

Titan King 821

Chapter 821: The Crucible of the Gods

"Brother, you should pick a few for yourself."

In the command tent, Leonidas slid a list across the table to Orion. On it were the names of the most promising of the Silver-Eyed captives. Properly trained, they would become a formidable force.

Orion took the list, considering it for a moment before giving a slow nod, accepting his brother's offer.

"Gustalon!"

At Orion's call, a whisper of wind coiled in the center of the tent, coalescing into the lithe form of his servant.

"My lord, your command?"

"Take this list to Dirtclaw," Orion ordered. "Tell him I want these captives from the Dusk Continent forged into a new legion, ready for war."

For prisoners and slaves, there was no better method of indoctrination than the crucible of the Horde's cannon fodder legions. There, under the relentless discipline of the Stoneheart banner and the fanatical zeal of a commander like Dirtclaw, they would be broken down and reforged. They would find a new faith, or they would die trying.

As Gustalon vanished to carry out the order, the last pieces of the continental conquest fell into place. Of the half of the continent they had seized, sixty percent now fell under Isabella's domain. The Deputy Commander, Arthas, Alexander, and Leonidas had each claimed a symbolic territory at the four cardinal points, effectively acting as wardens for Isabella's new queendom.

Her own strength and resources were far too green to hold such a vast expanse. Even claiming it would have been impossible without the legions of undead she had summoned during the war, skeletal hosts that now slumbered in barrows across the land, ready to be awakened at a moment's notice.

"I am taking Kraken to patrol the coastal waters," a voice cut through the low murmur of the camp. "It is time we established clear borders with our new neighbors. I recall you slew a creature of Leviathan-class."

By the time Orion turned, Arthas was already standing beside him.

"You mean the ancient Giant-Horned Whale, brother?"

"The same."

Orion flipped his hand, and a dimensional satchel appeared in his palm. Within it lay the colossal corpse of the whale. As a beast on par with an upper-tier Archlord, its remains were a treasure of immense value. A prize of this magnitude wasn't something to be squandered, and Orion would not have parted with it without a perfect plan for its use.

Arthas took the satchel, gave its contents a cursory glance, and then turned, his form already beginning to dissolve.

"When my work is done, I will bring you something worthy in return."

Though he had vanished, his voice still echoed in the ears of Orion and Leonidas.

"Why is it," Leonidas grumbled, staring at the empty space where Arthas had stood, "that ever since he and the Deputy Commander ascended to demigod, they have to act so damned mysterious? Always putting on airs like some unfathomable oracle."

"If you were a demigod, you could do the same." Alexander strode in from the tent's entrance, having caught the tail end of Leonidas's complaint.

"You think I don't want to? I dream of it. But becoming a demigod isn't something you can just wish into existence," Leonidas sighed, his enthusiasm for the topic souring as it always did. He eyed Alexander. "What are you doing back here already?"

"What do you mean?"

"You left. Is that little queen Isabella going to be able to manage on her own?"

Alexander rolled his eyes. "We conquered the territory for her. Am I now expected to hold her hand and teach her how to govern it? She is my apprentice, not my daughter."

"Come now, brother, this is your chance!" Leonidas grinned, his tone shifting to one of wicked suggestion. "Offer the little queen a strong shoulder to lean on, and she'll offer you her throne... and her bed. Before you know it, you could have heirs planted across the whole damn continent!"

Orion shook his head at Leonidas's crude scheming. "Brother, you must have returned for a reason," he said, looking to Alexander. For all his protests, Alexander would never truly abandon his protégée.

"I did," Alexander confirmed. "I have already spoken with Isabella. We will be establishing branch headquarters for the Blade Hall in all of her major settlements."

His gaze fell upon Orion. "And in your territories as well. I suggest you make the arrangements quickly."

He leaned forward, his voice low and serious. "You all saw it. Thirteen demigods standing in the heavens. Without a proper intelligence network, our lower-level subjects and creatures could be easily swayed or corrupted. We need eyes and ears everywhere, to prevent and prepare."

This was a matter of grave importance. Orion nodded at once. With Alexander's shadow armies, they could monitor the entire continent, moving unseen to counter any sudden threats.

"Brother," Leonidas said suddenly, slinging an arm over Orion's shoulders. "Is this avatar of yours free for the foreseeable future?"

"It is. Its current mission is simply to stand guard over the Dusk Continent." Orion was unsure where this was going, but he answered truthfully.

"Excellent. Keep it that way. Don't give it any new assignments." Leonidas's grin widened. "Rest up. Soon, this avatar will be joining the rest of us for a special task."

Orion looked directly into his brother's eyes, seeking an explanation. Leonidas just chuckled and shrugged, saying nothing. Orion's gaze shifted to Alexander, but the spymaster was intently studying the dregs of wine in his goblet, as if he'd heard nothing at all.

"Very well," Orion said finally. Unable to pry any more information from them, he agreed, suppressing his curiosity as he left the tent to see to the Blade Hall arrangements.

Once he was gone, Alexander's voice rose, quiet and contemplative.

"He has only just ascended to Archlord. Is it not too soon to bring him to the Crucible of the Gods?"

Leonidas turned from watching Orion's retreating back. "He was killing Archlords when he was at the peak of the Legendary tier. By rights, he was qualified even then. And now? You haven't seen the savagery of that new avatar of his. If you told me he could challenge a demigod right now, I'd believe you."

Leonidas knew that even without the protection of the Champions Alliance, Orion now possessed the strength to survive on his own. He had proven as much when he'd faced the Silver-Eyed Grand General Dorian, an enemy whose very style was a counter to his own, and had lived to tell the tale.

Alexander said nothing. He found himself remembering the battle on the Dawn Continent, where they had slain three Archlords. That day, Orion had killed his target before Alexander had killed his.

"Notify me when you are ready," Alexander said, downing the last of his wine. He rose and departed the tent, leaving Leonidas alone with his thoughts.

Stoneheart City, upon the throne.

The moment his avatar on the Dusk Continent had accepted the mission, Orion's main body acted. In the face of an unknown and clearly dangerous task, any advantage, no matter how small, was worth seizing.

He brought forth the treasure coffer dropped by the behemoth he had slain in the World Tunnels.

He focused his will, and the coffer opened. Resting inside was a single scroll, shimmering with a brilliant golden light.

Chapter 822: An Insult to the Reign

[Siren's Regeneration]

[Type: Enhancement Skill Scroll (Special)]

[Quality: Legendary]

Description: Upon learning this skill, the user's self-healing abilities are greatly enhanced. As long as the head and heart do not suffer catastrophic damage, any wound will regenerate. Destroyed limbs and organs will also be restored in a short time.

Note 1: Regeneration consumes the body's life force. If the life force is insufficient, or if a corresponding source of energy is not provided, the regenerative ability will be weakened.

Note 2: This is a bloodline enhancement skill. When the host's body is weakened and on the verge of death, there is a small chance of bloodline mutation. If the host dies, the body will transform into a Siren.

The scroll in Orion's hands was an artifact of legendary power. Without hesitation, he tore it in two. A torrent of golden light flooded from the parchment, pouring into his body.

He felt a primal energy infuse his very cells. Reaching for his trident, he drew one of its razor-sharp points across his own forearm. A deep gash appeared, yet the pain was a dull, distant thing.

In less than a second, before a single drop of blood could even form, the wound sealed itself shut. The skin was left flawless, without a trace of a scar.

Even for a giant, whose resilience was immense, the sheer speed of the healing was startling. The scroll had granted him no new overt ability, but his body's own power to mend itself was now magnified to a terrifying degree, drastically increasing his ability to survive any battle.

As for the scroll's two drawbacks, Orion dismissed them. Life force as fuel? A small price to pay. The risk of transforming into a siren upon death? When facing annihilation, who had the luxury of worrying about the state of their own corpse?

Just as Orion was about to turn his focus to the Survivor's Platform, the silken voice of a succubus guard echoed from outside the hall.

"My lord, Elder Lysinthia requests an audience."

Orion's brow arched slightly. He knew Lysinthia's temperament well. She was a creature of quiet frost; if he did not seek her out, she would never approach him of her own accord.

Unless something was wrong.

"Let her enter."

A moment later, Lysinthia swept into the great hall. Orion patted his leg, and without a word, she glided over and settled onto his thigh, the gesture one of familiar intimacy and deference.

"Is there trouble in your city?" he asked. If she had come to him, it could only be about her domain, the port city of Lysinthia. And it would be serious.

"Yes."

Orion said nothing, waiting for her to continue.

"Master," she said, her voice tight, "Commander Clawpincher is dead."

Clawpincher. Commander of the Tidecrab Shield-Wall. Since being summoned, Orion had stationed him at Mist Bay to help Lysinthia defend the harbor. Orion froze, immediately reaching out with his senses to the magical contract that bound the warrior to him.

There was nothing. The connection was gone.

"Tell me what happened," Orion's voice became edged with ice. He had just ascended to Archlord, and already one of his alpha-level beings had fallen on his own shores. To have this happen so soon was an open act of defiance. An insult to his reign.

Half a month ago, in the seas near the city of Lysinthia.

With the Giant Kelp Water Cannons and the Ocean Hunters fully cultivated, the Sea-Devouring Warships stationed at Mist Bay began their primary mission: to explore the vast, uncharted waters and find a safe route to Serpent Isle.

On that day, Clawpincher led his Tidecrab Shield Warriors and a contingent of lizardmen aboard two warships, pushing further into the unknown territories.

"Commander," a lizardman said from behind Clawpincher, his voice a gravelly attempt to break the monotony of the open sea. "They say our lord has ascended to Archlord. You think the Sea-folk out here have heard? Think they're hiding from us?"

The loneliness of the sea was a pressure cooker; without talk, the warriors would go mad.

"They have surely heard of our lord's name," Clawpincher rumbled, his gaze fixed on the churning waves. "But as for his ascension... I doubt it. Even we only learned of it because the Sentinel Corps sent word. Keep to your duties. Once we chart the route to Serpent Isle, you'll all be rotated for shore leave."

At the mention of leave, a murmur of anticipation rippled through the crew. Leave meant a trip to Blackstone City, or even the capital, Stoneheart. The bustling markets of the capital, filled with goods from foreign lands, were a powerful lure.

"Heh, I heard you can buy human thralls in Stoneheart's outer markets," cackled another warrior, his voice crude. "Prettier than anything that crawls out of the sea. When we get back, I'm buying a half-dozen for myself!"

A wave of rough laughter followed the shameless declaration. But it was cut short by a violent shudder that ran through the hull of the warship—a combat signal from the Ocean Hunters, warning of an imminent threat.

"To arms! Enemy contact!" Clawpincher's reaction was instantaneous, his voice bellowing across the deck.

The Giant Kelp Water Cannons swiveled, their maws turning toward the sea. The Ocean Hunters detached from the hull and swarmed into the depths. But as the crew stared, a collective chill seized them. All around them, the waves were rising to impossible heights, and within the churning walls of water, the silhouettes of countless merfolk warriors could be seen.

"We are the Stoneheart Horde, sailing from Mist Bay!" Clawpincher roared, hoping to avoid a clash between potential allies, knowing his lord had ties to the mer-races. "Identify yourselves!"

The only answer was the triumphant, piercing cry of a sea-drake.

It was followed by a barrage of water magic that hammered the ships and the swarm of Merfolk warriors that poured from the waves.

"Fight! Fight! Fight!"

The world became a storm of chaos. The cannons boomed. The Ocean Hunters tore into the enemy with feral rage. The Tidecrab warriors locked their shields, forming a wall against the tide, while the lizardmen fired heavy crossbows from the ship's battlements. But they were surrounded, an army rising from all sides.

They held out for half a day. After the last of the Ocean Hunters were slaughtered, Clawpincher and his warriors were dragged into a desperate, final battle. In the depths of the ocean, with no support and no retreat, against an enemy whose strength far outmatched their own, their fate was sealed.

When the storm subsided, the Sea-Devouring Warships were gone, sunk to the depths. Not a single body floated on the surface. Even the blood that had stained the ocean red was quickly diluted, washed away by the currents.

It was as if nothing had ever happened.

Stoneheart City, upon the throne.

"Return to your city at once," Orion said, his voice betraying no emotion. "Halt all voyages. Let no warship leave the harbor."

He patted Lysinthia's back, a gesture of reassurance. "Hold Mist Bay. In time, my avatar will descend upon your city personally."

With Clawpincher's death, Lysinthia had lost her right arm, and her city, a great general.

"Was it the Merfolk Race?" she asked, looking up at him.

Orion nodded. The contract with Clawpincher had been severed, but not before fragmented, dying images had flashed through their connection. There was no doubt who was responsible.

He couldn't help but reflect on the irony. In the south, where he had expected war, he had instead brokered peace with the Sea-Drakes. Yet here, in the northern waters of the Silvercurrent Sea, the Tidefang Clan—a faction he had paid little mind—had been the first to strike a blow against the Stoneheart Horde.

Chapter 823: It Is Not Truly Gone

Was this because of Marina?

Orion didn't know why the Tidefang Clan had attacked his fleet, but he knew the lives of Clawpincher and his warriors would not be sacrificed for nothing.

Tidefang Clan... Merfolk... Marina...

His thoughts spiraled, connecting the disparate facts. The Tidefang were a mer-race, which meant a connection to the Demigodess Seraphina was almost certain. That was a complication he did not welcome.

Let's hope this doesn't drag her into the fray. But that was a problem for another day. If she was to be involved, he would face that reality when it came.

The Emerald Dream Realm. On the coast west of Stratus, on the Southern Continent.

This was the same shoreline where Kraken had first been teleported into this world. Orion stood on the beach, watching as a spectral figure approached from the horizon. It was Arthas, and he stood atop the colossal form of the ancient giant-horned whale. Its shape was vast and imperious, and its aura, vast and oppressive even in undeath, was unmistakably that of an Archlord.

Gods, the power of necromancy, Orion thought with a flicker of envy. The ability to command such might is a truly fearsome thing.

Half a day later, the leviathan ran aground, and Arthas drifted from its back to stand beside Orion.

"Kraken was willing to pay any price to keep this thing," Arthas said, gesturing to the beached undead whale. "I refused him." An Archlord undead would have sent the Kraken's power skyrocketing. "Its will, even in death, is not something a mortal like him can hope to command. Besides, it was your kill. I had no right to dispose of it."

Arthas produced a black, ornate funerary urn. As transcendent power pulsed from his hand, the entire whale dissolved into a torrent of black smoke that was drawn into the small vessel. He then handed the urn to Orion.

"Summoning it will require a formidable will. Fortunately, as an Archlord yourself, you now have the strength to command it," Arthas explained. "The corpse was dead too long, and you hadn't preserved it with the necessary rites. Its power decayed. From an upper-tier Archlord, I could only raise it as a lower-tier. A pity."

It was a pity indeed. An undead of this magnitude, a lord of the deep sea, was a unique prize even for a master of undead like Arthas.

"This... is for me?" Orion was speechless. He had given away a corpse. In return, he was receiving an Archlord-level undead mount. The bargain was so lopsided it felt like a dream.

"You don't want it?" Arthas's lips curved into a faint smile. "Perhaps I should take it back, then?"

Without a second thought, Orion secured the urn safely within his storage ring.

"You have your own Skeletal Knights of the Legendary tier now," Arthas continued, his tone shifting back to business. "I will be reassigning Vexis and Rumbold. Rumbold will be guarding the northern territories. If your Skeletal Knight commander wishes to learn more of the arts of undeath, he may seek out Rumbold for instruction." He paused. "As for the path beyond, I cannot say. My own strongest Skeletal Knights have only reached the Legendary tier."

The ritual to create the knights had been a gift from Arthas. It seemed that Clymene had reached the limits of that teaching. Whether she could advance further would depend on her own will and the strength of the souls bound to her.

"Thank you, brother." Orion nodded, his gratitude sincere. Without Arthas, his bond with Clymene would have ended long ago.

Arthas said nothing, simply looking at Orion. There were words he wished to say, but they remained unspoken. The Lord's Stone Orion had given him... it had been the key, the very thing that had

illuminated his own path to ascension. This debt was not one that could be repaid with a single undead thrall.

"You did well in my absence," Arthas said instead, the statement grand and yet, from him, it felt natural. "You did not shame my name."

Coming from anyone else, the words would have been an outrageous arrogance. But Arthas had been Orion's guide, his mentor in the ways of this world.

"It was a stroke of luck, nothing more," Orion said with a wry smile, shaking his head. Having seen the sheer number of demigods in this realm, he felt no pride in his own ascension. If anything, he knew it had been a shortcut.

"There are no shortcuts to the realms beyond Lord-tier," Arthas corrected him, his voice firm. "Every single ascension is fraught with peril. Yours, mine, Alexander's, Leonidas's... we all walk the same razor's edge."

He began to walk along the coastline, and Orion fell into step behind him. The two moved in a comfortable harmony, like a master and his student.

"Leonidas told me my power is a spring without a source," Orion admitted. "That in a true battle of attrition, it will not sustain me."

Arthas did not refute it. He stopped and turned, his gaze serious. "You are an Archlord now, with an Archlord-level avatar. It is time you began invading the Godforsaken Lands. Take a few of them, conquer them. Your domain will grow, and the problem you now face will cease to be a problem."

This was advice Orion was happy to hear. Was there any problem that could not be solved by conquest?

He proceeded to recount the major events that had transpired during Arthas's period of slumber, seeking the invaluable perspective of a third party, a mentor who could point out his errors.

"Your timing for the invasion of the Emerald Dream Realm was perfect. Any later, and the Deputy Commander would not have been able to set his plans in motion," Arthas analyzed. "The Secret Art of the Rite of the Serpent Trinity is a powerful prize. Once the Commander and his Deputy have modified it, you will likely be rewarded again. And as for that demigod, Tusha... he is not dead. You shattered his plans. He has undoubtedly marked you for death."

Arthas's praise was welcome, but his analysis was crucial. He offered wisdom and perspective that Orion, for all his power, lacked. The possibility that the demigod Tusha had survived was something Orion had overlooked. A cold knot formed in his stomach.

"Do not let your true body wander the other continents of this realm," Arthas warned. "You cannot know if that evil being is watching us... watching you. And there is another thing. This problem of yours..."

Arthas raised a finger and pointed to Orion's chest, to the very spot where the Curse of a Hundred Blossoms had once bloomed.

"It is not truly gone."

Orion frowned, his expression a mask of confusion.

"Do not resist," Arthas commanded, his voice devoid of warmth. A wisp of pure death-energy coiled around his fingertip as he reached toward Orion's heart.

Chapter 824: The Seed of a God

As the death-energy flowed into him, Orion felt no pain, no malice. But under its pressure, something deep within his chest was forced into the open: a dull, lifeless seed, pulsing faintly where the curse once bloomed.

It was a final, lingering gambit from the Flower Goddess.

Orion's blood ran cold. He clearly remembered using the Commander's gifted blade-flash to obliterate her divine will.

"Do not be alarmed. It is merely a remnant," Arthas said, his voice calm. "But though it is only a remnant, it was masterfully hidden. If not for my nature... for the sensitivity of the undead to all things vibrant with life, I would not have found it."

An undead being was a vessel of pure death-energy; the vibrant, unique life signature of this seed, however faint, could not escape his senses.

"I suspect even the Purification Tower could do nothing against this seed," Arthas continued. "Because there is no will attached to it. Not yet."

Orion didn't understand, his gaze fixed on his mentor, waiting for an explanation.

"Judging by the nature of this seed, and the fate of that lover of yours who conceived your child by transforming into a flower... I am certain it was no mere demigod you provoked," Arthas said, his tone growing grave. "You have made an enemy of a true god."

He let the weight of that sink in before continuing. "The seed is dormant now. But the moment you attempt your ascension to demigod, the moment your soul reaches out to grasp the rules of the cosmos, it will awaken. It will become a conduit, a beacon to draw down that goddess's divine power. You will face another invasion, a divine assault at your most vulnerable moment. Whether you would survive... I cannot say."

Arthas withdrew his hand, and the death-energy receded. The seed, like a patient parasite, dissolved back into Orion's body, becoming utterly undetectable once more.

Seeing the grim set of Orion's expression, Arthas offered a sliver of comfort. "Do not despair. For you, this is not necessarily a bad thing."

The ghost of a smile touched his lips. "The machinations of a god are not so easily erased. You used her, again and again. It is only natural she would play a wicked game of her own." Arthas was familiar with the curse; he had been the first one Orion had sought for a solution.

“But now you know she is there. You can prepare for her. You can set your own traps.” Arthas’s smile became a wry, knowing thing. “Just as you did before. Did you not steal a great deal of faith-energy from her to fuel your own ascension to Archlord?”

The meaning was clear. Orion’s eyes lit with understanding.

“Brother, you mean to say...”

“You understand perfectly well,” Arthas said, turning to continue his walk along the shore.

Orion pondered this new, perilous opportunity for a long moment before hurrying to catch up. “Brother, there is another matter. Leonidas mentioned a mission he wanted me for. Do you know of it?”

Arthas did not answer directly, his voice a dispassionate whisper on the wind.

“You will know when they are ready.”

Titanion Realm, Stoneheart City.

A month had passed. The festive air from the coronation had not faded; instead, it had settled into the city’s bones, transforming it into a place of bustling, ceaseless prosperity. A springtide of commerce and life showed no signs of ebbing.

Yet one young giant, walking against that vibrant current, was leaving the castle with a heavy heart.

“I’ll be back next year to challenge you!” Kronos yelled, finally mustering his courage as he looked back at the two small figures standing at the castle gate. He fixed his gaze on his older sister, the one who could cast spells without a single word.

He made a solemn vow to himself: when he returned home, he would have his mother find him a mage. He too would learn magic. Only magic could defeat magic. As for Pallas... he was the younger brother. How could an older brother possibly lose to him?

With that thought fortifying his spirit, Kronos waved both hands high in the air in a final farewell. In the distance, his cousin, Prince Theodore, was waiting for him.

"Sister, why does brother have to leave?" Pallas asked, his voice small. "Isn't it nice here? You're here, and Mama is here, and our Aunts, and Daddy..."

He couldn't understand Kronos's departure. Just as Kronos had been sheltered from the world by his mother, Ava, in the human kingdom, Pallas had been sheltered by the love of his own family within the walls of Stoneheart.

"What does it matter to us if he leaves?" Elara said with a 嘻嘻. She glanced at Kronos's retreating figure, then took Pallas's small hand. "You'd better practice, Pallas. He's coming back to challenge you, you know. You don't want him to be the one giving you a thrashing next year."

She tugged him along. "Come on, let's go to the gardens. I know which of the magical fruits are ripe."

At the mention of fruit, Pallas's eyes lit up. If Elara said a fruit was delicious, it was always the most delicious thing in the world, the kind that could let you play for three days and three nights without sleep.

In the distance, Kronos, now holding Prince Theodore's hand, suddenly looked back, a strange feeling drawing his gaze. But the two small, beloved figures were already gone from the castle gate. He felt a pang of disappointment.

As he was about to turn away, his eyes were drawn upward, to the highest turret of the citadel.

A tall, majestic figure stood there, watching him. A pair of bright, scarlet eyes met his own.

An overwhelming urge to fall to his knees and prostrate himself washed over the young giant. At the same time, he felt a profound and inexplicable sense of familiarity, of closeness, emanating from that gaze.

Is that... Father? The thought arose in his mind, fierce and certain. In the month he had been here, he had never once met the king. He only knew what Elara and Pallas told him: that their father sat upon the great throne and rarely came out.

He came out, Kronos thought, his heart swelling. Did he come out to see me off? His only impression of his father was this: a mighty silhouette, scarlet eyes, and the whispers of everyone around him, speaking of a being of supreme power.

“Are you certain we should let him go?” Lilith materialized at Orion’s side, linking her arm with his and resting her head against his shoulder. Their gazes were fixed on the small, departing figure of Kronos.

As Orion’s queen, she held authority over the discipline of all his children. If she had decided to keep Kronos at the castle, no one, not even Orion, would have objected.

“You have already let him go, have you not?” Orion murmured, leaning down to kiss her forehead. His wife’s wisdom, her grasp of the larger picture, and her firm, independent judgment in raising their children were things he cherished deeply.

“I thought it would be a cruel thing, to separate a child from his mother,” Lilith said softly, basking in his affection. “And his heart is good. He has not been spoiled or taught malice. The faction behind him knows there are lines that must not be crossed.”

Her voice was a low, contented purr. “I have made a decision. We will send a stipend of resources for him, every year. A prince of the Stoneheart Horde should not want for anything while living in a human kingdom. He will not be forced to beg others for the means to grow strong.”

“Mm,” Orion agreed, his voice a soft rumble of assent.

Chapter 825: A Profound Stain Upon His Honor

Orion's hands roamed freely, his touch slipping beneath the layers of Lilith's gown, stoking the fires in his succubus queen.

"The younglings are your domain," he murmured against her skin. "You have sole authority over their upbringing. Should any outside force dare to interfere, I will be the one to break it."

With a powerful grace, he swept her into his arms. Lilith went willingly, burying her face in his chest with the shy devotion of a new bride as he carried her from the balcony.

The Kingdom of Man, Soaring Bird City.

When news of the Giant King's ascension to Archlord spread, Baron Torin was ecstatic. Orion's new status elevated the Stoneheart Horde to the ranks of the continent's true powers, guaranteeing the stability of its capital.

In practical terms, this meant the considerable wealth Torin had squirreled away in Stoneheart City was safe from the ravages of war or confiscation. In fact, with the Horde's continued growth, the value of the properties he had acquired there was set to multiply several times over.

So, when word arrived that Princess Ava intended to visit Soaring Bird City and stay for a time, a spark of ambition ignited within him. By their prior agreement, Torin had already pledged his allegiance to her faction; in the eyes of the city's other nobles, he was Princess Ava's man.

He had come into possession of the sword of the legendary knight Arthur—Princess Ava's former sworn shield—and with it, a claim to his knightly traditions. To further ingratiate himself with the princess, Torin went to great lengths to seek out and gather several other knights of similar renown.

In a lavish palace near Ava's own residence, the princess hosted a banquet. In attendance were six individuals who all carried the legacy of a great knightly order: Torin, Garrett, Lambert, Godfrey, and two others, Drustan and Klythia.

Ava raised her goblet. The candlelight danced within the wine, casting a deep, thoughtful glow upon her refined features.

“With courage and fealty, I pledge my life to the protection of my Princess. I shall uphold honor, loyalty, and justice, and be tempted by neither avarice nor power. I shall, with all my strength, protect the interests of my Princess.”

The words hung in the air, a perfect recitation of the oath Arthur had sworn when he first joined the Order of the Rose and pledged himself to her service. He had kept that oath to his dying breath. It was a memory Ava held as a great honor, and she was fiercely proud to have had guardians like Arthur and Galahad.

“My lords, my lady,” she said, her gaze sweeping across them all. “I welcome you, and I thank you from my heart for coming. We are gathered not only to share this feast, but to celebrate the reunion of this noble fellowship.”

Of the fabled Eight Great Knights, six were present at this table. Including the fallen Galahad, she had nearly brought the entire legendary order back together. Though this gathering had been Torin’s idea, she had not refused it. Ava knew, with absolute clarity, that she needed a formidable power at her back. If not for herself, then for the future of her son, Kronos.

“I hope this banquet will allow us all to become acquainted. I am certain every knight here has a tale of their own worth sharing. But before that, let us raise our glasses together and celebrate this wonderful moment!”

With Princess Ava’s opening words, the atmosphere in the hall warmed. The knights began to converse, sizing one another up between pleasantries. The most animated of them was the lady knight, Klythia, who quickly drew close to Ava. As women, they found they had much to discuss.

“Your Highness, believe me, I will be the strongest shield in our Order of the Rose!” Klythia declared. She was a shield-maiden whose physique was as deceptively delicate as her name was lovely. Unlike most who wielded a tower shield, Klythia possessed a slender frame more akin to a court maiden’s than a warrior’s, yet her finely toned arms held a promise of explosive strength.

“I have faith in every knight here,” Ava replied with a warm smile. Klythia’s eager pledge alone made the journey to Soaring Bird City worthwhile.

Beside Klythia sat Drustan, a dual-blade knight who remained masked and silent. His withdrawn nature stood in stark contrast to the rest, but fortunately, the polished charm of nobles like Torin and Lambert kept the conversation flowing, maintaining a harmonious atmosphere throughout the feast.

Ava did not speak of any serious business that night, but every knight at the table knew the true purpose of their assembly. From the beginning of the banquet to the end, as her guests finally rose to depart, a gentle, unwavering smile never left her face.

After the last guest had gone, Ava stood by a window, gazing out at Soaring Bird City. It had grown much more prosperous in the three years since she had last seen it, its outer walls having been expanded several times.

“Can the knights be united?” she asked quietly, the question directed not to the city, but to Lambert and Garrett, who had remained behind. She was asking if the others could be brought to heel, to serve her cause.

It was Lambert who answered. Garrett, as usual, was silent. “Aside from Lady Klythia, the loyalties of the others are not yet certain, Your Highness.”

“And Sir Drustan? What are his thoughts?” Ava asked, her gaze still fixed on the city lights.

“Drustan says he is a wanderer. He is not accustomed to being bound by oaths, nor does he wish to be.” Lambert sounded regretful. The knights of this age held the old codes in high regard, and this fierce independence would make it difficult to draw Drustan fully into the Order of the Rose.

“And the others?”

Lambert looked at the princess’s back, gathered his thoughts, and then spoke with the candor of a man putting his full trust in his liege.

“Your Highness, I believe we can win over both Sir Drustan and Sir Godfrey. We can offer Sir Drustan certain privileges, an exception to accommodate his desire for freedom. Sir Godfrey has long been an ally, but he hesitates because he has an entire mercenary company that depends on him. If we can

alleviate that burden, I believe he will join us. I support any effort Your Highness makes to recruit these two.”

As a knight and a noble both, Lambert had thrown his lot in completely with Princess Ava. This was advice from the heart.

“However,” he continued, his tone hardening, “as for Baron Torin, I hope Your Highness will harbor no illusions. I have three reasons for this.”

“First, his claim to Arthur’s legacy is suspect. The full truth of how he came by it is unclear.”

“Second, his ambition is boundless, and it is well known that his wealth is bolstered by the slave trade. For a man who calls himself a knight, this is a profound stain upon his honor.”

“Third... I fear he gathered us tonight not for your sake, but for reasons that serve only himself.”

Lambert had more dealings with Torin than anyone. As a fellow noble, he understood Torin’s maneuvering. But as a knight, he saw a man whose actions had long ago crossed a sacred line.

A man who was dangerous.

Chapter 826: Slay Any Who Trespass

“Your Highness, I share Lambert’s view. Baron Torin cannot be trusted.”

After Lambert had spoken, Garrett added his own blunt assessment. “He is a jackal, waiting for the moment to strike. We would be better served putting our faith in Sir Godfrey.”

Ava did not turn. She continued to gaze out at the lights of Soaring Bird City, her hair stirring in the night breeze, her eyes holding a new and profound depth.

...

Half a month passed in a blur of travel and preparation. Prince Theodore and Kronos's party finally reached Soaring Bird City, but they did not linger. They collected Princess Ava and immediately set off, heading deeper into the heart of the human kingdom.

From the city walls, Baron Torin watched their caravan recede into the distance. His eyes narrowed, his gaze flickering with indecipherable thoughts, yet his expression was one of intense focus.

"My lord, what is the princess's meaning?" asked Mike, Torin's former mercenary second-in-command, who had since reached the Alpha-tier of power. Beside him stood Wyatt, the grim leader of his slavers, who had also achieved the same rank.

Since his own ascension, Torin had leveraged his access to the Survivor's Platform, trading rare resources to acquire the means to elevate his most loyal lieutenants. Every Survivor's rise was a tide that lifted their chosen ships.

"Indeed, master." Wyatt added, his eyes following Torin's gaze. "Since the banquet, the princess has sent no word. Does she not trust you? By all rights, we should be her most reliable allies."

Torin let out a long sigh. He could guess what was in Ava's mind. "We built our house on the backs of slaves. They are the true imperial nobility. Of course they look down upon us. There is no wall in this world that can hold a secret forever. The more you do, the more likely it is that someone will notice."

In Torin's mind, Ava was the most powerful patron to court. Behind her stood not only the royal house of the human kingdom, but also the newly ascended Archlord of the Stoneheart Horde. Unfortunately, it seemed that powerful patron was keeping him at arm's length.

"No matter," Torin said, turning from the wall. "Time and patience can weather any stone. As long as we prove ourselves useful, a day will come when Princess Ava has need of us."

He descended from the battlements and walked toward his palace. The Torin of the past would have been consumed by rage. But since tasting true power, a shrewd cunning had taken root in him; he had become far more adept at masking the fires of his ambition.

Far from the city, a carriage rolled along the smooth, official road. The pace was unhurried, the breeze through the window gentle and pleasant.

“Mother, is Pallas really my brother?”

Looking into Kronos’s clear, questioning eyes, Ava found she could not summon a single shred of denial. She feared that a careless word might wound this innocent soul who knew nothing of the world’s complexities.

“Yes,” she nodded, her voice soft. She was surprised to find that admitting it did not bring the pain she had anticipated.

“Then why did you want me to challenge him?” Kronos’s voice, though guileless, was innocently relentless.

Ava drew a deep breath, about to confess the petty jealousy in her heart, when Prince Theodore spoke from the other side of the carriage.

“After you challenge Pallas, you must also one day challenge Princess Elara,” he said calmly. “Your mother wanted you to understand the gap between you. She hoped it would motivate you, so that you would not grow complacent in your training, blinded by your own talent.”

Ava looked at her nephew, her eyes filled with gratitude. In that moment, she felt the true pettiness of her own heart. Compared to the grace of Orion’s queen, her own actions felt cheap and dishonorable. After all, Kronos had not only returned safely, but had brought with him a wealth of cultivation resources gifted from his father’s house.

“Were they good to you?” Ava asked, her heart aching with a sudden sense of guilt. She stroked her son’s head, prompting him to speak of his time in Stoneheart City.

“They were very good to me, Mother,” Kronos began, his voice alight with excitement. “Pallas is a bit dense; he’s not as clever as I am. But Big Sister is amazing! She knows magic. With just a wave of her

hand, she could tie me up, or even make me fly! Mother, I want to learn magic, too. Please, will you find me a magic tutor?"

He barely paused for breath. "And the food! I ate so much delicious roasted meat in the castle, even better than the kind cousin Theodore makes. And... that other mother, she was so gentle with me, just as kind as you are. She gave me so many things. Oh! And I saw Father before I left. He was watching me go."

His flood of words slowed. "Mother... why don't we live in Stoneheart City?"

He trailed off, his voice growing quiet. Through his journey, Kronos seemed to have grasped something profound. There was a rift between his mother and his powerful father, a chasm he could not understand. And the way the other races in Stoneheart City had looked at him... it had left a deep impression. Compared to his life at Rose Manor, he thought he might like Stoneheart City more.

Ava pulled Kronos into a tight embrace. This was her son. He deserved more love, more joy, more everything. She made a decision then and there. Whatever Kronos wanted, wherever he felt he belonged, she would let him choose his own path freely.

...

The North, Lysintha City.

When Orion's avatar appeared on the docks, Lysintha, Slagor, and Brakthul were already waiting. Twenty Sea-Devouring Warships floated in the harbor, fully armed and crewed, each one equipped with its symbiotic Giant Kelp Water Cannons and a complement of Ocean Hunters. It was nearly eighty percent of the city's entire military might.

"My lord!" Slagor and Brakthul saluted, their reverence absolute.

"Your talent is not lacking, Slagor," Orion said, looking at the long-serving subordinate who had faithfully guarded Thunderwood Forest during all his campaigns. "When this task is complete, I am sending you to the Emerald Dream Realm. Cleanse the land of the rebellious heretics there."

The environment of that realm, rich with strange energies, was better suited for a warrior of Slagor's potential to achieve a breakthrough.

"As you command, my lord!" Slagor boomed.

"Prepare your gear and do a final count of your men," Orion commanded the assembly. "We set sail at dawn. Brakthul, you will remain here and assume command of the city in our absence. During that time, you will not permit any foreign Sea Race faction to enter Mist Bay."

His voice dropped, becoming as cold and unforgiving as the northern sea.

"Slay any who trespass."

Chapter 827: They have taken the bait

The Lord Who Despoiled Marina

Orion's gaze settled on Brakthul. The Alpha-tier troll had followed his brother into the Stoneheart Horde long ago, earned his stripes in the brutal charges of the cannon fodder legions, and had since served ably here in Lysinthia. After so much time working alongside Lysinthia and Slagor, he would have developed some measure of command capability.

"As you command, my lord!"

Orion nodded, then turned. With Lysinthia at his side, he walked toward the city's central citadel.

The next morning, the low, mournful call of a war horn echoed across the harbor. Within the citadel, Lysinthia attended to Orion, helping him don his wargear for the journey ahead.

Before long, he stood upon the deck of his flagship. Gazing out at the endless expanse of the sea, he felt something long-dormant uncoil within him. Once, in another life, he had dreamed of being a king of the open water, a reaver whose only master was the tide, chasing the horizon in a relentless pursuit of freedom.

He breathed in the salty air, watched the rolling waves, and felt the rhythmic pulse of the ocean's heart. A fire ignited in his spirit, and he threw his head back, his voice booming across the fleet in a great shout.

"Set sail!"

The deep, powerful command was picked up by the warriors, echoed again and again in a thunderous chorus.

"Set sail!"

"Set sail!"

Buoyed by their king's spirit, the morale of the entire fleet soared, every heart filled with fierce ambition.

In a deep-sea palace, somewhere in the Silvercurrent Sea.

Ever since the two Stoneheart warships had been destroyed, Mist Bay had been under constant surveillance by the Sea Race. The departure of a twenty-ship fleet, a bold and undisguised movement, was intelligence that traveled swiftly to the depths.

"Second Brother, Third Brother, if we withdraw now, there is still time," urged Vorluk, the fourth brother. Before Gulas and Heket, he held little sway. They were both Merfolk lords of purer bloodline, their power far exceeding his own.

"Withdraw?" Gulas snarled. "I will not be satisfied until I have flayed the skin from the Stoneheart Horde. My hatred will not be sated otherwise." As Marina's second brother, his voice carried the most weight here. He hurled his goblet, and it shattered against the coral floor.

"Second Brother is right," Heket slurred. He was drunk, barely coherent, but the mention of their sister's name stirred him to a fresh rage. "Everything Marina suffered began with that giant lord. He and his entire tribe must pay the price."

His eyes blazed with a drunken, humiliating fury. "Blood must be shed to wash away the stain on our family's honor. Let the damned Giant King join our sixth sister in the grave!"

"Ah..." At the mention of Marina, Vorluk fell silent. As her full-blood brother, he had watched her tragic end unfold, and his grief was the deepest and most painful of all.

"They think they can challenge the Tidefang Clan with a mere twenty ships?" Gulas scoffed. "Tomorrow... tomorrow, we brothers will lead our entire host and annihilate them all."

.....

Seven days later, at dawn.

At the place where the sea met the sky, the sun burst forth from the horizon, casting the world in a brilliant, fiery light. Orion stood on the deck, admiring the magnificent, sweeping vista. The ocean was boundless, a majestic and terrible power. In the distance, the water merged with the sky, its vastness painted in a thousand shades of blue.

The rhythm of the waves grew more urgent, the sound a low, steady rumble. It was a signal that the fleet was approaching the deep sea. Lysinthia and Slagor could feel nothing amiss in the water, but Orion, an Archlord, could.

The enemy has arrived, he thought. And they have taken the bait.

He kept his aura reined in, his power concealed. He did not summon the undead leviathan. The twenty warships were his lure, and his only goal was to draw out the force that had ambushed and killed Clawpincher.

The sea level in the surrounding area began to rise, the precursor to a tsunami. Waves, large and small, slammed against the warships, which had been steady until now. As they entered the deep water, the ships began to pitch and roll violently. The roar of the coming tidal wave was like the charge of a great beast, sweeping toward the fleet, threatening to drag it down into a watery grave.

"My lord!" Slagor appeared at Orion's side. This was not his first time at sea; as a commander, he knew what the signs meant.

"Do not be afraid," Orion said, his back still to Slagor. His voice was calm, and it settled the commander's frantic heart. "And do not be hasty."

Yes, why am I so anxious? Slagor thought, his panic subsiding. My lord is an Archlord. The enemy has only come here to find their own ruin. Those damned Sea-folk killed Clawpincher... he was my friend. Unforgivable!

A surge of vengeful fire replaced his fear. I must prepare. Perhaps I can even avenge my brother Clawpincher myself. At the very least, I can send more of them to join him in his grave.

He moved to the ship's rail, preparing to personally unleash the Ocean Hunters he had spent so long cultivating in Mist Bay.

Just then, a roar echoed from the churning sea—the cry of a dragon-beast. It was joined by the hiss of water being displaced and the great, splashing sound of something breaking the surface.

In Orion's line of sight, a Tidewyrm and two colossal Hippocampus Drakes burst from the waves, floating on the turbulent water. Atop them stood the three Merfolk lords: Vorluk, Gulas, and Heket.

Including their mounts, they were a force of six Legendary-tier beings. A force like that could have easily overwhelmed Clawpincher. Even a true abyss dragon would have been hard-pressed to escape.

"I did not think we would meet again in this way, Vorluk," Orion said, his voice calm, his aura completely suppressed. He stood at the very prow of the warship, his gaze fixed on the Merfolk prince.

"It's you!" Vorluk started, not having sensed Orion at first. But he recognized the voice instantly. It was the Giant King who had once intimidated him into submission. "I did not expect you to come to sea yourself!"

"Fourth Brother, you know him?" Gulas, the second brother, turned to Vorluk, surprised that he was acquainted with the enemy. The figure in the distance had no discernible aura, which likely meant he was powerful. But what of it? He was, at most, Legendary-tier. Six against one. The giant had no chance of victory. The calculation was instant—the mark of a prudent commander weighing his enemy.

"Since you know him, Fourth Brother, you need not act," Heket chuckled. "Leave this to Second Brother and me today, hehehe!"

Vorluk frowned, his gaze shifting from Orion back to his two brothers.

"He is the King of the Giants. Orion of the Stoneheart Horde," he said, his voice flat. "And he is the lord who despoiled Marina."

The air grew suddenly still. For a moment, Gulas and Heket thought they had misheard.

"Fourth Brother, are you joking?"

Vorluk met his second brother's incredulous eyes, then turned his head slowly back toward Orion, his expression confirming the terrible, impossible truth.

Chapter 828: A Black Tide of Rage

"Do not underestimate him," Vorluk warned his brothers, his voice tight. "His power is formidable!"

Gulas and Heket exchanged a look, a flash of avaricious glee passing between them. They had not dared to hope they would find their true target on their second raid.

Across the churning water, Orion heard them. From their words, he understood two things: something terrible had happened to Marina, and these three were ignorant of his ascension to Archlord. It made sense. The distance between the north and south was vast, and there were no channels of

communication between the sea-races and the peoples of the land. As for the demigoddess Seraphina, why would she trouble herself to warn her descendants about a single, newly-ascended Archlord? Such a being would hardly register to one of her stature.

And if Marina were well, with her and Vorluk acting as intermediaries, it was unlikely this attack would have ever occurred.

"Vorluk," Orion's voice carried across the waves, calm and steady. "What has become of Marina?"

Before he annihilated them, it would be best to learn what he could.

It was Gulas who answered, his voice thick with rage. "What becomes of a princess who has lost her honor? Who has given away her mermaid pearl? She is the shame of the Tidefang Clan, and it is all because of you!"

At the mention of their sister, both Gulas and Heket seethed, their fury coiling into a murderous bloodlust.

A flicker of true worry finally crossed Orion's placid features. His relationship with Marina had not been one of love, but of mutual curiosity, a fascination with the desires of another's flesh. Still, her gift of the pearl had been an unexpected, profound gesture. He felt a debt to her.

A princess who had returned to the deep, waiting for him to come and ask for her hand. That knowledge was the very reason his avatar was here. The holds of his ships were laden not just with weapons of war, but with bride-gifts fit for a queen.

"Vorluk," Orion asked again, his tone turning to ice. "What happened to Marina?"

"Our sister was given as a Sea Offering," Vorluk said, his voice hollow. "She is dead. She died in the deepest trench of the Silvercurrent Sea."

The sea frothed. The waves churned. And in Orion's chest, his heart erupted in a black tide of rage.

"You killed her?" The question was a low, chilling whisper, laced with disbelief.

"I told you before," Vorluk replied, his voice strained with grief and accusation. "The princesses of the Tidefang do not marry outsiders. When you took her pearl, you took her last chance for survival. Marina died because of you!"

Orion stared at Vorluk, then at Gulas, then at Heket, searching their faces for any hint of a lie, any flicker of deception. He found none.

"Marina... is truly dead?" he murmured to himself. He had never imagined such an end. In his grand design, he had envisioned a marriage alliance, a bridge between his people and the Tidefang Clan that would lead to trade and lasting peace.

"Enough talk, Fourth Brother!" Heket roared, brandishing his harpoon. "Kill him! Let his corpse sink to the depths and keep our sister company!"

"One last thing," Orion said, his voice a low sigh. "The two Stoneheart warships. Was that your work?"

He already knew the answer, but some things needed to be confirmed, to settle the soul before the slaughter.

"Hehehe... you mean those two little rowboats?" Heket jeered, throwing his head back in a braying laugh. "And you call them Sea-Devouring Warships? Don't make me laugh myself sick!"

Orion watched the laughing merfolk prince, his own face a mask of stone.

"Then you will be the first to be buried with Clawpincher and his men," he declared. "And from this day forward, let every creature in the Silvercurrent Sea learn this truth: those who offend the Stoneheart Horde will be annihilated."

He flipped his hand, and the black funerary urn appeared in his palm.

"Hah! Laughable! Utterly laughable!" Heket bellowed. "A petty giant lord from a backwater tribe dares to speak such arrogance! I will take you alive and use you as a blood sacrifice for my sister Marina!"

He spurred his Hippocampus Drake forward, raising his harpoon high as he charged across the waves. Orion didn't so much as blink.

A thick, cloying death-energy poured from the urn, a dense fog that instantly enveloped Orion and the fleet behind him.

A low, haunting song of ancient sorrow echoed from the mists. The undead ancient giant-horned whale emerged, its colossal horn piercing the fog. Its maw, a chasm that seemed to swallow the light, appeared directly in Heket's path.

A wave of sonar paralyzed the charging prince and his mount. Before they could break free, the great mouth snapped shut, swallowing them whole.

Deep within the leviathan's gullet, a prison of crushing water, corrosive acid, and a cage of erupting bone activated in unison. A few seconds later, the whale opened its mouth and spat two glittering Lord's Stones into Orion's waiting hand.

He casually tossed the two stones in his palm, his gaze lifting to meet Vorluk's and Gulas's.

The two princes were frozen, their faces pale with a terror so profound it stole the air from their lungs.

"A-Archlord..." Gulas stammered. "Impossible... that is absolutely impossible..."

"That... that thing..."

The whale let out another mournful cry, and the sound finally snapped the two brothers from their shock. But it was far too late.

"Now, you will join him," Orion stated, his voice as flat and final as a death sentence.

The whale roared and with a single, colossal sweep of its tail, it unleashed a wave of pure, kinetic force. The tsunami the Merfolk had summoned was rendered a mere ripple in the face of this new, monstrous tide. The sea itself seemed to bend to the creature's power.

Just as the impact was about to hit, a shimmering barrier of light erupted before the two princes, absorbing the full force of the blow. Within the protective dome, a spectral projection of a kingly figure materialized, radiating an aura of absolute dominion.

"What grievance could possibly compel you, my lord, to personally strike down my sons?" the apparition demanded, his voice echoing with the power of the deeps. "I am Jaklas, King of the Tidefang Clan. As one Archlord to another, I ask that you grant me the courtesy of an explanation."

Chapter 829: Was I Wrong?

The truth was, a patriarch with many children could not place a sliver of his will in each of them. The Merfolk King, Jaklas, had placed a spectral ward(phantom) upon his second son, Gulas, but Vorluk and Heket had been afforded no such protection.

King Jaklas's tone had been one of cautious diplomacy. Aboard his flagship, Orion considered the invitation, then stepped into the air, landing softly atop the great whale's head.

"I am Orion, King(Lord) of the Stoneheart Horde."

At the declaration of his name and title, the spectral image of Jaklas seemed to flicker with understanding. He did not speak, but instead opened his mouth and expelled a swirling globe of seawater. Within the vortex, the phantom of a mermaid pearl shimmered into existence. It was an image Orion knew intimately; it was the echo of the one he now carried.

Seeing it, Jaklas appeared to confirm his suspicions. He inhaled, drawing the misty globe and its spectral pearl back into himself.

"Archlord Orion, does this concern my daughter, Marina?" Jaklas's projection was hazy, his motives impossible to read.

"Yes. And no," Orion's voice was flat, devoid of emotion. "Your sons ambushed my fleet. The one responsible has paid the price."

With Marina's 'death', his connection to the Tidefang Clan was severed. In that context, killing one prince was no different from killing two.

Jaklas did not respond immediately. After a long, thoughtful silence, he made his offer. "Orion. My daughter Marina is gone. There is nothing that can be done to bring her back. Heket's death was deserved. Let us consider the matter closed."

Before Orion could answer, he continued. "Marina's death involves another Archlord of the Tidefang Clan. If you cannot let this grievance go, then I invite you to the Silvercurrent Sea, where we may speak of it plainly."

Orion stared at the spectral king. He knew, as did Jaklas, that he could order the ancient whale to obliterate the will projection with a single thought. But Jaklas had spoken of the reason for Marina's death. As the one who had benefited from her pearl, Orion knew he had no choice but to go.

"Very well."

The single word was enough. The shimmering shield around Gulas and Vorluk dissolved, and the king's will receded into his son's body. Orion raised a hand, and an unseen force seized the two Merfolk princes, pulling them from the water like landed fish and depositing them onto the deck of the warship.

"Vorluk," Orion said, his back to them, his voice a command. "Have your creatures lead the way. I am going to the Silvercurrent Sea."

Vorluk scrambled to his feet, opened his mouth, and emitted a low, subsonic pulse. In the depths below, the terrified Sea-folk scattered, fleeing for their lives. Only a lone Tidewyrm and a Hippocampus Drake remained, trembling in the water before the fleet, tasked with guiding them.

They swam with constant, terrified glances over their shoulders, praying the colossal undead whale behind them would not simply devour them.

"Now," Orion said, his voice dropping, his gaze finally turning to fix on Vorluk. "Tell me about Marina."

The tone was not a request. It was an order.

Vorluk stared, his mind reeling. He could not reconcile the being before him—this Archlord who commanded monsters from the abyss—with the giant king he had met before. Could a warrior truly leap from the peak of the Legendary tier to the heights of an Archlord so easily?

He saw Orion's expression darken and took a deep, shuddering breath, forcing his terror down.

"I regret it," he began, his voice choked with a grief that was suddenly raw again. "If I had only stopped her... stopped her from going back to you, from giving you her pearl... she might still be alive."

He had only understood the terrible truth of it the moment he learned the pearl was gone. His head bowed, his shoulders shaking with the force of his remorse. If he could turn back time, he would have done anything to stop her.

"Before she met you, Marina was betrothed to a prince from another branch of our clan," Vorluk said, his voice gaining a bitter edge as he recounted the tale. "If she had merely lost her virtue to you, it could have been forgiven. By our laws, she could have offered her pearl to her betrothed as penance. It would have been proof that her heart, at least, remained loyal."

He lifted his head, a ghost of a snarl on his lips. "But she didn't just lose her pearl. She gave it to you. To the Tidefang, that was not an act of coercion, but an act of love. A willing betrayal of her vow."

He spat the words like venom. "It was a declaration that she had given her heart to another. Do you have any idea what that means? Can you imagine the insult?" He looked at Orion, his question both a condemnation and a broken query to himself.

Orion said nothing, his face a placid, unreadable mask.

"Of course you can't," Vorluk whispered, answering his own question. "How could you? Her betrothed is a new Archlord. The most promising talent our people have produced in a thousand years. Marina broke a sacred pact and, in doing so, offered a profound insult to a being of his stature."

His voice began to tremble with a mixture of rage and helplessness, a fury at the unbending rules that had doomed his sister.

"For breaking her vows, for insulting an Archlord of the clan, the law demanded a blood price. She was to be made a living sacrifice, her body cast into the lightless trenches of the deepest sea."

He looked up, his eyes locking with Orion's, burning with an ocean of hatred and pain.

"That was her fate. Are you satisfied now?"

When the pure, undiluted animosity reached its peak, it finally broke him.

"You bastard!" Vorluk screamed, stumbling forward.

"If you were an Archlord, why didn't you come sooner? Why didn't you come to the Silvercurrent Sea and demand her hand?"

"She was waiting for you! Until the very end, she was waiting! She told me she didn't regret it!"

He choked on a sob, the sound raw and terrible. Marina was his full-blood sister. Her horrific end had branded his soul with the mark of his own powerlessness.

"If you had just come sooner, she wouldn't have had to die! Heket wouldn't have attacked your ships, and he wouldn't be dead! You are the root of this calamity! You are the devil who brought this upon us! It is all your fault!"

He dissolved into a desperate, wracking wail. "Ah..."

Orion did not move. He stared at the broken, raving prince, and for the first time, a flicker of uncertainty clouded his gaze. Hearing the full, wretched story, he felt adrift.

He could, on a cold, logical level, understand it. Sacrifice as a means of purification, of cleansing a bloodline of a perceived stain—his own giant tribes held similar, if less codified, beliefs. Purity of blood was a concept he knew well.

But this knowledge offered no comfort. It only hollowed him out further.

Who was to blame? he thought, the question echoing in the sudden silence of his mind.

Was I wrong? Or was I simply too late?

The death of the mermaid princess, a woman with whom he had shared a brief, strange intimacy, had plunged him into a state of chilling self-reproach.

Chapter 830: The Path to Godhood

An unknown passage of time, a long, quiet moment suspended in the salt-laced air, went by before Orion's focus returned from the abyss of his thoughts.

"You are wrong."

The words were spoken calmly, cutting through the sound of Vorluk's weeping.

"I may be the devil you name me, but I am not the root of this calamity."

Orion's gaze was hard as forged steel. "Think, Vorluk. If Marina had never met me, what fate awaited her? Handed from one master to another like a treasured cup, her beauty a curse that would have invited endless humiliation. She would have been broken by a thousand cruelties or driven to take her own life."

He spoke with absolute certainty. She had already been offered up as a gift by the dragons; her path was never destined for a happy end.

"In the end, it was the Tidefang Clan that killed her. It was your precious laws, your unbending pride." He swept his gaze over the two brothers, huddled on the deck. "And it was you. Three brothers, so utterly powerless you could not protect your own sister, and now you seek to cast blame upon a power you cannot even begin to comprehend."

As he spoke, Orion released the iron grip he held on his aura. A terrifying, suffocating pressure, the pure might of an Archlord, slammed down upon the deck. Vorluk and Gulas, who had just managed to struggle to their knees, were flattened once more, pinned to the timbers as if by the weight of the sea itself.

Orion's voice was imbued with that same, crushing confidence. "Marina chose me, and she was right to do so. I am greater than she ever imagined."

He paused, his expression unpitying. "As for whether I came too late... that was never a matter I could command."

It was true. He had been back in the Titanion Realm for less than two months. Even if he had left for the sea the moment he returned, he could not have reached her before she was sacrificed.

But if she was forced to her death, then he would force those responsible to join her. The rules of the Tidefang Clan were the rules of merfolk. They were not Orion's rules, and he cared nothing for them.

Moreover, Orion didn't believe Marina was dead at all; he was determined to uncover the truth.

The Emerald Dream Realm, Dusk Continent.

High in the sky, Arthas swung his bone-forged sword. Arcs of energy, sharp enough to tear rents in the fabric of the void, forced back a demigod shrouded in a mist of blood.

"The Dusk Continent is ours for the taking," Arthas's voice was as cold as the grave. "You are not welcome here."

He pressed his attack, his power undeniable. The demigod in the mist, finding no purchase and gaining no ground, ceased his assault. He cast a wary glance at the old man watching the battle from a distance, then turned without a word and fled toward the scattered islands across the sea.

As the enemy vanished, Deputy Commander Edward stepped forward. "How did it feel?"

Arthas was a newly ascended demigod. These duels against his peers were the perfect crucible in which to temper his power. For that reason, unless more than one demigod attacked at once, Edward left the defense of their territory to him.

"He was not as strong as I imagined." The statement was about his foe, but also about himself. The gulf between an Archlord and a demigod was the difference between the earth and the heavens. One had begun to grasp the fundamental rules of the cosmos, while the other was still merely accumulating the dregs of faith. They were not in the same reality.

"There are chasms of difference between demigods as well," Edward said with a sigh. "Different realms of understanding, different levels of strength. Most who reach this stage will spend an eternity lingering on the very first step."

To mortals, a demigod was the pinnacle of existence, the ultimate power in many lesser worlds. But they did not know of the vast hierarchy that existed even among gods-in-the-making.

"The first step?" Arthas asked. "Where I am now?"

Edward nodded. "From what I have gleaned, there are five stages on the path. Or perhaps, it is more accurate to say six." He paused, reconsidering his own words.

Arthas waited in silence.

"Demigod is only the beginning," Edward murmured, his gaze distant. "From faith, you nurture divine power. With that power, you ignite a divine fire. In that fire, you forge your soul. Within that forged soul, you awaken to your divine calling. That calling will, in time, birth a God-Spark. And only with that Spark can you finally construct a divine body."

He looked at Arthas, and for a moment, the weariness in his ancient eyes was replaced by a roaring, indomitable will. "That final stage... that is godhood."

Without the ambition to become a god, how could one ever hope to attain eternal life?

A long silence passed before Arthas spoke, deliberately steering the conversation away. The topic of godhood was too immense, too heavy. Even as a demigod, true divinity felt impossibly distant.

"Has the duel in the Crucible of the Gods been set?"

"It has."

"Two demigods and three Archlords?"

"Indeed. The wager is three Relics and two legendary equipments."

"Three Relics?" The casual way Edward spoke the words sent a shock through Arthas. A Relic was an artifact forged beyond the Legendary tier, an object that could only be claimed, typically, from the corpse of a fallen demigod. While they could be crafted through a confluence of rare materials and master artisans, the resources required were staggering, beyond the means of most factions.

"The Commander has put up one of the Relics himself," Edward explained. "Neither you nor I possess one. He hopes our strength can turn his one into three."

Arthas fell silent again. He hadn't realized the stakes of this Crucible were so high. In the past, these duels between factions were fought over resources—world essence or the coordinates to lesser realms. To wager three Relics at once was a gamble of staggering proportions.

"Are you certain about letting Hulk fight?" With the stakes so high, Arthas felt a surge of apprehension.

"Have no fear. I have personally tested Hulk's mettle. He is stronger than you think," Edward assured him. "While you were... indisposed... he has slain several more Archlords. His talent for battle is profound."

Orion had heard of Relics. The artifact King Harold used in the human kingdom of the Utessar continent to teleport his armies was one such item. It was so precious, so potent, that over time, myth had transformed it into a 'Godly Artifact' in the minds of the common folk. True Godly Artifacts, however, could only be created and wielded by the gods themselves.

The Titanion Realm, The Silvercurrent Sea.

Darkness. Crushing pressure. Absolute cold. This was the environment of the abyssal trench, an extreme realm that had birthed terrifying forms of life. As the Sea-Devouring Warships descended into the unknown depths, they were flanked by swarms of silent, armored figures.

They were Abyssal Chitin-Warriors, their bodies encased in black carapaces as thick and hard as plate mail. From the oppressive gloom, countless pairs of baleful, blue-glowing eyes stared at the Stoneheart fleet, their focus fixed on the ancient giant-horned whale leading the procession.

Orion knew that if not for the overwhelming, predatory aura radiating from his undead leviathan, the swarm of chitin-warriors would have descended upon his fleet in a frenzied wave, eager to tear them apart and feast upon the scraps.