

Titan King 831

Chapter 831: An underwater city

"They are the Abyssal Crawlers," Vorluk explained, gesturing with a trembling hand toward the swarms of armored creatures that flanked them. "They feed on the carcasses that sink to the seabed. If any living intruder enters their domain, they will swarm and kill, devouring everything until not even bones remain." He gave a weak, sycophantic smile. "You, of course, are the exception."

They were using a deep-sea trench as a shortcut to the Silvercurrent Sea, riding a powerful undercurrent to shorten the journey.

"Even we would not dare this path, if not for your protection," Vorluk continued, his eyes fixed on the immense silhouette of the undead whale moving silently before them. He could still scarcely believe what he was seeing.

That a creature of such primal power, a whale born of the crushing abyss, could serve as the giant's mount was a truth his mind refused to accept, even with the proof before his very eyes. "The aura of that beast... it keeps the lord of the Crawlers hidden in its burrow, too terrified to even show its face."

"Past this trench and through two subterranean seas, we will reach the Silvercurrent Sea."

Orion didn't respond. His gaze was fixed on the distant, bioluminescent creatures that glittered in the oppressive darkness, but his mind was elsewhere, already immersed in the Survivor's Platform.

Hulk: Kraken. I need to build a city. Underwater. How?

He was familiar enough with the members of his team now to be direct.

Kraken: An underwater city?

The question seemed to momentarily stun Kraken. Building underwater cities was, after all, his people's specialty. Then, the image of the undead leviathan Arthas had claimed as his own flashed through his mind, and he accepted it with a mental shrug.

Kraken: It's simple, really. You choose a suitable location, design a sound structure, find quality materials, and then you build it.

He paused before adding.

Kraken: Of course, a complete city also needs integrated systems for power, water, and air, all governed by large-scale magical arrays. And a standing military garrison for its defense.

Orion stared blankly at the text. Kraken had said many words, yet had said nothing at all. He had no idea where to even begin.

Leonidas:

Ho, look at our little brother, finally expanding his domain! Dipping his toes into the sea, are we? About time. I was getting sick of looking at your endless tide of cave spiders and scorpions.

The timely taunt from Leonidas pulled Orion from his spiraling confusion.

Arthas: Don't dismiss them. On the battlefield, those spiders and scorpions are exactly what is needed.

It was a familiar pattern. If Leonidas prodded, Arthas, or sometimes Alexander, would push back. He was clearly defending his protégé.

Leonidas: Arthas, shouldn't you be patrolling the Dusk Continent instead of chiming in here?

Arthas: Are you offering to take my place? Be my guest.

That shut Leonidas up. The enemies Arthas now faced were all demigods. If Leonidas were to take that post, a few encounters would be enough to completely bankrupt his reserves.

Leonidas: Hmph. I can't be bothered with you.

Hulk: Brothers, enough messing around. Your pupil requires guidance.

Orion deftly steered the conversation back on course.

Leonidas: It's just an underwater city. Simple.

As he typed, a complex schematic for a sprawling aquatic metropolis appeared in the group's shared channel.

Leonidas: For anyone who wants it. Don't say I never give you anything.

Orion copied the blueprint instantly. With this, he had a grand design, a direction.

Kraken:

The boss is generous! This is a prime schematic. Even in worlds that are primarily aquatic, a city built from this design would be considered top-tier. Power grids, defense systems, filtration, countermeasures... every component is of the highest caliber. Once built, it would be a nigh-impregnable fortress.

Kraken was intimately familiar with the design; Leonidas had given it to him long ago, and he had learned its every nuance through the construction of several cities.

Kraken: But be prepared, Hulk. The resources and magical components required to build this city will exceed your wildest imaginings. I suggest you start with the core district and then slowly expand the other functions and zones over time. Also, take note of the following. These are lessons we learned the hard way.

Kraken: First, site selection. Avoid the nesting grounds of large marine fauna and steer clear of geological hazards—active volcanoes, unstable trenches, subterranean magma flows.

Kraken: Second, your power source. Do not rely solely on water-elemental arrays. Most powerful sea creatures have some ability to control water. If the sea around your city is turned against you, your power grid will be useless.

Kraken went on, listing several more crucial points. Orion recorded every word. These were mistakes paid for by his allies; he would not repeat them.

Arthas: When you are ready to build, have Kraken dispatch one of his people who knows the business of construction. As for the magical arrays, you will have to petition the Deputy Commander.

In the end, it was Arthas who offered the most practical advice. Why struggle with a problem yourself when you could delegate it to the experts? The Deputy Commander himself, a demigod, would certainly not deign to design magical arrays for a city. But the faction of mages behind him would undoubtedly have the necessary talent. Orion didn't doubt for a second that his brothers all had cities of their own beneath the waves.

Hulk: Kraken, it's settled then. When I've made my decision, I'll call on you for aid.

Kraken: A small matter.

The Silvercurrent Sea.

This was the ancestral home of the Tidefang Clan. Everywhere, opulent palaces rose from the seabed, crafted from treasures of the deep.

They were sculpted from iridescent shell and living coral, their pillars and roofs crusted with pearls. Curtains of shimmering crystal beads hung from the eaves of every colonnade, catching the faint, filtered light and scattering it like captive stars. The very ground seemed paved with jade, reflecting the world above like polished glass. Here, pearls, agates, amber, coral, gold, silver, and crystal were as common as stone.

Within the most lavish of these palaces, the low voice of the Merfolk King, Jaklas, traveled through the water, carrying into a separate, private sanctum.

"Phorcys. You wished to know the whereabouts of the man."

"His name is Orion. He is the King of the Stoneheart Horde, from the continent of Utessar."

"He is on his way to the Silvercurrent Sea now. He comes to ask for Marina's hand."

"Marina gave you her answer, Phorcys. Now, you will give me mine."

Chapter 832: A Game of Kings

King Jaklas had long been guarding another of the world tunnels. He had been unaware when Marina was cast into the endless abyss.

To be precise, his avatar had been dormant, having suffered grave injuries in the last great war between realms. Besides, at the time, Jaklas had no idea that the suitor who had won Marina's heart, this giant, would prove to be an Archlord.

Under normal circumstances, sacrificing a minor princess to appease a newly ascended Archlord from within his own clan would have been a sound political move. Had he been awake, he would not have intervened.

But now, with Orion at his doorstep, the situation had changed. This was an opportunity. He could use the King of the Giants to put the ambitious Phorcys in his place.

Phorcys was the Tidefang Clan's newest Archlord, having risen to power after the destruction of the world tunnels, which was why he had not been drawn into their defense. He and Orion had, in fact, ascended in the same era, though Phorcys's rise had come slightly later.

"Your Majesty, what manner of satisfaction do you require?" Phorcys's voice drifted from a distance, betraying neither sorrow nor joy.

In truth, Marina's fate was of little consequence to Phorcys himself. But the noble houses that formed his faction could not abide such a stain upon their collective honor. With Phorcys's ascension, Marina's

broken betrothal had become a personal, galling insult. He had not intervened to cause her death, but he had certainly not lifted a finger to prevent it.

"Marina is dead," Jaklas said, his tone a carefully crafted instrument of statecraft. "She broke her vow to you. On that, I have nothing to say."

He paused, letting the implication hang in the water. "However, she died because of this Orion, and now he has come here because of her. He will demand an answer from you."

It was, of course, sophistry. But Phorcys was a newly-minted Archlord, the prideful genius of the Tidefang Clan. Even if he recognized the king's verbal trap, his arrogance would compel him to step into it.

Orion was Marina's lover. Marina was Phorcys's betrothed. By extension, Marina's dishonor was Phorcys's dishonor. Orion had, in effect, insulted him.

A rival who had stained his name was now approaching the Silvercurrent Sea. To Phorcys, this was not a threat, but a gift from the Fates. It was a chance to personally wash away his humiliation and, more importantly, a perfect stage on which to display his newfound power. It was an opportunity to make an example of an outsider and, in doing so, send a clear message to his rivals within the clan.

The identity of those rivals was an unspoken understanding. In fact, many of the warriors who had followed the princes Vorluk, Gulas, and Heket had been placed there by Phorcys's own faction. The three brothers, of course, had been entirely oblivious, fools played for pawns by the old powers of the clan.

"Rest assured, Your Majesty," Phorcys's voice echoed again. "He wants an answer? I shall give him one."

As he spoke, his figure materialized outside the grand audience chamber of the palace. He was powerful, but he knew better than to barge in on Jaklas, the ancient king and an Archlord of the old guard.

"You are a pillar of the Tidefang Clan, Phorcys. There is no need for such ceremony. Come, join me." Jaklas's voice was magnanimous. He wished to check the young Archlord's ambition, not make a

permanent enemy of him. Though they hailed from different bloodlines, generations of intermarriage had woven their lineages together.

"This Giant King, Orion... what we know of him is limited," Jaklas offered as Phorcys entered. "He is likely a new power. The old dragon's release has thrown the continent of Utessar and the southern Starfall and Trident Seas into chaos. I suspect the Giant King rose to prominence amidst that turmoil."

It was a show of the magnanimity that kept Jaklas secure on his throne. He offered the warning because he did not wish to see Phorcys suffer too great a loss.

But he held one card back. He did not tell Phorcys about the undead leviathan, the Archlord-level creature that served Orion.

In Jaklas's mind, the outcome was clear. Phorcys and Orion would fight. With an Archlord-class mount at his command, the Giant King would surely have the upper hand. Phorcys would be defeated. Just as his defeat seemed imminent, or when his life was truly in peril, Jaklas would intervene, mediating the conflict and restoring order.

It was the ending he had foreseen, the ending he desired.

As for the Marina whom Orion sought, she was truly gone. But the Tidefang Clan had many other princesses, some even more beautiful. If Orion were willing, he could leave the Silvercurrent Sea with two new brides.

The old king's mind was a whirlwind of shrewd calculations.

"A giant?" Phorcys scoffed. "A land-dweller Archlord dares venture this deep into our domain?" When he learned of Orion's race, his disdain was palpable. It was the innate contempt of a creature of the abyss for a thing of the surface. In the sea, they were the masters.

"Ah, of course. He must have Marina's mermaid pearl, does he not?" Phorcys reasoned aloud. "No wonder he has the courage to come here. The fool. He has no conception of the true power of the Sea-folk(sea race)."

Dripping with self-assurance, Phorcys snatched a goblet of wine from a passing attendant and drained it in one gulp.

"Your Majesty, grant me the authority to handle this affair in its entirety."

"It is my very intention," Jaklas replied smoothly.

Meanwhile, in Stoneheart City, within the walls of a tavern known as The Silent Goblet(mysterious tavern).

The third floor of the establishment was a space apart, reserved for patrons who had attained the Legendary tier. Power, not status, was the only currency that granted entry.

Today, the floor held only two occupants: Orion and Lycanor.

Lycanor had yet to formally become one of Orion's women, and she felt awkward lingering in the castle. The tavern provided a suitable, and relatively private, venue for their meeting.

"I enjoy the southern climes," Orion began, his voice a low rumble. "The wind is warm, the rains are frequent, the sun is generous."

He paused, his eyes locking with hers. "And I enjoy the blood elves of the south even more."

"Would you like to know my first impression of you?" He sat by the window, swirling the wine in his goblet with one hand, his gaze unwavering.

A faint blush rose on Lycanor's cheeks. Just as her eyes began to dart away, Orion turned his head, looking down at the bustling street market below.

"I remember thinking, Seven Hells, she's a vision. And then, That archery is astoundingly brilliant." He could still recall the shock of watching her unleash volleys of six, then nine arrows at once during the

War of North and South. If he could win her, the Stoneheart Horde would gain another supreme warrior, a power to rival his own.

"The most astounding figure in that war was you, the Giant King," Lycanor replied, her voice soft but firm. "And the greatest victor of the western theater was the Stoneheart Horde."

Chapter 833: This Is Your Home

The blush on Lycanor's cheeks began to fade. To be sitting so close to Orion, speaking of the past—it stirred a strange, indescribable feeling within her.

To her praise, Orion remained noncommittal.

The blood elves, he had to admit, were masters of subtlety. Grand Elder Lireesa had stated their intentions, and then, after the coronation, had led her people back to the City of Blessings, leaving Lycanor behind as a deliberate, unspoken offering. They had made no demands for a formal proposal journey to their city, nor had they requested a grand wedding feast. They had simply delivered Lycanor to his doorstep.

"Are you willing to enter my tent?"

Anyone with the slightest knowledge of giant customs would understand the weight of his question. Lycanor certainly did.

She fell silent.

A slow, triumphant smile crept across Orion's lips. Sometimes, silence was acceptance. A proud woman was often a passive one, waiting to be claimed.

"The western territories, those that border the lands of the blood elves—I will grant them to you as your own fiefdom."

His voice was a low murmur beside her ear. "In return, you will have a duty to me, and to the Stoneheart Horde. You will act as warden of the City of the Guardian on our western frontier. The trade market between land and sea is set to open there soon. It will need a lord of your strength to protect it."

Before Lycanor could fully process his words, Orion was on his feet. He swept an arm around her waist and lifted her from her chair.

Lycanor was tall, her body a stunning example of her race's heroic proportions, honed to perfection by her Legendary-tier power. She instinctively tried to struggle, but Orion's hold was brutally strong, pulling her tight against him. The potent scent of a male giant and the deep, heavy drum of his heart assaulted her senses, breaking through her defenses.

The fight went out of her. Her body went slack, and she leaned against his chest.

"Will there come a day," she asked softly, "when the blood elves and the Stoneheart Horde must face each other in battle?" She had surrendered, but she had not forgotten her mission.

"According to the Horde's grand design, war between our peoples is impossible—unless the blood elves choose to drive a knife into our back," Orion answered. He tightened his grip. "If such a war ever comes to pass, it will be because you failed to mediate the interests of both sides. Peace is not something only your people desire, Lycanor. The Stoneheart Horde has great need of it as well."

He ran his hand along the curve of her waist, feeling its softness, its supple strength—a quality, he knew, unique to a blood elf maiden who had never borne a child.

"I will be the bridge between our people," Lycanor vowed, a breath of relief escaping her. Orion had given her the answer she needed. Peace. It was the entire purpose of this union.

"The blood elves are your people. It is only right that you care for them," Orion said. "But you must understand one thing above all else, Lycanor."

He turned her in his arms to face him, forcing her to meet his gaze.

"You are my woman."

"A woman of the giant tribe."

"A woman of the Stoneheart Horde."

"From this day forward, this is your home."

In her beautiful eyes, under the sweep of long lashes, he watched a war unfold: struggle gave way to surrender, a final flicker of defiance was extinguished by acceptance.

Lycanor said nothing. She stared up at him, her gaze so intense it seemed she was trying to carve his image into her very soul.

Orion lowered his head and kissed her.

In the deep north, beneath the Silvercurrent Sea.

The journey had been an arduous one. The avatar's party had navigated lightless trenches and fields of volcanic sludge, finally penetrating the waters of the Silvercurrent Sea. But as they approached the entrance to the hidden realm, a barrier of force shimmered into existence, and they were stopped.

"The Silvercurrent Sea is forbidden to all who are not of the Tidefang Clan."

The voice was a deep, powerful wave that rolled through the water, carrying with it an immense pressure. Orion knew at once that the one who blocked his path was an Archlord.

But Orion had not come as a guest. He had no need to announce his arrival. He had come for his woman, Marina. He had come for an answer.

Vmmmmmmm.

A low hum, a subsonic call from the ancient giant-horned whale, vibrated through the sea. To an outside ear, it was barely a sound. But to every Merfolk in the vicinity, it was a thunderclap that detonated inside their skulls.

If the Tidefang Clan would not speak, Orion would not be civil. The whale's sonic blast was only the beginning. It coiled its colossal tail, gathering terrifying kinetic force. With a sound like tearing space, it charged, its horn aimed at the heart of the Merfolk realm.

BOOM!

The undead leviathan struck the defensive shield of the Silvercurrent Sea, and the entire underwater kingdom shuddered from the force of the blow. The impact was so apocalyptic it startled every merfolk of the Tidefang Clan.

"Insolent fool!"

From within the shimmering shield, a merman nearly ten feet long, his body covered in shimmering, hero-grade scales, shot forth with a trident in hand. A terrifying torrent of water surged before him, aimed at the ancient whale. It was Phorcys, the genius Archlord of the Tidefang Clan.

His opponent, however, was a creature that had once been an upper-tier Archlord.

The ancient whale opened its maw. A sonar cage snapped into place around Phorcys, followed instantly by an Abyssal Lock. The water in his immediate vicinity froze into a solid, unmoving mass. The elemental water he commanded was leached away, and he found himself utterly imprisoned.

"Archlord Jaklas?" Orion asked, landing atop the whale's massive head and looking down upon the trapped Phorcys. The Merfolk before him was an Archlord, yes, but the voice was wrong. And he remembered Marina's tail was the color of the sky; this one's was the burnished color of gold. They were not of the same bloodline.

Orion waited, but Phorcys could not answer. The crushing power of the Abyssal Lock was lethal to the Sea-folk.

"If no one will answer, then I will kill you first and find my answers later."

Orion raised his trident. Transcendent power surged, and the blood-red weapon crackled with arcs of lightning.

Zzzt!

The trident pierced the Abyssal Lock as if it were water and plunged directly into Phorcys's heart. For a moment, the prison of water was stained with a swirl of gold and silver blood.

But the fatal blow did not kill him.

A single golden scale on Phorcys's forehead shattered. In that instant, he vanished from the prison. When he reappeared, he was back inside the protective shield of the Silvercurrent Sea, shaken but alive.

Orion's expression did not change. He was not surprised.

An Archlord always had more than one way to cheat death. The golden scale, he surmised, was some manner of artifact that had taken the death blow in his stead.

Chapter 834: World-Ending Maelstrom

"What's the matter?" Orion's gaze was fixed on the hero-merman within the shimmering shield, his tone flat, edged with a casual contempt. "Has the mighty King of the Merfolk lost his tongue?"

"Orion, you are mistaken." The voice of King Jaklas echoed from the deep, and as it did, a radiant figure emerged from a magnificent palace within the protected city. When he reached the edge of the defensive ward, his voice rang out once more. "The one you faced was Phorcys, a newly ascended Archlord of our clan."

He let the name hang in the water before continuing, his voice pitched for every listening ear. "Phorcys was Marina's betrothed. When she lost her mermaid pearl, she shamed him, an Archlord. For that, she was made a sacrifice."

He paused, his eyes meeting Orion's. "Marina is dead. What price would you have us pay?"

A murmur swept through the assembled Merfolk and the warriors of the Sea-races. So this was the man Marina had loved. An Archlord. And by the looks of it, one far more powerful than their own Prince Phorcys. An Archlord with a sea-beast of his own and a great host at his back.

What good was any of it now? The princess was already sacrificed. There was nothing left for him to claim. A wave of despair washed through the crowd—they had made an enemy of a power like this—followed by a current of rising fury. This was an invasion of their sacred home.

"Phorcys," Jaklas said, turning his attention inward. "You claimed this matter was yours to handle. Give the Giant King his answer."

Phorcys felt a surge of cold fury, realizing he had walked directly into the old king's snare, and was now being roasted over a fire for all to see.

"I am Phorcys!" he roared, his voice shaking with indignation. "The dignity of an Archlord will not be offended! The honor of the Tidefang Clan will not be trampled!"

He was no fool. A single exchange with the Giant King had cost him one of his life-saving artifacts. It was clear this giant was a slab of impenetrable steel. He could not win alone. And so, cleverly, he bound his fate to the clan's. With the honor of the Tidefang on the line, and with nearly every citizen of the realm watching from a distance, drawn out by the leviathan's rampage, the old king could not possibly stand aside.

"Your Majesty!" Phorcys cried, his voice ringing with false righteousness. "This giant raped Marina! He forced himself upon her and used foul sorcery to steal her pearl! Now he dares to attack our sacred home. He is a monster whose crimes are beyond measure! We must act as one—unite our strength and crush him, his mount, and all his followers!"

No one who ascended to Archlord was a simpleton. With a few words, Phorcys had turned the tables, putting the king himself to the flame.

Jaklas shot Phorcys a single, sharp glance before turning his gaze back to Orion. "Orion, I regret this," he said, his voice the calm pronouncement of a monarch. "But what became of Marina was a matter for the Tidefang Clan alone."

The statement was for Orion, but also for his own people. The old fox was already positioning himself. "Marina is dead. Let all grievances die with her. If you are willing, Orion, the Tidefang Clan would gladly continue its friendship with the Stoneheart Horde. Go home."

The words were polite, showing the proper respect for a fellow Archlord. Orion heard the unspoken offer between them. A new alliance could be forged. A new princess could be offered.

He understood. But he refused.

Orion was not like other Archlords. In his heart, a code from another life burned. A debt of honor, a matter of conscience. He had to give Marina justice. He had come here hoping against hope that the king possessed some arcane power to bring her back from the abyss. Instead, he found only a cynical old man using him as a pawn to chasten a rival. He had seen the entire game play out in the exchange between the two Merfolk archlords.

So be it. Let them all be destroyed.

"Go home?" Orion's voice was glacial, a shard of ice that chilled the very water. "You say Marina is dead. Then your entire Tidefang Clan can be buried with her."

The ancient giant-horned whale began to beat its fins frantically, using its innate mastery of the sea to push back the surrounding water, carving out a pocket of unnatural space. The action looked bizarre, but Orion knew its purpose. His beast was creating the conditions for a great and terrible spell.

A blinding light erupted from the Lightning Cloak Orion wore. Within it, a forbidden sanction of power began to coalesce: World-Ending Maelstrom.

The very fabric of the sea seemed to tear. A storm of spectral thunderheads boiled into existence above, roiling with power. The rumble of thunder was like a thousand war drums, a physical blow against the soul.

CRACK!

A bolt of lightning tore through the water, a sight no Merfolk had ever witnessed. The air was ionized. The sea around the defensive shield began to hiss and boil. A storm of celestial lightning rained down, a relentless, deafening bombardment. The ward, at first unyielding, began to tremble violently.

"No!" King Jaklas's voice was sharp with alarm. "Council of Ten, to your posts! Stabilize the formation, now!"

Ten figures of immense power shot from the city below, taking their places at key nodes in the defensive matrix, pouring their own transcendent energy into the failing ward. The true power of an Archlord's faction was on full display.

"Kori! Break them!"

At Orion's command, the ancient giant-horned whale transformed. It swelled into its Gigantic Form, then threw its colossal weight against the flickering shield.

Screeeee!

A sound like cracking crystal echoed through the sea. The ward had not shattered, but it had reached its absolute limit.

"Phorcys!" Jaklas roared, making his decision. "You hold off that whale! I will kill the giant myself!"

Chapter 835: Marina isn't dead. She is sleeping

At this moment of life and death, Jaklas and Phorcys were remarkably united.

The instant Jaklas's voice fell, Phorcys shot out from the defensive shield, charging the ancient giant-horned whale.

The Merman King, Jaklas, charged toward Orion.

As he surged forward, Jaklas produced a prismatic scale. It pulsed with an aura Orion recognized—the power of the demigod, Lady Seraphina.

The scale expanded in the water, morphing into a massive, shimmering portal shaped like the scale itself. As the gateway stabilized, a Merman warrior burst forth with a deafening roar.

"Oh, great guardian, destroy this enemy for the Tidefang Clan!"

Orion's pupils contracted. The creature before him was a monster of colossal proportions. The ancient giant-horned whale was already immense, but this Tidefang Guardian, emerging from the portal, seemed a full size larger. It radiated the power of an upper-tier Archlord.

With its single horn, sharp fangs, a ridge of spines down its back, six clawed limbs, a long, whipping tail, and a great golden anchor held as a weapon, the guardian was an overwhelming sight.

"Kill him!"

With the guardian summoned, King Jaklas's confidence surged. He let out a furious roar and followed in the behemoth's wake, rushing Orion.

Orion took a deep breath, holding his trident ready, his demeanor calm. A baleful, crimson light erupted from his Boots of the War-Tyrant, unleashing a barrage of blood-red blades that hammered against the Tidefang Guardian. At the same time, Orion activated Aura Lock and Instant Impact, appearing directly behind Jaklas.

Without hesitation, he thrust the trident.

Jaklas's body shattered into a cloud of scaly dust. But he was not dead. He reappeared beside the Guardian, though the sky-blue scale on his forehead had vanished into nothingness. He possessed the same kind of life-saving artifact as Phorcys.

Orion remained silent, immediately targeting Jaklas again.

Zzzzt!

He appeared behind the king once more and shattered his form. But this time, the Guardian's immense, terrifying trident swept through the water, smashing into Orion and sending him flying.

Far in the distance, Orion stabilized himself. The protective barrier from his Battle Will Surge shattered on impact. Fortunately, the Lightning Cloak's own defense was strong enough to absorb the remaining force. From that single blow, Orion knew the Tidefang Guardian would be a formidable foe.

He looked back at where King Jaklas had been. The body he had destroyed had left behind only an ancient, preserved skin, an heirloom passed from each Merman King to his successor, capable of negating one fatal blow. Such artifacts were exceptionally rare; it was the only one Jaklas possessed.

Having lost two life-saving trump cards, Jaklas was shaken to his core. He no longer dared to remain outside the city's defenses and flashed back inside the shield. Even an Archlord fears death when their last resorts are gone.

With Jaklas routed, Orion activated his Titan Form and summoned the Eightfold Spear Barrage, preparing to meet the Guardian head-on. His plan was to use the barrage to draw the Guardian's blood, then use that blood to summon a Ghost Dragon to end the fight.

With a thunderous shout, Orion charged. To make the Eightfold Spear Barrage work subtly, he had to present himself as the primary bait, drawing all the Guardian's attention.

The plan worked. As the Guardian's next blow sent him reeling, Orion reached out into the void and seized one of his spectral spears, now slick with the behemoth's blood.

Without a moment's delay, he began the summoning.

"O ghostly dragon, slumbering in endless darkness, hear my call..."

Far across the battlefield, the ancient giant-horned whale unleashed its own ultimate ability, Ancient Devour, swallowing Phorcys whole. It then swam to Orion's side, shielding him.

The summoning ritual for the Ghost Dragon required a brief moment of absolute stillness. The window was short, and a typical Archlord might not notice it. But the Guardian was clearly no ordinary opponent. To be safe, Orion had called his leviathan (ancient giant-horned whale) back.

However, just as Orion was about to complete the final words of the incantation, a familiar voice echoed through the water.

"Enough."

A gentle current began to flow, and where it passed, the combatants and the spectating Mermen of the Silvercurrent Sea froze as if trapped in time.

Unseen before, a graceful figure now stood upon the single horn of the Tidefang Guardian. She had a tall, slender form, a tail of iridescent rainbow scales, and a face of perfect beauty.

It was the will-projection of Lady Seraphina.

"Stop the summoning," she commanded, her voice placid, yet carrying an authority that permitted no argument. "There is no need for your Horde and my Tidefang Clan to come to blows."

Orion hesitated, his mind racing with suspicion. He could not see through the demigod's intentions. He had come to the Silvercurrent Sea prepared for this. Knowing Lady Seraphina was likely connected to the Tidefang Clan, he was not mad enough to challenge a demigod without a plan.

Before his departure, he had not only brought his Faith Avatar but had also coordinated with Arthas. If all else failed, he would have brought his powerful brother-in-arms into the realm. It was a risky move, as the Titanian Realm was the territory of three demigods, and Arthas's arrival could easily trigger a war between gods.

"Marina isn't dead. She is sleeping," Lady Seraphina's voice entered his mind, a private message for him alone. "When she awakens, she will find you."

Hearing those two sentences, Orion's doubts receded. He chose to trust the word of a demigod known for her benevolent nature, and cancelled the summoning ritual. He didn't so much trust her as he understood he had to, lest he force the situation into a conflict he could not win.

"Very well," Orion sent back his own telepathic reply, deactivating his Titan Form. "I will await her return."

"Release Phorcys," Lady Seraphina said, seemingly aware that the Archlord had not yet been fully digested by the whale. She had to intervene.

An Archlord of the Tidefang Clan was a primary source of her faith; she could not allow Orion to kill him.

Orion landed atop the ancient whale and tapped its head lightly. The leviathan opened its maw and spat out a glob of acidic slime containing the near-dead body of Phorcys. In truth, Phorcys had already died again. Inside the whale's digestive space, he had perished once, consuming another of his life-saving artifacts.

Orion felt a pang of envy. Even a newly ascended Archlord of the Tidefang Clan possessed multiple artifacts to cheat death. It was a testament to the profound resources of their race. It made sense; any people capable of birthing a demigod would surely possess a deep and powerful heritage. The colossal Guardian before him was likely their greatest trump card, second only to Lady Seraphina herself.

"This matter is concluded," Lady Seraphina declared. "The sea territories around Mist Bay are now forfeit to your Stoneheart Horde."

Orion nodded, ultimately choosing not to challenge a demigod.

A part of him had wanted to test the combat power of his Faith Avatar. But upon learning that Marina was alive, he had abandoned the thought.

Chapter 836: An Unimaginable Secret

With Marina alive, the relationship between the Stoneheart Horde and the Tidefang Clan was not beyond saving.

Orion offered a respectful bow to Lady Seraphina, then turned his ancient giant-horned whale and departed the Silvercurrent Sea. As for Vorluk and Gulas, still on the deck of the Sea-Devouring Warship, Orion had no intention of releasing them yet. He still needed them to navigate the labyrinthine trenches of the deep sea.

As Orion's fleet departed, Lady Seraphina's gaze swept over Phorcys and Jaklas.

"I am reclaiming the scale used to summon the Guardian," she announced. "When the Tidefang Clan learns to stand as one, I will bestow it upon you again."

With those words, her will-projection vanished. The Tidefang Guardian retreated slowly into the shimmering, scale-shaped portal before it, too, disappeared. Jaklas and Phorcys were left behind, one just inside the defensive formation, the other outside, both looking utterly wretched.

In this battle, Jaklas had fled rather than fight. Though he had not further disgraced the title of Merman King, such an outcome was already the greatest humiliation. Phorcys, for his part, had suffered catastrophic losses. His trump cards were exhausted; if Lady Seraphina had not appeared, he would be dead.

"Alas... the blame for this battle is mine." A true king, in a critical moment, had to stand and accept responsibility, salvaging what he could.

Jaklas directed his transcendent power to wash the acidic slime from Phorcys's body and personally helped him back into the Silvercurrent Sea.

“There are always greater powers in the world, Phorcys. Our Tidefang Clan is not the strongest race in the Titanion Realm. Let today be a lesson to us both.” Jaklas sighed. Lady Seraphina reclaiming the summoning scale was a clear sign of her displeasure with him.

“Your Majesty...”

In an unknown region of the deep sea, within an endless trench.

The slumbering Lady Seraphina’s eyes suddenly snapped open.

“What a terrifying presence!” she whispered to herself. “It could warp space before it even arrived. A being like that... it must be at least a true god!”

The place where Lady Seraphina slept was a colossal, violet-gold clamshell. She looked like a nymph resting within it. After murmuring to herself, she stretched languidly.

“That giant of yours is quite ferocious,” she said, her tone teasing. “He was ready to have the entire Tidefang Clan buried with you.”

Finishing her stretch, Lady Seraphina turned her head to look at a smaller, though still large, violet-gold shell beside her.

Inside, Marina—who the outside world believed had been sacrificed—was resting on a soft bed within the shell, her chin propped in her hands. Her face was alight with happiness and longing.

“That just proves I chose the right man,” Marina said cheerfully.

“To give yourself completely to another... isn’t that what you’ve always wanted?” Lady Seraphina turned back to face her.

Marina giggled but offered no reply.

No one knew that Marina was, in fact, an avatar of Seraphina. Nor did they know that Marina had only traveled to the Trident and Starfall Seas because she was following Seraphina's own prophecy, using the summons to her own sacrifice as a convenient pretext.

Even if she hadn't been 'sacrificed', she would have found another reason to leave the Silvercurrent Sea. After Lady Seraphina returned, she needed her avatar to reach the Legendary tier.

The prophecy had foretold that her destined love would meet her in the southern seas, and they would fall for one another. This was a demigod's prophecy about herself. Of course, it was also the prophecy of a beautiful Merman demigod who very much wanted to find a husband.

Seraphina was exceptionally talented. Her outward demeanor was cold, but her true personality was kind, lively, and playful. The moment she saw Orion outside the world tunnel and sensed the mermaid pearl within him, she knew who he was. For that reason, she hadn't been offended by his forwardness in the illusion; in fact, she had been a little expectant.

It was an almost unimaginable secret. The great and perfect demigod, Lady Seraphina, secretly yearned for a lover who would not be intimidated by her divinity, one who would claim her with overwhelming passion. This was a demigod's private desire, one of which Orion remained completely unaware.

"I told him that when you 'awaken', you will go find him," Seraphina said. "So you'd better work hard. You won't be able to leave here until you reach the Lord tier(Legendary level)."

She continued, "Besides, if your power isn't at the Legendary level, you won't have any status in the Stoneheart Horde. You'll have to constantly watch how you act around others. The kind, beautiful, playful, and adorable Lady Seraphina can't possibly be bullied by those lesser women, can she?"

Seraphina winked at Marina, then gave a great yawn. As Marina watched, she flopped down onto her shell bed like a young girl, sprawling out and hugging a ball of snow-white, fluffy material of unknown origin before drifting back to sleep.

"Orion, you came for me. I'm so happy," Marina whispered to herself. "I knew you would come to ask for my hand. I just didn't expect you to become an Archlord so quickly, or for you to be so unbelievably strong. Wait for me. As soon as I reach the Legendary tier, I will come find you."

Lost in her thoughts and murmurs, Marina gradually entered a state of intense cultivation.

Stoneheart City, the castle.

Orion opened his eyes. Beside him lay Lycanor, her skin pale and smooth, her collarbones elegantly defined. After they had finally broken the unspoken tension between them, Orion had invited her to live in the castle.

It was a development Lilith had long anticipated. A bedroom specifically for Lycanor had been prepared well in advance.

It wasn't that Lilith felt no jealousy, but that Lycanor's status and power were unique. With an upper-Legendary tier blood elf marrying into the Stoneheart Horde, not even Lilith, with the entire succubus race behind her, could prevent it. It was the will of the Horde itself.

The Horde needed peace, and an alliance by marriage with the blood elves was essential. Only through this union would the blood elves be assured of their place, preventing them from siding with another faction at a critical moment, much as they, the humans, and the dwarves had stood together during the War of North and South.

"You're awake."

Lycanor was a lord; the slightest movement had not escaped her notice.

"Mm."

Orion absorbed the memories from his mirrored avatar. The Tidefang Clan's display of power had been impressive, revealing a deep foundation of strength. A typical Archlord would have been completely shut down the moment the Guardian appeared.

"What would you like to eat? I can go get it for you."

New to her role as his consort, Lycanor was still a little shy. She pulled the blanket up to hide her chest, her eyes avoiding Orion's direct gaze.

"Lycanor," Orion rumbled, a smirk playing on his lips. "Why would I want food?"

He rolled over and pressed down on top of her.

A moment later, the quiet of the morning was broken by the sounds of passion, her melodious elven cries mingling with his.

Chapter 837: Preventative Arrangements

The sea, when the winds are calm and the waves are still, is a realm of tranquility and vastness. Perhaps the sight of the water meeting the endless sky was the very image of beauty that now lay before Orion. Sunlight spilled across the surface, turning the ocean into a ribbon of gold, where countless fish leaped in a vibrant, unforgettable display of life.

"You can go."

Orion's gaze was fixed on the horizon, his eyes reflecting the sea's peace, and his voice carried a similar calm. The words were directed, of course, at the two merman princes, Vorluk and Gulas, who had been forcibly detained to serve as his guides.

"Your respected Majesty, King of the Giants... what about me?" Gulas asked, panicked that Orion might have forgotten him.

"You as well," Orion replied coolly, without turning around.

Hearing this, Gulas was ecstatic. To escape from the clutches of a killer like Orion was a stroke of incredible fortune.

“Thank you for sparing my life, Your Excellency! I will be sure to restrain the other Mermen and keep them from entering the waters of Moonlit Reef.”

As he spoke, Gulas grabbed Vorluk, ready to flee. Vorluk, however, did not move. He gestured for his brother to go on ahead.

Gulas and Vorluk were not full brothers, and since Vorluk seemed determined to linger, Gulas had no intention of staying with him. He clapped Vorluk on the shoulder, then vanished into the sea with a flick of his tail. In the deep water far below, a Hippocampus Drake and a Tidewyrm were waiting for their master.

“Orion, thank you,” Vorluk said, his voice earnest. “My sister Marina was not wrong to choose you. It was only fate that was not on your side.”

“I thank you on her behalf. What you tried to do at the home of the Tidefang... it was something I wanted to do, but I lacked the courage and the strength.”

Between his race and his family, Vorluk chose family. Sometimes, if one’s kin are gone, even the grandest clan becomes meaningless. Between an individual and a faction, there must be mutual care for either to survive and grow.

“Go on,” Orion said, finally turning to look at Vorluk.

For a member of the Tidefang Clan, Vorluk’s words were treasonous. But for a brother who was powerless to protect his own sister as she was dragged away to be sacrificed, they were the words of a man filled with grief and unwilling to accept injustice. The fact that Vorluk held such rebellious thoughts made him far better than the hypocrites who would raise the banner of righteousness to commit merciless acts against their own blood.

From Orion’s current vantage point, he knew that ideas like Vorluk’s were the very engine of change within a faction. In fact, he hoped for that same spirit within the Stoneheart Horde. Only with such drive could the Horde grow in a healthy way, nurturing new generations of forward-thinking geniuses. Technology, martial arts, sorcery, magic, forging techniques... all of these required rebellious young minds willing to create and experiment.

“Take care, Orion,” Vorluk said. This time, he spoke without the honorifics his brother had used. If one were to be formal about it, by acknowledging Orion and Marina’s relationship, Orion would have had to call Vorluk his brother-in-law.

With a splash, Vorluk entered the water, his figure quickly disappearing into the distance.

With the Mermen gone, only Orion’s own people remained on the Sea-Devouring Warship. Lysinthia and Slagor came forward to stand behind him, their eyes filled with fanatical devotion.

The battle had been absolutely legendary. Orion, alone in the Silvercurrent Sea, had faced three Archlords of the Tidefang Clan and had held the upper hand. It was the kind of story Slagor knew he could tell for the rest of his life. Even as a spectator, recounting this tale to his old comrades-in-arms would be the stuff of legends, certain to earn a roar of approval.

“Master, from these waters, if we head west for a month at most, we will reach the Serpent Isle of Jynx,” Lysinthia said, coming to his side and raising a slender hand to point west. She was familiar with this part of the sea, having crossed it herself on her journey to the continent of Utessar.

“Send out the Ocean Hunters,” Orion commanded Slagor. “Have them sweep the sea beasts from this ocean and make them remember whose territory this is now.”

The Ocean Hunters were vicious, but beyond their rapid breeding, they possessed an excellent memory for terrain, so long as it was within their own domain. Once they claimed these waters, they would map every trench and reef.

Hearing the order, Slagor turned and went to see to it immediately.

“Is something on your mind?” Orion asked, turning to look gently at Lysinthia. The young serpent-woman who had followed him from the very beginning was loyal, shy, and fiercely devoted. When something troubled her, she tended to fall silent, merely standing quietly behind him or Lilith. It was a habit she had formed back in their tent in Moonshadow Valley.

“Master... the serpentfolk on the continent of Jynx... would it be possible for me and my gorgons to handle them?” Her tone was pleading, a clear request to Orion.

“Tell me what you are thinking,” Orion said, neither agreeing nor refusing.

“The Gorgons and the Medusa are enemies. We want to use our own strength to conquer them, to convert them. I don’t want to see more serpentfolk die in this civil war. I want to build a vast army of Gorgons for you, Master.”

“I... I also want to reach the Legendary tier, to lead the Gorgons behind me and fight for you in other worlds.”

Orion gazed at Lysinthia, certain that the young serpent-woman was speaking from the heart.

“It seems my Lysinthia has grown up,” he said, a fond smile on his face. “You have ambition and a goal now.”

He reached out and stroked her dark, silky hair with great tenderness. “Very well. I will entrust the conquest of Jynx to you. I will give you five years. In five years, I expect a result that will satisfy me.”

A brilliant smile lit up Lysinthia’s face. She leaned her head into the palm of his hand, cherishing the moment of gentleness that was hers alone.

“Thank you, Master!”

Orion smiled faintly and pulled her into his arms, holding her as they looked out at the distant sea together.

Jynx... serpentfolk... Medusa... Lysinthia...

Orion’s mind turned over the problem, considering how he could create the best conditions for her, to give her the strength and confidence she would need to face her own people.

He considered the complex history of her race: the Medusa were the royal bloodline of the serpentfolk, while the Gorgons, like Lysinthia, were an aberrant offshoot, mortal enemies to their kin, yet possessing the power to convert them. It was a true civil war she was asking to lead. As her man, it was his duty to consider these things.

After the precedent set with Marina, Orion knew he had to make preventative arrangements for the safety of all the women in his life.

Chapter 838: Save Your Loyal Wood Elf Worker

In Stoneheart City, upon the throne.

For the past few years, Orion had settled into a routine: ruling his horde, spending time with his wives and children, and managing the faction's myriad affairs. Of course, a great deal of his time was spent immersed in the Survivor's Platform. Leveraging the now stable and prosperous Stoneheart Horde, he used the horde's immense wealth and resources to sweep the Platform for anything of value, enriching both himself and his people.

In truth, the Commander, Deputy Commander, Arthas, Alexander, and Leonidas—all his powerful patrons—had walked this same path. Their vast resources had not appeared from thin air; they had been accumulated piece by piece, over countless hours of effort. Orion was now simply retracing their steps.

This process would continue indefinitely, until the day the Survivor's Platform could no longer meet his needs. As things stood, this would be the daily reality for Orion's true body for a long time to come.

"Sir... help me!"

"Godfather... help me!"

"Adoptive father... help me!"

“Darling... save me!”

“...”

The moment he entered the Platform, Orion was bombarded by messages from Aerin. It had been some time since he’d heard from his business partner, and she had returned with an absolute information blitz.

Among all his contacts, only Aerin would use such a shameless and varied list of titles. The girl was proud and prone to her own little schemes, but when trouble struck, she could truly swallow that pride. The repeated cries of “Godfather” brought a smirk to Orion’s face, the corners of his lips twitching with amusement.

“Speak. What is it?” Orion replied, his message brief, his composure as unshakeable as a mountain.

Aerin didn’t reply with words. Instead, she initiated a trade.

A massive quantity of Pet Pills, high-tier Pet Pills, high-tier magical plants, vials of Moon Well water, high-tier Toughness Potions, alchemical birds, flash powder, and three sealed elemental sprites appeared in the trade window.

The other items were one thing, but the sheer number of alchemical birds and the three sealed elemental sprites made Orion’s eyes light up. Alchemical birds were excellent tools for relaying intelligence and transporting small goods. For Aerin to offer nearly a hundred of them, she must have been giving up her entire savings from the past several months.

He knew it was an offering because before he could even transfer the crystal cores, Aerin had confirmed the trade, as if terrified he would refuse. As for the elemental sprites, they were semi-elemental life forms, rare treasures that could increase the concentration of elemental energy in their environment. His adopted daughter, Elara, deeply needed and longed for such things.

Orion chuckled and accepted the trade. He knew Aerin’s personality well. This was just the preamble. The real request was coming, and he was curious to see what she would ask for.

“Godfather... save me! Save your loyal Wood Elf worker!!”

Seeing the word ‘worker’ broke through Orion’s composure, and he laughed aloud on his throne.

“Well then, my dear adoptive daughter and worker, Miss Aerin, what is it that you want?” Orion replied, his tone teasing.

“Godfather, we’ve been invaded! The whole world is shrouded in an evil plague cloud!”

“The Wood Elves’ Forest of Nature was attacked too. The enemy didn’t get in, but if they failed this time, what about next time? And the time after that?”

Orion could read the panic between the lines. Aerin had told him before that the Wood Elves detested war, were unskilled in it, and preferred to live in their forests, tending to their plants. Their own combat strength was likely negligible. The fact that they had defended themselves meant they probably had corresponding Treant guardians.

In short, the Wood Elves had poor offense but a respectable defense. From just two sentences, Orion had already pieced this much together. It was an intuition born from long experience in war, backed by a vast reserve of knowledge.

“So, what do you need?”

“Equipment, weapons, mounts, artifacts. I have them all. What do you want?”

Orion was calm. Aerin was only at the Alpha-tier; he could easily satisfy her current needs.

“Godfather, I need things to save my life. And things to increase my ability to survive.”

“Anything. There are no restrictions.”

Orion narrowed his eyes. For her to say that, this wasn't simple panic. She must have felt the true terror of death. It was why she attached "Godfather" to every sentence.

"Godfather, you have to think of something, quickly! It's a dire emergency!"

Orion reined in his amusement, his demeanor becoming calm and detached.

"Wait."

After searching through his personal collection for a moment, Orion traded her several life-saving items she could only have dreamed of.

First were ten Cursed Scarecrows, death-substitute artifacts he had acquired from Scarecrow himself. Every Alpha-tier expert in the Stoneheart Horde carried one of these. To get more, one had to exchange merit points in the horde's treasury. Next were two bracelets, each sealing an Alpha-tier scorpion soldier within.

"The Scarecrows are death-substitute artifacts. As long as your power doesn't exceed the Alpha-tier, they can save your life once," Orion explained after the trade was complete. "The two bracelets contain scorpion soldiers. Their intelligence is low, but they are more than adequate as bodyguards and will improve your chances of survival."

"Godfather, love you! Mwah!" came Aerin's reply, expressing her boundless gratitude.

"Disgusting," Orion replied dismissively, before falling into deep thought.

In an unknown realm, the Forest of Nature.

Within a massive wooden house, Aerin leaped up from her large bed, waving her arms, shaking her head, and wiggling her hips.

She was a romantic dreamer, and a bundle of nervous energy all rolled into one. After witnessing people she knew die horribly from the plague, twisting into illusions of their worst fears, she had developed a profound terror of death.

To be honest, before receiving Orion's items, she had been living in a constant state of anxiety and fear. Having finally awakened to her powers, she desperately did not want to die.

After seeing the incredible items Orion had given her, the anxiety vanished and the fear dissipated. Her true nature was revealed, and she transformed into a jubilant, sprightly Wood Elf.

"Oh yeah! Oh yeah! Oh yeah!" she cheered.

"Godfather, Aerin loves you! I'll never marry anyone but you!"

Chapter 839: A Flaw Can't Obscure its Brilliance

After the excitement faded, Aerin clenched her small fists, psyching herself up. With ten death-substitute artifacts in hand, she felt she finally had the resources to be a little reckless. She adored the bracelets, immediately putting one on each wrist.

Not long ago, when the Forest of Nature had been invaded, the peace-loving Wood Elves had immediately organized a resistance.

As an Alpha-tier survivor, Aerin had naturally become a mid-to-high-ranking officer, leading her own squad on patrol. The patrols were relentless and without rest, which was why Orion had been unable to reach her on the Platform.

During one of those invasions, Aerin had watched her companion, a squad leader, die right before her eyes. It was the first time she had felt death so close, the first time she truly understood that the peace her people cherished had been stolen from them.

The moment the enemy temporarily retreated, the first thing Aerin did upon returning to her treehouse was to bombard Orion with messages. It felt like the only way to soothe her panicked heart. And it had worked. When Orion finally responded, she had been happy enough to fly.

"Right, the plague," she muttered to herself, her joy not distracting her from the real threat. "I need to search the Survivor's Platform for anything that can fight the plague. I need to find materials to craft some anti-plague potions for myself."

Her own life was at stake. In the face of annihilation, all dignity, shame, and pride had to be cast aside.

In Stoneheart City, upon the throne.

Aerin's world had been invaded. Orion wondered if it was an internal war or a cross-realm invasion. If it was the latter, he was genuinely interested in extending his influence to her world. But he couldn't be sure yet, so he would not be hasty.

Besides, even if he were to make a move, he would wait for Aerin to ask first. If, for example, she invited him to aid her in battle, it would give him the perfect justification to establish a foothold.

Afterward, she would have no grounds to complain, as she had invited him willingly.

For now, it was a speculative play, a seed planted in a distant garden. Whether it would blossom and bear fruit, he could only wait and see.

Aerin's plight, however, did remind him of someone: Artemis, the creator of the Plague Totem Pole. When Blackstone City had been corrupted by the plague-infested crows, Orion had weathered the storm by purchasing one of those very totems.

Back then, his power was limited and his insight shallow; he hadn't understood the totem's true nature. But now, as an Archlord with his own Horde Hall, he understood perfectly. Artemis was a Legendary-tier lord, masquerading as an Alpha to sell his wares.

The sinister purpose was now obvious. A Plague Totem Pole absorbed plague from a given area, which was a good thing. But the plague itself was saturated with the emotions of the infected; it carried a form of faith.

In other words, the totem would imperceptibly steal the faith energy of the territory it occupied. For any survivor who was not a lord, this mechanism was unknown and, without special means, undetectable. The totem was a dangerous item, one that could potentially expose its world's coordinates to those with malicious intent.

However, after Orion's own ascension, the totem no longer posed a threat to him. Whenever he purchased one, he could simply purify and destroy the hidden, parasitic component, turning it into a genuinely beneficial artifact.

Thinking of the soon-to-be-opened City of the Guardian, his planned underwater metropolis, and Lysinthia's impending conquest of the Serpent Isle, Orion knew he would need more. He found Artemis in his friends list and sent a message.

"Hey, buddy. Business has come knocking."

"I need to custom order ten of the largest Plague Totem Poles. And twenty each of the large, medium, and small models."

It was a massive deal, one designed to test Artemis's reaction. An order of this size would surely arouse his suspicion and might even bait him into revealing himself.

"Are you kidding?"

Seeing the reply, Orion's confidence in his theory grew.

In reality, survivors below the Legendary tier rarely had time to loiter on the Survivor's Platform. Faced with the brutal competition and cruelty of their own worlds, they were singularly focused on increasing their strength.

For them, life was training, and more training. They only entered the Platform when they needed to purchase a specific item they had long saved for. The ones who spent their time constantly scouring the Platform for goods were the old monsters and masterminds of the Legendary tier and above.

"I'm not joking."

Artemis was silent for a long time. He seemed to realize the implications of such an order.

"Have you reached the Legendary tier?"

Artemis knew that only a lord with vast territories would need to build multiple cities. And for city-building, items like the Plague Totem Pole, which improved a territory's habitability, were necessities and bestsellers.

"Yes."

Orion didn't deny it. Artemis fell silent once more, this time for even longer. After a good while, having apparently decided how to approach this new relationship, he finally replied.

"You know about the tricks in the Plague Totem Pole, don't you?"

"I do."

"Then why are you still coming to me to buy them? Are you mocking me?"

A smile slowly formed in Orion's eyes. The fact that Artemis could ask this so calmly was a tacit admission of his little schemes.

"I told you, I'm not joking, and I'm certainly not mocking you."

"Setting aside the little trinkets you hide inside them, the Plague Totem Pole is genuinely a good thing. A flaw can't obscure its brilliance. A good thing is a good thing."

Orion's attitude was clear. He genuinely affirmed the value of Artemis's creation. In fact, both Blackstone City and Stoneheart City were protected by Plague Totem Poles purchased from him.

Furthermore, Orion understood the principle that cutting off a man's livelihood was a grave offense. He had no intention of exposing the totem's flaws or shouting it from the rooftops. He had contacted Artemis for business, and to make a new friend.

"So, you really are here for a big purchase?"

"Of course. And I would be happy to have another friend like you."

"Let me introduce myself properly. My name is Tangere, a plague lord."

"Hulk, a giant lord."

Tangere, also known as Artemis, was direct, revealing his name without hesitation. The truth was, he was also willing to gain a new Legendary-tier friend.

In many cases, such friends were channels for selling one's goods and for acquiring rare resources. It was a mutually beneficial relationship.

Among lords, sharing intelligence, exchanging goods, and networking were common practice. This was how connections, the very fabric of power, were built one by one.

Chapter 840: A Subtle Test

"The quantity you want is large. Even with my existing stock, the fastest I can deliver is in three months."

With introductions out of the way, Tangere immediately moved on to the specifics of the transaction.

"No problem. You can deliver the Plague Totem Poles in phases. The cities in my territory won't be built all at once anyway."

Orion had no issue with this.

"You've already used a Plague Totem Pole, so you know its effects. I don't need to explain them," Tangere continued. "What I'm interested in now is what you will use to trade with me."

Orion had proposed a massive deal. Since the Survivor's Platform had no currency of its own, all transactions between survivors were conducted through barter. In Tangere's eyes, this was a major business exchange, and he was curious to see what Orion could offer. After all, there were some things he simply didn't need.

"What to trade?"

Orion fell into thought, not responding for a long moment.

Within the Stoneheart Horde, the most abundant resources were crystal cores and dark source crystals. The latter were purer, and Orion had designated them as a strategic resource for the Horde.

As for the crystal cores, Tangere might not be interested. Besides, Orion had a subtle test he wanted to conduct. With Aerin's world being invaded by a plague, he wanted to probe whether the man behind it could be Tangere.

"I have a large supply of crystal cores, grain, and a batch of siege weapons specifically designed to counter wood-based Treants," Orion replied, putting the ball in Tangere's court. "Which of these do you need?"

Of the three options, crystal cores were like a universal currency; Orion was sure that Tangere, as a lord, would have some stocked away. The second was grain. If Tangere was currently waging war, grain would be a necessary purchase. The final option, the anti-Treant siege equipment, was the test. Aerin's Wood Elf race used many Treant guardians. If Tangere was her enemy, these weapons would be incredibly effective, possibly even allowing him to breach her people's defenses. He would certainly choose them.

In his heart, Orion didn't really think the invader was Tangere. A cross-realm invasion required, at minimum, the power of an Archlord. Tangere was only a Lord of the Legendary tier; his strength fell short. Still, considering the man was a plague lord, Orion felt a test was prudent.

In an unknown realm, the Blighted Lands.

This was a territory where the very air was saturated with the stench of death. Unlike the Necro-Realm, this place felt more of decay, of a suffocating and absolute despair. It was a land utterly infected by plague.

Its inhabitants, though still alive, moved like mindless zombies. Green mists and rivers of lurid color coiled around them, choking even the groans of the dying and their cries for help.

And yet, in the heart of this decrepit territory stood a beautiful castle.

At this moment, Tangere was leaning back on the main throne in the castle's deepest hall, a strange light glinting in his eyes.

"Crystal cores, grain, and equipment... all of them strategic resources," he mused. "To be able to offer grain as trade... this fellow is no simple lord."

While Orion was testing him, Tangere was using the offered goods to gauge Orion's own resources.

As a plague lord, Tangere was in fact desperately short on food. Because of the plague, his lands were constantly corrupted, making it difficult to produce high yields of grain. Even the crops that did grow were virally tainted. While this toxic grain had a niche market, its value was far too low compared to normal, healthy food.

So yes, Tangere was in great need of grain.

"I'll take the grain."

Seeing this reply, Orion let out a quiet sigh of relief. This choice meant that Tangere was, in all likelihood, not the mastermind behind the invasion of Aerin's world.

"No problem. When you have the goods ready, we'll trade. My grain for your wares."

To prove his sincerity, Orion initiated a trade with Tangere, placed a massive quantity of grain in the window, and then canceled the transaction. It was a clear signal that he was a serious buyer, not a trickster.

"Good."

"In three months, I will contact you to make the trade."

Ending his conversation with Tangere, Orion put the matter out of his mind and dove into the trading section of the Platform, seriously hunting for bargains.

In the north, Blackstone City.

The morning quiet of the Moonshadow Valley military camp was broken by a clamor of voices. A group of armored bloodline warriors emerged from a secret passage that led from an underground fissure into the valley.

"I never thought the winters in Blackstone City were this cold!" a giant named Torvald exclaimed, rubbing his stiff fingers together.

Torvald was immense. He hailed from the Starveil giant tribe and was a head taller than even the native Blackstone giants. His time fighting in the Emerald Dream Realm had only increased his stature. As a southerner, Torvald had truly never experienced the bone-chilling cold of a northern winter.

"Brother Torvald, you'll come stay with us for a while! I'll have my missus cook you something good!"

"That's right! My sister-in-law's cooking is the best, especially her honey-roasted beast meat. It's to die for."

The speakers were Steropes and Brontes. The Bearmen were a boisterous and hearty folk, and they considered Torvald a brother-in-arms.

They had saved each other's lives on the battlefield multiple times, forging a deep friendship. The war of invasion in the Emerald Dream Realm was over, and they were all on leave to visit their families. Steropes and Brontes's families were in Blackstone City, making it their home turf. Of course, they had to show their good brother hospitality.

"Alright! This will give me a good chance to explore this legendary city of our Stoneheart Horde."

It was true. Within the Horde, Blackstone City had already become a legend. In the south, common citizens without the proper status, strength, or clearance were not permitted to use the teleportation array to come here.

In the word-of-mouth tales of those citizens, the name Blackstone City had been mythologized, becoming a place of legend.