical volume, pretending to be asleep.

"Pathetic beast," Aldous muttered, then stepped forward to clasp Orion in a one-armed embrace. The other arm remained limp at his side, controlled by the slumbering head.

"Orion, I must thank you," Aldous said, his voice earnest. "When word reached me of your ascension to Archlord, something shifted. I found I had... control. For the first time."

He gestured with his chin toward the snoring head. "If he misbehaves, I beg you, my friend... beat some sense into him for a poor, long-suffering ogre."

Orion laughed, a hearty, booming sound that filled the hall as he clapped Aldous on the back. "As you wish, my friend!"

They sat and talked for a long while, sharing stories and food as only old comrades could. When the last of the main courses had been cleared away, Aldous finally came to the purpose of his visit.

"Orion, my friend. We have decided. We are willing to bring the ogre clans to join the Stoneheart Horde."

Orion paused, the wine cup halfway to his lips. He set it down slowly, his gaze turning serious as he looked from Aldous to the another head.

"Oi!" Aldous snapped, nudging his other half. "Wake up, you lout. It's time to pledge your fealty!"

He jabbed it again. "If you don't speak, I'll have my friend take all the food away."

The threat worked instantly. The larger head's eyes flew open, darting toward the dessert platters now arriving at the table.

SMACK!

Aldous's hand cracked across the brute-head's cheek. "What did we agree upon before we came?"

The larger head grumbled, then turned its piggy eyes to Orion. "Ogres will bow to the giant tribe," it slurred, its voice a low growl. "And to you, Archlord. But... you have to feed us. And give us a place to live."

With the brute's terms laid bare, Aldous looked back to Orion. "What say you, my friend?"

Orion didn't give an immediate answer. The ogres were a complicated people. Aldous was an anomaly; the vast majority of his kind were little more than hulking beasts, driven by base urges for slaughter and sustenance. Unleashing them upon the delicate ecosystem of the Horde... they were a powder keg waiting for a spark.

"Aldous, I accept your pledge of fealty," Orion said finally. "But, my friend, given the unique nature of your people, they cannot be integrated into the Horde as others are. Not yet."

Orion's gaze was direct. "You understand my meaning, don't you?"

Aldous nodded slowly, his expression falling. He was no fool; he heard the reservation in Orion's tone, the polite rejection of his less... civilized kin. He didn't blame Orion. He knew his people's shortcomings better than anyone.

"However," Orion continued, leaning forward. "I have a proposal. Hear me out."

Aldous looked up, a flicker of hope in his eyes. He would listen to any path that led his people toward a brighter future.

"A pact of vassalage," Orion declared. "The ogre clans and your ancestral territories will fall under the banner of the Stoneheart Horde. Your people will remain on your lands, governed by your own traditions."

“All the resources of your territory—the mines, the forests, the quarries—will be open to the Horde. In return, the Horde will guarantee the survival of every ogre. We will ensure you are fed and protected, and we will interfere as little as possible with your way of life.”

“Any ogre who, like you, possesses wisdom and discipline, will be welcome to join our cities and our legions without restriction. But the others... the others must remain in their own domain, for now.”

Orion laid out his vision. To expand, the Horde had to incorporate other races. But with such vast differences in custom, temperament, not all could live together in one harmonious society. Some, like the ogres, required a different approach.

This would be the template. A way to bring disparate and volatile peoples into the fold without shattering the peace. The ogres were merely the first test.

Night had fallen over the castle square.

Elara, Pallas, and Kronos were still there. The young giant remained ensnared by the thorny vines, his skin covered in angry red welts from the whipping.

“Say it,” Elara commanded, standing before him with her arms crossed. The vine in her hand twitched like a serpent’s tail. “Say, ‘Elara is my big sister.’ If you do not, you will have no food. No water. And no rest.”

Kronos glared back, his entire body aching. At first, she had merely lashed his backside. When he had refused to cry out, she had directed the vines to strike him everywhere, her childish cruelty growing with his defiance.

Chapter 819: A Profound Loneliness

As for Pallas, he could only stare, his eyes wide with utter adoration for Elara.

Magic, to Pallas, was the greatest power in the world—a force of pure wonder.

“Sister, it’s dark now,” he whispered, tugging on her sleeve. “Mama will be looking for us! And... and Pallas is hungry!”

He felt a pang of sympathy for the bound figure of Kronos, having learned this was his brother. More than that, Pallas felt a strange, instinctual connection to him, a quiet hum of kinship in his blood. He wanted to plead for Kronos, but he knew Elara would not listen to him.

The night grew deeper.

Kronos, all of three years old, was starved, parched, and exhausted.

“Does... does calling you ‘(big)sister’ get me meat?” he finally asked, his voice a fragile thread of sound, laced with a stubbornness that was quickly fading.

The simple, primal need for food was eroding his defiance. Hunger, after all, is the beginning of all things, be they sin or salvation.

“It does.”

“Fine, then. Sister.”

“Hehe... good,” Elara giggled, a triumphant little sound. “That’s a much cuter little brother.”

With a flick of her hand, the thorny vines binding Kronos vanished, and he collapsed onto the flagstones in a heap.

Just then, a shadowy figure materialized before the three children. It was one of Lilith’s succubus guards.

“By order of the Lady,” the succubus announced in a silken voice, “Prince Kronos and Prince Pallas, for engaging in a private squabble, demonstrating a lack of brotherly amity and youngerly respect, are, after they have eaten, to be punished by kneeling in the square until dawn.”

She turned her gaze to Elara. "Princess Elara, for instructing her two brothers in their duties, is rewarded with ten new gowns and three jars of a specially prepared magical plant salve."

Lilith's judgment had arrived, swift and precise—a cause for joy for one, and misery for two.

"Huh? Why is Mama punishing me?" Pallas cried, his eyes welling with tears. "Pallas didn't do anything!"

To be punished by kneeling meant his mother was truly angry. "Sister..." he looked to Elara, his expression pleading for help.

"Don't be afraid," Elara said, patting his head. "I'll bring some treats and keep you company tonight. We can count the stars together. You didn't finish last time, remember?"

Hearing this, Pallas found that the prospect of kneeling in the square suddenly didn't seem so bad after all.

Kronos, meanwhile, watched the two of them with a curious expression. He was, for now, willing to accept that this girl was his sister and this boy his brother. He made a mental note to demand a full explanation from his own mother as soon as he returned to the human kingdom.

"I'm hungry," he grumbled, his stomach growling loudly. "Where's the food? I want meat!"

Elara turned, looking him up and down. "Call me sister," she said coolly. "And be polite. A little more affectionate, I think."

Kronos fell silent. After a few seconds, he spoke again, the reluctance thick in his voice. "Sister... I'm hungry. I want to eat meat."

The address was like music to Elara's ears. A delighted smile bloomed on her face as she turned to the succubus guard. "My brother wants meat. You may bring their food here."

"As you command."

Moments later, platter after platter of roasted meat appeared in the square. Elara watched, a strange, unreadable smile playing on her lips, as Kronos and Pallas scrambled to devour the food.

In the castle's reception hall, after bidding farewell to Aldous the Ogre, Orion met with his final honored guest of the day.

"Jorik, welcome to Stoneheart City."

At Orion's arrival, Jorik the Glacial Dragon immediately rose and performed an ancient, formal draconic greeting.

"Orion," Jorik's tone was warm and familiar. "It has been some time. Your deeds and your name are known across the entire continent." He was deliberately trying to establish a rapport, to treat Orion as a friend rather than a superior.

Orion, far from being offended, appreciated the gesture. The warmth of it surprised Jorik, who took it as a sign that Orion still valued the camaraderie from their old alliance, when they had marched south to invade together.

"Sit," Orion said with a welcoming gesture, settling into his own chair with a relaxed posture. "We've known each other since the northern campaigns. You know I have no patience for ceremony. There is no need for it between us."

"Hah! It's still incredible," Jorik said, relaxing slightly. "To think you are now an Archlord. I could never have imagined it. I remember when you defeated the Giant Balor in this very place to become the Giant King."

"I learned a phrase in another world," Orion said with a small smile. "The turns of fate. You yourself are at the peak of the Legendary tier, Jorik. Fate has not been unkind to you."

They both laughed, but a subtle gulf lay between them. Jorik, it was true, was only one step away from becoming an Archlord himself. That knowledge gave him a sliver of confidence, a foundation of pride.

But only one who had crossed that threshold could truly comprehend the sheer, cosmic vastness of the chasm between the peak of one tier and the bottom of the next.

Orion did not point this out. He did not wish to shatter the fragile bond of friendship that remained.

Since his ascension, a profound loneliness had begun to creep into Orion's existence. Friends and allies who had once treated him as an equal now kept their distance. He felt like he was becoming a myth in his own lifetime, shedding the bonds of the mortal world to become a cold, distant star, admired from afar but no longer touched. His power and his perspective were outgrowing his world, and his friends in it were becoming fewer and fewer.

And so, he cherished this rare chance to speak with a former comrade-in-arms.

Of course, if Jorik hadn't faked his own death to flee during the North-South War, Orion might have chosen to forge a deeper bond with him, a true friendship like the one he shared with Aldous.

A shame, he thought to himself.

Raising his goblet, Orion gestured to Jorik. After a long drink of the strong spirit, he decided not to play games.

"I won't hide it from you, Jorik," he said, getting straight to the point. "The Sea Folk have made the Stoneheart Horde an offer we cannot refuse. The war between my people and the seadragon race will end."

He held up a hand before the dragon could react. "But I want to be clear: this does not affect the friendship between the Horde and the dragons. Our alliance remains. As I understand it, your people are invading the Starfall Sea. Your enemy is the Reverse Whale race. The Starfall Sea is a great distance from the Trident Sea region. There is no direct conflict of interest between you and our new... associates."

This was Orion's new stance. He was an Archlord, and the Stoneheart Horde was now a true power on the continent of Titanion. It was a time to consolidate power, to build their foundations. Peace and stability, management and growth—that was what Orion now pursued in his home realm. War could be saved for other worlds.

Jorik listened intently, and when Orion had finished, the dragon nodded slowly. "Orion," he said, his voice grave. "My progenitor shares this sentiment exactly."

Chapter 820: A Hard-Won Peace

Orion met Jorik's gaze, holding it. The dragon did not flinch, but raised his goblet in a gesture of humble respect.

"With the World Tunnels shattered and the Archlords of the great houses returning, the board has been reset," Jorik said, his voice a low rumble. "Barring some unforeseen catastrophe, most wars between the powers of the realm will grind to a halt."

He spoke the truth. With a power like an Archlord anchoring each side, continued conflict would escalate into a war of annihilation, a battle for the very survival of a race. Such gambles were too vast, their consequences too dire. It was far more likely that the Archlords, like Orion and King Neptor, would extinguish the flames of conflict with a few curt words—a pact born of mutual, overwhelming power. In the calculus of kings, old grievances were poor currency.

Besides, who could say what demigod stood behind which Archlord? To risk a war between gods over the squabbles of mortals was unthinkable. Even the divines would not engage in such folly unless their own fundamental interests were threatened.

"The war between the dragons and the sea-races will end," Jorik continued. "From this day forward, my people, like the Stoneheart Horde, will seek stability. We will seek to grow."

Orion fell silent, the pieces clicking into place.

Only now did he fully grasp the sheer, breathtaking scope of the white dragon Frostsire's ambition. With the other Archlords bound in another realm, the ancient wyrm had launched his wars on land and sea, not for total conquest, but to carve out new territory. He had pushed against the borders of Men, Dwarves, Blood Elves, and Giants, but never so far as to make them irreconcilable enemies. In the seas, he had avoided antagonizing the Naga and the Sea-Drakes(Sea-Dragons) who bordered his primary target.

On the grand stage, the dragon race had made only one true enemy: the Reverse Whale race. All other skirmishes were mere feints, distractions.

A cunning old lizard, Orion thought with a grudging respect. He plays a long game.

Frostsire had executed a grandmaster's gambit, expanding his domain to its absolute limit without crossing the one line that would bring true ruin upon his house. And now, just as the demigods and Archlords returned, he had called a halt. The dragons' return to prominence was seamless, a perfectly timed maneuver. They were guided by a master strategist, one whose roots ran as deep and steady as the ocean floor.

"Orion," Jorik said, breaking the silence. "I have come to ensure the pacts of trade between our peoples remain strong. We hope the gates of your cities will remain open to us." He added, "As ours will be to you, of course."

Orion's eyes lit with interest. Continued trade meant continued access to the dragon-forged galleons that, once modified, became his formidable Sea-Devouring Warships.

"You have my word," Orion declared. "The cities of the Stoneheart Horde will be open to all peoples of the continent who come in peace."

They spoke for a long while after that. From Jorik, Orion learned that a true, lasting peace might finally settle over Titanion. With the dragons and the Horde both choosing to consolidate their power, only the human kingdoms possessed the ambition to stir the waters of war. But with the continent's political landscape now so complex, so fraught with returned power, even the most belligerent human king would hesitate to make the first move.

Peace, Orion mused. Hard-won, and all the more precious for it. The Dark Beast Tides, the North-South War, the battles on the high seas, and the secret, two-sided war through the World Tunnels... peace was the quiet dawn that followed a long and bloody night.

Later, in the deep of that night, the castle square was quiet.

The two giant princes, Kronos and Pallas, knelt side-by-side on the cold flagstones, their gazes turned up toward the moon and the endless tapestry of stars.

Elara, by contrast, was quite comfortable. She had summoned a thick vine from the cracks between the stones, weaving it into an elegant swing upon which she sat, gently swaying. She was counting the stars aloud for Pallas, her voice a soft murmur in the night air.

Kronos, for his part, was sullenly munching his way through a pile of exotic fruits Elara had procured from somewhere, watching the other two with a strange mixture of curiosity and alienation.

It was a strange tableau: two princes kneeling in punishment, while their big sister swung happily beside them, the scene a bizarre yet strangely tender portrait of their nascent brotherhood.

From a high balcony above, Orion held Lilith in his arms, the two of them watching their children below.

"Do you think," Lilith murmured, her head resting on his chest, "that when he is grown, Kronos will resent me for this?"

Though her heart was vast, and her methods wise, he was not her-born. A sliver of doubt remained. Making Pallas share the punishment was a masterful stroke; it not only forged a bond of shared hardship between the two brothers, lessening any resentment, it also gave Kronos an honest measure of the siblings he had never known. Should someone whisper poison in his ear years from now, he might remember this night—the two children who knelt with him in the dark—and question whether they were truly deserving of his hatred.

"Never," Orion said, his voice a low rumble. "You are the Hearth-Queen of the Stoneheart Horde. Your word in our halls is law, especially in the raising of my children. If he is to be a true giant, he must learn to respect the Matron of his clan."

His tone hardened. "A son who does not honor you is no son of mine. Such a whelp, I would cast from the clan myself—"

Lilith's fingers gently covered his mouth, silencing him. "Hush, my love. While I am here, they will all be well. Kaelen, too. If he ever finds his way here, I will care for him as my own."

Orion had told her everything upon his return, including the existence of Kaelen, his son trapped on the Chaos Continent.

Lilith had taken the news with quiet grace. The boy was worlds away; for him to reach them, he would first have to cross from the Chaos Continent to Dusk, and then find passage to the Titanion Realm. Without the aid of an Archlord or a demigod, the journey was impossible. More than anything, Lilith simply pitied the boy.

Emerald Dream Realm, The Silvermoon Empire.

With their ruling caste spirited away, the remaining Silver-Eyed people were nothing more than sheep without a shepherd. Their fate was a matter to be decided by a single command from their conquerors.

In the end, mercy was a courtesy they were not afforded. The entire race was enslaved, their future now belonging to Alexander and Leonidas.

"Some of them possess a unique aptitude in their third eye," Alexander noted with cold detachment. "They are suited for the shadows. They will make a fine crucible for a new generation of assassins."

He selected over a hundred of the most promising youths, inducting them into the brutal trials of his Blade Hall.

The rest he gave to Leonidas. They would serve a different purpose. They were no longer a people, but a resource. A breeding stock to be managed.