

## Titan King 781

### Chapter 781: Stagnant Strength

"I understand," Orion said, his voice level. "The Commander and the Deputy Commander have always aided me greatly. In that moment of despair... yes, the resentment was strong. But I've had time to think. If I had fallen then, it would only have meant that I was not yet strong enough."

He spoke with an unflinching honesty. When dealing with old wolves like Alexander and Leonidas, truth was the only currency that mattered. Deception was a fool's game.

"Yes," Alexander said softly. "The only one you can truly rely on... is yourself."

Orion's head snapped toward him, surprised. The very same thought had just crossed his own mind.

"What, are you shocked?" Alexander asked, a rare, faint smile touching his lips. "Did you think you were the only one to have such a revelation? Heh. The desperate situations that I, Leonidas, and Arthas have faced are beyond counting. We did not reach the peak of the Archlord rank by finding a quiet corner of the universe and meditating for a few centuries."

He turned, meeting Orion's gaze. In the depths of Alexander's eyes, Orion saw not the cold killer, but a profound calm, an acceptance of the world as it is, and beneath it all, a flicker of inexplicable warmth.

"In truth, we often overthink these things," Alexander continued, turning away again. He stared toward the distant mountains, his expression serene, almost beatific. "Stare down death, and meet defiance with battle. That is all."

He began to walk, his stride long and purposeful.

Stare down death, and meet defiance with battle? Orion chewed on the words, pondering their deep, simple truth. After a moment, he shook his head and strode to catch up.

"Once you have the Spring of Life," Alexander said as they approached the mountain pass, his voice once more the quiet murmur of the wind. "Go into seclusion. Settle your mind. You have the heart of a true predator. I have no doubt you will forge your body of faith and ascend to the rank of Archlord."

It was both a reminder and a statement of expectation. And it was the last thing he said before they entered the mountains, and silence fell between them once more.

Dusk Continent, the Kadira Hills.

The name was new, chosen by the giants for the lands they now called home. In their tongue, Kadira meant 'The Conquered Place'. It was a vast territory, encompassing the thousand leagues of land surrounding Red Moon Valley.

In the most populated part of Kadira, a colossal tent had been raised. It was the Chieftain's Tent, built by the giants in honor of their king, Orion. For what is a tribe of giants without a tent for their lord? Though Orion had not yet taken up residence, its presence was a powerful symbol.

Nearly every evening, hunting parties would return and gather in the open space before it, lighting great bonfires that roared against the encroaching dark. The flames lit the night, but they also kindled a growing fire of unity in the hearts of the people.

Here, giants from a dozen different clans and tribes found a shared sense of belonging. They gathered around the flames, sharing their kills, boasting of their deeds on the battlefield. The deep call of war horns and the reedy tune of bone flutes would often rise, and the people would dance and celebrate, their joy uninhibited.

"It has been a long time since I have felt so alive," Rendall said, lowering the great horn from his lips. It was his call that had echoed through the party moments before. The horns of the giants were massive, and it took one whose veins flowed with immense vitality to make them sing.

"I can count the memories this bright on one hand," he continued, a happy, distant smile on his face. "The most vivid was when Orion and Clymene ascended to the Alpha-rank. For three days and three nights, the bonfires never died, and the ale and meat never stopped flowing. That was the way, back then. Any time one of our own reached that rank, we feasted."

The memory was a warmth that never faded.

"I was not yet a man then, not allowed on the hunts," said Fergus, handing Rendall a sizzling cut of roasted meat and a horn of ale. "Like the other youths, I knew the bite of hunger more often than not. The winters in the Black Forest were so cold... so hungry."

"But after Orion ascended, our bellies were full," Fergus went on, his own eyes gleaming with the memory. "I remember that winter... my first taste of an Alpha-beast's flesh. It was tough and chewy and full of fire. After I ate it, a heat filled my body, and I could not sleep for two days and two nights."

He fell silent for a moment, the memory bittersweet. Clymene had still been alive then.

"Heh, I remember mine, too," Thundar rumbled from Rendall's other side. "The tribe celebrated for three days when I ascended."

He raised his cask of ale and clanked it against Rendall's. "And look at us now! These young ones have nothing to do but make more young ones, and the Tribe itself will raise them! Food, training, shelter... they want for nothing. This is the greatest era in the history of the giants."

Rendall looked out at the warriors performing a war dance around the fire, his eyes half-closed. The flickering light and the blurring shapes of his people filled his vision.

"Arch-Elder," Thundar said, "we must have more nights like this."

He was right. In an atmosphere like this, warriors found partners. It was one of the surest ways to grow their numbers. That was Rendall's purpose here: to give his people the time, the security, and the resources to multiply.

The three old friends drank deeply. After some time, when Rendall and Thundar were swaying with drink, Fergus leaned close to the Arch-Elder.

"Arch-Elder," he whispered, "I saw her at the front lines. Clymene. She has ascended. She is a Lord now... powerful, proud, more majestic than ever before."

"She who was your greatest student(disciple)... she who took me in when I was a lost orphan... If you wish to see her, you could travel to Marshlight Sanctuary."

Rendall did not reply. He merely gave a great, drunken belch, leaned back against a giant log, and began to snore.

Fergus watched him for a moment, unconcerned. An Alpha-rank warrior like Rendall could not truly get drunk, and even if he could, his senses would remain sharp.

The Arch-Elder's silence was its own answer. Fergus rose and walked away.

Only when he was gone did Rendall open his eyes. He stared up at the misty sky that veiled the stars.

So, Clymene too has advanced, he thought, a familiar ache in his heart. Good... that is good... Now, it is only my strength that remains stagnant...

Chapter 782: Do You Recognize Me?

Dawn Continent, the Greyridge Mountains.

At the roof of the world, all was ice and stone, a frozen realm where the peaks were permanently crowned in snow. Yet here, in this frigid landscape, was a miracle: a crystal-clear tarn, its surface wreathed in a gentle, life-giving mist.

"The Spring of Life is a great mystery," Alexander said, standing at the water's edge. "It is pure vitality, an artifact of creation itself, compelling all things to grow and multiply. Under normal circumstances, only the masters of a world, or those with a truly pure heart, can pierce the veil of rules and gaze upon it."

He raised a hand, and a single drop of water leaped from the surface to land on his fingertip. With a flick, he sent it flying, where it dissolved into a fine spray.

If the sun were out, there might be a rainbow, Orion thought absently.

A palpable aura of life bloomed in the icy air, a vibrant, melodic presence that felt like a hymn to creation.

"Is this it, then?" Orion asked. "The Spring of Life?"

"You think too small." Alexander shook his head. "The life you feel in this tarn is merely the faintest echo of the Spring's power, the barest runoff that has trickled its way to the surface. It is not even a scrap from its table."

The words struck Orion with the force of a physical blow, his mind reeling at the thought of such a potent artifact. Alexander pointed toward the center of the mountain lake, to a spot deep beneath the water.

"That is the tarn's wellspring. The Spring of Life should be hidden somewhere below it. As for its precise location, that is for you to discover."

He turned to face Orion fully. "I will wait here for half a month. If you do not return by then, I will come down to find you."

It was clear Alexander would not be accompanying him. The place where the Spring was hidden was undoubtedly shielded by powerful wards, the kind that could cut off all sensation from the outside world. If he were to enter and Isabella's forces were attacked, he would be unable to aid them. And so, having guided Orion to the threshold, his duty as commander compelled him to go no further.

"I understand. Thank you for waiting for me here, my friend."

Orion did not ask for more. Alexander had already gone to great lengths. Besides, he was the mind of their army; without his presence acting as a deterrent, the northern enemies might be tempted to launch an all-out war.

Orion gave a respectful nod, then his form flickered. In the blink of an eye, he was hovering over the center of the tarn. He looked down into the wellspring, a dark, gaping maw some ten feet in diameter that seemed to swallow the light.

Without hesitation, he plunged into it.

On the shore, Alexander watched him descend until he was gone, his expression thoughtful.

He still carries one of the Commander's blade-wards. Even if he finds trouble, he should be able to see himself through it. May his journey be swift.

The world below was a sensation beyond description.

It was not the simple fear of drowning—the pearl gifted to him by Marina allowed him to breathe freely in the crushing depths. It was the power emanating from the wellspring itself that was so deeply unsettling.

At first, as he descended, the current pushed violently outward, forcing him to use his transcendent power just to fight his way down.

But then, as he reached what felt like a subterranean river, the force abruptly reversed. The outward pressure vanished, replaced by an irresistible pull that threatened to tear him apart.

Even with his immense strength, the current tumbled him head over heels, his senses spinning. The pressure of the deep water became immense, creating the horrifying illusion that his body was being flattened, his bones ground to dust.

For a time that he could not measure, a feeling of utter despair and helplessness washed over him, his breath coming in ragged, panicked gasps.

He didn't know if it was half a day or three. In the disorienting chaos of a racing heart and a spinning mind, time had no meaning. Then, with a dull thud, he collided with something solid, and all at once, the pressure, the current, the fear—it all vanished.

Plink.

He landed in a pool of water. The sound was as clear and gentle as a springtime bell.

The water was perfectly transparent, the pool itself like a flawless, liquid gem shimmering in an unseen light. He looked up. The sky was a featureless, absolute black, without a single star or wisp of cloud. The pool lay beneath it like a perfect mirror, reflecting nothing.

"Where am I?" he wondered. "Is this the Spring of Life? Or am I inside it?"

As a thousand questions bloomed in his mind, a voice spoke at his ear.

"How did a lowly giant like you find your way here?"

Orion whipped his head toward the sound. On the shore to his right stood a strange man. Strange, because his eyes were tightly closed, and his body was entwined in the coils of a giant black serpent.

The man's hands were locked on the serpent, one gripping its throat, the other its heart. The serpent, in turn, was a living prison, its powerful coils wrapped around the man's legs, torso, and neck, constricting with relentless pressure.

The bizarre, static tableau left Orion momentarily stunned.

"That vacant expression cannot hide the cowardice in your heart," the voice hissed again. "You have stumbled into a miraculous world, giant. Submit to me."

"Even the lowly can be made to grow. Even the weak can one day breach their limits. The rank of Archlord need no longer be a dream."

This time, Orion saw it clearly. It was not the blindfolded man who spoke, but the great black serpent coiled around him. He stared at the creature, a prickle of uneasy familiarity running through him. He frantically searched his memory, and after a few seconds, his pupils constricted in shock.

"Giant. Your eyes betray you. What have you remembered?" the serpent's voice was sharp, curious. "Have you seen me before? Do you recognize me? Impossible. I remember every insignificant creature that has ever crossed my path."

Orion's mind snapped into focus. He smoothed his features, forced his heart to be as still as the water beside him. In the presence of a demigod, he could not afford a single wasted emotion, a single flicker of weakness.

The essence radiating from the great black serpent... it was the same. It was the will of the demigod that had tried to possess him in the Wind Ward.

Chapter 783: I Would Rather Make a Deal

So, this is the one, Orion thought, his mind racing. The evil being. Its true form is that of a great serpent? But what is it doing here?

Does it truly not recognize me? No... wait. The Deputy Commander's Wind Ward. Its will-projection was destroyed within the seal. Its main consciousness... it never sensed what happened. It doesn't know who I am.

In the space of a single breath, Orion had pieced it together. But why this ancient demigod was here, locked in this strange embrace, remained a mystery.

"Who are you?" Orion asked, deciding to feign ignorance. Whether he could truly fool a demigod was debatable, but he was certain of one thing: this creature did not know him.

"Hahahaha... a lowly, insignificant creature, attempting to play the fool before me," the serpent's voice hissed with a sinister amusement. "You lie with your eyes wide open, little giant. You have courage."

Orion said nothing. He watched the serpent, his body coiled and ready for any hostile move. For a long moment, they simply stared at each other, the serpent's glistening black eyes radiating a palpable sense of danger.

Then, the man trapped in the serpent's coils opened his eyes.

A light, brilliant and absolute, erupted from his gaze. It flooded the cavern, illuminating the still water and the featureless black void of a sky.

"Damnable old thing!" the serpent shrieked. Under the power of that blinding light, its scales hardened, its coils tightened, and it became utterly still, a living statue fused to the man.

The light was so intense that Orion had to shield his own eyes, an instinctive revulsion rising within him. It was a pure, holy radiance, anathema to any being with a touch of the abyss in their blood. After a moment, the light dimmed slightly, but the man's form remained a blinding silhouette.

A new voice, firm and resolute, sounded in Orion's mind.

"Young friend. I sense no taint of evil corruption upon you. By that measure alone, we are not enemies."

"Perhaps you are a native of this Emerald Dream Realm, or perhaps you are a being from the abyss or another world. You are at the peak of the Legendary tier; you must feel it. This world has been corrupted. And the source of that corruption... is the evil being upon my body."

Orion's heart hammered in his chest. So it was true. This was the great evil, the world-ender. No wonder its projection had spoken with such arrogance.

"Do not be alarmed," the voice continued. "This is not its true form. Like me, it is merely a will-projection."

The fist of fear around Orion's heart finally loosened. If they were only projections, he had a chance. Deep in the sea of his consciousness, a blade of absolute power lay dormant.

Thank the Fates for the Commander's foresight, he thought, a wave of relief washing over him.

"I can sense the faith energy you carry, young friend," the being of light continued. "It is enough. You are qualified to ascend to the rank of Archlord. My name is Valthor. I am a demigod of the Chaos Continent. Perhaps you have heard of me."

"Let us cooperate. Help me destroy this projection of the great evil. Give the tormented souls of the Emerald Dream Realm a chance to see the light once more. What say you?"

Valthor, a demigod of Chaos Continent. His attitude was a world away from the serpent's contempt. He was courteous, respectful even.

And yet... Orion remained wary. What demigod was not a survivor of countless trials and bitter hatreds? A kind face could hide a cunning heart.

"My apologies," Orion said aloud, his voice carefully neutral. "I came here only to find the Spring of Life. A battle between demigods is not something a being of my station has any right to interfere in."

He had to be cautious.

"Young friend, this world is drowning in darkness. With but a small effort from you, we could light a torch for millions of souls, a flame that might guide them out of the gloom."

So, this one fancies himself a great savior. In Orion's eyes, there were no true saints in any world. Every soul had its own selfish desires. He saw Valthor as a hypocrite, cloaked in a mantle of goodness and light.

Every demigod was a terrifying being. Even the mighty Alexander, Leonidas, and Arthas had not yet reached that rank. To treat such a creature with anything less than extreme caution would be the height of folly.

"I am sorry," Orion stated firmly. "I cannot help you. Nor can I help the millions of souls you speak of."

"Young friend, this is our chance! To destroy his will-projection is to weaken him, we... we..."

Valthor's voice began to fade, growing distant, as if something were dragging him back into an unseen abyss. The light receded. The man and the serpent became a silent, frozen statue once more.

The mysterious place fell completely quiet, so still it felt like a paradise at the end of time. Orion stood on the mirror-like surface of the lake, looking at his own reflection, and felt as if none of it were real.

The silence was broken by a familiar, hissing laugh. The serpent was alive again.

"It seems you are not a complete fool, little giant. Now, submit to me."

"I will grant you a forbidden rite. You can forge your body of faith right here, in this very place, and become the Archlord you long to be."

The black serpent did not wait for a reply, its voice dripping with temptation.

"You are clever enough to know that such arcane knowledge is precious. Ascension to the rank of Archlord always comes at a price. Submit to me. Help me destroy this old man."

"Once I have taken the Spring of Life, I can even grant you passage to my world. This one, after all, is doomed to perish."

"Heh heh heh hahahaha..."

...

The serpent's laughter was thick with triumph, as if its victory were a foregone conclusion.

If Orion had been a native of this world, like Sophia, perhaps the offer would have been irresistible. A guaranteed escape from a dying world, a path to godlike power... it was a potent lure.

But Orion was not a native. He had the Champions Alliance. He had a world of his own.

"Your Grace," Orion said, his face an unreadable mask as he stared down the great serpent. He was beginning a negotiation, a parley for information. "Submission is impossible."

He had to engage, to press, to learn more.

"However," he continued, "we could cooperate. You give me this secret rite of ascension, and I will help you eliminate your foe."

If the evil one agreed, Orion was willing to play along. A technique for forging a body of faith, if it was real, was an asset of incalculable value—not just for him, but for Kraken and Isabella. And if he found a suitable buyer, it could be traded for other priceless treasures.

"My secrets are for my servants alone," the serpent hissed, its amusement vanishing. "You are dreaming, little giant."

The negotiation was over before it had truly begun. Orion stared at the serpent, considering his next move.

But at that moment, the brilliant light flared once more. Valthor awoke, and the great black serpent was once again frozen in stone.

"Young friend,"

Valthor's voice resonated in his mind, "a secret art from such a being... he offers it to you, but would you truly dare to practice it?"

The question struck Orion to the core. He would not. At the very least, he would need Leonidas, Alexander, and the Deputy Commander to examine it. With their vast knowledge, they might spot the traps hidden within. And even if they didn't, he would still hesitate. This universe was vast; it was all too easy to imagine a single, cursed rite that could lead to an eternity of damnation.

"Be wary of his temptations," Valthor warned. "Hold fast to the integrity of your soul. Do not place your trust in evil, lest you fall into a bottomless abyss. The darkness is the unknown, and the unknown is the wellspring of fear. It will make us afraid. It will make us lose our way. Do not be seduced, or you will regret it when it is far too late."

It was a bizarre tableau. Two demigods, one of light and one of shadow, both treating him as a simple, impressionable child to be swayed. One tempted him with power, the other preached virtue. Orion remained silent, watching the being of light, waiting to see what he would offer, what reward he would promise.

But Valthor promised nothing. Instead, he simply explained the true, righteous path to power.

"To ascend to the rank of Archlord, young friend, requires more than a resilient will. It requires a vast reserve of faith energy. To forge a body of faith is, in essence, to fuse your will with that energy. To command faith with your will. When that fusion is complete, you will have your new form. Then, wherever your will goes, your power will follow."

Orion listened intently. He had already gleaned the basics of this from his own recent ordeal. The Commander's Blade Flash had annihilated the wills of the evil demigod and the Flower Goddess, but it had left their raw power behind. Now, hearing Valthor state it plainly, his understanding became complete. Valthor was right. No secret rite was necessary.

"A shortcut, while tempting, is fraught with peril," Valthor continued earnestly. "Never trust an arcane rite from an unreliable source. Such techniques only make the process of fusing will and faith easier. The body of faith they create is often fixed, specified by the rite's creator. The hidden flaws are too great."

Valthor's words sent a chill through Orion. He understood the implications. A body of faith forged through a shortcut might be unstable. Worse, the creator could have woven a hidden chain into its very design, a backdoor for control or influence. The new form might have inherent weaknesses, or be entirely mismatched with a warrior's own spirit and fighting style.

And then, the final piece clicked into place. Alexander, Leonidas, Arthas... none of them had ever spoken of such a thing. They had deliberately kept the existence of these shortcuts from him, wanting him to ascend through his own strength, on his own terms.

The higher one climbed, Orion realized, the more treacherous the path, the more insidious the traps. He felt as though he were walking on the thinnest of ice.

"The lake at your feet, young friend," Valthor's voice was growing fainter. "This is the Spring of Life. If not for my presence here, and that of the evil one, you could claim it with ease. But now it is tainted with the essence of our wills. To take the Spring, you would first have to destroy us both. Young friend..."

Valthor's voice trailed off as the light faded. The serpent stirred, its evil presence descending once more.

"Do not listen to the old man, little giant," it hissed. "He offers you nothing but empty words and expects you to die for him. Such is the way of hypocrites. Besides, this world is doomed. Do you not wish to secure a path forward for yourself, and for the horde at your back?"

The serpent's tone was as arrogant as ever, but Orion could now hear a faint tremor of desperation in its attempts to obfuscate the truth.

"Submit to me," it repeated. "I will help you ascend. And you must believe this: even a demigod would not easily discard a follower who has attained the rank of Archlord."

The last part was likely true. An Archlord was a valuable asset. But Orion also knew that in a moment of true crisis, a being of pure evil would sacrifice anyone—even its own kin. He did not hear a word of it.

"Your Grace," Orion said, his voice now firm with a newfound confidence. "Submission is impossible."

Knowing they were merely will-projections, his fear had abated.

"I would rather make a deal."

#### Chapter 784: The Sigil of Substitution

The fact that these two beings were taking turns to speak, to persuade, gave Orion a crucial insight. Their situation was likely precarious. Perhaps they were locked in their eternal struggle, unable to take any direct action against him. They could only resort to words.

Realizing this, a plan began to form in Orion's mind. He knew nothing of these secret ascension rites, but the veterans in the Champions Alliance certainly would. Before he acted, he could ask for their counsel.

"You are not worthy of making a deal with me, little crawler," the serpent hissed, its voice dripping with contempt.

Orion remained silent, his gaze locked with the serpent's. It stared back, trying to plumb the depths of his thoughts. Seizing the opportunity, Orion diverted half of his focus, opening a channel to the Alliance.

Survivor's Platform // Champions Alliance Public Channel

Hulk: Brothers, I need assistance. I've run into a complication. I'm near the Spring of Life, facing two will-projections. One is the great evil being, the other is a demigod from the Chaos Continent...

Orion quickly summarized the situation, including the serpent's offer of a secret rite for ascending to the rank of Archlord.

Leonidas: A secret rite of ascension? Do those things actually exist? Well, my friend, it seems your luck is in!

Orion ignored Leonidas's jest. His response made it clear he knew nothing of such matters.

Alexander: I have heard whispers of such rites, but I have never seen one.

Alexander's words made Orion's expression grow grim. He had underestimated the serpent's offer. If a veteran like Alexander had only heard rumors, the technique must be rare beyond measure. No wonder the serpent demanded submission, not partnership.

Edward: Rites of ascension are exceptionally scarce. Neither I nor the Commander possess such a thing.

The Deputy Commander's timely intervention cast a pall of silence over the channel. If even the Commander did not have one, the true value of what the evil being offered was staggering.

Edward: Such a rite simplifies the process of fusing will and faith. It makes the creation of a specified body of faith much easier. However, the drawbacks are immense. The process of fusing will and faith is, in itself, a tempering. It is a crucible that forges the body of faith, and it is a step that no true aspirant to power can afford to skip. By enduring that process, the will is hardened, the faith is purified, and the resulting body of faith becomes a perfect extension of the self.

As both Kraken and Orion were on the cusp of this very step, the Deputy Commander decided it was time to elaborate.

Edward:

Ascension through such a rite is a false path. Hulk, Kraken, Isabella—you are forbidden from using such a method. An Archlord created that way is the weakest of its kind, and has sealed its own path to ever becoming a demigod.

His words were both a lesson and a warning, the stern counsel of a respected elder.

Kraken: Thank you for the guidance, Deputy Commander!

Hulk: Thank you, Deputy Commander.

Such wisdom was a gift, and Orion was deeply grateful for it.

Edward: However. While that rite is useless for your own ascensions, it is of enormous strategic value to the Champions Alliance as a whole. Hulk, since you have stumbled upon this, you must acquire that rite.

The Deputy Commander's tone was now deadly serious.

Leonidas: Sir, if the rite is useless for us, how can it improve the Alliance's overall strength?

Leonidas, ever the one to spot a contradiction, immediately posed the question.

Edward: If we possess the original rite, the Commander and I can study its principles. We can attempt to modify it, to reverse-engineer a safe version exclusive to the Champions Alliance. With such a thing, we could perhaps increase the number of Archlords within our allied factions.

A proprietary rite of ascension. That was the prize the Deputy Commander sought. Not for the core members, whose potential was already vast, but for the most talented individuals within their subordinate factions.

Edward: And I have another, less conventional idea.

He didn't wait for questions.

Edward: As we all know, any warrior of the Legendary tier possesses some measure of faith energy. If we could use a modified rite to help them condense that energy, to create a temporary echo of a body of faith... it would grant them a taste of an Archlord's power. It would give them a trump card that could ensure their survival, or even allow them to dominate their peers.

A stunned silence fell over the channel. The Deputy Commander's idea was radical, audacious. After a moment, the silence broke.

Leonidas:

Gods below, Commander, that's an absolutely insane idea!

Alexander: Hulk. You must get the rite. Do you need me to come and assist?

Kraken: Hulk, my friend, our future happiness is in your hands!

Isabella: Get that rite. I will find you a dragon egg when you return.

The channel erupted with excitement and fervent desire. To be honest, Orion coveted the thing himself. A technique that could grant Legendary warriors a taste of a higher power, a new defensive trump card, and one exclusive to the Alliance... it was a prize beyond imagining.

Hulk: Alexander, your help isn't needed for now, but thank you. Deputy Commander, I will do my best to acquire the rite. The problem is, the evil being will not trade or cooperate. It will only accept submission.

This was the crux of the matter. No submission, no rite.

Edward: Then agree to submit. That is not a problem.

As he spoke, a transaction notification appeared before Orion. An item had been transferred to him.

[Sigil of Substitution]

Type: Special Sigil (Single Use)

Quality: Legendary

Description: A sigil created by an ancient magical order. The complex patterns and symbols upon it represent transference, substitution, and concealment. It is said that the creation of each sigil required the living sacrifice of a master mage.

Evaluation: The Sigil of Substitution exists to mock all binding oaths and fatal curses.

Looking at the description, Orion could only sigh in amazement. The resources of a demigod were truly beyond his comprehension. With this sigil, he could play the serpent's game.

Hulk: Brothers, sisters... wait for my good news.

Orion disconnected from the platform. A new, urgent light gleamed in his eyes.

"Your eyes tell me you have made your decision, little giant."

## Chapter 785: Become the Chaos

The great serpent stared at Orion, and on its massive head, an expression of smug satisfaction formed. The eyes are the windows to the soul, and in Orion's gaze, the serpent saw something it knew well. It saw greed.

"I will submit," Orion said.

"Hahahaha... a wise choice!" the serpent boomed in triumph. "Then let us seal our pact!"

This upstart little Lord, this third party in its ancient war, had been won over by the simple promise of power.

At that moment, the light flared. Merrick's divine power pressed down on the serpent with furious intensity as he seized the upper hand.

"Young friend, you cannot!" his voice pleaded in Orion's mind. "For the sake of the countless souls of the Emerald Dream Realm, you cannot agree to this!"

Orion merely shrugged, his eyes narrowed at the blazing silhouette of the demigod. "My apologies," he said aloud, his voice cold. "The fate of those countless souls is no concern of mine. And I am no native of this realm. I am here to claim my piece of the spoils, just like everyone else."

Hearing this, Merrick seemed to reel, but before he could speak again, the serpent's wicked essence surged back, driving the light away.

"You are impressive, for a lowly creature," the serpent hissed, its voice dripping with self-satisfaction. "In this world, self-interest is the only law that matters. That old fool tries to win you with morality, yet offers nothing of value. Pathetic."

It had conquered another heart—a giant's heart—with the simple lure of profit. It had ensnared a future Archlord.

"Now, the contract. You will not receive the rite until the pact is sealed."

The serpent opened its maw and spat out a scroll of roiling black mist, covered in an arcane script that writhed with unequal terms.

"I will not sign," Orion said, shaking his head, "until the rite is written into the terms."

He stared at the ethereal contract, a new understanding of the power of demigods dawning on him.

"Heh heh. A cautious little fellow, aren't you?" the serpent hissed. "Very well. As you wish."

It opened its mouth again, and another glob of black mist merged with the scroll. Orion focused his gaze and could now make out the first half of the promised technique.

"Sign it," the serpent's voice turned cold, its time for pleasantries over.

As Orion reached for the scroll, the two voices began their final assault, a demonic chorus swirling around his ears.

"Young friend, you mustn't sign!"

"Sign it now!"

Orion let a surge of his own transcendent power rise, shielding his mind from their words. His decision was already made. He plunged his hand into the swirling black mist. There was a sharp, biting sensation, and the pact was sealed.

At the same instant, the full knowledge of the ascension rite flooded his mind. The Rite of the Serpent Trinity. Its final form, he saw with a detached coldness, was a three-headed fiend serpent.

"Hahahaha... old man! This battle has dragged on for centuries, but in the end, it is I who wins!" the serpent's laughter was a storm of triumphant madness. "Excellent, Orion! I will now focus my power on suppressing this fool. You will stay here and begin your ascension."

"The Spring of Life possesses endless vitality; it will nourish your body and repair any damage you sustain during the fusion of faith. Once you have risen, once you have forged your body of faith, we will slaughter this old man together! Hahahaha..."

Its voice faded into the background. Believing its new vassal was now bound and committed, the serpent turned its full attention inward, and the otherworldly sanctum fell silent.

Orion's eyes glittered. After a moment of consideration, he stepped into the pool of the Spring of Life, settled himself on the bottom, and fell into a deep meditation. It was time.

He had been to his Sea of Faith before, when he first ascended to the Legendary tier. To call it a sea was a misnomer. It was a personal cosmos, a void where every point of faith he had gathered was a single, shimmering star, orbiting the nexus of his will.

The Deputy Commander had warned him: the fusion of will and faith was a tempering, a process fraught with challenge and peril. Here, in this inner world, the stars were his faith, and he himself was his will.

He reached out, trying to draw the nearest stars of faith into the vessel of his consciousness. They came willingly, settling on his spiritual hands, his shoulders, his face.

The next moment, his features contorted in a mask of pure agony.

Each star that merged with him was like a miniature sun exploding within his soul. It was a pain beyond description, a forced fusion of fire and water, two warring opposites tearing each other apart inside him. And in that crucible of torment, his will and his faith were being hammered into something new.

The pain did not lead to numbness. It led to a silent, soul-tearing scream. It birthed despair, a chorus of inner voices begging him to stop, to repent, to abandon the ascent. Every negative emotion, every lustful impulse, every raging fear and shred of hypocrisy rose up to meet him. For every star he absorbed, a phantom of himself materialized to plead with him to surrender.

"I cannot give up!"

"I have endless potential! I can do this!"

"The pain is an illusion! The phantoms are nothing!"

"I WILL BECOME AN ARCHLORD!"

He fed himself these mantras of resolve, desperate affirmations against the overwhelming agony. But soon, the affirmations were not enough. They became hollow words in the face of such profound torment. And so, as his mind began to fracture, his deepest, most primal instinct took over.

He would not endure the pain. He would destroy it.

"I will kill you all!"

"I will slaughter everything that stands in my way!"

"Kill... KILL!"

The pain in his mind and will was driving him to madness. His conscious self-recrimination fell away, replaced by a warrior's single-minded purpose. To stop the pain, he would kill the source of the pain. To master the chaos, he would become the chaos. This was his path, chosen not by thought, but by instinct.

In the mindscape, the stars of faith transformed. They became a legion of every horrifying monster he had ever faced—giants, ogres, dragons, sirens... a resurrected army of his own past battles.

And so, he began to kill.

And kill.

And kill.

He fought until the heavens of his mind grew old, until the last enemy fell, until nothing else was left standing before him.

Chapter 786: Asura Titan

He did not know how long he had been fighting.

When Orion awoke from the pain and the phantoms, he found himself standing amidst an endless field of bones, his eyes filled with a profound and weary confusion.

In the space of that brief moment, the bones dissolved, fading into the nothingness of his mind. When all the illusions and agony had receded, he looked around the boundless sea of his consciousness and found that he was utterly alone. The ocean of faith energy that had once shimmered here was gone, vanished without a trace.

"Did I succeed?" he whispered, raising a hand to observe his own form.

The sight made him freeze. The hand, the arm before him—it was not his own. The fingers were like talons, the palm as broad as a shield, the arm as thick as a stone pillar. This was a hand that could tear the world asunder.

His gaze traveled up to muscles that bulged like hills, to veins that coiled like great serpents, to skin the color of dark copper, etched with shifting, esoteric runes. This was a body built for absolute, explosive power.

Focusing his will, he took in the entirety of his new body of faith. It stood eighty-five feet tall, a colossus with a waist as thick as an ancient tree. It had four heads and eight arms.

It was a form that radiated raw power, wildness, and an ancient, brutal mystery. As Orion beheld his new self, only one thought came to mind.

This... is the body of a Titan God.

His attention was drawn to the four heads. Each bore his own features, yet each was distinct. Two of the heads had the sharp tusks and pointed ears of his primal ancestry. The other two, while lacking those features, were covered in the familiar, strange runes of the more mystical giant clans.

"The four branches..." he realized after a moment of contemplation. The four heads represented the great clans of the giants: Stoneheart, Ironbone, Starveil, and Shadowabyss. The eight arms were bare, holding no weapons.

"A four-headed, eight-armed titan god..." he murmured. "This is my body of faith."

He clenched his new hands, and the feeling of holding the world within his grasp surged through him. It was the intoxicating pride that comes with newfound, immense power, the illusion of command over life, death, and the very rules of existence.

"I truly succeeded."

On the shore of the Spring of Life, the great serpent Tusha had opened its eyes long ago. It stared unblinking at the pool where Orion had vanished. The Spring's power had shielded Orion from its senses, but Tusha was patient.

The boy has succeeded, it thought, feeling the subtle but distinct shift in the aura of the contract that bound them. An Archlord as a follower. Good. Very good.

Though it could not perceive the process, the result was undeniable.

"Old man," the serpent hissed to its silent captive. "I will be taking this will-projection of yours now, and I won't be polite about it. This world, starting with this third of the Spring of Life... it is all mine! All mine! Ha ha heh heh heh..."

Its evil laughter echoed through the strange, silent space. Valthor's light remained dim, his projection silent, perhaps mourning for himself, or for the natives of the Emerald Dream Realm.

Gurgle... gurgle...

Suddenly, the waters of the Spring began to bubble. It was the sign that Orion was about to emerge.

"Is there truly no future for the Emerald Dream Realm?" Valthor's voice sounded one last time, and his form blazed with a final, desperate surge of light. He was preparing for his last stand.

"Hahaha, Orion! You have finally ascended!" the serpent boomed as Orion's form broke the surface of the water. "Good! Excellent! Now, join with me, and we shall slaughter this old fool's will-projection!"

The darkness roiled, clashing with Valthor's light. Both demigods knew the final moment had come.

But Orion did not move. He stood, his gaze fixed upon the great evil serpent.

"Tusha," he said, his voice calm, yet resonating with a new, profound power. It was the serpent's true name, a secret he had learned from their pact. "Do you know how much I truly loathe you?"

The serpent stilled.

"'Little giant,' 'insignificant,' 'inferior,' 'low-grade'... no one has ever dared to mock me so to my face. Today, upon my ascension to the rank of Archlord, I will christen my new power in your blood. I have yet to personally slay the will-projection of a demigod."

Orion's voice trembled slightly, not with fear, but with the thrill of extreme excitement and absolute confidence.

"Valthor," he said, his voice now a clear command. "Hold him for me. And watch how I kill him."

Orion took a single step forward. His eighty-five-foot-tall body of faith shimmered into existence, enveloping his true form within its chest like a heart. This was the Asura Titan Form, a manifestation of his will.

In the primary right hand of the four-headed colossus, a brilliant flash of light coalesced—the Commander’s blade, no longer a passive ward, but a weapon he could now consciously wield.

"Now, you two," Orion’s voice boomed from the chest of the Titan, a chilling politeness in his tone. "You may find your oblivion."

The smile on the Titan’s face twisted into a snarl as it strode through the air. On the surface, his target was the serpent. In truth, Valthor was a target as well. As the two demigods were locked in their eternal struggle, the Asura Titan drew near, and the blade in its hand blazed with impossible light.

"DAMN YOU, ORION!" Tusha shrieked, its arrogance shattering into pure terror. "DO YOU KNOW THE CONSEQUENCES OF BREAKING A PACT?! EVEN WITH A DEMIGOD AT YOUR BACK, YOU WILL NOT ESCAPE MY CURSE! I WILL HARVEST YOUR SOUL AND MAKE YOU SUFFER FOR ETERNITY!"

Compared to the serpent’s panicked rage, Valthor was silent, as if he had accepted his fate. He offered no resistance. Instead, he poured all his remaining power into holding the great serpent fast.

"Old fool, can you not see the situation?!" Tusha screamed at him. "The waste of flesh wants to kill us both! You idiot! Damnation! Damnation upon you all!"

Valthor did not answer. The blade descended.

It cut through evil. It cut through light. For an instant, time, space, faith, and will—all of it collapsed.

When reality reasserted itself, all that remained was a cloud of pure, untethered faith energy. The Asura Titan opened one of its mighty mouths and inhaled, drawing the power into itself, its form growing visibly, infinitesimally, larger.

The battle was over. Orion dismissed the Titan Form, his own body reappearing in the silent space. He ignored his own condition and reached into his tunic, pulling out the Sigil of Substitution.

Crack.

A fissure appeared at its center. It spread rapidly across the artifact's surface. In five seconds, under the corrosive backlash of the broken contract, the Legendary sigil crumbled into fine, gray ash.

"Such a fine artifact," Orion lamented softly, watching the dust drift away. "It wasn't even warm in my pocket. What a pity."

Chapter 787: Hope Has Finally Appeared

In the aftermath, Orion felt a pang of disappointment. For all the power unleashed, the demigod projections had left no tangible spoils, no echo of their power to be claimed. He now understood.

Killing a will-projection was not like felling a true foe; it was merely wounding the great beast, severing a single claw from a monster with a thousand more. The projections had only been able to manifest in such solid forms because of the immense, life-giving energy of the Spring of Life itself.

The enemy is slain, he thought, shaking off the feeling. But to be safe, I must leave this place quickly.

He closed his eyes, and once more summoned the Asura Titan Form. The Commander's Blade Flash still pulsed in its primary right hand, smaller now, but no less absolute. He had learned a valuable lesson: to actively wield the ward as a weapon cost far more than letting it act as a passive defense.

Dismissing the thought, he commanded the Titan to step into the Spring. Its eight arms rose as if to hold up the sky, and its four heads let out a silent, earth-shaking roar. The entire sanctum began to tremble violently.

The mirror-like lake, the featureless black sky—the very fabric of the pocket dimension wavered like a heat haze, then dissolved into mist and vanished. Within the heart of the great Asura Titan, a new wellspring now pulsed, radiating an endless, vibrant energy. He had taken the Spring of Life and hidden it within his own body of faith.

The moment it merged with him, Orion's senses exploded. For a fleeting instant, he was connected to the very rules of the Emerald Dream Realm. Its sky, its earth, its rivers and lakes, its flora and fauna, its native souls... he saw the world's ley lines as a great, intricate web of light.

And within that web, he sensed a familiar thread. An echo of his own blood.

That is... it is... my own bloodline? Sophia?

Miles and worlds away, on the Chaos Continent, within Phoenix Butterfly Ridge, Sophia's expression was grim. Her repeated refusals to submit had finally angered Archlord Emeric, and he had unleashed his vassals upon her lands.

Now, all that remained of the Dark Butterfly race's territory was this ancestral peak, shielded by the wards of generations of lords. She was besieged, cut off. It was a death sentence, albeit a slow one.

"Your Majesty," an Enchanted Butterfly whispered from behind her. "The enemy has surrounded the Ridge. We cannot get out."

Sophia stared at the shimmering shield above them, her mind racing. "We stockpiled supplies long ago. We can hold out. Send all non-combatants into a healing slumber. We must conserve every resource."

"As you command." The attendant flickered and was gone.

Not a minute later, Sophia gasped, her hands flying to her stomach. A power that was hot, wild, tyrannical, and terrifying surged from within her womb. It was the bloodline of her child.

This... this is... bloodline evolution? she realized in a panic. The aura of an Archlord! He has ascended!

Joy, terror, hope, and dread warred within her. Joy, because this was the salvation her people so desperately needed. Dread, because a newly ascended Orion, with his senses now attuned to such things, would eventually feel the presence of his own child across the world.

And when he came to find it, what would become of the child? What would become of her? What path would be left for the Dark Butterfly race?

As her thoughts churned, a sharp pang of pain shot through her. The child, long-conscious within her, was ready. It wanted to be born.

Realizing what was happening, Sophia vanished, retreating to the sanctity of her main nest.

In another unknown place, the avatar of Valthor opened his eyes. They shone with the light of creation, with shifting rules and the flux of a million possible futures.

"He has taken it," Valthor whispered, his voice trembling with an emotion that sounded like ecstatic relief. "He has stripped the Spring of Life from this realm. Tusha, you fool... you could never have predicted this. Our world... it has been given a chance."

Orion believed he was the victor, but he was wrong. Valthor was. The Emerald Dream Realm had been incomplete, its very rules fractured because a third of its essence—the Spring—had been held hostage.

Now that it was not merely controlled, but removed, the rules could be mended. The wound could be healed. Valthor finally had a chance to rebalance the cosmic laws of his world, to counter the dark influence of Tusha.

"Hope," he breathed, a tear of light tracing a path down his cheek. "Hope has finally appeared."

In the subterranean river, Orion fought his way back against the current, his new power a raging sea within him.

When he finally broke the surface of the tarn on the peak of the Greyridge Mountains, Alexander was there, standing so still at the water's edge that he seemed a part of the landscape. If not for the faint, occasional glint of light in his eyes, one would have thought him a statue.

As Orion emerged from the dark wellspring, Alexander's gaze sharpened.

"You took your time," Orion said with a weary grin.

Alexander stared at him. He could no longer feel Orion's aura, could no longer gauge his level of power. This could only mean one thing.

A genuine, unguarded smile touched the assassin's lips.

"You have done well," he said, the simple words carrying the weight of his full and honest praise.

Orion was no longer just a promising ally. He was a true peer, a pillar of the Champions Alliance.

"My luck was good," Orion admitted. "And without the Deputy Commander's fine artifact, I'm not sure I would have escaped so cleanly."

He looked around at the icy peaks, the majestic glaciers. In his new state of being, they seemed exquisitely beautiful. Even the biting wind felt like a refreshing caress, scented with the clean fragrance of snow and stone.

#### Chapter 788: Sympathetic Evolution

Alexander shook his head, waving away Orion's humility as if it were a pesky fly.

"It took the fastest of us over a century to ascend to the rank of Archlord," he said, his voice flat with fact. "And you? How many years has it been? Your talent is undeniable. Now, let us return."

Orion, who had been secretly basking in the praise, was taken aback by the sudden shift. One moment, a rare compliment from the stoic assassin; the next, it was back to business.

Titanion Realm, Stoneheart City.

Within the fortress, Lilith frowned, her gaze fixed on the small, still form of Pallas lying on the bed. Her face was a mask of calm, but beneath it, a storm of anxiety raged.

Earlier that day, while Lilith was attending to matters of state in the great hall, the giant prince had been playing on the castle ramparts under the watch of his handmaidens. Without warning, a shroud of blood-red flame had erupted around him. His clothes were instantly incinerated, and after a single, agonized cry, Pallas had fallen into a deep coma.

"What have you found?" Lilith asked, forcing her voice to remain steady.

Two dark shapes detached themselves from the shadows behind her. Her personal guard. The moment the incident occurred, she had them secure every handmaiden and guard who had witnessed it.

"My Lady," one of the shadows reported, "our interrogations have yielded nothing. There was no assassin, nor did any outsider approach the prince. We are certain of it. What happened to His Highness... it came from within."

Lilith's eyes narrowed, becoming as cold and deep as a wolf's.

"What in the hells happened?"

A shimmer of spatial energy announced Delilah's arrival. She stepped from the portal directly beside Lilith, her eyes immediately locking onto the bed. Pallas was now encased in a pulsating, crimson cocoon.

Delilah's eyebrows shot up. The moment Pallas had collapsed, Lilith had used the bond of their twinned souls to summon her sister. In Lilith's eyes, while her twin was dangerously ambitious, she was also frighteningly capable.

Delilah had used a realm-locked teleportation scroll—a priceless artifact Orion had given her for emergencies—to return from the western coast. That she would expend such a treasure spoke volumes of her devotion to Pallas, and to the future of the succubus race.

"The initial investigation shows no external factors," Lilith said, her words clipped and precise. "He was playing, and then he was simply... on fire. The flames were incredibly powerful; any who drew too near were burned."

"But strangely, Pallas himself, at the heart of the blaze, has no burns. He is only in this coma. Something inside him has changed, something we cannot see."

After listening to Lilith's report, Delilah looked even more bewildered.

"We cannot delay," she decided after two sharp breaths. "Contact Orion. If anyone knows what this is, it will be him."

Lilith nodded and closed her eyes. A moment later, Orion's voice echoed in the room. It was deeper than they remembered, resonant as a great bell.

"Do not be concerned. I have had a breakthrough in the Emerald Dream Realm and have, by chance, ascended to the rank of Archlord."

"My son's bloodline has sensed this, and it is undergoing a sympathetic evolution to match my own."

"The same phenomenon is likely occurring in the human kingdom, with the boy Kronos. Send word to them."

"And this news of my ascension... keep it secret for now. I will return as soon as my business in the Dream Realm is concluded. When I do, the current situation of the Stoneheart Horde will change."

The voice faded. In the bedroom, Lilith and Delilah stood in a silence so profound it felt like a spell.

After a long time, Delilah let out a heavy sigh.

"Ever since he led the tribe to victory in the south, I knew he was destined for a future we could scarcely imagine," she murmured, a deep melancholy in her voice. "I just did not think that future would arrive so soon. Now... now all we can do is watch his back as he walks away from us."

She was dejected. Orion was an Archlord. And she was still stalled at the peak of the Alpha-rank, unable to even glimpse the path forward. Lilith felt her sister's helplessness as her own. For all their tireless work, for all their devotion to Pallas and their people, fate had chosen another.

"The message to the human kingdom," Lilith asked quietly. "Should I explain the cause?"

"No. Simply inform them that the Giant Lord's bloodline is awakening."

Delilah cast one last look at the cocoon on the bed, then turned and strode from the castle. She had to return to her post. Thankfully, the Four-Winged Blood Bat she had left for Lilith was still stabled here; she would not have to waste time traveling by land.

Lilith followed her out, watching in silence as her sister took the lift platform to the ramparts, summoned the great bat, and vanished into the sky. Only when the dark speck was gone from sight did she return to the bedroom to keep her vigil over Pallas.

The South, Human Kingdom, Rose Manor.

In her private chambers, Princess Ava paced like a caged lioness. On the bed, her son Kronos was also wrapped in a cocoon of blood-red energy.

"Go!" she snarled at a guardsman. "Ride to the capital again! Bring the Royal Physicians! If they dare make excuses or delay, you will drag them here in chains!"

It was the seventh time she had given the order.

After the guard scrambled out, she whirled on the giant Tarn, who stood anxiously in the corner. "And you. You still have no idea what this is?"

Kronos had been training with Tarn when it happened, practicing his martial skills. If Ava hadn't been watching her son's training at that very moment, Tarn would have a hundred questions to answer that he could not.

"The cocoon has the scent of the giant bloodline, like an awakening," Tarn said, shaking his massive head. "But it is not like the awakenings in our histories. Our people awaken at the age of eighteen, after the rites in the Cavern of Trials. I have never seen anything like this."

He was an Alpha, but the deeper secrets of his own blood were a mystery to him.

"I have already sent a warrior with a message to the Horde," he added, his voice strained. "I pray they send a reply swiftly."

He felt utterly powerless, a knot of fear in his stomach as he looked at the unconscious boy. He had grown fond of Kronos over their months together; their bond was like that of brothers. If anything happened to him, Tarn didn't know how he could ever face Orion again.

#### Chapter 789: Can It Be Trusted?

But just as Ava and Tarn could do nothing but stare in helpless frustration, the air shimmered with the energy of the void, and the regal form of King Harold appeared in the bedroom.

Ava was his beloved sister and Kronos his nephew; moreover, the boy was the linchpin in the critical relationship between the human kingdom and the Stoneheart Horde. It was no surprise that the king had come. He kept his own informants within Rose Manor. Receiving the news, he had come at once, bringing one of the most senior Royal Physicians with him.

But as the King's gaze fell upon Kronos, he froze, his own vast knowledge doing little to prepare him for the sight.

Ava, however, seeing the aged physician at her brother's side, felt a surge of hope. "Master Elian, quickly, you must see to Kronos!" she cried, pulling the old man by the sleeve toward the great bed, her face a mask of desperate expectation.

Master Elian nodded, his attention fixing on the boy. He reached out a hand, intending to sense the nature of the energy pulsing from the cocoon.

"Don't!" Harold's warning came an instant too late.

The physician's fingers brushed the crimson shell. As if sensing a foreign presence, the blood-flames roared to life, leaping onto the old man's hand.

"Aaaargh!"

A terrible scream echoed through the chamber as the flames shot up the physician's arm. In a flash, King Harold was at his side. A blade of pure, transcendent power flashed from the king's hand, and the physician's arm was severed cleanly at the shoulder. With a second gesture, Harold's power sealed the wound, staunching the flow of blood.

"Your Majesty, why...?" the physician gasped, white with shock and pain.

Harold shook his head and simply pointed to the floor. The severed arm had already been reduced to a pile of fine grey ash.

"By the gods..." Master Elian breathed, a cold sweat breaking out on his brow. He understood now. If the king had not acted, it would have been his entire body, not just his arm, that lay in that pile of ash.

"Kronos is well, Ava," Harold said, placing a reassuring hand on his sister's shoulder. His voice trembled almost imperceptibly. "This is a sympathetic bloodline evolution. It is a good thing."

Ava trusted her brother implicitly. Since they were children, he had never lied to her, never let her down. "Truly, brother?" The doubt in her voice lasted only for the space of that single question. "Oh, thank the gods!"

"Yes, it is a good thing," Harold affirmed. "After this evolution, Kronos's future will be brighter than we could have ever imagined."

If Prince Theodore had been there, he would have recognized the strain in his father's voice. He would have noticed that the king's gesture—a simple pat on the shoulder—was a break from his usual, impeccable regal decorum. But Ava, lost in her worry for her son, noticed nothing.

"Now that I know Kronos is safe, I must return. The empire has many matters that require my attention," Harold said. "And a bloodline awakening of this magnitude will require... resources. As my nephew, he shall have the full rights and allocations of a prince of the blood."

He stepped forward and gave Ava a brief, formal hug—the customary gesture of comfort between them. "The first of his monthly stipends will be delivered."

"A prince's due? Truly?" Ava's eyes filled with tears of gratitude. "Oh, thank you, brother! Thank you!"

Harold nodded, patting her back gently. "He cannot draw upon the kingdom's treasury, of course. But the private resources of our royal line... he has a right to them. Raise him well, Ava."

He stepped back, and taking the injured physician by his good arm, vanished from Rose Manor in another shimmer of teleportation magic.

With the king gone, Ava finally let out a long, shuddering breath. The great stone of worry that had been crushing her heart had finally been lifted. In her mind, her brother Harold was infinitely more reliable than even the great Orion. It was the absolute, unshakeable trust of family.

The Imperial Capital, the Royal Palace, the Secret Chamber.

Compared to the gilded opulence of the palace, the chamber was stark. It contained nothing but a single wooden bed. King Harold entered and bowed his head respectfully to the white-haired old man who sat meditating upon it. It was the Ancestor Saint, and Harold approached him with the reverence of a supplicant.

"Ancestor, I have something to report."

The Saint did not move, did not open his eyes. Nearly fifteen minutes passed in absolute silence before he finally stirred.

"Given your temperament, Harold, you would not come here unless the matter was of the utmost gravity," the Saint's voice was like the whisper of ages. "Let me guess. Have the Naga sent an Archlord's avatar to meddle in our affairs?"

Harold shook his head.

"The old dragon's avatar is restless again?"

Harold shook his head a second time. Seeing the Saint's brow furrow, he finally spoke.

"Ancestor... Orion, the King of the Giants, has ascended to the rank of Archlord."

The silence that followed was heavy and absolute. After a long moment, the Saint's eyes snapped open, and an immense pressure, held carefully in check, filled the room.

"Harold. How do you know this? What is your source? Can it be trusted?"

The Saint's tone was severe, incredulous. He knew it to be impossible. If a new Archlord were to rise on the continent, their very presence would be sensed and they would be pulled inexorably toward the two-realm battlefield, the cosmic front line where the champions of their world fought the greatest threats of the Emerald Dream Realm.

The Saint's true form was on that battlefield. The Giant King was not. Therefore, Harold's news had to be false.

"Ancestor," Harold began, his voice steady. "I have a nephew. He is the son of the Giant King. His name is Kronos, and he resides at Rose Manor."

He explained everything. He told the story of his sister, Ava, of her misfortunes and her return, and of the bizarre events that had transpired that very day with Kronos.

"It is a sympathetic bloodline evolution, Ancestor," Harold concluded, his words now laden with conviction. "It is much the same as what happened to your own descendants, when you yourself ascended."

Ava and Tarn had been blind to the truth, but Harold, as king of a line that had its own Archlord Saint, knew the histories.

The royal archives recorded such phenomena. From the first moment he had laid eyes on Kronos, encased in that blood cocoon, he had understood exactly what it meant.

#### Chapter 790: A Rootless Source

"Activate the Imperial Hallow," the Ancestor Saint commanded, his voice leaving no room for argument. "We are going to the border. Perhaps, from there, I can sense the aura of this new Giant King."

The Saint did not doubt Harold's word. His plan was simple and logical. With the power of the empire's most sacred artifact, he should be able to extend his senses into the territory of the Stoneheart Horde.

If he detected the presence of an Archlord, it would mean the bloodline evolution was a fluke, and Orion had not truly ascended. If he sensed nothing, it would confirm his suspicions: the Giant King was not on his own lands. He had ascended in another world entirely.

Emerald Dream Realm, Marshlight Sanctuary.

In a vast, torch-lit hall, Leonidas circled Orion, then circled him again, his expression a comical mix of disbelief and scrutiny.

"Was the Dawn Continent really that good to you?" he finally burst out. "You take one trip over there and come back an Archlord?"

Orion simply smiled, saying nothing. The path his ascension had taken was something he could have never predicted himself.

"Gods damn it all," Leonidas grumbled, his tone sour with envy. "When Arthas wakes up, he's going to lose his mind with joy."

Orion just laughed. "My friend, I have only just ascended. What comes next? What must I be wary of? A student requires his master's wisdom."

He was sincere. He may have attained the rank, but compared to old wolves like Leonidas and Alexander, he was a newborn. After leaving the tarn, he had used a teleportation scroll to return to the Dusk Continent immediately, leaving no time to ask Alexander these questions.

"Hah! Details, my friend, mere details! Come, let us drink, and we will speak of such things!" Leonidas boomed, slinging an arm over Orion's shoulder and pulling him toward the throne.

Moments later, tables were laden with roasted meats, candied fruits, and casks of strong ale.

Leonidas took a great swig of ale before finally meeting Orion's expectant gaze.

"Alright, my friend," he began, his tone now serious. "You are an Archlord now. A true patron of a realm. Above us is the rank of demigod—beings who touch the very rules of creation, who take their first steps toward immortality."

"So, from this day forward, you must learn a new way. You must learn caution. You must learn to be cunning. The time for reckless charges is over. Our goal, yours and mine, is godhood. And you cannot become a god if you are dead."

He paused, letting out a loud belch. The words were not a jest; they were the heartfelt counsel of a brother-in-arms. A demigod, barring some unforeseen catastrophe, could live for a hundred thousand years. To throw away such a prize for a moment of pride was the ultimate folly.

"But to preserve your life, caution is not enough," Leonidas continued, raising his cup. "You must also grow stronger."

Orion grabbed a cask of his own and drank deep.

"As an Archlord, the path to strength is through your domain. You must have more territory, nurture more subjects, and gather more faith for yourself. And, I'll speak plainly with you, brother... your current state is unstable. Your foundation is not your own."

Before Orion could ask, Leonidas elaborated.

"You ascended using the faith energy left behind by others. It is not that this is bad, but that power is a rootless source. Once it is spent, it is gone. And battles between Archlords are wars of attrition. The more faith energy you have, the less you fear your enemy."

Orion listened intently, taking another long drink from his cask. Leonidas was warning him that beyond bloodline and personal might, the true contest between Archlords was a clash of faith energy. Certain forbidden arts, certain ultimate techniques, could not be cast or countered with mere physical power.

"Is that why," Orion interjected, a piece of the puzzle clicking into place, "the Archlord avatars we fought would rather die than summon their bodies of faith?"

"Exactly," Leonidas confirmed with a grin, clearly pleased with his student. "Faith energy, once spent, takes a very, very long time to replenish. But an avatar? An avatar can be remade. This world is filled with secret rites for creating or finding new vessels."

He leaned back, looking relaxed. Now that Orion was an Archlord, topics that were once off-limits could be discussed freely. To see Orion listening so earnestly, like a fresh-faced squire, filled him with a deep and profound satisfaction.

With Arthas still sleeping, teaching Orion felt like fulfilling a duty to his oldest friend—a responsibility, and a validation of his own long, hard-won wisdom.

"And, my friend," Leonidas said, his voice dropping conspiratorially, "the amount of faith energy one has is also linked to ascending to the rank of demigod. Take an old warrior's advice: in the future, avoid using your body of faith unless you have no other choice. It is the core of an Archlord's being, the foundation upon which a demigod is built."

Orion nodded, and with genuine gravity, he bowed his head to Leonidas in thanks.

"Hahaha! For that bow alone, I will light a few more paths for you," Leonidas laughed, his good humor restored.

"First: lay low and build your house. You have a new form, but it was built with another's energy. You must focus on your territory, on your people. They are the wellspring from which you will draw your own power, the foundation that will truly make you a lord."

In ancient times, he explained, many worlds did not even distinguish between Lord and Archlord; they were simply two sides of the same coin, a path of gathering power through one's domain. The body of faith simply made an Archlord a far more terrifying prospect in a fight.

"Second," he continued, "you need to acquire some capable avatars. An esteemed patron cannot be everywhere at once, doing everything himself. You cannot risk your true body on minor adventures. At our level, you must learn to delegate. All of it."

He chuckled, a strange, knowing look in his eyes, as if he could see right through Orion. Orion looked down, pondering the meaning. He knew Leonidas had seen his tireless efforts, his constant running between two realms, his hands-on approach to every aspect of the Horde. To Leonidas, he must have looked like a busy little bee.

"And third," Leonidas said, his expression turning serious again. "You need more trump cards. Your new body of faith... does it have proper weapons? Proper armor?"

And the avatars you will create... will they not need their own equipment? Their own secret weapons for a desperate moment?"