

The Oracle Paths

- Chapter 1035: Hey, Buddy... |

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Then came the turn of the Rank 12s to join the warfront. At this level, one could still find a few who had gamed the system, farming early ranks by taking down Rank 1 to 4 Digestors incapacitated by their minions, but none were wholly incompetent.

Killing a Rank 4 Digestor gained between 10,000 and 50,000 points. Considering that advancing from Oracle Rank 3 to 4 only required a million, it was entirely achievable, even for persistent Evolvers relying solely on their own merit. The silver-spooned elites could even aim for the Rank 6 of Staff Sergeant, with the more audacious targeting Rank 7, given the average stats of a Rank 4 Digestor hovered around 30 points.

However, even with these effortless promotions, one had to seek the next five Oracle Ranks through Ordeals. Starting from Rank 9 of Master Sergeant, it cost 200 rating points and 400 to ascend to Rank 12 Second Lieutenant.

This meant accumulating at least 1,100 rating points in just four Ordeals, even when starting from Rank 7, requiring a performance in the top 0.1% of all Players. Those starting from a lower rank, or even Rank 0, had to earn nearly double the rating points.

For this reason, in this wave of high-ranked Players, only about 42,000 from each side participated, totaling 84,000, which accounted for just over 0.5% of all participants. This rate, five times higher than expected, was due to the dwindling numbers of the incompetent Players. The natural selection of the initial four Ordeals had done its job, with only the truly confident (and a few oblivious daredevils) daring to venture forth.

Among the Myrtharian Nerds in this wave were a few Beskyrians, Eltarians, and Myrmidians, but the majority were Kintharians and Throsgenians. Despite their boundless strength, their legendary lethargy nipped any spark of ambition or enthusiasm in the bud, numbing even their fear of death. These guileless giants lived day by day without a care for tomorrow, reflected in their Ordeal Ratings.

The two unexpected notable players among them were the Egean Shield Dancer, Nicolet, and the veteran Knight-Lancer, Ingranus the Bold. Both had come from dire straits, with vivid memories of their days suffering in Oracle Shelters rife with unchecked debauchery, drugs, famine, and despair. Had they not encountered Jake, their fates would've been sealed long ago.

When the aged knight, who now bore the striking physique of a vigorous, athletic man in his early thirties with a well-groomed goatee and mustache, opened his eyes and felt the crushing gravity envelop him, he couldn't help but flash an elegant smile.

"A good old war," he mused, a hint of nostalgia playing on his face. "It's been ages since I've set foot on an old-fashioned battlefield, where soldiers fight and earn their victories with pure grit instead of hiding behind fancy tricks or absurdly advanced tech."

Nicolet shared his sentiment but quickly frowned upon realizing he couldn't summon his shield or tap into his Earth Magic to conjure one. Noticing a short sword on his person, he tossed it to the ground with contempt, eyes scanning the vicinity for something.

"First order of business: I need a worthy shield from the armory," he reminded himself aloud, oblivious to the baffled barbarians nearby, wondering why he'd broken formation instead of marching with the rest.

A Shield Dancer without his shield was like a one-handed juggler. Performing adequately might not be impossible, but damn, he'd bet his boots it'd be a hell of a lot tougher...

The real wild card, though, was Esya. Having met her end in almost all her Ordeals, she owed her high rank to her exploits before her untimely eliminations.

When the stunning beauty, her pink hair neatly tied in a ponytail, opened her eyes, gone was her usual playful demeanor and zest for life. Far from her sister and aware she had no more respawns, her anxiety was palpable.

But her fear wasn't for herself. It was for her sister and all her comrades.

"I hope all of you make it, and we can celebrate our triumph at the end," she whispered, shedding a silent tear. But with a swift swipe of her sleeve and a resolute expression, she fell back in step with the oblivious barbarians around her.

They were too busy ogling her assets to notice her momentary heartache.

The arrival of the 84,000 or so Rank 12s went largely unnoticed, as they merged into an even larger army of conscripts. 36 hours later, the Rank 13 First Lieutenants made their grand entrance.

To achieve such a rank, one needed to accumulate between 1,500 and 2,200 rating points, depending on one's starting point and privilege level. This meant ranking between the top 0.001 and 0.000 001% in each of their four Ordeals. Spotting a weakling among them was now a fool's errand, and those few lacking in brute strength made up for it with cunning or skill, playing pivotal roles in their respective factions.

They numbered barely 1500, even including Players from both Mirror Universes, but ironically, the Myrtharian Nerds boasted a good quantity of their iconic members in this rank:

Will Hopkins, Vincent Wilderth, Kevin Wilderth, Skorgeld, Trea, Fo, Temra, Peter Brady, Jinlong, Daniel Wilderth, a handful of dragons, several Myrmidians, a smattering of Aristocats, and many more. Each had gained their stripes, their power undeniable even among Players of the same rank.

As soon as he opened his eyes, Will's brow furrowed, sensing none of his dragon friends nearby through his Draconic Link. He felt diminished. After quickly assessing the gravity and other constraints, his face took on a thoughtful expression.

"I need to find a way to reconnect with the others," he thought, his gaze fixed on the horizon. "Never thought I'd rue the day I got my current Oracle Rank, but starting this way? It's a downright handicap. Gonna take time to catch up..."

Throughout this introspection, Will never missed a step. None of the barbarians noticed the soldier marching amongst them had shifted essence...

Whether it was Vincent, Kevin, Daniel, or the others, their reactions were largely consistent. With a few notable exceptions. Take, for instance, Peter Brady...

"Hey, buddy..."

Upon waking, his first move was to swipe the fragrant herb the soldier beside him smoked from a long pipe, even before he could grasp the language. His babbling in an alien tongue landed him promptly in the grasp of the nearest Soulmaner.

Clueless about the unfolding events, Peter followed willingly, thinking this black brocade-robed figure, adorned with silver, looked well off. By tailing him, he might snag some superior weed...

Another exception was Jinlong. Finding no sign of Will, he naturally reverted to his original form: a majestic golden dragon. The chaos this incited among the regiment of Underworld Barbarians he was amidst meant he instantly faced a hail of lethal projectiles, each arrow and lance gleaming with radiant runes.

Slicing through the air swifter than shooting stars, they pierced his scales and wing membranes in a heartbeat. Letting out a powerless roar of fury, he plummeted, raising a cloud of dust upon impact. Shortly after, a Soulmaner fitted him with a strange collar etched with inscriptions. The moment it clasped around his neck, Jinlong realized he couldn't remove it by his own might. One mere moment of hubris had dashed his hopes to bits.

"Sorry, Will. It'll be a while before I can join you," he rumbled, his deep voice barely above a whisper before he vanished into an amphora adorned with ancient symbols, held aloft by the Soulmaner who had captured him.

On a starkly different note, Duchess, the leopardess and Crunch's love interest, cautiously opened her eyes. She found herself caged behind steel bars, alongside a cavalcade of creatures, some more frightening than the next. The pungent blend of stale urine and various animal excrements immediately attacked her keen nose, triggering a bout of dry heaves.

Straining to overhear on the conversations of the strange half-giants escorting the convoy of cages she was a part of, with some intense focus, she soon discerned they were dealing with Beast Tamers. To protect her identity, she'd have to play the obedient pet for now, and ideally, earn the trust of one of them...

It promised to be an experience she'd find deeply... degrading.

Next up were the even rarer and elitist Rank 14 Oracle Captains, followed by the Rank 15 Oracle Majors. The former didn't even reach 200 in total, evenly split between the two Mirror Universes, while the latter numbered in the mere forties.

This is where the Myrtharian Nerds truly flexed their muscles. They boasted nine Rank 14 Players, including Enya, Svara, Haynt, Aisling, Tim Paradis, Drastan, Aurum, Hasta, and Pictorus. As for the Rank 15, they had even more.

Hade, Asfrid, Gerulf, Rogen, Mufasa, Shere Khan, Crunch, Lord Phenix, Azeus, Galadin, Eris, Nyx; each was a force to be reckoned with, and some like Hade were just points shy of Rank 16. This meant that Jake's faction controlled a whopping 60% of Rank 15 Players fighting for their Mirror Universe. Had Jake known these stats, he would've flipped.

How damned weak was their Mirror Universe, for crying out loud?

Chapter 1036: The Three Hidden Lieutenant Colonels

Time hurtled forward, and soon it was the turn of the feared Rank 16 Lieutenant Colonels to emerge. When the lower-ranked Players received the notification, their expressions darkened, and a knot of dread formed in their guts.

At first, the notification heralding the entrance of the higher-ranked Players was predictable, but as the ranks of the involved Players climbed higher and higher, those who appeared later began to harbor the hope they might be the top contenders of this battle.

The ones who faced the sting of disappointment the most were undoubtedly the Rank 15 Majors who'd arrived 36 hours prior. Much like the Rank 14 Captains before them, they'd clung to the fleeting hope that they held the highest rank among the participating Players, a position that would've bestowed upon them a significant advantage. Yet, their hopes had been brutally dashed.

Their only silver lining was the knowledge that encountering one of these titans on the battlefield would be a rare event, especially at the outset of the war. Arriving earlier had given them a head start over the rest.

Of course, these high-ranking factionless Players were actually in the minority. The majority, instead of anxiously awaiting their superiors and leaders, were quite composed about the idea. If anything, it comforted them, knowing that more competent allies had their backs.

The eyes of some Myrtharian Nerds, like Enya, Esya, and Will, gleamed with anticipation, knowing their trusted leaders would join them in battle soon. Sadly, for many faction members, the opposite sentiment rang true.

Not all faction members were knowledgeable to the exact Oracle Rank of their leading officers, and each new notification only deepened their unease. The more pessimistic and uninformed even believed that Jake, Lucia, and others were merely Rank 11 or 12.

Regarding these Rank 16 Players, save perhaps for the Oracles from both sides, no one knew their exact numbers. In fact, within the Myrtharian Nerds alone, Jake was in the dark about Lucia and Ulfar not being the only Lieutenant Colonels in his faction.

Some had played their cards close to their chest. But if one were to venture a guess, the more calculating and informed Players thought their number could be counted on two hands. Now, whether the one counting had three or eight fingers on each hand was an entirely different debate.

Thirty-six hours after the Players already present on Twyluxia received the last notification, a Rank 16 Player, who'd successfully kept his rank under wraps, made his entrance. Walking incognito amidst a mismatched procession of Underworld Barbarians, an elegant young man with jet-black hair opened his eyes.

Though dressed in rags like the other conscripts, his demeanor was eerie - calm and cruel. His eyes, dark as the abyss, seemed to create an illusory vortex around him, absorbing ambient light and erasing his very presence. At that moment, even if he'd unleashed his powers or transformed into a dragon like Jinlong earlier, it was plausible that even the nearest Soulmaner wouldn't have noticed.

This man with the stern and reserved aura was none other than Hephais Vist.

Many Myrtharian Nerds saw him as a reliable assassin, spy, and scout, as well as a master of precision when circumstances demanded, but few truly grasped the depth of his skills.

Jake had been more insightful about this ever since he had rescued Hephais from the Manastorm at the end of the Fourth Ordeal, realizing the latter was still lucid, battling to slow the relentless transformation of his body into Mana. Without Jeanie's assistance, he knew he probably wouldn't have fared much better - the dismal state he found Gerulf and Rogen in was testament to that.

Like Enya and Esya, Hephais was an Egean, his black hair and eyes signifying his inherent affinity for the Dark and Shadow Elements. But unlike the two sisters, his upbringing was far from privileged.

Collected with hundreds of other abandoned newborns or war orphans from streets and orphanages, he was trained and indoctrinated to become a soulless assassin, a mere tool, a pawn to be readily sacrificed.

Hephais perpetrated his first kill at the tender age of seven and remembered it vividly. The victim? A corpulent baron, drenched in sweat and reeking of old rum, guilty of hoarding wheat during a famine to spike the prices.

Whether the accusation held truth didn't matter. As a child, Hephais didn't hesitate for a moment to slit the man's throat in his sleep after witnessing him brutally attack a maid who had dared to reject his advances.

By the age Tim is now, Hephais had more human blood on his hands than Jake currently had on his own. Even if he'd been a powerless Earthling, the cold rationale and resourcefulness gleaned from his experiences as an elite mercenary, assassin, and spy would've enabled him to outperform over 99.999% of the Players.

His lone Achilles' heel was his solitary nature and his inability to trust anyone. Before aligning with the Myrtharian Nerds, this personality flaw had caused him more trouble than necessary; some battles are unquestionably easier won in numbers.

It was in Jake that he found a kindred spirit and a truly dependable leader for his subordinates, compelling him to join. Initially, he thought of his involvement as temporary, planning to gain what he could and leave, but in time, he grew fond of the Myrtharian Nerds. Now, the idea of departing was far from his mind.

Upon awakening, Hephais stoically scanned his body, registering his new limitations just like the others.

"I can't even harness 1% of my true power, and the artifacts I had are now sealed in my Space Storage," he summarized grimly in his mind, then muttered sardonically, "Well, it's good enough..."

Moments later, he broke ranks, blending into a blur as he darted towards the battlefield—the destination of the conscripts—to gather intel. The overseeing Soulmaner and officers never perceived his absence. By the time one of them called roll to weed out potential deserters, Hephais had long since returned.

In another regiment millions of miles from Hephais's location, but part of the same draft wave, an angelic beauty with pale gray skin showcased a chitinous golden armor and matching flowing hair. She wore a sly, ominous smile, watching the brawny barbarians overtly salivate over her all-too-revealing torn attire, particularly her plunging neckline and curvaceous rear. The four pairs of folded golden wings on her back were all but overlooked in comparison.

This otherworldly lethal beauty was the Schwazen Virtue, spawned by Aurae, and coincidentally a born Digestor Trojan with a double-agent status.

Stretching seductively, her generous bosom pressed taut against the thin fabric shielding her modesty, drawing sharp intakes of breath and audible gulps throughout the regiment.

"Aaah! This is going to be fun," she exaggeratedly moaned, slipping her index finger into her mouth and suggestively beckoning the nearest barbarian with another.

Battle achievements and promotions aside, within the hour, she had the entire regiment ensnared around her finger. And unlike Aisling, seduction wasn't even her forte.

Between Hephais and Caphriel's regiments, another young woman was coming to grips with her new surroundings. Of all the Myrtharian Nerds at Rank 16, she had best concealed her true nature—even Jake and Will were oblivious to her real standing.

Maeve Gibson once embodied youthful exuberance. She moved with the grace of spring petals and had a laughter so infectious, it would light up anyone's day. Yet, tragedy morphed this young woman, and since then, the sole fire burning within her was an insatiable thirst for revenge.

Now, her raven-black hair, dark as a moonless night, cascaded in sleek waves just above her shoulders, framing a face so breathtakingly ethereal it seemed handcrafted by gods. But it was her eyes that held the unfathomable. They gleamed with a reddish hue, untouched by the influence of the Cosmic D Starfeyrves Body Passive, reminiscent of embers that never died out. These eyes told tales of power, pain, and retribution, revealing the lineage of a primeval demon pulsating through her veins.

Her skin, once soft and rosy, had transformed an opalescent white, almost translucent, displaying a subtle mesh of dark veins that slithered beneath like serpents. As she moved in sync with the other barbarians, a chilling aura cloaked her, frosting the air in her wake.

Her movements, though fluid and almost trance-inducing, radiated an underlying threat. Each step, each gesture seemed deliberate, as if she was perpetually on the edge, ready to unleash the demoniac tempest brewing within.

Despite her supernatural allure, rivaling even that of Caphriel, no barbarian dared lock eyes with her for more than a fleeting moment—a chilling sensation of impending doom gripping their cores. She was both irresistibly magnetic and deeply unsettling, a creature forged by anguish and power in a volatile fusion. Malice and frigidity seeped from every pore, and though her quest for vengeance was not yet sated, it was evident nothing would deter her.

Unlike Hephais and Caphriel, her hostile aura imparted visceral discomfort throughout the regiment, immediately drawing the attention of the overseeing Soulman— a cold, foreboding man with sharp, angular features and a chiseled jaw.

"What do you think you're doing, outsider?" The Soulman growled menacingly, trying to assert dominance as he summoned a peculiar object. "If you wish to live, you'll follow me, willingly or otherwise."

Far from daunted, Maeve's demonic face darkened, her already cool demeanor plummeting. Eyes fixed on the Soulman's object, she retorted venomously, her killing intent palpable,

"I had plans to spare you, but you had to brandish the one thing I abhor before me. You might not know, but I hate lanterns..."

Moments later, bloodcurdling screams echoed through the regiment, then silence. Minutes afterward, quivering barbarians hastily buried what remained of the once-feared Soulman, marking the beginning of a reign of terror under an enigmatic force: Maeve Gibson, their new general.

Chapter 1037: Jake's Entrance

Whether in the Duskwight Lands or the Lustra Plains, standout Players of the likes of Hephais, Caphriel, and Maeve made their entrance with thunderous flair in their own distinctive ways.

Some chose to keep a low profile, blending into the masses, while others chose to go big from the get-go. But whatever their approach, it was executed flawlessly, their true identities meticulously shielded for the time being.

Even an entrance as aggressive as Maeve's barely made ripples beyond her regiment. The tangible aura of fear and the chilling intent emanating from her lithe figure were more effective than any oath in silencing these barbarians who lived by might alone.

Yet, their emergence was accompanied by something else – another notification...

[Rank 17 Players and Oracle Knights will join the war in 36 hours. These are the highest-ranking Players participating in this Ordeal. Rank 17 Colonels combined with the title of Oracle Knight hold the highest authority for this Ordeal. We recommend you use this time to solidify your position before your superiors arrive.]

This alert was slightly different from the others, but for the Rank 14, 15, 16, and 17 lone Players, if any, it spelled disaster. Their sole relief was, thank the heavens, that it was the last. Had there been subsequent ones heralding the imminent arrival of Rank 18, then 19 and 20 Players, their self-worth would've been utterly shattered.

Thirty-six hours later, inside a specific Red Cube...

Jake, bored to tears and wondering how much longer he'd have to wait to partake in the war on Twyluxia, finally felt a familiar force grasp his soul, rudely yanking him from the desolate dimension.

'At last! I thought this moment would never come.' Jake rejoiced, feeling his consciousness waver briefly before sensing solid ground beneath him and being met with a pungent sweat-scented gust, prompting him to discreetly rub his nose.

The crushing gravity that had ended the earliest Players and horribly oppressed those in subsequent waves didn't even warrant a mention in his presence. Yet, with his keen perception, he instantly took in all there was to see.

'The gravity here is insanely high compared to my previous Ordeals. This world must be staggeringly vast.' He marveled, cracking his neck.

He could also sense other, more concerning restrictions; one of which severely hampered his mental senses, making the use of his various powers nigh impossible. If he, a Player of his caliber, found it challenging, then odds were that the other Players had basically reverted to mere mortals since arriving here.

In fact, even the Aether, generated by his Energy Body and supposedly stored within his cells for easy access, seemed to vanish somewhere before he could harness it for his own use. This implied, much to his chagrin, that nearly all his Aether Spells had become moot.

However, he could still tap into the energy directly contained in his cells. But the restrictions on his mental senses considerably diminished its power to the extent that he might as well duke it out with his bare fists.

"Those behind these Ordeals are truly twisted," Jake quipped, realizing that both his Space Storage and his Inner Space Dimension were now out of reach—unless he exerted a monumental effort.

The most maddening part was that the armor he had poured so much love and effort into, which he had equipped to brace against any unwelcome surprises, had been torn from him without consent, replaced by rags and a short sword even more fragile than his nails.

Seeing the brawny brutes humming as they marched around him dressed in the same worn-out attire, he felt a smidge better. Keeping pace with the other barbarians in his cohort as if all was normal, he keenly listened to Xi's report.

[The gravity here is roughly 40,000 times that of Earth. The Aether is being redirected elsewhere, our mental sense is sealed, and the world's space has an impressive stability,] she relayed calmly after analyzing the Oracle Scan's data. [The average Fifth Ordeal Player's Real Strength is about 27,000 times that of an Earthling, which, by my calculations, should suffice for them to endure for a while without perishing.]

"Thing is, where there's an average Player, there's one below average," Jake interjected, feeling a fleeting pang of pity for those souls who had heedlessly thrown themselves into the jaws of danger chasing fleeting glory.

There had likely already been a massacre...

After a silent prayer for all those faceless Players lost in a war between two Mirror Universes that didn't even concern them, Jake's attention finally shifted to the "hikers" jovially marching beside him.

Men and a handful of women, ranging between 2 and 3 meters in height, marched clad in the same mismatched rags as him. Many were barefoot, armed with dubious iron short swords, spears, or pitchforks. Some of the cockier barbarians flaunted proper steel blades, bows, and sturdy leather sandals. About a fourth of them used a shield—a tiny wooden buckler no larger than Jake's hand—strapped to their forearms, leaving one to question its actual efficacy.

As for their looks, the Underworld Barbarians were naturally brawny, their thick bones and broad frames giving them a rough, rugged appearance. Their expressions vacillated between vacant and menacing. Their ashy, near sickly skin was reminiscent of the Throsgenians. But unlike the latter, their hair wasn't always white, nor did they look strictly human. Many bore features typical of other pseudo-humanoid alien species like the Drurs, Nosks, or Krishs.

But right now, what got under Jake's skin the most was...

"Damn it, this raunchy song is just awful," Jake muttered, barely resisting the urge to throttle the officer leading the procession, who belted out a chorus in his guttural language. "But first, I need to learn their tongue to perfect my disguise."

His skin already pale, Jake had no issues blending in with the Underworld Barbarians. Quite the opposite, his delicate features and lean, athletic build contrasted sharply with the bellowing, bulked-up semi-giants beside him. Standing a good head shorter than even the smallest recruit with his 1.9 meters stature, and wedged mid-cohort, all he saw was an expansive back.

"It's too late to alter my height or look now," Jake concluded, lips thinning as he halted the spontaneous shapeshifting of his body that was instinctively trying to match his surroundings.

If his false identity didn't at least account for that, it'd be utterly useless. He loathed the Oracle and its deceptions but begrudgingly admitted that it left no stone unturned.

While learning the local language was a tricky challenge for other Players, for Jake it was child's play. Even his techniques were a cut above the rest.

Struggling, he focused his mind to extend his mental senses beyond his body. However, immediately, an oppressive force as crushing as a mountain bore down on him, pushing back against his effort. His attempt was momentarily thwarted, and his mental projection ground to a halt.

Grinding his teeth in determination, Jake redoubled his concentration. Veins on his temples bulged and throbbed noticeably. His mental sense, initially stalled, began to spread out slowly, soon enveloping the entire regiment in an undetectable sphere.

'Their neural networks are easier to understand than I thought,' Jake mused with a touch of surprise.

In honing his Life Manipulation skills, Jake had also elevated his medical knowledge to a level unfathomable compared to his home planet before the advent of the Oracle System. Combined with his sharpened senses, analyzing an individual's brain activity in depth was about as simple as scrolling on the internet.

Also, he had grown accustomed to thinking and speaking in Oraclean, almost forgetting how primitive other languages felt in comparison. After all, Oraclean was touted as the ultimate language, encompassing every conceivable word.

Instead of painstakingly deciphering the language by ear, he delved directly into the structure and functioning of their brains to extract the information he needed. It might not match the Soulsearch abilities of the Duskwight Lands' Soulmanagers — Jake was admittedly skittish about tampering with the soul — but in some ways, his method surpassed it. At least this way, he didn't harm anyone.

Moments later, the hidden gleam in Jake's eyes dimmed, and he pulled back his mental senses, his face etched with mild annoyance.

'This Ordeal is both simpler and more convoluted than I anticipated," he sighed, loudly joining the singing conscripts now that he grasped the song's meaning. Resignedly, he acknowledged to himself, 'In the grand scheme of things, there's no avoiding it. I'm going to have to engage in this war and climb the ranks the hard way.'

Chapter 1038: Life And Spirit Lumyst Water

Approximately three hours later, the shadowy and sinister outlines of a city loomed in the distance. The officer leading the procession abruptly ceased his chanting and halted. Clad in his distinctive armor, he was easily recognizable.

To be precise, his equipment was a hodgepodge of rudimentary designs, mismatched, and failing to fully cover his body. But Jake, with his experience as a blacksmith and keen eye for quality materials, knew its strength was exceptional. Compared to their tattered rags, it was like night and day.

The helmet, in particular, intrigued him. At first glance, it appeared an ordinary steel helm, but with his heightened senses, Jake felt a mysterious spiritual resonance vibrating from the object. It hinted at something more, something that would not be easily marred or broken.

'Must be some form of enchantment, indigenous to this world,' Jake deduced, recalling that his mission briefing mentioned the term Spirit Enchanter.

After observing this helmet, he was almost certain that their enchanting methods differed from his own, rooted in the etching of Aether Symbols and Runes. Whereas smaller Aether Symbols allowed him to add functionality, the power of his enchantments relied on the available energy source, such as an Aether Core or ambient Aether.

The enchantment behind this helmet was of an entirely different nature, more spiritual. It was as if the object, not initially at its full potential, had its spirituality awakened, transcending its initial limitations. Aether played no part in it.

Discovering an enchantment method he did not know, one that did not conflict with his Aetherist ways, immediately piqued his curiosity.

'I need to meet one of these Spirit Enchanters at the earliest opportunity,' Jake reminded himself, tearing his eyes away from the officer's helmet to refocus on the landscape.

The journey thus far had been peaceful, but Jake, who fancied himself well-versed in the wonders of the Universe, was nonetheless taken aback several times while crossing the desolate, grim gray lands of the Duskwight Lands.

The soil was parched and cracked; vegetation was limited to a few withered shrubs and sickly, dark plants; now and then, unnerving peaks, ridges, and hills swarmed with wandering souls in endemic quantities.

These wandering souls were visible to all, sometimes even passing through them, though most kept their distance from the regiment. It was the Soulmancer, floating in the sky above, that they seemed to fear, emitting an aura that simultaneously attracted and repelled them.

There were also more tangible souls, emitting a spectral, oppressive aura. Unlike the aimless and harmless wandering spirits, these stared with evident greed. Once again, it was the presence of the Soulmancer that held them at bay, but their overt hostility indicated that they did so begrudgingly.

Beyond these wandering souls, they crossed paths with numerous other soldier processions. Most were conscripts heading in the same direction, but occasionally, they marched the opposite way, escorting wagon convoys laden with rarely intact corpses.

These grim sights and the stench of rotting flesh assaulting their senses were but a foretaste of what awaited them. If the officer hadn't made them sing along with him, the terrified conscripts would have fallen silent much earlier.

For that same reason, as soon as the officer ceased his song, the rest of the barbarian cohort quickly and thankfully followed suit. Jake, weary of humming the refrain, was more than happy to mimic them.

At that precise moment, the Soulmancer, who had been hovering high above and never paid them a glance, descended toward the halted regiment like a phantom and spoke,

"We are about to reach Grimstone Keep. Further North runs the Lumyst River, while 60 kilometers to the east lies Havocspire Citadel, and even farther east, the Ironsoul Rampart. Beyond that, we enter a vast neutral zone about 5000 kilometers wide that separates Twyluxia in two and serves as the border between our Duskwight Lands and the Lustra Plains. The battlefields where you'll be dispatched are located there. Grimstone Keep and Havocspire Citadel were hastily constructed for this war and serve as headquarters, resupply points, and rest for our wounded soldiers and troops on leave. All the facilities you may need are there, but staying isn't cheap. For those who survive to their first leave or are tempted to fall back, relying on their meager savings, know that the currency accepted here is your merit points. Every deed and contribution you make during this war will be recorded by the badge in your pocket."

The old man, draped in a luxurious satin black robe, waved his hand to punctuate the end of his speech, and suddenly Jake and the others felt a hard object in one of their pockets.

Reaching in, they pulled out a tiny black skull the size of a die, with twelve spikes forming a crown of thorns around its head. Wisps of blue fire burned ominously in its eye sockets, giving the illusion that the skull was meticulously monitoring their every move.

'That's a clever trick,' Jake chuckled inwardly, instantly deducing how this "badge" had appeared so suddenly in his pocket.

He had distinctly felt the presence of an invisible spectral entity placing it in his pocket, and if he was not mistaken, it could phase through space, an ability he was temporarily deprived of.

[This guy doesn't seem any more powerful than you, so if he can use these powers, you should be able to as well,] Xi said, echoing his desire.

Jake said nothing, but his gaze was fixed on the dense cluster of evil spiritual energy enveloping the old man. Through his Cosmic Eye, he discerned it as a form of solidified killing intent—but it was more than that. It was mainly the astronomical mass of vengeful souls fused to this aura that made it so terrifying.

Terrifying enough to partially resist the limitations affecting all living beings traversing Twyluxia. It was an aura he and the other conscripts lacked entirely, while the officer had one of negligible quality compared to the old man's floating in the sky.

Still, this came as no surprise to Jake. By probing the brains of his future comrades-in-arms, he'd already learned what it was and how to obtain it.

In Twyluxia, the leveling system was straightforward. The laws of this world made Aether inaccessible and magic nearly impossible, but the Aether did not simply vanish; life would be impossible if it did. Instead, it entered matter and energy, enhancing their stability and tolerance to the Aether.

That's why these natives were all so strong and robust, to the point that even mere peasants could endure such gravity. As for magic and how to lift the intrinsic limitations imposed on them by Twyluxia, the Duskwight Lands and the Lustra Plains had their own methods.

The energy needed to fuel their spells was replaced by Lumyst Water, but its properties differed depending on which half of the river it was harvested from. That from the Lustra Plains was called Life Lumyst Water, while that from the Duskwight Lands was directly opposed and named Spirit Lumyst Water.

Each side wanted what the other did not have, but while Life Lumyst Water benefited the living, it had no harmful effects on their spirits. Conversely, Spirit Lumyst Water was like an elixir of youth for wandering souls and spirits in general, but it was entirely toxic to the living.

Jake found the Underworld Barbarians to be strong, but the truth was that their constitution had gradually adapted over millennia by enduring the spectral aura emitted in small doses by their side of the Lumyst River. In reality, they were pitifully weak compared to the Light Warriors of the Lustra Plains, as well as having a considerably shorter lifespan.

But the Spirit Lumyst Water wasn't all downside; those who survived its prolonged exposure, at the cost of their life expectancy, would ultimately develop unmatched mental agility and ethereal strength.

The first to bathe at the foot of the Underworld Cascade had paved the way for the professions of Soulmanagers and Spirit Enchanters. It also provided a practical solution to make the Underworld Barbarians more powerful and enable them to live longer.

After a painful baptism with Spirit Lumyst Water—which wasn't always necessary if they had been extensively exposed to its aura—a Soulmanager or Spirit Enchanter would bless them by imprinting an eternal mark upon their soul.

It worked somewhat like a Soul Glyph, Jake immediately thought, and once activated, each Underworld Barbarian would become capable of cultivating their spectral aura, fusing souls and killing intent by slaughtering their enemies on the battlefield.

The more they killed, the more Twyluxia's limitations on them would diminish, until they ultimately regained their connection with the Aether, and with that connection, an infinity of possibilities.

Chapter 1039: Grimstone Keep

After his no-nonsense speech, the Soulmanager resumed his aloof stance, and the officer leading the procession commanded the regiment to resume the march toward Grimstone Keep. They covered the final kilometers without incident, soon approaching an archaic-looking medieval fortress that loomed about a hundred meters high.

"Halt!"

A mere half-kilometer from the gates, a guard in plate armor, stationed on the battlements above, bellowed at them with a thunderous voice, compelling them to slow their pace. The guard's voice was imbued with a palpable killing intent, making the knees of the fresh recruits buckle.

Jake also arched a surprised brow. His cosmic vision allowed him to clearly see the thick murderous aura shrouding the guard's burly, menacing figure.

If the guard had intentionally filled his voice with this aura, all the newcomers would have dropped dead right there. The lucky ones who could withstand it would have inevitably fainted or been paralyzed with fear, which on a battlefield was a death sentence.

'Even a mere sentry here is stronger than 90% of the Players participating in this Ordeal,' he mused with a deep frown.

For Jake, it was inconsequential; that level of killing intent had no more impact on him than a gentle spring breeze. But for the majority of other Myrtharian Nerds, this was undoubtedly a serious issue.

[The setting of the Ordeal is fair,] Xi, quickly noted, trying to boost his spirits. [If they don't do anything stupid, the odds of encountering such trained warriors on the battlefield are low in the early stages of the war. However, those who merely survive without scoring any kills won't be able to cultivate that elusive killing intent, or whatever they call it. And that, when the real battles begin, will make them as vulnerable as helpless lambs.]

Jake inwardly nodded at Xi's final words. 'That's exactly what bothers me.'

Not all Myrtharian Nerds were bloodthirsty killers at heart. Given a choice, many would opt to contribute to the war effort in ways other than on the battlefield. But this would mean forgoing the cultivation of that unfathomable intent and, consequently, the only means to lift the restriction imposed by Twyluxia.

On the one hand, he didn't want to see them risk their lives needlessly—the mortality rate in such a war was horrifyingly high. On the other, he hoped that these four years of adversity without him would have purged them of that limiting mindset.

Naturally, Jake's worry was for Lily, Tim, Khal, and all the other less-seasoned members of the group. What he didn't realize was that his view of them was outdated. Ever since the collapse of the Aether Network and the ensuing Digestor counteroffensive, they had been forced into a crucible of rapid maturation.

After the guard's booming order to halt, the Soulmancer—hovering high in the clouds—remained silent. In stark contrast, the armor-clad officer spearheading their procession roared back, his voice equally thunderous and laced with untamed spiritual power.

"3000-Man Commander, Sank-uk," the barbarian bellowed, clasping his hands in respect but not bowing. "I bring with me the last recruits drafted under the orders of His Majesty, the Soulmancer King."

'So he's 3000-man General' Jake noted, listening to the audacious proclamation. 'Not too shabby.'

From reading the brains of the newcomers in his regiment, he'd gleaned everything he needed to know about Twyluxia's military hierarchy. Mirroring ancient China's setup during the period of conflict era, soldiers in the Dusken Realm started in squads of 5 to 10 men. They'd climb the ranks—squad leader, section chief of a hundred men, company commander of a thousand, and so on—each level comprising multiple lower-level units, up to a corps commander or Great commander who oversaw multiple divisions.

In practice, squad leaders were often called lieutenants, section chiefs captains, company commanders colonels, and those commanding a regiment went by the title of commander. Only officers overseeing a division or more were legitimately eligible for the title of 'general' in the formal sense.

Rather than complicating things with intermediate ranks like corporal, sergeant, or lieutenant colonel, this simplified nomenclature was commonly used. An officer leading two squads would simply be referred to as a 'twenty-man commander.'

Jake's own regiment numbered just over two and a half thousand, so it was evident that the guiding officer wasn't yet fully qualified for the next rank up.

This structured system seemed oddly disciplined for the Duskwight Lands, which just a few years earlier had been a chaotic patchwork of warring, primitive barbarian tribes vying for scant resources.

Comparatively, the more civilized Radiant Conclave had long adopted this system, leading many to suspect that the enigmatic and charismatic Soulmaner King behind the Dusken Throne hailed from the Lustra Plains—or at least had spent considerable time among them. After all, no one had ever heard of him until he ascended to power, virtually overnight, by unifying the fractured Duskwight Lands.

Soon enough, the officer finished his identification. The intimidating, scarred guard towering from the ramparts gave the signal to lift the gate and lower the drawbridge, which, honestly, was more symbolic than functional. Moats were dug around the walls, but the water meant to fill them was conspicuously absent.

As for the ramparts, they might impress humans, but fifteen meters was just a flight of stairs for the elite warriors of this world.

Moments later, Jake and his regiment marched through the weathered gates of Grimstone Keep, their boots sinking into the mud that formed the fortress's courtyard.

Compared to the other recruits, Jake couldn't summon the awe to marvel at the historic masonry or the tattered banners limply hanging from the battlements. Like his own

jaded perspective, they bore the grime and soot of endless battles and worn-out soldiers.

The dried blood on its ramparts here and there indicated that the place wasn't as safe as one might assume.

His fresh-faced regiment swarmed around him, a vibrating hive of naivety and nerves. Their eyes, wide with awe and trepidation, gawked all along at the towering walls of Grimstone Keep—a monolithic structure that once stood as a vigilant sentinel, now a crowded hive groaning under the weight of the sprawling war at its gates.

As they shuffled through the maze of muddy streets, rows of tents, and various makeshift establishments, Jake caught snippets of frenzied conversations—a cacophony mingled with the clashing of swords and drill officers' shouts.

The air was heavy, laden not just with the stench of sweat and stale ale, but also with a palpable sense of desperation. Vendors barked their wares, vying for attention against the din of soldiers haggling for supplies and prostitutes offering brief escapes into oblivion.

For these young men, most of whom had never ventured beyond their tribal lands, the experience was nothing short of eye-opening. Grimstone Keep stood as a relic of ancient splendor, something their native tribes could never hope to replicate. Yet for all its past grandeur, the fortress was now a crumbling echo of a world long upended.

"I can't believe our ancestors built a fortress like this," a recruit muttered, his voice tinged with shame as he thought about his own rickety village and the hut he used to take pride in.

Jake glanced at him but stayed silent. What could he say? To him, this place was just a hellhole.

Keeping his snide remarks to himself, he continued to follow the officer alongside the other draftees. As they trekked on, his opinion of the city shifted. After walking for miles, they still hadn't reached the heart of Grimstone Keep. For all its faults, he had to admit: it was colossal.

The fortress itself wasn't awe-inspiring by Jake's standards; any Earth skyscraper would dwarf it. But the surrounding city, teeming with hundreds of millions of tribespeople and opportunistic merchants, was truly commendable.

As they marched through the labyrinthine streets, maintaining a loose formation, they crossed paths with many soldiers on leave as well as on-duty patrols.

These guards donned daunting black armors, and their scarred faces wore expressions of stern vigilance—clear indicators that they were not here for leisure. If any recruit thought landing a guard gig was a golden ticket, they were in for a rude awakening.

Jake initially thought the officer was leading them to their encampment or perhaps through Grimstone Keep en route to the frontline Havocspire Citadel. However, his expression soon changed when a looming, dark edifice adorned with bones emerged after the final turn. Meanwhile, the eyes of other newcomers widened in excitement.

"A Netherwell Chapel!" a barbarian shouted first, quickly followed by other ecstatic exclamations.

Chapter 1040: Soul-Crushing Intent

The pagan temple loomed like a monolith of dark, weathered stone. Its sinister facade bore an unsettling mosaic of bones—arcane patterns formed by skulls of disparate creatures, while spines and ribcages twisted into macabre ornamentation. The walls themselves seemed to pulsate with a malevolent aura, as if steeped in the unholy essence of innumerable dark rituals.

Yet it was the temple's interior that set it apart from other nefarious sanctuaries. No sooner had they approached the looming edifice than their imposing officer wheeled around, shooting them a contemptuous glare before barking,

"All you worthless grunts, hustle! I want everyone inside in under thirty seconds. Latecomers get ten lashes and a front-row seat in tomorrow's battle. Make your choice!"

Their regiment numbered around 2,500 recruits, and the building's entrance wasn't exactly accommodating... The conscripts blinked in confusion for a split second before reality slammed home. Their eyes dilated in panic, pupils shrinking to pinpricks.

The next second, a frenzied mob of barbarians stampeded toward the narrow chapel entrance, jostling with sharp elbows and even more vicious low blows to muscle their way through.

Witnessing this textbook example of a devolution to primal instincts, Jake stood his ground like an unyielding boulder in a river's current, chuckling softly. In contrast to the frantic barbarians, he meandered toward the entrance long after the last recruit had made it inside.

The officer, who'd so effectively galvanized them with his grim threats, narrowed his eyes at Jake, his expression a stormy blend of irritation and curiosity. What the hell gave this pretty boy the audacity to saunter so casually? Was he deaf?

Now that he'd captured the veteran warrior's attention, the officer couldn't help but feel a twinge of jealousy. Jake's skin was unnaturally smooth and fair, almost glowing in the pallid sunlight. Though his mid-length, raven-black hair was unkempt, it cascaded over his forehead with a captivating, effortless flair.

This was, by far, the most striking Underworld Barbarian he'd ever encountered, transcending gender. Were it not for Jake's diminutive stature and slender build—by their race's standards—he would have been the epitome of male perfection.

The term "foreigner" flashed across the officer's mind, recalling one of the latest reports he'd received. The presence of Players was no longer a secret among the higher echelons of the Dusken Throne, and even mid-ranking generals like himself were now in the know.

They had standing orders to merely observe and report if they suspected any of their recruits to be one of "them," but not to take any action. Right now, the officer was wrestling with that very decision—whether to report Jake or let him be.

Ultimately, his lingering doubt that Jake might just be a pint-sized Underworld Barbarian with shocking beauty made him hesitate. After a brief internal struggle where he shook his head repeatedly, he decided to let it slide.

'But, make no mistake, deaf or not, you're fighting front and center tomorrow,' the officer thought, his lips curling into a hideous grin. 'And for your punishment, I'll personally administer the lashes.'

Jake was blissfully unaware that his unearthly allure had not only raised the general's suspicions but stoked his jealousy as well. Not that he'd have given a fuck about it if he'd known.

As Jake was about to enter the chapel, a shadow crossed his field of view. Looking up, he met the severe gaze of their irritable 3,000-man commander, a glint of malice flickering in his eyes.

"Hmm? Need something?" Jake asked nonchalantly. "If it's about the whipping, I'm ready. Do your worst."

Now, the burly officer was downright flabbergasted. This pretty boy must have a screw loose. But on the bright side, he wasn't deaf!

Grinning savagely, revealing his sturdy yellow teeth, he ominously informed Jake,

"Feeling confident, huh? You're the only one who didn't make it into the chapel on time. Not only will you fight on the front lines tomorrow, you'll be the only one on that line. As for your lashes, consider yourself lucky. They'll have to wait until after your baptism—if you survive it."

Far from seeing the cocky recruit crumble under the weight of this bad news, Jake stroked his chin thoughtfully before politely responding, "Thanks for the intel."

Then he sauntered into the temple, casually brushing aside the hulking mass of muscle and armor that was the officer. The commander was so stunned, his eyes nearly popped out of their sockets.

At first, rage surged through him, and he was tempted to behead Jake on the spot for insubordination. But a moment later, rationality returned, replaced by a chilling sweat that broke out across his skin.

"How terrifying... How could such a monster even exist?" he thought.

The moment the barbarian had unleashed his killing intent, forged through countless deadly battles, he had felt the acute forewarning of his own demise. The sensation was so lucid it rattled his bones. This was no mere hunch; it was an unvarnished glimpse of his impending future.

Drenched in sweat beneath his armor, the officer remained paralyzed for a few more seconds, weighing his options, before exhaling a heavy sigh.

"Haha, I'm done for... He got me bad," the barbaric officer muttered, laughing awkwardly to dispel the dread constricting his muscles.

Only he knew that from this point on, he'd never summon the courage to report Jake's existence to his superiors. He thought he was a fearless warrior with an unwavering sense of duty, but now he knew he was far from infallible. The specter of this enigmatic pretty boy would haunt his nightmares for years to come.

Inside, Jake suppressed a sigh of his own, aware he had played a dangerous hand. He could've easily mimicked the anxious and glory-hungry demeanor of the other conscripts, but playing by the rules never won you an Ordeal. Of that much, he was certain.

Just seconds prior, when the commander had zeroed in on him with his hybrid killing intent, laced with evil souls, Jake had instinctively unleashed a alteration of his Original Spell: Morphic Grasp.

Soul-Crushing Intent!

By releasing a thread of will, Jake could mobilize his Soul Power to overwhelmingly crush not just the physical form but also the Spirit Body and Soul of his target. Although his abilities were constrained by the world laws of Twyluxia, what little had leaked out was enough to scare an officer with a supposedly tough mind.

In fact, the barbaric officer hadn't escaped unscathed. To ensure the officer wouldn't regain his audacity once the fear faded, Jake had crushed something tangible: his dignity. Not metaphorically, but quite literally.

His Original Spell, Morphic Grasp, was far more frightening than anyone, not even his master, could fathom.

With the issue of the officer settled, Jake cast his eyes around the chapel's interior and was immediately struck by its misleading spaciousness. From the outside, the chapel seemed modest, but that was merely the tip of the iceberg. Most of the edifice was buried underground, the chapel itself housing only the entrance and a descending staircase.

Once he reached the bottom of the hundred-step stairwell, a massive rectangular pool reminiscent of Olympic swimming pools from his former planet, but much bigger, filled his field of vision. The water itself appeared unremarkable—clear and translucent—but the spectral aura of death accumulating on its surface betrayed its unnatural nature.

A dense, suffocating atmosphere saturated the air, tinged with the pungent scent of burnt herbs and something far more indiscernible, far more sinister. Shadows clung to the corners as if they were indelible marks, refusing to be banished by the flickering light of ceremonial pyres. As shamans circled a central altar, their chants mutating into unsettling echoes, it was evident that this temple was a nexus for evil energies and unutterable intentions.

Naturally, such hocus-pocus was for these uninformed conscripts. When Jake saw the chapel's interior and the pool, his first thoughts were of Lumyst River and Underworld Cascade. What the commander meant by 'baptism' couldn't have been clearer.

If he wasn't mistaken, they were about to take a dip...

Jake was close to the mark, but not quite on target. Subjecting these green recruits with their lackluster constitutions to a swim in a pool filled with pure Spirit Lumyst Water would have been a death sentence. They'd have been drained of vitality in the blink of an eye.

What awaited them was far less ostentatious.

One of the shamanesque figures, his face daubed in black and clad in a robe made entirely of crow feathers—or those of some other ill-omened bird—knelt reverently by the pool, cradling a small black earthenware vessel in both hands.

Moments later, he approached them, vessel now full, and inquired,

"So... Who wants to go first?"

Chapter 1041: It's A Bit Chilly

Jake had half-expected a sea of hands to shoot up from these eager, rowdy barbarians. But that didn't happen. Instead, they all withdrew into themselves, tucking their heads into their shoulders as if trying to vanish. The paradox was, even doing that, he was still the smallest one among them.

Sure, if he wanted, he could easily flex his size to dominate them, bruising their already fragile egos. But that was beneath him. Arms crossed and eyes closed, he waited calmly for someone to volunteer.

Except it didn't unfold as he'd envisioned.

In the blink of an eye, the crowd of recruits retreated like a receding tide, leaving Jake, who'd held his ground, sticking out like a sore thumb. Finding himself alone before the crow-feathered shaman, Jake cracked open his eyes and managed a wry smile, uncertain whether to laugh or cry.

"...Guess it'll be me," he said, a touch of mockery coloring his words.

Hearing this, the other recruits wore faces tinged with guilt and embarrassment. When they realized it was the smallest among them showing the courage they all lacked, they were awash in shame.

Pity for them—they couldn't have been more wrong. While Jake wasn't lacking in courage; he just didn't feel threatened in the least. In fact, he doubted anything at this early stage of the Ordeal could pose a real threat to him.

As long as he didn't play the fool, this early part of the Ordeal felt like a drawn-out cutscene. He was still figuring out whether he was the protagonist or merely a spectator, and so far, he was leaning towards the former.

"Excellent," the shaman laughed, clapping his hands. "It's promising recruits like you, bursting with courage and unafraid to face any adversity, who keep our Duskwight Lands from falling to the Radiant Conclave. Your unwavering resolve is a key indicator of whether a recruit will survive their baptism. Just from your attitude, I'm optimistic about your odds."

'Of course you are,' Jake sneered inwardly. 'If you knew what kind of Player you're dealing with, you'd know this so-called baptism is child's play to me.'

And that was the unadulterated truth. He had absolute faith in his ability to emerge unscathed from this ritual. The officer, who had recently got a taste of his power and now stood arms crossed at the back of the regiment, could only agree.

'I can't picture this guy biting the dust so easily,' Sank-uk, the commander's name, sighed, shaking his head in dismay. Despite his gloomy demeanor, a spark of curiosity flickered in his eyes. He was enthusiastic to see how this rookie's initiation would unfold.

The man who looked like a shaman, but was actually a Spirit Enchanter, grinned at the recruits "hiding" behind their lone volunteer.

"You need not be so afraid. The Spirit Lumyst Water in this pool is diluted—a few drops in a basin full of ordinary fresh water. We're not savages. Although some losses are inevitable, the goal of this initiation is to ensure the survival of as many new recruits as possible. Otherwise, how are we to win this war?"

Hearing the Spirit Enchanter's comforting words, the until-now jittery recruits breathed easier, straightening their spines a fraction. Still, they'd heard ominous rumors about this baptism of fire and hadn't missed the Enchanter's caveat about "inevitable losses."

All things considered, they'd rather let the pretty boy take the plunge first. At the very least, they'd be a smidge more prepared for their own turns.

Refocusing on his lone volunteer, the Spirit Enchanter's approving smile flickered momentarily with pity. 'Poor kid. With that face and frail frame, he's likely been a whipping boy all his life.'

In contrast, the Enchanter's expression remained icy and stern. When he beckoned Jake forward, his tone was as detached and inhuman as if he were addressing an insect. "Come to me, my child," he cooed, extending the earthenware pitcher toward Jake like a predator luring its prey.

Jake's lip twitched at the Spirit Enchanter's tone, momentarily tempted to slap him into next week. Ultimately, he restrained himself, halting a few inches from the earthenware pitcher cradled in the man's hands.

"So, what's the next move?" Jake asked, arching an eyebrow. "Chug it?"

Upon hearing Jake's question, the Spirit Enchanter's eyes widened in astonishment before he burst into laughter. The chapel staff and other recruits, equally dumbfounded, swiftly joined his uproarious mirth.

Unfazed by their reactions, Jake sifted through the intel he'd gleaned from his squadmates' brains, searching for his misstep.

'Ah, I see. It's not to be ingested, but applied—like a balm—or if enough for a bath.'

His blunder stemmed from the absence of any taboo against drinking Lumyst Water in the recruits' collective memories. It simply wasn't done, a matter of unspoken common sense for the inhabitants of this world.

This had nothing to do with religious reverence but rather the empirical fact that Lumyst Water was potentially toxic. Consuming it meant surrendering control over the process—a gamble even the most seasoned Soulmanancers avoided.

The laughter lingered for a moment, but the Spirit Enchanter's chuckles soon died in his throat. His expression turned solemn as he took in the young recruit before him—a man of majestic composure, whose black eyes harbored a mesmerizing silver vortex sporadically shot through with dark blue streaks. He was staring at him with unsettling indifference, as though the ritual was a trivial farce he had no choice but to endure.

Suppressing the unsettling fear rising within him, the Spirit Enchanter cleared his throat awkwardly and locked eyes with his unnerving volunteer.

"Just dip your hand into the pitcher for a second or two. Even if it stings, don't pull it out until I say so. Disobey, and not only will the baptism fail, but you'll have shaved years off your life for nothing. Trust me, if you make it through this, you can easily cut your losses. But back out now, and you squander your lone shot at rewriting your destiny."

His advice was also meant for the other recruits, which is why he raised his voice for everyone to hear as he instructed Jake.

"Whenever you're ready, begin," the Spirit Enchanter spoke softly, his demeanor far more guarded than before.

His gut told him that this young man was a wolf in sheep's clothing. An outsider...

Within minutes, two natives had already pieced together his true identity. Yet neither seemed inclined to report their discovery to higher-ups.

As both the shaman and the officer watched his every move with inscrutable expressions, Jake finally extended his hand over the earthen pitcher. With nary a hint of hesitation, his hand descended towards the vessel, his fingers making contact with its contents. And then, nothing more.

The rest of his hand vanished entirely into the liquid. With the same nonchalance that was his trademark—a nonchalance that knocked the entire audience on their asses—he remarked,

"Ah, it's a bit chilly."

Hands trembling, barely holding onto the pitcher, the Spirit Enchanter found himself grateful for the first time for the identity-concealing black paint on his face. Otherwise, his jaw-dropping astonishment would have undoubtedly tarnished his reputation for the rest of his career.

To command respect, a low-ranking Spirit Enchanter in charge of a Netherwell Chapel like him had to evoke fear. Once his aura of mystique evaporated, earning the esteem of his peers would become a far more arduous task...

Chapter 1042: Why The Cockiness?

As the Spirit Enchanter, the officer, and the gathered conscripts stared in disbelief, Jake zeroed in on his own sensations. A frown quickly furrowed his brow.

'Too diluted to affect me,' he concluded internally after letting his hand wade in the decanter for nearly half a minute.

It's not that the water was useless. Even diluted, Spirit Lumyst Water was no laughing matter. The spiritual energy in that small decanter could likely vault a freshly condensed human's Spirit Body up to level 10. On Quanoth, that would be equivalent to leveling up a dozen times—something unheard of without vanquishing a significantly higher-level foe.

But the true allure of the water was elsewhere. Jake sensed—almost imperceptibly—that the spiritual fabric of his mind was undergoing an internal restructuring, teetering on the brink of evolution.

Or rather, it was as if the water was trying to awaken something already within him, but due to its diluted state, lacked the catalytic punch to do so. Still, he felt repeated attempts to tip an internal domino and trigger a sweeping overhaul, but each time it failed.

'Interesting.'

It was hard to articulate. If he had to pick a word, it'd be "maturation?" It was more about quality than quantity, although the water was also teeming with spirit power.

He was hypothesizing, but Jake felt he was edging close to the truth. The Spirit Enchanter profession made sense now. Properly utilized, this water could perform wondrous spiritual enchantments.

"However..." Jake's expression darkened as he continued his scrutiny.

Each time the water unsuccessful to tip that internal domino, he noticed that his Spirit Body took damage. Intuitively, he felt even if the potency of this Spirit Lumyst Water was sufficient, it offered no guarantees that its mysterious agenda would succeed.

With his heightened cognitive abilities, Jake could sense an underlying Aetheric law in Twyluxia directly affecting the probability of success. Limited by his mental scope, he estimated it at... 50%.

"Ugh...Coincidence? That number seems arbitrarily precise."

Regardless, whatever the fallout of failure, he knew it wouldn't kill him. He couldn't say the same for the other recruits.

Beyond this looming danger, Jake also corroborated the shaman's warning that the water drained his lifeforce. No longer a novice with the Life Element, he felt this sapping extended far beyond mere vitality.

Like all conceptual elements, the Life Element existed only for those who practiced it. Normally, lifespan had less to do with lifeforce than with telomere shortening, random DNA mutations, mitochondrial slow-down, irreversible stem cell differentiation, and other biochemically observable factors.

Only those skilled in the Life Element or gifted with a unique constitution could transmute all these biological parameters and tie their lifespan to their lifeforce, making them immortal as long as the latter was not exhausted. Clearly, these Underworld Barbarians weren't inherently endowed with such lifeforce.

To drain both lifeforce and lifespan without directly damaging their organism, this water had an intrinsic spell of its own.

'Death Energy,' Jake surmised calmly, before reconsidering. "No, it's a conversion spell. From Life Energy into some sort of spiritual power."

On that note, he sharpened his mental focus, resisting the spectral aura attempting to drain and convert his lifeforce into spiritual energy. After this observation, he also understood why it would be unwise to ingest the water.

Unless entirely drained, its special properties would continue to sap his lifeforce to replenish lost spiritual energy. While it might theoretically provide him with an limitless source of Spirit Energy, his health would pay the price.

Still... Jake was not intimidated by a mere jug of water and knew how to execute a Conversion Spell. It was a shame that his mental scope was so limited, or he would've turned the tables on this decanter.

Sighing, he reluctantly disengaged his fingers, aware that whatever this ritual was supposed to accomplish had failed.

"It didn't work," Jake stated matter-of-factly to the genial shaman, the tone as if lamenting a defective TV purchase.

"I can see that, but these things happen," the Spirit Enchanter consoled him with a strained smile. The overseeing officer wore a similarly bewildered expression.

This never happened! Either the initiate would perish, drained of vitality, or their soul couldn't endure the Spirit Lumyst Water purification, leaving them more foolish than before, or in the worst case, a vegetable.

To see someone walk away unscathed, wearing the disgruntled expression of a swindled customer, was undoubtedly a first in the annals of Twyluxia.

Because Jake was clearly one of these enigmatic foreigners, the shaman hesitated on how to handle this unexpected curveball. Logic dictated not to give him a second chance, but the disappointed pretty boy was obviously special.

Something told him that Jake wouldn't leave without his blessing. If he wished to survive the day, he would need to satisfy this difficult customer. Searching the gaze of the commanding officer, he found a discreet nod in his direction.

With that endorsement, confirming that the warrior was also in on the game, a weight lifted off the Spirit Enchanter's shoulders, restoring his initial tranquility. Smiling at Jake, he said,

"It seems you'll need more Lumyst Water to earn your blessing. While I prepare for your second baptismal attempt, you can stand aside and watch how it unfolds with the others."

"All right," Jake accepted without hesitation, also curious to see how the ritual usually played out.

The timing was impeccable. His inconsequential failure had rekindled the confidence of the other recruits. Many were even kicking themselves for having believed the ominous rumors about the Lumyst Water baptism.

Without the shaman needing to raise his voice or single anyone out, a towering barbarian with a knotted, unruly beard soon broke away from the crowd, striding forward with his chin held high.

"I'm ready for my baptism," the half-giant in tatters haughtily proclaimed, flexing biceps as broad as Jake's head.

The Spirit Enchanter encountered such boorish brutes daily and was far less optimistic about this one's odds than he had been about the previous candidate. Still, he betrayed nothing, maintaining an inscrutable facade in the face of the barbarian's misplaced bravado.

As he had with Jake earlier, he extended a carafe filled with clear water and said softly, "Whenever you're ready."

The antsy barbarian didn't need to be told twice. He plunged his left hand into the vessel, quickly followed by a gut-wrenching "AAAAAAARRRRRRGGGGGGHHH!"

The agonized scream pierced everyone's eardrums, although the Spirit Enchanter had magically sealed his own the moment the barbarian stepped out of the crowd. He'd done the same for Jake, but it had turned out to be an unnecessary precaution.

Jake, casually standing beside the shaman, suddenly stiffened, his eyes widening as if attempting to escape their sockets when his brain processed the unfolding scene.

'Damn, if you're so weak, why the cockiness? In a hurry to die?' he thought, exasperated and lost for words.

Before him, the hulking, eight-foot barbarian writhed in pain as though his hand was engulfed in flames. His robust physique was withering before their very eyes, a crash-course therapy far surpassing any miracle weight-loss regimen.

In mere seconds, the once-vigorous barbarian, not much older than twenty, aged to resemble his middle-aged self. Still, he clung on, teeth gritted, refusing to relent.

Jake and the other conscripts held their breath through his ordeal, the latter silently praying for his soul and questioning whether they would fare any better.

In the end, the question became moot. After withstanding for eleven or twelve hellish seconds, the barbarian's gray eyes rolled back into his skull, and he collapsed like a marionette with its strings cut.

A quick scan with his Cosmic Eyes told Jake all he needed to know: this barbarian was beyond saving. His shriveled body still breathed, but his soul had crumbled.

Clinically, he was in a vegetative coma—a coma from which he would most likely never awaken.

Chapter 1043: Ulfar's Stage To Shine

1043 Ulfar's Stage To Shine

A bone-chilling silence quickly swallowed the underground chapel hall, enveloping everyone who witnessed the grim fate of the audacious barbarian. The rookie looked like he was peacefully asleep, but the froth at his lips and his glassy, wide-open eyes told a much darker tale.

There was no sugarcoating it-the baptism had spiraled into a catastrophic failure.

This turn of events instantly shattered the renewed confidence and enthusiasm the other recruits had just seconds before. Now, all you could hear were stifled gasps and gulps of dread. Their instincts screamed at them to get the hell out, but they were too mesmerized by the gruesome tableau before them-a haunting preview of their potential futures.

Amid his rattled tribesmen, Jake was in no mood for laughter either. Inspecting the soul-state of the comatose barbarian, an unprecedented gravity weighed down his features.

'Xi, do you think the Oracle can heal this? I mean, through a Green Cube or other means?"

His Oracle AI didn't respond right away, equally skeptical about the rookie's chances of recovery. After a brief pause, she cautiously answered,

[His soul is still in one piece, so it should be possible... However, it's riddled with cracks, like a shattered vase glued back together. If his memories and personality still exist, they're fragmented, and neither Spirit nor Soul Power flows through him anymore. I think his Spirit Body could recover with enough time and resources, but repairing a soul is far beyond my expertise. Perhaps only an Aetherist above Rank 5 stands a chance of saving him. But what would a mythical Rank 6 Aetherist be doing in this shithole? Those types of Evolvers are venerated everywhere they go, and even Oracle Sovereigns from other Mirror Universes fight for their favor. That level of skill belongs to Ancient Designers and other genius Evolvers. Our Mirror Universe officially has no more than 15...]

'So the guy's totally screwed, Jake sighed, casting a final pitying glance at the unconscious figure. At the same time, he couldn't help but wonder since when had Xi gained access to such information.

He'd be lying if he said he wasn't intrigued by these legendary Rank 6 Aetherists or becoming one himself, but that would have to wait for another day. What concerned him now was-

'Xi, if it were my soul in this state, do you think I could pull through?" he darkly questioned. Her answer would determine the risks he was willing to take with his own baptism.

After all, his soul was somewhat unique. His Oracle Status provided the following description:

[Cosmic D Starveyrves Soul lvl 1: Very strong Energy, Cosmic, Life and Space Attribute. Able to feed on any Energy to continuously strengthen and regenerate.]

Despite training hard all this time, Jake hadn't been able to level up his bloodline, which spoke volumes about its difficulty. According to the short description, his soul could indeed continuously strengthen and regenerate thanks to his Energy Soul, the third triplet along with his Energy Spirit and Energy Body. On paper, he had nothing to worry about.

But the catch was, with his experience as an Aetherist and his recent acquaintance with the Aetherdream, Jake also knew that even the soul had its own Aether circulation system, albeit in a special form called Soul Power. If that system was compromised, then it became a urgent mystery whether its perks would still hold any water.

Digestors were said to be able to fully regenerate their souls as long as a fraction remained, but although Jake was corrupted, he wasn't sure he qualified as a Digestor himself.

Furthermore, unlike his fleshly body, his Oracle Status made no mention of adaptability. His soul was neither highly morphable nor could it adapt to any environment or situation. The only common ground between his body and soul were their affinities for various attributes.

So Jake had a good reason to hesitate about trying this baptism again. Because a baptism that could work on him might also have the power to kill him.

50% chance of success, huh? Seems a little low to gamble with my life, Jake rolled his eyes.

But just as he was about to shelve his hopes for the blessing promised by the Spirit Enchanter, Xi unexpectedly contradicted his line of thought.

[You won't die.]

Jake's face scrunched up, and he mentally growled, "Explain."

Unfazed by his doubtful tone, she calmly explained,

[The barbarian's soul was too fragile. The enchanted spiritual energy contained within the diluted Lumyst Water ignited an internal cataclysm his soul couldn't withstand, nearly causing it to collapse. Whether you're seeking the blessing through enchantment, the imprinting of a Soul Glyph, some kind of soul mutagen, or some even more arcane method, the victory and failure rate appears to be a coin flip for everyone-from the weakest to the strongest. Success bestows the blessing, while failure results in the disruption of the normal flow of spiritual energy in both your soul and Spirit Body. Add in the extra spirit energy extracted from the Lumyst Water, and the weak souls of these recruits are pretty much screwed.]

[Except your soul isn't weak, Jake. It won't collapse from something like this. Moreover, you seem to have overlooked something. The odds. Where there are probabilities, there's also..." Jake's face lit up like a supernova, as if struck by divine insight.

'Luck!'

In the realm of probabilities, luck could tilt the scales! During his first baptism, he couldn't sense its influence because the result was doomed from the get-go due to the insufficient energy in the water. If the victory rate was zero, there was no room for luck to maneuver.

Realizing this, Jake almost burst into laughter.

"Haha, Ulfar, you clever son of a bitch," he muttered bitterly, his face twitching. It seemed this Fifth Ordeal would be the Beskyrian's stage to shine.

"AAAAARRRRGGGHH!"

Meanwhile, the third and fourth volunteers had gone, each falling victim to their own dreadful fates. The conscripts in the crowd looked like they'd seen a ghost; a relentless parade of failed baptisms unfolding before their eyes, a waking nightmare they couldn't escape.

The third had ended up like the second, in a vegetative coma. The fourth fared even worse; his life force siphoned away, leading to a sudden cardiac arrest well before age or soul damage could claim him.

Others had tried their luck since, and the two who survived with their sanity intact had pulled their hands from the water before the effects kicked in. In the end, they'd lost years off their lives for nothing- along with the courage to shape their own destiny.

Up to this point, the victory rate was a whopping zero. The conscripts were starting to think they'd been played, unwitting participants in some dark sacrificial rite.

That changed with the ninth volunteer. Well, "volunteer" was a stretch; he just wanted to get this nightmare over with. He wasn't as massive or intimidating as the others, but his eyes were alert and resigned. Trembling with fear, he took a quick breath and decisively plunged his hand into the water, eyes clenched shut, too anxious to face the outcome.

Soon after, a now-familiar, ear-piercing scream echoed, but like the ones before it, quickly faded. Jake and the other recruits glanced at the latest "victim," expecting another disastrous failure. But this time, a different scene played out.

The volunteer stood upright and conscious, his body enveloped by an ethereal, insubstantial halo. To those like Jake with special pupils or heightened extrasensory perception, the young barbarian seemed to glow faintly, like some mythological deity.

Using his Cosmic Eyes and his understanding of the Aetherdream, Jake noticed immediate changes. Compared to before, the young man's spirit seemed... more awake and charismatic? A close connection had formed between his soul and the nearby souls, including Jake's, exerting an imperceptible pull.

That was as much as he could deduce with his current grasp of the Aether, but he was sure he'd missed some things. In any case, this barbarian's spirit had successfully evolved.

The baptism was a success.

Chapter 1044: Chalice Of Nethershade

1044 Chalice Of Nethershade

After that initial breakthrough, the curse hanging over the anxious recruits seemed to lift, allowing the next wave of volunteers to survive their baptism at the cost of shaving a few years off their lifespan.

Sure, there were always the hard-luck cases who bit the dust now and then, but the success rate had crawled back into alignment with the whispers: a touch over 60%. The true average across all regiments clocked in closer to 65%, leading the overseeing officer to deduce that his latest batch of recruits left something to be desired. The hope was that their battlefield prowess would prove less underwhelming.

In case you're wondering why the probability leaned more towards 65% instead of a coin flip, chalk it up to the quality of the men. They weren't all conscripts dragged from the fields.

If it weren't for the war's tremendous scale, the new blood usually hailed from various tribes of young, battle-hardened warriors. They'd been steeping in the arts of war since they were old enough to hold a sword. Be it body, mind, or spirit, these recruits were made of sterner stuff, slashing their odds of kicking the bucket during their initiation.

With each baptism averaging about a minute, nearly two grueling days passed before every barbarian in the regiment had taken their turn. All the while, the officer remained stoic, forcing them to stand at attention and bear witness to the death or rebirth of each of their comrade.

According to him, it was a way to pay respects to the courage of the fallen. The Lumyst Baptism was a sacred ritual, after all.

By this point, sleep-deprived, unfed, and for those who hadn't thought to fill their canteens, parched, the motley crew of peasants looked even more ragged and

miserable than before. They leaned heavily on their makeshift spears and rusted swords to keep from collapsing. Their legs ached so much they could hardly even stand.

When it was finally the last conscript's turn, his feet were hurting so bad that his fear had long since numbed over. Death or vegetative state, he just wanted it over with.

Tough luck. The Dusken Throne wasn't done with him, and his baptism turned out to be a winner, capping off the series of rites on a high note.

Disbelieving, he pinched himself to make sure he wasn't dreaming. Confirming he was very much alive, he let out an involuntary cackle of joy.

"Finally, back to me... Jake yawned without bothering to cover his mouth, his patience stretched to the breaking point.

He was so bored he'd almost jumped into the pool-not to retake his baptism, but just to swim. Unlike the recruits, he was neither tired nor suffering from aching limbs. If he'd wanted, he could've stood stick-straight for another century or two.

As the last conscript joyfully rejoined the crowd, silence settled back into the chapel hall. The Spirit Enchanter, who miraculously lacked any dark circles under his eyes despite two days of vigilance, turned back towards Jake, wearing a solemn expression.

"I honestly don't know how to give you a baptism that'd do you justice, but I'll give it my best shot," the shaman declared before gesturing to the enormous pool filled with clear water. "You could try bathing in that, but the water is the same as what I used for your first baptism. It's likely too diluted for your needs."

Jake agreed with the reasoning. If he used his mental sense to forcibly extract the spiritual energy from the entire pool, it would show off a mental prowess too alarming. He had already revealed far too much.

"So, what's your play?" Jake asked, his brow furrowed deeply.

"Simple," the Spirit Enchanter chuckled teasingly. "Just use a more concentrated Lumyst Water."

"Great. What are we waiting for?" Jake exclaimed impatiently.

"Hold on. We need to clear out any unauthorized personnel first," the shaman halted him. "Spirit Lumyst Water is a tricky resource to contain and transport, and I can't let everyone in on how it's done."

'An artifact? Or maybe a relic? Jake thought instantly, picking up on the man's reverent demeanor as he stood in his robe of black feathers.

No wonder he didn't want to display it in front of a crowd. Protecting it in case shit hit the fan would be a tall order.

The officer, who had been standing at attention for almost 48 hours, gave the shaman's request a green light without batting an eye but asked to stick around. Given his rank, it wasn't exactly easy for the low-level Spirit Enchanter to say no, so he begrudgingly complied.

A few minutes later, only the shaman, the officer, Jake, and a select group of clerics remained. The rest had been evacuated out, along with the new recruits.

Once everyone was gone, Jake expected the Spirit Enchanter to unveil some hidden passage leading to a fortified chamber or at least an ultra-secure vault, but nothing of the sort happened. To retrieve the "relic," the guy actually used the most straightforward method Jake could think of a method he hadn't expected to see in this context.

"A Space Storage!" Jake's eyes flashed with exhilaration as he saw a peculiar golden goblet, adorned with a single blue sapphire the size of a quail egg, materialize out of thin air in the shaman's hands.

He immediately sifted through the collective memories of the other conscripts for any info about a similar object but came up empty-handed.

"Now I get why he was so keen on clearing the room," Jake smirked inwardly, maintaining a façade of curiosity.

"What the hell is that?" Jake inquired bluntly.

"Is this what I think it is?" The gruff officer quivered as he spoke, staring at the goblet with almost reverential awe, as if merely looking at it was sinful.

"Yes and no," the Spirit Enchanter answered cryptically. "This is indeed a Chalice of Nethersshade, but it's just a replica. The real one is in the hands of the Soulmaner King"

Noting Jake's lack of reaction, both the shaman and the officer silently reaffirmed that this recruit was alien to their world. Anyone hearing the term Chalice of Nethersshade would have had an immediate attitude adjustment.

But they were wrong. The moment the relic materialized, Jake had already scanned it with his bracelet, his eyes widening at the intricate web of shimmering Aether Runes that seemed to dance when glimpsed out of the corner of the eye.

To the uninitiated, this golden cup might seem ordinary, but with his Aetherist knowledge, how could he possibly overlook it?

[Bronze Aether Artifact: Chalice of Nethershade +3 (Replica): This mystical chalice is forged from an elusive and ancient material called "Naetherium," a mineral that exists in both the physical and spiritual realms simultaneously. Intricate runes are etched into its surface, acting as a magical barrier to contain the dualistic properties of Spirit Lumyst Water.

The authentic chalice is rumored to have been forged in the molten core of a dying star by a clandestine order of cosmic monks attuned to the duality of life and spirit. The outer layer of this sacred container is imbued with Life Element spells, rendering it impervious to the vitality-draining properties of the water it holds. Conversely, the inner sanctum is enchanted with Spirit Element spells to retain the water's soul-nourishing potency.

The lid of the Chalice of Nethershade is crowned with a blue sapphire crystal known as the "Soulgem," which shifts hues based on the purity of the Spirit Lumyst Water it contains. This serves as a litmus test for whether the water is suitable for consumption or too potent, even for ethereal beings.

This replica has survived three spiritual enchantments, significantly awakening its latent spirituality and reinforcing all its attributes. The cup can hold up to 150 milliliters of pure Spirit Lumyst Water, but it's also versatile enough to contain substances that exist across different planes of reality.]

Beyond the artifact's captivating properties, it was the '+3' that piqued Jake's interest, instantly recalling the equipment enchantment systems in the role-playing games he used to indulge in. Many pay-to-win mobile games thrived on such mechanics, where each successful enchantment demanded increasingly scarce resources while the triumph rate plummeted.

The most cutthroat of these pay-to-win games even destroyed equipment upon a failed enchantment, compelling these spoiled whales to shell out ludicrous sums of money just to feed their egos. The description clearly stated that the replica had 'survived' three enhancements, which instantly made him think of the baptism's fixed 50% triumph rate.

Could he infer that succeeding in this baptism was akin to enchanting his very soul?

Chapter 1045: Side Mission n°1

1045 Side Mission n°1

"This replica already seems pretty mind-blowing," Jake mused inwardly, his eyes tinged with envy. "The original chalice must be a real game-changer."

His otherwise stoic face wavered ever so slightly, his blazing greed mirrored in his narrowing eyes. At that moment, a resolute assertion cleared his mind of all distractions.

"The original chalice... I must get it!"

As if the Oracle System had been waiting for that cue, it immediately shot him his first side mission since the start of the Ordeal:

[Side Mission n°1: Find a way to acquire the Chalice of Nethersshade and the Chalice of Etherlife and fuse them to restore the original relic. Reward: An unknown Diamond Aether Artefact.]

Jake's jaw nearly hit the floor as he read the absurd mission prompt.

"What the actual hell is this madness?! I just wanted one goddamn chalice, and now the Oracle is asking me to score another one and fuse them? Are you kidding me?!"

The Oracle System wasn't pulling any punches anymore. Long gone were the days of receiving manageable side missions that anyone with a smidgen of luck and grit could accomplish. Now, it felt like the Oracle or Aaas, or whoever was running this Ordeal- was reminding him to step up his game.

If Jake wanted to keep raking in the insane ratings from his previous Ordeals, he'd have to bust his ass way more. Easy mode was officially over.

What frightened him about this mission was that the bare-minimum requirement left little room to amp up his rating. If securing both chalices and fusing them was just scraping by, what the hell would he need to do for a perfect rating? The sheer complexity of it made his head spin.

"Cough, cough... Hey. Ahem... Shit! What the hell have I done to deserve this... This is gonna bite me in the ass... HEY CONSCRIPT!"

Snapped out of his grim reverie, Jake winced as the imposing 3000- man commander barked at him, a spray of spittle pelting his face. Apparently, the earlier lesson hadn't stuck.

Luckily for the officer, Jake was the one at fault this time, so he let it slide.

"Sorry, got lost in thought," he deadpanned, completely ignoring the fuming officer.

"Take that for shouting at me when I didn't ask for it; Jake sneered inwardly, relishing the sight of the commander grinding his teeth in impotent fury.

The Spirit Enchanter didn't quite know how to react to their bizarre exchange, but having been through more than one outlandish ritual, he had long since learned how to comport himself on such occasions. The aim was to get this rite over and done with, posthaste.

With a well-practiced motion, he carefully lifted the golden goblet before his face and closed his eyes, his forehead creasing in intense concentration. The artifact immediately began to glow with a spectral aura, and the previously empty vessel started filling with water, as if by magic.

The water shimmered with the same ghostly gray hue enveloping the goblet but its brilliance was far more intense, almost blinding. Merely standing nearby, Jake, the Spirit Enchanter, and the officer felt as if their vitality was being drained against their will.

Almost instantly, Jake's cells resisted the pull, reverting to their baseline status. Neither the Spirit Enchanter nor the officer could say the same. As if holding an about-to-detonate bomb, the enchanter nearly tossed the goblet into Jake's hands, before sprinting to the far end of the chapel. The officer had already fled to the top of the stairs from where they had come.

Jake stood there, dumbstruck, holding the relic before recalling what he was supposed to do. Still, he hesitated momentarily, locking eyes with the goblet's ectoplasmic twinkles. Now that he was so close to the chalice, the force trying to siphon his life force felt even more overwhelming.

"What now?" he shouted toward the Spirit Enchanter, who was crouched against the wall at the other end of the room. "Do I have to mix it with regular water, or can I just dunk my hand in?"

It wasn't that Jake doubted his own toughness, but he chose to play it safe until he had a better grasp of this mysterious water and its mystical properties. The shaman, not losing sight of why he was here, cupped his hands around his mouth and bellowed back,

"This Chalice can only hold Spirit Lumyst Water with a purity of 30%. If you're feeling ballsy, give it a shot. I reckon you can handle it."

'Xi? What's your take?' Jake swiftly sought a second opinion, although he already knew the answer he'd get.

[The water from your initial baptism didn't even contain 0.000 001% of Spirit Lumyst Water. They probably used a single droplet for the whole pool. To play it safe, one drop in the same carafe as earlier should suffice.]

"Great minds think alike, huh," Jake chuckled as he heeded the advice and dropped a solitary droplet into one of the many black earthenware jars littering the corner.

Big mistake! The moment the droplet hit the bottom of the empty jar, the vessel was suddenly enveloped in a dazzling, spectral aura. The next second, its surface was crisscrossed with radiant fissures, like a sky ablaze with lightning during a tempest. Seconds later, the jar disintegrated, reduced to ash under its own weight.

Having witnessed the spectacle from atop the staircase, the officer audibly gulped, while the shaman muttered a string of curses under his breath for overlooking such a vital detail. He could have turned back, but he knew that the carafe used in earlier baptisms wouldn't withstand the pressure either.

"Regular water first!"

"Thanks, Captain Obvious, Jake rolled his eyes, masking his own embarrassment. The destruction of the jar was indeed his own doing; he should have seen it coming.

[Hey, who could've predicted their gear would be so shoddy?] Xi immediately piped up in his mind, trying to lift his spirits. [They've got no one to blame but themselves.]

'Right, Jake's mood immediately buoyed. 'If it were artifacts I'd forged, they'd have definitely held up. Definitely!

Learning his lesson, Jake picked another similarly-sized earthenware

jar and filled it first with the clear pool water. This time, the jar held,

and he could finally add another drop of pure Lumyst Water.

Jake expected the two waters to mix like ordinary fluids, but he nearly dropped the jar when the mundane water started to shimmer, displaying luminescent cracks eerily familiar to him.

"Fuck. Don't tell me, anything that touches this water gets

automatically enchanted?"

That was exactly the case. To be precise, the spiritual energy in the Lumyst Water was attempting to awaken the innate spirituality of the lifeless substance, whatever that entailed.

This time, the magic worked, and the two waters managed to meld, albeit grudgingly. Jake thought he was past the worst, but soon the new jar began to shimmer upon contact with the diluted water. In the end, it also turned to dust.

Realizing that enchanting a durable container could take all day, Jake did something he'd sworn not to do in the early phases of this Ordeal: he used his powers.

Just a touch of telekinesis.

The enriched water mixture hovered a meter above the ground instead of splattering with the ashes of its former container, eliciting a series of stunned gasps from both the shaman and the officer.

Such raw power, without the blessing of Lumyst? It was unheard of- a monumental scoop. If reported, this would completely reshape both factions' perception of these foreigners.

Aware that he might have to silence these witnesses to avoid future complications, Jake clenched his teeth and plunged both hands decisively into the shimmering blob of water floating before him.

Unlike the first time, the moment his fingertips made contact with the liquid, a searing pain savagely exploded throughout his nervous system, setting both his physical body and soul ablaze. The agony was so excruciating, he could barely remember his own name.

"Gods, this hurts like a motherfucker," Jake snarled through gritted teeth. If this was the kind of agony diluted water could bring, he wasn't jumping into that mystic river anytime soon.

Yet, as if a celestial algorithm had finally compiled, he felt his luck kick into overdrive. The arcane gamble that the enriched water had been taking with his spiritual essence suddenly became a surefire win-its success rate rocketing to a flawless 100%.

Before Jake even had a chance to truly test the bounds of his Cosmic D Stafeyrves Soul, the ritual drew to a close.

The magic was a roaring success.

Chapter 1046: Side Mission n°2

1046 Side Mission n°2

Jake remained still for a long while after the process concluded, his eyes blurry as he probed the internal shifts within himself, wearing an expression of intense focus. Eventually, his gaze sharpened like a blade being drawn, and he relaxed.

"Not too shabby. Virtually no change in my Oracle Status, but I can definitely sense a power-up in my soul force-plus, there's something... different."

As for the Oracle Status in question, it was nearly identical to before, with only minor adjustments:

[Cosmic D Starveyrves Soul lvl1 (+1): Able to feed on any energy to continuously strengthen and regenerate.

[Attributes (Very strong): Cosmic, Energy, Life, Space, Time.

[Soul Class: Aetherdream Inceptor

[Graces: Child of Lumyst(+1).

[Glyphs: Blacksmith (Platinum),

[True Wills: Self, Crushing, Growth, ...]

Evidently, the Oracle had opted for a slight interface rearrangement in light of new data. From top to bottom, the intrinsic properties of his soul were listed in order of their respective importances.

His Attributes represented not just his affinities but his very nature.

For most Evolvers, these were synonymous with strengths and weaknesses. For example, a soul with a weak Fire Attribute might more easily endure and even thrive in a hot climate without being incapacitated when the temperature drops. In contrast, a soul with a perfect affinity for fire would be labeled a Fire Soul.

While such a pronounced attribute granted numerous advantages in the corresponding element, anything deviating or opposing it would make the soul lethally vulnerable. For instance, an attributeless soul could move freely in water, provided its inner quality and the local Aether density were sufficient. A weak Fire Soul would be snuffed out instantly.

On this front, Jake was once again an anomaly among his peers. To his humble knowledge, very few Evolvers had Attributes as all-encompassing and hard to counter as his own. Make no mistake, future foes, there were no realms where Jake's Soul could not flourish.

Soul Class needed no explanation. The Oracle Status didn't even mention it. Jake could only sense its existence through his Artefact Incarnation ability.

The tab regarding Graces was new, though. Given that it was listed above Glyphs, he deduced that their impact was more profound than the latter, of which he had hundreds after grinding nearly every available module in his Purgatory. This presented a treasure trove of potential Soul Classes should he ever decide to switch.

'Child of Lumyst, huh? Does that mean it's specific to Twyluxia?' Jake wondered, a tinge of disappointment coloring his thoughts before he swiftly dismissed that assumption.

The (+1) made it abundantly clear that this was a qualitative and lasting change tied to the enchantment. Unless multiple types of soul enchantments existed and it was possible to reset them-which remained a real possibility-it was safer to assume its effects were not limited to this world.

Indeed, when Jake checked the details of his first Grace, he initially groaned in disappointment upon reading the first half. But his frown flipped into a grin when the shaman clarified one of his concerns.

[Child of Lumyst: Your soul exerts a weak attraction on wandering souls that are part of Twyluxia's reincarnation cycle or bear the Lumyst mark. The probability of successfully completing a spiritual enchantment on yourself with Lumyst Water is slightly increased. The souls of the enemies you defeat add to your Lumyst Aura, reducing the restrictions imposed upon you by Twyluxia's world-laws.]

Jake's skepticism centered specifically on the last aspect of this Aura of Lumyst. The Oracle System was maddeningly cryptic on the subject.

All that his bracelet revealed was that the Aura allowed for the fusion of numerous warrior Intentions and Wills into one, all supercharged by every additional soul that joined in, and was refined by the Aura itself. Each Lumyst Aura was a unique blend, tailored to the individual motivations of each soldier on the battlefield.

When Jake had voiced his concerns, the shaman had immediately clarified that its essence wasn't necessarily an overwhelming and materialized Killing Intent, as many wrongfully assumed. In the end, though, it was more or less the same thing since the base principle of any war was to defeat or kill one's enemies.

What truly piqued Jake's interest about the Lumyst Aura was that its effects weren't merely confined to intimidating enemies, nor were they limited to the realm of Twyluxia. Unlike his Child of Lumyst Grace, his Lumyst Aura could attract and refine wandering souls autonomously. The more potent it was, the more overwhelming its spiritual pressure would be, making it nigh impossible for nearby spirits to resist its gravitational pull.

The cherry on top? The Lumyst Aura could also amplify his base attributes, offering offensive, defensive, and supportive benefits. All in all, it was a kick-ass skill, gained for free without shedding a drop of blood or sweat.

Well, almost free. One could still die in the process.

At the bottom of his skill list, 'Aura of Lumyst' now made an appearance. For now, it had no levels or perks, its description summing up to:

[Aura of Lumyst: Enemies Killed: 0, Souls Harvested: 0. Stat boosts: 0%]

In essence, it was as good as not having it at all. The silver lining? He now had a damn good reason to throw himself into combat.

"I can already picture the frenzied madness driving all these natives and Players to slaughter each other. No one can resist such a dark allure... Jake mumbled with a dash of cynicism, oblivious to the fact that he'd voiced his thoughts out loud.

The shaman and the officer winced, their faces tightening at his words, but neither sought to contradict him. After all, it was the unvarnished truth. Long before the unification of the Dusken Throne by the Soulmaner King, tribes had been warring over the very same reasons.

The thirst for power-it was both the greatest aspiration and the ruin of many men. Maybe all intelligent beings were governed by this urge as soon as they became sentient. And when one found they could grow no more, could seize no more power, disillusionment set in, followed by the onset of despair.

Mortals faced many such grim epiphanies, from their first scrapes teaching them they weren't invincible in childhood, to their first wrinkles reminding them they weren't immortal either. Some accepted this truth early on, while others lived in denial their whole lives, resorting to plastic surgery and other reparative delusions, until their insignificance was brutally reinforced by the death of a loved one or a terminal illness diagnosis.

As superhuman as Jake had become, and as cynical and arrogant as he might appear-especially in these early, deceptively laid-back stages of the Ordeal-he had never forgotten that there were entities far stronger than him out there. As far back as he could remember, he'd always been acutely aware of his own mortality, refusing to partake in any activity where his life wasn't entirely within his control.

The difficulty Ruby had once faced in persuading him to go skydiving in a virtual reality game spoke volumes about his old mindset. And deep down, not much had changed. Despite his undeniable strength, he felt perpetually inadequate, forever chasing an elusive horizon of power.

And now, his concerns weren't limited to just his life; his friends were part of the equation, too.

'Let's wrap this shit-show up. If the Dusken Throne and the Radiant Conclave can't find a way to kiss and make up, they can all vanish for all I care. Whether it's the edicts of the Soulmaner King or the greedy resource hoarding by the Radiant Conclave, if they can't find common ground, guess it's up to me to end this goddamn war myself!

Jake was just marinating in his own dark thoughts, a cauldron of anger and resentment bubbling inside him toward the two Mirror Universes that forced all their Players into a

deadly game for their own twisted agendas. He was half-serious, but apparently, his Oracle didn't see it that way.

For the second time in mere moments, the Oracle System slapped him with another Side Mission. The moment Jake read the prompt, his face instantly fell, contorting into an ugly snarl, as if each word he read were nails on the chalkboard of his soul.

If he had even a sliver of doubt before, now it was crystal clear-the Oracle was targeting him.

[Side Mission n°2: End this war by uniting Twyluxia under your dominion.]

The message hung in the air like a guillotine blade, positioned to fall. It wasn't just a mission; it was a death sentence wrapped in a riddle, hidden in enigma. A Pandora's Box of chaos that, once opened, could not be undone.

And Jake knew it.

Chapter 1047: Nervous Laughter

1047 Nervous Laughter

Jake, who had been treating the early stages of the Ordeal like a leisurely stroll, felt his mood shift in the blink of an eye. More than just anger, he seemed restless, a glint of worry flashing fleetingly in his eyes before being stamped out by sheer force of will - and fury.

The inhuman growl that escaped his clenched teeth sent shivers down the spines of the two barbarians nearby. The sound was so deep that they could even feel their bones quiver. When the shaman and the officer exchanged anxious glances, their expressions were mirror images of shocked bewilderment.

'What the heck did we do wrong this time?' Both barbarians thought simultaneously, not daring to voice their burning question aloud.

Just when they began fearing that the foreigner would lash out in

rage, Jake returned to his usual composure. However, the sharp edge

of menace still danced within the depths of his eyes.

"Let's move, commander," Jake declared, heading straight for the exit. He waved dismissively at the Spirit Enchanter without a backward glance, adding, "Oh, and thanks for your help. Can I keep this replica? I'll swap it for a better one in a few months."

The shaman, having dreaded this request but mentally prepared for it the moment he showcased the item, flinched upon hearing it. But he reluctantly nodded, a pained grimace on his face.

"Sure," he conceded evenly. Internally, though, he was relieved. "Thank god I have an even better one stashed away. I'd be a fool to trust his word."

The officer, after giving a solemn nod to his fellow in misery, quickly followed Jake, who was already halfway up the staircase. He didn't even register that Jake had issued a command, grateful that Jake still addressed him with the title of 'commander'.

Just before leaving the chapel, Jake abruptly paused at the entrance, shielded from prying eyes and ears, and whispered,

"Commander Sank-Uk, I don't care if you report my existence to your superiors; I'll survive. But the question is: will you? Given your rank, you should know the scale and ferocity of the upcoming war. I may be unfamiliar with this world, but I'm sure if there's a victor, only a handful will remain. The weak will fall first, but make no mistake: the strong will follow. Our rookie regiment? We're less than cannon fodder. Even you aren't safe. There are countless foreigners like me on the other side."

"What?!" The officer choked, clearly blindsided by this revelation. Thinking of something, his face contorted in horror. "Are they all as powerful as you?"

Jake swiveled his head toward the burly warrior, giving him an odd look before bursting into laughter. The commander's facial muscles twitched as he watched Jake succumb to uncontrollable laughter, wondering what he had possibly said that was so comical.

"Did I say something weird?" Sank-Uk asked with a grouchy pout, momentarily forgetting his fear of the foreigner.

Jake's laughter dried up sharply upon hearing the barbarian's aggrieved voice, and in moments, his mirth vanished, his features hardening once more. Absentmindedly rubbing his abs, he declared gravely,

"You didn't say anything out of line. To answer your valid question, no, thank God! They're not all as strong as me. Out of those millions of foreigners scattered among the armies of the Radiant Conclave, only two or three, perhaps, are on my level. There's also a fair chance I'm the strongest."

The warrior let out a deep sigh of relief, the information lifting a weight off his shoulders. Then, with a puzzled expression, he curiously inquired again, "I still don't know what I said that was so funny."

Jake chuckled. "Don't sweat it. It was just nervous laughter. I was merely imagining a scenario where I'd be the weakest Player of all. If that were the case, it would have been one hell of a joke."

What he kept to himself was that while pondering this, he

remembered the two Side Missions the Oracle had just handed him.

If, on top of that, he turned out to be the weakest Player sent here, the universe would have truly been having a laugh at his expense. 'At least it puts things into perspective.' Jake mused wryly, letting out

one last chuckle.

Because somewhere in this Ordeal, there was statistically such a Player. Probably already dead, crushed under the oppressive gravity of Twyluxia. He never wanted to find himself in such a situation again.

'No more games,' he resolved, his face taking on an expression of icy determination. 'I'll treat this war like my first Ordeal when I had no choice but to hone my swordsmanship for the coliseum. Beyond merely surviving to the end, it's the one with the sharpest progression curve who'll come out on top. Even if I'm the strongest

now, there's no guarantee I will still be if I take this war too lightly!

[Good mindset,] Xi praised approvingly, her emotions echoing his own. [Great General Jake... this is going to be fun.]

'Foot soldier Jake, you mean?' He shot back mentally with a teasing

smile on his lips. 'I have to climb the ranks on the battlefield first. [Eh, then get a move on, tsks.] Xi snorted dramatically before bursting into laughter alongside him.

A laugh that died down as soon as he and the commander stepped out of the chapel. Before them, the barbarians from their regiment, faces etched in sorrow, were loading the lifeless bodies of their comrades onto large carts-those unfortunate enough to not survive their deadly baptism.

Their bond had been fleeting, never having shared the heat of battle together. Yet, the sight tugged at their hearts, reminding them of the harsh truth: it could've easily been them.

The draftees who had wet themselves during the two-day enforced stand-to inside the chapel hadn't even bothered to change. They stood there, teeth gritted in somber frustration, as they joined the others in their grim task.

Catching sight of this, Jake cast a disdainful glance at the commander, silently berating him for such misuse of power. But the officer remained unfazed, meeting Jake's scathing gaze with a nonchalance that spoke volumes, easily shrugging off his guilt.

"In the military, orders are absolute," the seasoned warrior stated bluntly. "Not to mention, we are Underworld Barbarians. If they can't hold their bladder, what will they do on the battlefield when a prolonged skirmish offers no privy in sight? Worse, some tactics in war involve unspeakable measures for victory. If their rations get tainted, they may find themselves fighting while plagued by diarrhea, or even worse conditions. Believe me, I know what I'm talking about..."

Jake felt a chill run down his spine. He had to concede; he hadn't thought of these realities, never having fought on a battlefield as a human. Ever since acquiring his Myrtharian Bloodline, the delicate dance of bathroom breaks had become a distant memory.

Throughout Earth's history, there were many large-scale wars, some immensely bloody and heartless. But more often than not, they adhered to certain unspoken rules. Even though in theory, war has no rules, these battles still operated around the physiological needs of their soldiers.

That's why conflicts rarely took place at night, allowing soldiers time to rest. The intensity of combat wasn't like the movies depicted. No warrior, no matter how skilled, could maintain peak combat prowess for more than a few moments, definitely not an entire day.

The grim truth was many stratagems took advantage of these physiological vulnerabilities. During a siege, it was common to make noise at night, depriving the enemy of sleep or sabotaging their water sources, torching their food stores, or tampering with their rations.

Yet, the commander had a point. These barbarians weren't ordinary humans. Earth's wartime etiquettes might not apply on Twyluxia.

Here, they might be forced into endless days and nights of combat for weeks on end. Soldiers held captive by their own bodily functions might indeed have to soil themselves with no chance for a change. The sooner they embraced this grim possibility, the better their odds of survival.

"Let's go, Commander," Jake commanded again, his voice carrying a note of weariness. He took a determined step toward the draftees, ready to assist in their mournful task. 'Let's win this war.'

Alas, even as he had braced himself to engage in this unforgiving war, he and the remnants of his regiment were blissfully unaware that it would be the war that would seek them out first, clawing at their doors with a voracious hunger. And when it came, it

would unleash a brutality more savage and shattering than any of them could have fathomed, tearing through their ranks like a maelstrom of destruction and despair.

Chapter 1048: First Pawn

1048 First Pawn

"Can we rely on this intel?" A gruff, aged voice rumbled skeptically, its normally measured rhythm quickening imperceptibly upon hearing the news.

From the source of that voice, an opulent throne crafted from pure gold, its back adorned with spikes fanning out like the sun's rays, held an old man. He wore a pristine white linen robe, so immaculate it looked as though it had just been pressed. Healthy, lustrous hair cascaded over his shoulders, matched by a brilliantly white beard, meticulously groomed to perfection.

But it was the dazzling smile stretching across his face that was the most blinding of all. Those who addressed him found it nearly impossible to meet his gaze, making his true countenance known only to the other four members of the Radiant Conclave.

Indeed, this unassuming elder was recognized as Master Eldrion, one of the five most powerful Lifemancers of the Lustra Plains, reigning supreme over all but bowing to just one.

At that moment, the other four identical golden thrones lining the stained-glass windows of the spacious crescent-shaped room stood empty. Only Eldrion, who seemed perpetually on the verge of nodding off from the weight of governance, was present. But as the messenger knelt before him, Eldrion's previously languid gaze sharpened, piercing as if trying to strike the man down with a mere look.

The messenger, a man with the build of a lion, donned in gleaming golden armor, maintained his bowed position. With hands clasped in false-reverential fear, he declared in an even yet thunderous voice,

"It's confirmed. The Soulmancer King's hideout has been discovered. Defying all logic, he hasn't holed up in his capital under the protection of the Underworld Cascade. Instead, he's stationed at the headquarters of his armies in Havocspire Citadel. This is our chance to eliminate this puppet king and end this war with minimal losses. Without their king, the Dusken Throne is just a band of disorganized brutes, ripe for conquest."

Master Eldrion didn't respond right away, his gaze drifting towards the majestic view offered by the stained-glass windows. They were located at the very pinnacle of the tallest tower in the undisputed capital of the Lustra Plains: Lustris.

In the distance, squinting eyes could make out the monumental Heaven Cascade, unleashing a relentless torrent into the Lumyst River. The sheer life force in its waters was such that even the tiniest blade of grass along its banks grazed the clouds, while the most minute crab residing there competed with the most titanic behemoths-an enormous crustacean as towering as a skyscraper.

Any creature surviving near the Heaven Cascade was undeniably a force to be reckoned with. And all these beings were loyal to the Radiant Conclave, rendering Lustris virtually impregnable,

Dusken City, the newly established capital of the Duskwight Lands, was built at the base of the Underworld Cascade, seemingly challenging the Conclave's dominance. The vengeful souls wandering upstream were as formidable and vast as the beasts lurking below, yet notoriously untamable.

Thus, when an unknown Soulmaner King had established his Dusken Throne there, it had sent shockwaves across the Lustra Plains, with the Radiant Conclave at the helm being no exception. It was safe to assume that these formidable wandering souls had been completely enslaved by the new king...

This was precisely why Master Eldrion was so taken aback by the news. By leaving his Dusken Throne, the Soulmaner King had forsaken his most potent guard and the purest source of his power.

As powerful as he was, he was just a man, or rather, a barbarian. Now that they knew his location, they could easily end his life. Because unlike him, their Radiant Conclave wasn't made up of one individual, but five.

And among them, their ultimate leader, Celestial Valandar, was renowned as an invincible Lifemancer, so much so that none of the other four members of the Radiant Conclave dared challenge him...

Master Eldrion still hadn't responded to the messenger. His thick brows knitted together, deepening the lines on his forehead as he pondered the situation.

The Soulmaner King venturing beyond his walls was obviously a trap. The old man trusted the skill of their spies, but it seemed like a rather naive error for someone of the king's stature.

Unfortunately, the opportunity was also too golden to pass up. A chance like this to eliminate the Soulmaner King might never come again. After several moments of silent contemplation, the aged Lifemancer seemed to have finally made up his mind and declared with a heavy sigh,

"Thank you for your diligence... messenger. Head to the kitchens and claim a well-earned meal. I will inform the other four Lords of the Conclave"

Still with his gaze fixed on the pristine marble floor, the armored warrior emotionlessly thanked the revered and fearsome Lifemancer watching him from the throne and swiftly made his exit. But once outside, his docile and sincere facade melted away, revealing an expression of pure disdain.

'Finally done with that charade. Now, just to wait for the Radiant Conclave to bite.

As he moved towards the kitchens, relishing the thought of his promised meal, the candles and wax chandeliers burning peacefully in the corridor abruptly went out one by one, starting from the far end and moving toward him as if a fierce gust of wind was blowing his way.

The battle-hardened messenger immediately sensed impending doom and reached for his sword, but it was already too late. A slender hand clamped onto his face like a vice, plunging him into darkness.

The next moment... there was no next moment.

His soul was instantly yanked from his body, scanned and scrutinized by his assailant before being slightly altered and reinserted into its original vessel... with a malevolent addition."

Pulling her delicate hand away from her victim's forehead, a tall, willowy woman with an otherworldly beauty flashed a smile that was both smug and indifferent.

"This Duskwight Lands' spy makes the first pawn in what I predict will be a long line," she hummed, the icy detachment in her voice contrasting sharply with her melodic tone and angelic features. "I didn't expect to hit the jackpot this early. With this intel, reaching the rank of a 1000-commander should be well within my grasp, even if I reveal my true identity."

Because unlike most of the Players from the Lustra Plains, her appearance was far too unusual to blend in. There was a enormous variety of races serving the Radiant Conclave, but sadly, hers was not among them:

Her silvery-blue skin had an almost translucent quality, betraying her non-human origins, just like her claws, curved horns, and the nine tails trailing behind her, reminiscent of the tendrils of a colossal jellyfish. Her eyes were complete abysses, twin voids, and she moved with a serene, ethereal grace. Alien symbols glimmered faintly across her skin, pulsating whenever she wielded her powers. Though she wore no clothing, she was invisible to all.

This venomous beauty, like Jake, was one of the Rank 17 Oracle Knights who had recently entered this realm. With one crucial distinction: She played for the opposing side.

Far from the conspiracies and machinations, Jake maintained his guise as a near-average recruit, assisting what remained of his regiment in piling up the bodies of their fallen comrades.

By the time they were done disposing of the corpses, a good chunk of the morning had slipped away. The wan sun was already high in the sky when the last embers from their incineration ceased to smolder.

Given the sheer volume of troops flowing daily through Grimstone Keep, and the daily rites taking place in the various chapels across the city, columns of smoke rising to the clouds were a common sight. The number of draftees dying every minute without even reaching the battlefield was nothing short of staggering.

They could have given these souls a proper burial, but with the city being a mandatory stopover for every regiment, there simply wasn't room. In just a few years of relentless skirmishes, millions, perhaps even billions of barbarians, had met their end during their first baptism.

The grim reality was that the vicinity of Grimstone Keep was strewn with mass graves, easily identifiable by the humble mounds overshadowed by hasty, massive stone epitaphs.

Faced with this environmental quandary, the lord of Grimstone Keep eventually yielded to public outcry. Taking a cue from Havocspire Citadel, which had adopted the practice some time ago for clear sanitary reasons, he ordered that the dead be cremated.

When the last funeral pyre finally died down, Jake's regiment let out a weary cheer and collapsed to the ground. But just as they thought they'd earned some rest and a warm meal, their commander barked out,

"What the hell are you slackers doing?! This isn't a damn vacation! If you want to rest, you'll reach Havocspire first. Chop chop!"

They seemed destined to be tortured by hunger until nightfall, but fate, it seemed, had another cruel twist in store for them. No sooner had they left Grimstone Keep than they were immediately attacked.

Chapter 1049: Utterly Decimated

1049 Utterly Decimated

Or rather, a fleeing force crashing toward them was!

Barely an hour had passed since their departure from Grimstone Keep when an army of ragtag barbarians-armor-clad and wearing mismatched scraps similar to their own-suddenly surged forward, blocking their way. In stark contrast to their own depleted regiment, missing 40% of its numbers, this mob was massive.

Sadly, by the time they encountered this half-giant horde, it was already the least of their worries...

Indeed, a few minutes before they could see this oncoming storm with their own eyes, they had first felt the earth beneath them tremble, sending waves of panic through the undisciplined conscripts straggling along, often three to five in a row.

The thing is their procession, stretching out like an endless serpent, was particularly vulnerable to ambushes... and other mishaps.

Such as the perils of the very landscape itself.

As the first signs of impending doom manifested, they had just transitioned from the cracked plains surrounding Grimstone Keep, offering open views, to a maze of rocky hills. These inclines were so steep they looked more like cliffs than hills.

The narrowness between them made their path canyon-like. With these "hills" partially obstructing the sunlight, the trail they embarked upon was almost perpetually veiled in gloom.

For this reason, their regiment of green recruits, already skittish from leaving the plains, had been shaking like leaves in a storm for a while when the sound of a rockslide reached their ears.

Following yet another quake, more intense than any before, a colossal slab of rock had without warning detached from the cliff at the trail's end, hurtling down its slope and gaining momentum rapidly.

"By Lumyst, how can our luck be so damned cursed!" one conscript shrieked from somewhere within the ranks.

Then pandemonium ensued. All hell broke loose.

Some recruits tried to flee backward, while the savvier ones pressed themselves against the canyon walls, hoping to let the avalanche pass them by. But safe spots along the canyon's edge were few, and the path narrow. As a result, those stuck in the middle soon resorted to fists, jostling and elbowing as if their very lives hung in the balance.

Which they did!

Their commander, witnessing the chaos, had already given up on issuing any orders, knowing full well they'd fall on deaf ears. Instead...

In such dire straits, nothing spoke louder than a show of raw power. The burly warrior, radiating fierce determination, dismounted his steed in one swift motion and decisively unstrapped the heavy guandao-akin to a western glaive-from its place behind his saddle.

The enormous polearm, taller than the man himself, culminated in a thick, saber-like blade. As soon as it was detached from the horse, the creature's hunched back seemed to straighten a tad. If this beast weren't some mutated abomination, vastly different from the horses Jake had known, it would've collapsed long ago under its burden.

Jake, one of the few who had held his ground, watched with an inscrutable glint in his eyes as the officer brandished the majestic guandao overhead. It radiated a thick, grey-red aura, amplified by screaming souls, enhancing its lethality. With a move as fierce and swift as a thunderclap, he slashed forth.

The cliff face, several meters wide and weighing an immeasurable tonnage under the effects of the amplified gravity, was instantly split in two. The guandao sliced through it like a hot knife through butter.

The two remaining rock fragments, their freshly cut surfaces eerily smooth and glistening from the weapon's passage, were still hovering in place when the guandao whistled through the air once more.

In the blink of an eye, the commander slashed through the air dozens of times, generating wind blades and shockwaves rivaling divine fury. The sheer power and dexterity he was displaying at that moment was nothing short of breathtaking. For the uninitiated barbarians who had witnessed nothing of this superhuman scale before, it was a true eye- opener.

But for Jake? Just another day in the life. His attention had already drifted elsewhere, his Cosmic Eye focusing on a point far beyond the now-flattened cliff-hill.

'An army is coming toward us. But it doesn't explain such tremors," he noted coolly, debating whether to inform his superior. Given the rapid pace of the advancing army, alerting them would make no difference. It'd only add to the current mayhem.

From their attire, this army comprised a blend of fresh recruits and seasoned infantry. At that moment, he could see them pouring like a relentless tidal wave into the countless narrow canyons in their path, filling and blocking any route they might've taken to avoid them.

At a rough estimate, there were at least 100,000 to 150,000 of them. And it looked like they were coming from... Havocspire Citadel!

'Oh shit, I've got a real bad feeling about this...! Jake grimaced, his expression darkening with every passing second.

If Jake and his regiment remained on this trajectory, they'd inevitably clash with this army's vanguard. Given the palpable desperation evident in their ashen faces, whatever pursued them was far more terrifying than the horde itself.

Only Jake, with his otherworldly vision, could see it. For the rest, including their commander, this surging tide of barbarians was simply... their doom. Or at least the reason they were fleeing as if hellhounds were on their heels was!

With his heightened sight, Jake could already discern the real cause of the tremors. Frankly, 150,000 stampeding soldiers couldn't account for such seismic activity. Especially when, unlike their commander, most of these troops looked rather average.

One couldn't just go by their towering stature or muscular frame. Under the ludicrous gravity, these Underworld Barbarians were just ordinary mortals. Only after successfully cultivating their Lumyst Aura would they have the chance to rise above.

No, the cause of the tremors was...

Fwoooooosh!

Before the first fleeing foot soldier could even stumble into their canyon, the pale sun above was abruptly eclipsed, and the air hummed ominously. Moments later, the remnants of the cliff before them crumbled like a house of cards, bombarded by forged steel arrows as large as spears, and faster than cannonballs.

Realizing the cause of the sun's sudden disappearance, the commander's eyes widened in horror, and he bellowed anxiously,

"Shields!"

He didn't yell "Take cover" because there was nowhere to hide.

Those with a shred of sense and fortunate enough to possess a shield, or rather a buckler, instinctively raised it over their heads, while the others froze in terror. Some even soiled their pants, while others lost hope completely.

"Damnation! Hic! Go f-fuck yourself, Soulmaner King! We're gonna... huh... bite the damn dust 'fore even gettin' to the front!" A recruit, barely over 20 but looking twice his age, slurred, his face draining of color.

Walking beside Jake at the forefront, with his matted hair and tattered, grimy attire, he looked more like a vagrant than a soldier. Clearly, enlistment wasn't just duty for this barbarian; it was a lifeline.

This ever-chatty fellow, perpetually wide-eyed and with a booming voice, usually had some joke up his sleeve to lighten the mood. He also reeked of booze... How he managed to get hammered after 48 hours standing guard and then marching right behind their commander was quite the feat...

Ironically, the twist of fate that placed him so close to Jake at that precise moment had just become his lifeline. I mean, how could flimsy wooden bucklers stand up to a rain of arrows with enough kinetic force to reshape the very face of a mountain range?

Even if Jake was at the pinnacle of his power, he would've thought twice before flaunting his true abilities, especially now, when he was operating on just a sliver of his might.

Hence, he'd coldly resigned to the fact that the rest of his regiment was bound to die today.

Soon after, the very heavens seemed to tear open as a relentless barrage of projectiles consumed the sky, their descent cruelly reminiscent of the Reaper's inexorable swing. As time seemed to stretch into an agonizing eternity, the dust finally settled, leaving only a haunting silence in its wake.

Their newly-formed regiment had just been utterly decimated.

Chapter 1050: A Commander's Life-Debt

1050 A Commander's Life-Debt

When the dust kicked up by the relentless arrow onslaught finally settled, the once teeming and vibrant canyon presented a scene of macabre destruction, torn from the darkest nightmares of Hades itself. Of the mass that had stood there moments before, only Jake and the conscript by his side remained; they were the sole survivors.

Amid the sprawl of fallen bodies, the two of them stuck out like a glitch in a matrix. Most chillingly, they were untouched - not a scratch, not a tear in their ragged clothing, and no blood marred their forms. It was as if the volley of arrows had consciously veered away from them, guided by some ethereal force.

However, the true story - if observed - lay in the shell-shocked expression on the face of the drunkard, who teetered to Jake's right. What this soused warrior had witnessed just moments ago was so jarring that it would forever redefine his perception of raw power.

Desperately searching for his now-missing flask of liquor beneath his frayed and stained linen shirt, the inebriated barbarian let out an almost relieved huff when he couldn't find it. Lost during the turmoil, he figured.

"Guess today's as good a day as any to go sober," the man remarked with dry humor, his mind replaying the shocking events. Even the way he spoke sounded sober compared to a minute earlier. He'd never sobered up so fast.

Only moments ago, as the cliffs had crumbled, unleashing an arrow deluge so thick and menacing, the barbarian, like everyone else, had braced for the end. He'd never in his wildest dreams anticipated that the unassuming, seemingly frail lad marching beside him would reveal himself as such a monstrous force of nature.

First, the barbarian recalled a profound, almost mournful sigh emanating from Jake - a sound that carried the weight of their world's sins. Following that, he witnessed Jake's slender hand rise, as if to shield himself from the blazing sun. Then, reality shattered.

As the first massive arrow, resembling a giant spear from his vantage point, bore down on him, the barbarian's eyes widened, anticipating his imminent death. That unblinking gaze gave him a front-row seat to the impossible.

Like a striking serpent, Jake's hand shot out, nonchalantly snatching the arrow from its deadly trajectory. The shockwave's gust from that act alone was palpable, even in the barbarian's muddled state.

But the truly horrifying spectacle followed immediately after. With a swift twist, Jake reversed his grip on the arrow, wielding it with supernatural speed. The outlines of his arm became a blur as he employed the arrow, deflecting the incoming barrage with unflappable composure.

All the while, Jake remained rooted to the spot, as if he bore more weight than the massive arrows seeking to end him. Every one of these supersonic missiles was effortlessly repelled, forced to crash elsewhere around them. In moments, they formed a massive semi-circle of steel bars, akin to a makeshift cage.

"T-terrifying..."

Before them rose this crescent palisade of arrows, towering as tall as giants, a haunting testament to the jaw-dropping heroics that had just unfolded. Peeking through the gaps of their self-made prison, the now stone-cold sober foot soldier could glimpse beyond, a sea of steel beams jutting from the earth as far as his eyes could fathom.

The once undulating tapestry of hills, cliffs, and canyons had been obliterated. And with this new, unobstructed vista came the knowledge of what had wrought this heavenly judgment.

"H-holy shit! An army?!" The shaken man blurted, stumbling back in shock. His eyes, once fogged by liquor, were now bulging at the sight of the sea of foot soldiers charging their way.

If any booze lingered in his system seconds ago, it was now thoroughly banished. Two greenhorns against a juggernaut of an armed force? That was pure lunacy.

Well, one greenhorn. Because the unsuspecting youth next to him? More like a god of war masquerading in human skin. Recognizing this, a glimmer of ease returned to the drunkard. Not full-fledged calm, but a semblance of it.

As for Jake, his attention lay elsewhere. The crease on his forehead held dual inquiries: Were they the last men standing from their regiment, and how did this tide of soldiers survive this cataclysmic arrow rain?

Unlike the overwhelmed soldier beside him, Jake's purview wasn't so narrow. From where he stood, it was evident that this enemy battalion bore similarities to their own decimated unit.

Their patchwork attire and mismatched armor indicated the majority were raw conscripts, like them, with a smattering of battle-hardened veterans boasting legit gear. Faced with such an expansive rain of destruction, they should've been obliterated, vanished without a trace.

Yet, against all odds, this greenhorn army, vast as it was, had emerged almost unscathed.

Before he could piece together this enigma, Jake's solemn expression shifted as he picked up on a feeble, erratic heartbeat not belonging to the man he'd just saved. It was weak, yet its proximity was undeniable.

"Ehhh... Didn't think he'd pull through, but in hindsight, it makes sense. If I had to place a bet on any bastard walking out of this alive, he'd be my top pick," Jake mused with a hint of dark humor, although he didn't quite feel like laughing.

The mighty warrior's condition was dire as hell. His chest skewered by three projectiles, his battered body covered in a grotesque curtain of gore, hung over a meter above ground, sustained only by the grim tripod these arrows created.

Miraculously, his heart had dodged a killing blow, but both his lungs were punctured. The third arrow had shot through his lower abdomen, yanking a good deal of his guts

along with it. Had the brute not been so damn resilient, powered up by his Lumyst Aura, he would've been toast long ago.

Unfortunately, he teetered on the edge of unconsciousness. If he passed out, his Aura would fade or at least weaken considerably, being largely tethered to his mental strength.

To keep him breathing, Jake had to act immediately-and act he did. He had hoped not to reveal his true prowess, but at this juncture, that ship had sailed.

Halting before the barely conscious commander, he grimly assessed the wounds, tuning out the warrior's faint, almost unintelligible mutterings: "It should... not have... happened... The Soulman... King... Is in... danger."

"Sounds like you're up shit creek," Jake remarked sardonically, rolling his eyes. "Now shut up and let me work my magic." In a swift motion, he shattered the arrows with a mere flick of his wrist.

Then, with a deftness that blurred the eye, Jake yanked out the impaling arrows, and with a surge of telekinetic might, he roughly put back organs and spilled blood where they belonged, swiftly casting a simple healing spell with just a thought.

'Simple' but only for him. Had the revered Lifemancers of the Lustra Plains witnessed his spellwork, they'd be on their knees, begging him to teach them.

Even with most of his powers on the down-low, his latent mental prowess was still badass enough to wrest control of the warrior's vitality, all while channeling a slice of his own life force. On top of that, he used his finesse with telekinesis for a surgical precision way beyond this world's primitive civilizations.

Blood clots got blasted out, each organ slid back into its spot, and shredded arteries were neatly stitched together. The warrior's lungs too sealed up in a heartbeat, and the instant they were whole enough to function, a bone-chilling scream of agony echoed throughout the flattened canyon.

Feeling your guts and bones shift and regenerate at such a blistering pace was just that excruciating.

A few seconds later, Sank-Uk, practically wrestled from death's doorstep, finally stopped his teeth-gritting scream. With a voice that was raspy and spent, yet full of gratitude, he murmured,

"Thanks. I won't forget this mercy. From now on, my life's in your hands until I've squared away my debt."

"Yeah, got it. Whatever floats your boat, commander. It was no

biggie." Jake dismissively waved off the warrior's solemn vow with his usual nonchalance, clearly having bigger fish to fry.

Like, for instance, the massive army of fleeing soldiers closing in on them. Even from this close, even a drunk could tell these soldiers weren't the indigenous folks of the Lustra Plains, but looked eerily like them, both in racial features and in gear.

If some sloshed rookie could see it, then so could Jake and the commander. What truly got their goat, however, was what lurked behind that retreating army.

Because now that the mountain range had been blown to smithereens and the land's lay drastically altered, there was no obstructing their line of sight. The commander could barely make out its existence, but with Jake's supernatural sight, he could see it as clear as day.

A sprawling city... ablaze. Havocspire Citadel had fallen.

Chapter 1051: Who Are You?

1051 Who Are You?

However, it wasn't the immense destruction or the towering citadel with smoke spiraling to the darkened sky that altered Jake's previously relaxed expression. It was the shadowy figures hovering indistinctly above the smoldering ruins, like mirages, that captured his attention.

More specifically, the monstrous entity on which they stood. Contrary to the vaguely humanoid outlines of the other beings, this flying behemoth was undeniably noticeable-even to the most shortsighted human.

This behemoth was just that massive.

With eleven slit orange eyes, six pairs of wings, and three pairs of clawed limbs, this alien bird was undoubtedly the largest creature Jake had ever seen in his short life. Even without fully stretching its wings, its enormous silhouette cast a shadow over the entirety of the burning city. This creature was even larger than an Interstellar Carrier, although Jake had never seen one up close.

"H-how damn big is this thing?" The man, formerly inebriated and now lamenting his sobriety, was on the verge of a breakdown. Such an entity belonged in nightmares, not in one's waking reality.

Unfortunately, this world didn't care about his complaints. This harbinger of doom wasn't leaving anytime soon. Furthermore, Jake too was at a loss for words. Thankfully, he didn't have to speak. Someone else took the initiative.

"It's a Titan, the most fearsome creatures found in the Lustra Plains," the newly healed commander began, his stern eyes fixated on the entity responsible for nearly all the destruction. "I'm not sure how many the Radiant Conclave controls, it's part of their hidden arsenal, but I recognize this one. We call him Featherfall, or Featherfall Titan. I'll let you guess why."

It was only then that Jake and the other recruit noticed the unnatural design of the enormous lances. Their structure indeed resembled a metallic feather twisted for optimized aerodynamics.

Still, it was a masterpiece, not some hasty attack, especially since Jake hadn't noticed anything unusual about these "projectiles" until Sank- Uk pointed it out. After scanning one with his wrist device, he confirmed that it was, indeed, alive.

[Featherfall Titan's Plume: Formed with Living Metal, these are harder than most natural materials and alloys found on Twyluxia, while being highly flexible and regenerative. They are part of Featherfall Titan's body and can thus be recalled.]

"Oh, crap..." Jake murmured, reading the last line.

The ground trembled again, and suddenly the "arrows" that littered the area for miles began vibrating at a high frequency, emitting a shrill sound.

"Everyone down! Stay away from those feathers!" Someone shouted from the fleeing army opposite them.

Of course, that warning was moot. The tipsy barbarian had taken cover behind Jake's 'slender' frame as soon as the first arrow began to quiver. Unexpectedly, the proud commander had done... exactly the same.

In the blink of an eye and with a deafening roar, the forest of 'feathers' was uprooted from the ground, taking off with the noise of a hundred thousand rockets launching simultaneously.

The eardrums of Jake's two unlucky companions burst immediately. Had Jake not protected them by creating a thin vacuum sphere to halt the sound's propagation, the drunkard would've been a goner. In the end, he was left bleeding from every facial orifice, dizzy but alive.

Meanwhile, Jake still held the 'feather' he had used as an emergency weapon to block the remaining projectile rain. The steel arrow screeched angrily, trying to escape, but with his iron grip, it was a futile effort.

"Should I let go of this feather or keep it to craft a new weapon?" Jake mumbled to himself, oblivious to the increasing magnetic pull on the object in his hand.

As Jake was contemplating the idea of eating it, the shimmering flames from the burning city reflecting in his eyes, a dreadful possibility crossed his mind.

"Could it be..."

Jake's hair suddenly stood on end as he felt a malevolent pressure zeroing in on him. Eleven glowing orange eyes with slit pupils, reminiscent of Sauron's all-seeing eye, flashed in his mind, and he instantly released the feather. The sense of impending doom vanished as quickly as it had appeared, retracting as the Titan's gaze shifted elsewhere.

The sound of a droplet splashing at his feet jolted him from his daze, and in that moment, Jake realized his palms and forehead were slick with cold sweat. This acknowledgment sent shivers down his spine.

"Fuck, am I seriously scared of this bird?" He stifled an irritated growl, shook his head, and thought, 'Hell no! It's just not the time to confront this end-game big boss yet. Facing him now would be shooting myself in the foot, and revealing my identity to all the other Players. That would only play into my enemies' hands!

[That's right. One step at a time], Xi chimed in with the same vigor. [We'll take down that bird when we've regained all our powers.]

Jake wanted to steal another glimpse at the figures who could command and ride such a behemoth, but the fleeing army had finally reached them. Reluctantly, he shifted his gaze from the Titanic Beast to assess the newcomers.

About thirty individuals in a mix of robes and armors, all clad in black, had just landed soundlessly before their trio. It finally clicked for Jake how this vast army had managed to escape almost unscathed from the feather storm.

Just from the crushing, suffocating spiritual pressure radiating from these mysterious men and women, all strikingly attractive, Jake immediately pegged them as Soulmanagers. Their ability to fly erased any remaining doubts, not that he really gave a damn about them to start with.

Detaching herself from the group, a young woman with long, glittering black hair that looked like a cascade of stars, gracefully approached them. Her stern face immediately posed the cold question,

"Who's in charge?"

Sank-Uk instantly straightened up, chin raised and eyes unyielding, loudly declaring, "I am. 3000-Man Commander Sank-Uk reporting. I was... well, I used to be in charge of this rookie regiment. We were supposed to join the battlefield before-"

But the female Soulmaner was already dismissing him, her gaze fixed on the man who was a head shorter than her, standing casually right behind. From his deeply annoyed expression and the fact he was the only unharmed one of the three, he looked even more suspect.

His unusual leanness for an Underworld Barbarian was another giveaway, marking him as one of those troublesome Players. Except this one... Wasn't he a bit too powerful?

And she would know. After all, she was the first to inform the Soulmaner King of this new menace... The soul of the Rank 2 Player, Leo Vinson, was it? Still resided somewhere within her Soul Lantern.

That's right. The woman in black armor and robes was none other than Soulmaner Meribelle, the captivating brunette who once ensnared poor Leo's heart before subjecting him to her ruthless Sousearch Spell. But compared to her enchanting first appearance, she looked decidedly different now.

While she bore no visible wounds, she was smeared with blood of various hues, clearly not her own. Her Soulmaner robe was tattered in many spots, revealing the damp alabaster skin beneath, while her snug-fitting light armor blending leather and plates had seen better days.

What was most striking, however, was how gaunt and ghostly her face looked compared to just a few weeks prior. Shielding such a vast army had evidently not been a walk in the park. This was further emphasized by the state of the thirty Soulmaners accompanying her, with two even gravely wounded.

That was the whole deal with these Soulmaners. They were formidable foes as long as they had their enchanted gear and an abundance of spiritual energy. But once drained and their artifacts rendered useless, they weren't much different from regular soldiers. Unlike the Lifemancers from the Lustra Plains, who could easily recover from even severe injuries.

On top of that, the harrowing cause of all this destruction still loomed over the flaming citadel far behind them, painting a grim backdrop. They were so on edge that every time they glanced back to see if the Titan still shadowed them, they seemed to flinch. God knows what hell they'd been through to make it this far...

Approaching Jake, Soulmaner Meribelle stopped a step away from her suspect. Tightening her grip on the dagger handle at her waist, she asked in an icy tone, "Who... are you?"

Jake was already done with this shit. Without hesitation, his gaze hardened, and with silver vortices flashing in his black eyes, he responded with sinister indifference,

"Your new Soulmancer King."

Chapter 1052: What A Pity

1052 What A Pity

An oppressive silence succeeded Jake's revelation, quickly replaced by a rising tide of fury.

"How brazen!" One of the Soulmanancers erupted in indignation, his soulful energy releasing a shockwave that sent the tipsy rookie and Sank-Uk staggering backward.

The drunkard, already looking worse for wear, began to bleed more abundantly from his nose before collapsing to the ground. Before Jake could even assess his condition, another Soulmancer loomed overhead, a massive black steel scythe in hand, ready to cleave him in two.

"Die, heretic! No one is allowed to disrespect our king, even if he's-

Jake, still debating whether to dodge at the last second or let the scythe shatter against his skull for a dramatic effect, was suddenly robbed of his choice. Twelve of the other thirty Soulmanancers mercilessly impaled their furious comrade with their weapons.

Much like Sank-Uk earlier, the airborne attacker was abruptly halted in his tracks, skewered by half a dozen spears, two scythes like his own, three harpoons attached to long chains, and a serrated lasso wrapped around his neck. He was beyond salvation.

As the fiery light in his eyes dimmed, giving way to confusion and a profound sense of injustice, Jake tried to piece together what had just unfolded.

Soulmancer Meribelle, who had remained unmoved and expressionless throughout the brutal execution, cast a disdainful glance at her colleague's suspended corpse. She wagged her finger at him in disapproval.

"Tsk, ts. You shouldn't have done that," she chided with ridicule sorrow, as if they had just slaughtered a mere chicken.

The Soulmancer, who had labeled Jake brazen while leaking some of his spiritual pressure, was left dumbstruck. His face paled in horror, audible gulps escaping him every second or so. He had been scared out of his wits.

The fact that another dozen of his so-called colleagues had him dead to rights, their weapon's sharp edges barely grazing his throat, certainly didn't help matters. Just by the look on his face-half shocked, half as if he'd swallowed a hornet-you could tell that he had never once imagined such a plot twist.

Jake was equally stunned.

'What the actual fuck?' He thought, striving to keep his cool. It would be a shame to mar his grand entrance over some petty Soulmaner beef that wasn't even about him.

Turning to the immobilized Soulmaner, the young woman who appeared to lead the traitorous group locked her soulless light gray eyes onto the condemned man, forcing him to meet her gaze.

The unseen Lumyst Aura, hugging the sensual curves of Meribelle like an invisible film, then bolted towards the prisoner at a dizzying speed, wrapping around his Spirit Body like a shroud. Before he could react, all of this highly compressed spiritual pressure, teeming with thousands of submissive souls, infiltrated his face, quickly saturating his entire head.

Before his horrified expression could morph into screams and pleas, the captive's face went slack, his eyes glossing over completely. He might still have been alive, but perhaps that was an even crueler fate.

The four Soulmaners who weren't part of his group but had managed to remain silent until now wore disgusted expressions, feeling stifled and deeply unsettled after watching two of their peers be taken out by their supposed friends. In their circle, many of them had known each other for years, and such treachery seemed unimaginable-until it unfolded right before their eyes. But they couldn't deny what had just transpired.

Neither could Jake, for that matter.

Because unlike them, the sheer absurdity of this whirlwind of events was baffling. If this young woman and her Soulmaner posse were traitors, they could have offed those two hotheads way earlier. Why wait for them to throw a fit to do them in?

Needing valid excuses to act was something that only made sense in the bygone eras of imperial courts and monarchies, where moral high ground and honor outweighed all else. In a wartime setting like this? It just seemed utterly pointless.

"Why did you kill them like that?" Jake asked with genuine curiosity, his tone much like a schoolboy quizzing his teacher. "Don't tell me you bought that crap I just spewed."

He'd thought twice about switching gears so suddenly, but what had just gone down was straight-up bizarre. If these Soulmaners were indeed traitors, he'd have to ice them to make sure they didn't snitch about his existence as the second Soulmaner

King. Enemy or not, getting such news out would undoubtedly bring a world of trouble he'd rather not deal with.

The young woman, who had yet to react to his bold proclamation, glanced back at the fleeing army not so far behind them, staring at something or someone. She then signaled to one of her comrades.

The hooded figure, armed and garbed like a shadow assassin, nodded in return. Joining his hands in a peculiar mudra, his black cloak began to stretch out, spreading on the ground like a spill of liquid tar. In a flash, the ground in a fifty-meter radius was completely blanketed by this reflective void, giving Sank-Uk the creeps despite his vast experience as a commander.

In contrast, Jake and the other Soulmanancers, who were more attuned to the paranormal, especially noted that this shadowy area was totally insulated from the outside world. The rustling wind that had previously graced his face, carrying with it the smoky scent of the blazing Havocspire Citadel, had suddenly gone mute.

"No one can eavesdrop on our chat now," Meribelle informed him, a

sly glint dancing in her grey-blue eyes.

Jake kept mum, his bafflement having peaked long ago. The unfolding events made less and less sense, but he was all in, ready to see where this wild ride would go.

"Speak." he urged with a regal gesture, his voice firm, and his demeanor dripping with haughty arrogance-fitting for the mighty king he was playing at.

'Let's see how long you can keep this act up, he smirked inwardly, tingling with anticipation. He'd much prefer a good old-fashioned brawl over these serpentine plots.

The corner of the young woman's mouth twitched hearing his commanding tone, but her brief moment of rebellion was quickly replaced by a flirtatious grin.

"Your Majesty, I was unaware you had another double. I knew it was impossible for you to get taken out so easily by those conniving bastards from the Radiant Conclave," she flattered with over-the-top ecstatic admiration, all the while her pupils concealed a deep reservoir of disdain.

In a matter of sentences, Jake had gleaned a torrent of information. The Soulmanancer King had been ambushed, and those smoke plumes rising from Havocspire Citadel hinted he might've bitten the dust.

The Soulmanancer who had been offed was on the brink of spilling this news to the public, the rest of the army not being that far, hence the immediate take-down. As for the

second one, Meribelle and her crew decided to jump the gun due to his shady intentions.

To Jake, this sounded like a bunch of nonsense. There was no way to verify any of it. His gut told him the Soulmancer King was probably out there, licking his wounds, or maybe not even scratched.

What really caught his ear in the lady Soulmancer's spiel, however, was the baffling reason she was down to play ball with him, accepting his brazen bluff without batting an eye. Even if she'd clocked his earlier display of power, wasn't this all a bit too easy?

Turns out, it wasn't that straightforward. Circling Jake, she sized him up as if he was a piece of meat on the auction block, bringing back memories of his First Ordeal he'd rather shove to the darkest corner of his mind. She then remarked, with an air of indifference,

"Devilishly good-looking, a dark allure, pristine pale skin, a charismatic deep velvety voice, eyes that scream power... the guise is almost spot-on. Just one snag - you're a shrimp. You must've heard those nasty whispers about our king's stature, but you've overplayed your hand. Having seen him up close, he's at least half a head taller than me. Still short, yeah, but a solid two heads above you. What a pity..."

'Ah: Jake finally grasped the root of her disappointment, realizing that despite her outward leniency, she had never abandoned the notion of killing him.

She just couldn't wrap her head around the fact that an almost doppelgänger of their king existed among the new batch of recruits. Tragically, his height, or lack thereof, was a fatal flaw that laid waste to her grand scheme right out of the gate.

As Meribelle positioned herself behind him, her previously amused and disappointed face turned icy, and a long sword, a Zhanmadao almost as long as her, materialized in her right hand. As she readied herself to coldly deliver a beheading strike, the slender silhouette of her prey suddenly began to expand, with Jake's chilling laughter echoing mockingly across the battlefield littered with the remains of his regiment.

In the blink of an eye, his stature matched that of the young woman, and then rapidly, to the horror of the other Soulmancers and Sank- Uk, surpassed her by half a head, then another... A moment later, Jake had grown so immense that Meribelle's cherubic face seemed no more than that of an infant next to his hand. Slowly turning to face her, he glanced down in contempt at the steel toothpick she was brandishing with a trembling grip, and finally stopping his laughter, he uttered coldly,

"So... You tell me, when am I tall enough to be worthy of being your king?"

Chapter 1053: Hold That Throne As Long As You Want

1053 Hold That Throne As Long As You Want

The raven-haired beauty stood frozen, unable to utter a word. Her mouth opened and closed repeatedly, but no sound escaped her crimson lips. Yet from the flicker in her eyes, it was clear her mind raced at a mile a minute.

The other Soulmanancers present were in a similar daze: too stunned to react, but with undeniable sparks of excitement in their eyes. Seeing this, Jake had a bad feeling in his gut.

"Shit... I have a really bad feeling about this." He muttered bitterly, trying to ignore Xi's mocking laughter echoing in his mind.

Nevertheless, as much as they were all scheming bastards, it was also evident that many feared him. Maybe not all, the woman who'd spoken to him looked more shocked than scared. Still, among his present company, few could claim her acting skills.

At that moment, Jake had channeled enough of his biomass to more than triple his size, regaining his peak form as a Myrtharian. If he wished, he could've expanded even further, but accessing his Inner Space Dimension had drained him of a ridiculous amount of spiritual energy.

Just to do that, he'd felt in a heartbeat a mental exhaustion akin to a human staying awake for over a month. The sensation was gut-wrenching, and he felt that if he relaxed even for a split second, he might just keel over.

But the effect was clear. From the puniest, Jake now stood as the most imposing Underworld Barbarian he'd ever encountered since arriving on Twyluxia. The Soulmanancers seemed to share his sentiment given their dropped jaws.

So Jake's eyes nearly popped out of their sockets when Meribelle and the other Soulmanancers simultaneously knelt, clasping their hands reverently and bellowing in unison, "Your wish, our command, O revered Soulmanancer King! Forgive us for not recognizing Your Greatness sooner. We will accept any punishment."

'What the hell?!' Jake was dumbstruck.

Only the young woman continued to lock eyes with him, an infuriatingly smug smirk plastered on her face. All the other Soulmanancers bowed their heads, making it impossible to gauge their expressions. Yet, deep down, he felt like he'd walked straight into their trap.

Jake wasn't buying their sudden display of loyalty. What he did believe, however, was their need for a king, fake or not. As soon as their bowing ceremony ended, Meribelle promptly dished out her "advice", though he had no clue what title to attribute to her.

"Your Highness, it's quite the shocker that you managed to pull a fast one on the Celestial by masquerading like this, but it'd be wise to stick with your newbie persona fresh out of his baptism. Your Soul Clone's death will throw him off, but he'll catch on that you've played him. Maybe he already has."

The cunning stunner paused, flashing Jake another suspiciously charming smile, then continued, "For that reason, pulling strings in the Duskwight Lands from afar, away from your Dusken Throne, will be a tough gig. But don't sweat it! The Soulmanancer Guild will handle it for you. Your Abyssal Revenant, Bones, has agreed to act as the go-between, backing up the throne and legitimizing decisions made in your name."

Jake shot her a less-than-amused look, his eyes narrowing dangerously. "Just because I'm operating at a fraction of my mental prowess doesn't mean I can't squash you. You sure you want to play this high-stakes game with me?"

Even knowing it might give him a pounding headache later, he didn't hesitate to unleash every bit of his available spirit power, supplemented by a rogue wisp of soul force driven by his True Will of Crushing.

Meribelle's eyes widened in alarm, feeling a never-before-experienced lethal threat closing in. Reflexively, she let out a cry, thrusting her arms out and releasing her own spiritual energy. Her previously dormant Lumyst Aura began to expand, emitting a blinding brilliance, quickly forming a spectral miasma sphere about twice her size, shimmering like a full moon.

Jake felt resistance but was hell-bent on not letting her off so easily without pushing his menace further. His gaze intensified, a prominent vein pulsating on his forehead, and a split second later a "pop" sounded, followed by the unnerving crack of breaking bones.

Not his.

Ignoring the sudden mental exhaustion that drowned him, and with cold indifference, he then nonchalantly lifted his hand and levitated the young woman's body towards him, never releasing his psychic grip. All the while, the female Soulmanancer writhed, gritting her teeth, but it was clear she wouldn't last much longer.

The other Soulmanancers, witnessing this dominating scene in utter horror, had already drawn their weapons, ready to risk it all to save her. But when their eyes met Meribelle's, she subtly signaled them to stand down. At the very least, she'd guessed that this Player wasn't out to kill her; otherwise, she'd be dead already after her bold provocation.

Yet, she began to harbor some second thoughts. Glancing again at the fleeing army now only a kilometer or so away, her face contorted in a mix of emotions before she shut her eyes, resigning to her fate.

"Just do it," she whispered, reopening her eyes to confrontation Jake, daring him to follow through.

"No! You can't give up! The Soulmaner King nee-" One of her comrades tried to interject, but was harshly silenced by the woman he aimed to comfort.

"Shut your trap!" Meribelle snapped, even as the grip on her throat tightened. "One more word, and I'll take you down with me, even if I have to claw my way back from the dead to haunt your ass."

The man went pale hearing her threat, as he came to the horrifying realization that he'd almost made an irredeemable blunder. Biting back his words and swallowing his frustrations, he braced himself for whatever storm was about to rage.

But he was ready. They all were. If this outsider son of a bitch decided to end her, they'd unleash all hell on him in vengeance.

Unfortunately for them, the raw emotion of the moment had just handed Jake the missing piece of the puzzle he needed. He was starting to form a theory on the Soulmaner King's whereabouts.

[The real Soulmaner King is among us. More specifically, within that fleeing army rushing towards us.] Xi concurred darkly, mirroring Jake's conclusions. Meribelle's looks towards the army had finally given her away.

'If I had to bet, this woman holds some significance to him. A close friend? Or maybe even a lover?' Jake mused with a hint of wicked satisfaction. He felt like he was finally seeing the light at the end of the tunnel. 'So they want me to impersonate their King, because the real Soulmaner King is here too. They're taking the old 'hiding in plain sight' trick to a whole new extreme. Are they trying to use me as bait for some trap set for the enemy? The Celestial, right?'

Even without the full backstory, the botched ambush the Soulmaner King had supposedly sprung on the Radiant Conclave just hours earlier, he'd nearly pieced the truth together. But as tantalizing as it was to play along, there was one more thing he needed to verify.

Easing his grip on the young woman's throat just a tad, he stated sternly "I'll play your Soulmaner King for as long as you want. Use me as bait or a front all you like, but you better do your damn job. If I catch wind that you intentionally blew my cover to the enemy or our allies, I'll flip your own threat on its head. Believe it or not, I get a lot scarier when I'm dead too. Just hope you don't end up regretting this."

Choking on a cough, blood trickled from between Meribelle's clenched teeth. Forcing a defiant smile, she rasped challengingly,

"If you've got the balls, hold that throne as long as you want. Here's hoping you won't rue it either."

Seconds later, Jake had morphed back to his previous size, albeit with an added couple of heads in height to match the expected stature of the Soulmaner King. According to Meribelle, he didn't need any further adjustments appearance-wise since nobody really knew what the guy looked like, allies included.

She then downed a vile-looking potion, more crimson and viscous than blood itself, to cure her wounds and mend her frayed nerves. As for Jake's throbbing headache, it had already faded thanks to his Energy Spirit and Soul. His thoughts felt sharper, even if only by a smidge.

The mental strain had given him some new training insights, but they'd have to wait. Because the Soulmaner woman, Meribelle - whose name he'd just learned, disclosed that a fresh conflict was on the horizon.

Havocspire Citadel had to be reclaimed.

Today.

Chapter 1054: Abyssal Revenant, Chillmire

1054 Abyssal Revenant, Chillmire

"Have you lost your damn mind?! Didn't you see my whole squad get obliterated in a flash by that golden freak of a bird?!"

Sank-Uk, silent until now, snapped to attention when he heard Meribelle boldly proclaim that Havocspire would be retaken today, no matter the cost. Had she not seen the colossal Titan Bird, its wings casting ominous shadows over the ruined citadel? No mortal army, no matter its size, could stand against such a beast.

Recalling the commander's presence, the woman shot him a vexed look, letting him spew his worries before cutting him off,

"Would you shut it?" Her eyes then settled on Jake's face, and an inquisitive eyebrow rose. "By the way, what are we doing with these two? The other recruit passed out early on and likely missed everything, but this guy here's a regiment commander. We can't risk our conversation leaking out."

The burly warrior tensed, realizing that the Soulmancer was casually discussing ending his life. Right in front of him, no less! Suddenly, the topic of retaking Havocspire Citadel seemed a whole lot less significant.

Anxiously awaiting the outsider's verdict, he held his breath. But luck was on his side today. Jake wasn't the type to execute someone he'd just saved.

"I'll vouch for him," Jake replied, unfazed, as if discussing the weather. "However, I share his concerns. If you're banking on my powers to deal with Featherfall and the five riders atop it, you're barking up the wrong tree."

Relief washed over Sank-Uk as the proverbial knife left his throat. His gratitude towards Jake grew tenfold. Having overheard their conversation, he now vowed to protect Jake's identity, even if it meant lying to his superiors.

Normally, such deceit wouldn't sit right with him, but he wasn't a fool. In fact, he was sharper than he looked. He too had begun to question where the true Soulmancer King resided.

Regardless, whether the elusive king was dead or hidden among them didn't matter. Following Jake into battle was the smartest move. He hadn't forgotten that this all-encompassing war of unmatched scale was only beginning...

Even esteemed commanders like him could easily be tossed aside in such vast battles. Under this stranger's banner, at least, he saw a glimmer of survival. Who knows? He might even earn an advancement by the war's end.

As Sank-Uk mentally patted himself on the back for his decision, Meribelle, about to address Jake, stopped mid-sentence as the ground rumbled beneath them, signaling the cacophony of footsteps approaching from behind. The main force of the fleeing army, overseen by this team of Soulmancers, had finally arrived.

Suddenly recalling something, the woman turned to another of her colleagues - a gangly man with hollowed cheeks and, to put it mildly, sparse hair. Before she could utter a word, he raised a finger and snickered with a scratchy voice,

"Relax, Meribelle. Lucas has had it covered since we landed here. Assuming they have good eyes, all they've seen is our team touching down and having a leisurely chat with these two 'gentlemen' briefing us. Cough, your honor remains intact. As for your pride...

"Oh, fuck off, Emlat." Without hesitation, Meribelle flipped him the bird, eliciting a choked gasp from Jake, who was pleasantly surprised to discover the universal nature of that gesture throughout the cosmos.

As for Lucas, it turned out to be a sort of floating carpet hovering about a hundred meters above them. Its surface was eerily mirror-like, emitting an odd force that bent

the light around it, seemingly manipulating it to produce what Jake assumed were illusions.

Compared to what he could muster, this was peanuts, but given the context, it was more than adequate.

Of course, Jake had spotted the artifact the moment they arrived. If he could detect their approach through miles of canyons and hills, spotting a mirror carpet was child's play. He simply opted to play dumb after deducing that the artifact posed no threat to him.

What truly threw him off, however, was the carpet having such an "Earthly" name. Goes to show, you learn something new every day.

When the army of over 150,000 barbarians finally decelerated, halting in a somewhat orderly formation mere meters from the Soulmanancers, the demeanor of the latter shifted dramatically, reverting to their rigid and austere facade. Meribelle also cleared her sore throat one last time and followed Emlet's directions, adjusting her posture to mirror that of the illusion cast by Lucas.

Both Jake and Sank-Uk were also instructed to follow suit, slightly tilting their heads as they tried to strike a believable deferential pose, blending the perfect mix of fear and admiration.

"Not bad." Meribelle acknowledged with a nod of approval. She cleared her throat one last time and gestured for Emlet to drop his illusion.

What greeted the frontline soldiers was the stern faces of 28 Soulmanancers surrounding a trembling duo, staring at their feet - one clearly a commander, distinguished by his armor, and the other, a raw recruit, evident by his lack of armor, so to speak.

Well, actually three. Another ragged-looking man lay unconscious on the ground, dried blood oozing from all seven of his facial orifices - a sight that war-hardened veterans were all too familiar with. He must have crossed one of those sinister Soulmanancers.

Walking ahead of the army, a hulking barbarian, nearly ten feet tall in heavy armor, leapt off his equally imposing steed, and immediately clasped his hands in greeting. His straightforward gaze and the fact he didn't even attempt a bow spoke volumes about his rank.

"What are your orders, Soulmanancers? Should we continue our retreat to Grimstone Keep?"

"General Torvi... No need." Meribelle sighed heavily, casting her gaze northward. "The counterattack is already gearing up." Jake, who'd been pondering how the Dusken Throne intended to oust

Featherfall and the Celestial to reclaim Havocspire Citadel within a day, followed her line of sight, and all his questions were answered.

Hundreds, or perhaps thousands of kilometers to the north of their position, a sprawling blanket of rolling white clouds, which he hadn't noticed before, now filled the horizon. Though still too distant to discern the looming threat they harbored, Jake's eyes twitched when he discerned the ominous outline of an alien visage illuminated by lightning from the tempest within.

Harnessing his Cosmic Sight to its fullest, Jake narrowed his eyes for a clearer view and soon shuddered, his fists quivering slightly. Everywhere this wall of white clouds passed, a sheet of ice and desolation, even more lifeless than Pluto's surface, trailed behind.

What astounded him further, however, was the clouds' trajectory - it wasn't random. Their path seemed to be calculated to preserve as much life as possible. With his enhanced vision, Jake noticed, much to his astonishment, that all the friendly troop formations that had fled or were en route to Havocspire Citadel had been completely spared.

And the speed of those clouds... Even if he pulled out all the stops, Jake wasn't sure he could hit such a pace relying purely on raw power. By raw power, he meant both his physical strength and telekinesis, as well as any other means of propulsion at his disposal.

This behemoth was blitzing across the landscape, clocking in at dozens, if not hundreds, of kilometers per second. Yet, what really floored him wasn't just its blistering speed. It was the absolute absence of the expected ruin and cataclysmic shockwaves that should've followed such a supersonic movement of that volume of air.

It was as if these clouds... didn't truly exist. And if they weren't real, then it could only be the manifestation of a soul. A horrendously powerful one at that.

That's why Jake had felt a cold shiver down his spine. A consciousness so vast, wielding the power to influence the climate over hundreds of kilometers... When it came to ethereal might, he knew when he was outclassed.

"The Abyssal Revenant, Chillmire!" General Torvi bellowed, clutching his massive sword with a trembling hand for support as his legs wobbled. Now he understood why Havocspire was such an untenable position for the enemy to hold.

Now that all its garrison had retreated, one of their most dreadful Spirit Guardians, a calamitous entity that usually slumbered at the base of the Underworld Cascade, was free to unleash its wrath. And with no friendly troops to concern itself with, the voracious

winter soul was free to wreak havoc, plunging the still-burning city into a sudden and severe ice age.

Chapter 1055: Clash Of Titans

1055 Clash Of Titans

A few seconds later, the ethereal cloud mass was already at Havocspire's doorstep. The icy gust accompanying it had already snuffed out the last embers rising from the citadel's ruins. A thick sheet of frost was racing across the ramparts, threatening to encase the entire city and its new inhabitants in ice.

If Chillmire reached its target, barring perhaps Featherfall and the five figures atop it, every living being within a thirty-kilometer radius of Havocspire Citadel would be frozen solid. The Radiant Conclave, having already shifted several of its garrisons to bolster their stance, would be facing an inconceivably catastrophic defeat.

"It's about to begin..." Meribelle murmured, her expression grim. "Once Featherfall and the Radiant Conclave members on its back are out of the way, it will be Bones' turn to handle the Dreadnought Nematode."

As Jake pondered which Nematode she referred to, a bone-chilling roar echoed from Havocspire Citadel's depths, intensified by the approaching icy maelstrom. As if the massive bird soaring above the ravaged city wasn't a nightmarish sight in itself, a tubular monstrosity erupted violently from the ground, akin to a volcanic explosion.

The Dreadnought Nematode was a terror to lay eyes upon-a vast armored worm stretching beyond belief. The head now visible was merely the tip of the iceberg, but it already towered over a kilometer high, closer to the clouds than any skyscraper from Earth's past.

Its segmented body, adorned with rugged, chitinous plates, shimmered malevolently under the faintest light, flaunting shades of deep purples and wicked greens. Gigantic serrated spines emerged sporadically along its body, each pulsating with a dark energy as the colossus continued to dig.

Its head was a grotesque blend of natural malevolence and alien terror-a gaping maw ringed with countless rows of spiraling, razor- sharp teeth, gnashing relentlessly through the earth with a ravenous appetite.

As Jake wondered what such a behemoth intended against a substance-less sweeping blizzard, a figure atop the titan bird began to glow, brandishing what looked from a distance like a sort of scepter. Hundreds of thousands of luminescent specks began to

light up from within the citadel's ruins, only to be abruptly transmuted into radiant beams.

All these beams converged in a flash towards the scepter's top end that the figure was wielding, before being emitted as a more focused beam towards the massive worm's mouth. The moment the beam was swallowed, the nematode instantly clamped its jaws shut and retreated into the ground, upending enormous chunks of rock and soil, completing the annihilation of Havocspire Citadel.

Jake, having never witnessed such strategies, was blown away by the spectacle before him. When he relayed what he'd seen to Meribelle telepathically, who stood just beside him, her eyes widened in shock before she quickly composed herself, replying with a grave tone,

'Your sight is... something else. As for your questions, that colossal worm that's impossible to miss from here is the Dreadnought Nematode, another Titan loyal to the Radiant Conclave, just like Featherfall. A bird and a worm... A strange pair, but effective nonetheless. It's said that the former usually perches atop the tallest branch of the mightiest tree standing at the base of the Heavenly Cascade. The worm, on the other hand, is believed to slumber within the fertile earth below, perpetually nourished by the Lumyst River. Together with the tree known as Anthace, the Tree of Life, they make up the three Titan Guardians of the Lustra Plains. There are a few more at the Conclave's beck and call, but none are as trustworthy.

'As for the one who just took action, I'm not entirely sure, but it must be Lady Lyria, one of the legendary five members of the Radiant Conclave. She's said to be the most formidable Radiant Mage in all of Twyluxia, able to transmute life into light and vice versa. The staff she wields is supposed to be a branch of Anthace. Life Lumyst Water doesn't awaken spirituality but vitality, rendering it not that effective on inanimate objects. That's why the inhabitants of the Lustra Plains cultivate War Beasts and primarily use organic weapons made of wood or coral. It's the closest thing to our enchantments. Right now, Lady Lyria must have transformed the troops stationed at Havocspire into light, sheltering them in the Nematode's maw.

Jake blinked dumbly, at a loss for words. Picking up on his stunned reaction, a proud smirk played on Meribelle's face, and she teased him telepathically,

'What? Thought we just retreated for the heck of it? Without that dreadful Nematode transporting their forces directly beneath the city through an underground tunnel, we wouldn't have been caught off guard so quickly. For nobody to notice... that tunnel must've been dug ages ago. Seems the Radiant Conclave always knew it would come to this. Of course, that's not the sole reason Havocspire Citadel fell today...

Before Jake could press her further, three of the four figures remaining on the titan bird's back began to radiate an immense lifeforce, aiming at the approaching Abyssal

Revenant Chillmire. Fearlessly, they stepped forward and leapt into the void, rocketing towards the white cloud mass nearing the remnants of the ramparts like shooting stars.

BOOOOOOOM!

The blinding light from the monumental explosion resulting from their colossal clash hit Jake and the other barbarians' vision before the sound reached their ears. The tiny humanoid figures looked like faint fireflies, seemingly ready to be extinguished by the massive ethereal form of the Revenant. But against all odds, they held their ground.

They were neither snuffed out nor frozen solid. Instead, it was Chillmire that let out a harrowing scream, retreating to shift their battleground. When Jake relayed once more what he had witnessed to Meribelle, she explained gloomily,

"Our Abyssal Revenants possess far stronger souls than these Titans, granting them incredible powers over matter and the environment. Typically bodiless, they are also much swifter. They feast upon the life force of other beings, but converting that life force into Spirit Energy requires effort, especially when tainted by the Holy Light Element, their nemesis. Fire can warm and cook, but it can also burn. The Celestial and other members of the Radiant Conclave have some of the most impressive life forces on the continent. Simply by unleashing their Life Aura at full force, it's enough to scorch Chillmire's soul, as if it touched a red-hot iron."

Just when Jake thought he'd seen it all for the day, he caught a glimpse of what he initially believed was a distant mountain. But as it grew rapidly, he realized its true nature, and his mouth dropped open in awe.

A mountain of bones... Bones... It had to be the other Abyssal Revenant Meribelle had mentioned. Unlike Chillmire, this one had a body to move within.

With a fervent fire blazing in her eyes, the female Soulmaner smiled and clarified telepathically,

'At its core, Bones is also a vengeful spirit. But unlike Chillmire, it is the result of a high-level enchantment that succeeded. It's uttered that the Soulmaner King awakened the spirituality of the bones of a beloved deceased, hoping to grant them a second life. One enchantment wasn't enough, but after several attempts... a miracle occurred. Meet Bones, a Sentient Artefact.

As Jake wondered what a pile of bones, even sentient ones, intended to do against the enormous bird, it began to shapeshift. In a blink, it took on the appearance of a massive behemoth with vaguely humanoid features. The bone titan then accelerated, initially walking heavily, then to everyone's horror, breaking into a trot, and finally a sprint...

Covering several kilometers with each stride, Bones reached the now frozen citadel's edge within seconds. Each of its steps sent foreboding tremors throughout the land. So

much so that by the time its shadow combined with Featherfall's over the city, all standing structures had crumbled, leaving only the city wall intact.

Without slowing down, the relentless force of destruction stepped over Havocspire's wall, the last barricade in its path, and with a hellacious flex of its legs, it leapt into the sky. Before Featherfall could retaliate with an outraged screech, a enormous uppercut slammed into the underside of its beak, catapulting the massive bird into the atmosphere.

Immediately after, while onlookers took shelter from the shockwave, the vaguely humanoid figure of the giant crumbled, reverting to its original form-a mountain of disjointed bones. Then, as everyone shielded their eyes, Jake clearly saw the massive heap of bones infiltrate the tunnel where the Dreadnought Nematode had vanished, clearly intent on not letting its second prey escape.

Moments later, tens of kilometers to the east of Havocspire, the cracked earth exploded as if some monstrosity tried to burst forth. Soon after, looming geysers of violet blood, accompanied by a rain of bones and heart-wrenching screams of pain and rage, erupted into the sky.

It seemed the Nematode had been caught. The beam of light previously devoured by its maw was suddenly spat out, soon dispersing into hundreds of thousands of finer rays that almost immediately resumed their human forms.

The troops that the worm was supposed to transport had just been callously abandoned to facilitate its own escape. But that wasn't the primary concern.

The city was finally empty. Yet, the scattered enemy forces, left high and dry by their protector, found themselves trapped to the east by the imposing Ironsoul Rampart. With survival on the line, panic drove them to desperately rally back to defend Havocspire Citadel - or whatever was left of it.

With his keen eyesight, Jake could already see that the various regiments running away the city had stopped running, while a much larger army dispatched from Grimstone Keep was fast approaching. Thus, the inevitable battle that Meribelle had predicted just moments ago to reclaim the citadel was about to unfold.

Jake was about to partake in his first real battle.

Chapter 1056: Die With Honor, Commander

1056 Die With Honor, Commander

As if the gods themselves could sense the impending clash, one destined to result in a cataclysmic loss of life, the previously transparent sky began to cloud over with ominous, storm-laden black clouds. A biting wind, fierce and cold, blew with monstrous intensity, whipping their faces and forcing the remaining to squint against its ferocity.

In the blink of an eye, the once hopeful ambiance had taken a drastic, weighty turn, evident from the grim expressions of each soldier, whether a rookie or a hardened veteran. Without being given any order, they instinctively comprehended that the majority wouldn't make it through the storm to come.

But at least they had a shot... Unlike Jake's ill-fated regiment, wiped out mercilessly before they even got a chance to prove their worth.

Witnessing the weather's unpredictable temperament, many of the Underworld Barbarians started murmuring prayers or desperate chants, calling upon some unknown higher power. This left Jake somewhat puzzled because, as far as he knew, these primitive tribes only worshipped the survival of the fittest and, perhaps, the enigmatic Lumyst River and the twin waterfalls from which their power originated.

Moreover, with Jake's heightened senses, vast knowledge, and cold clarity, he knew that this weather shift had little to do with some divine entity - unless we're talking about those damned Abyssal Revenants and Titans.

Jake initially believed the white cloud mass enveloping Chillmire was intangible. He was wrong.

Not only was the blizzard very real, but its swirling maelstrom covered a vast expanse. The reason the ground-hugging clouds hadn't reshaped the land's topography despite their insane velocity was because the real clouds were situated much higher. Perhaps it was meant to shield the Duskwight Lands and its inhabitants as best as possible, but now they were witnessing the fallout.

By accumulating, condensing, and pushing the icy clouds within his mental grasp to higher altitudes, they had vertically stacked to become towering storm clouds or cumulonimbus. As soon as Chillmire had gotten wounded by the Celestial and the other three members of the Radiant Conclave, the Abyssal Revenant lost control over a part of these clouds.

And this was the aftermath... Now, this absurdly dense mass of stormy clouds, rising tens, or even hundreds of kilometers into the sky, was free to scatter and unleash its wrath, setting off a chain reaction throughout the local ecosystem, starting with its climate.

"There truly are no gods in this vast universe, just some potent assholes doing as they please, not giving a damn about the millions of ants they crush underfoot without even realizing. Jake sighed, swiftly turning his gaze to Grimstone Keep.

From the inner courtyard of its towering stronghold, the Keep itself, hundreds of ghastly flying creatures, the shade of a dark amphibian gray, took to the sky. From this distance, they looked like mere specks, but instinctively, he could tell they were far more monstrous than they first appeared.

And damn, they flew fast. Terrifyingly fast!

Each wing flap catapulted them hundreds of meters forward, generating a supersonic boom. A quick mental math told Jake that in just a minute or two, they'd be right over them. Another couple of minutes, and they'd be at Havocspire Citadel.

Predictably, just over a minute later, a ghastly shriek - part elephant bellow, part whale song, and something else, more insect-like and primal - tore through the air, making most of the soldiers wince in pain. Hearing it, many recruits and even battle-hardened warriors who'd seen their fair share of wars began to quake in their boots, sweating buckets.

As for those in the know, like General Torvi or Soulmaner Meribelle, their faces turned even more grim and foreboding.

"They're already here... The Vorzhul Riders Legion..." the imposing General announced, his expression dead serious and devoid of any enthusiasm. Addressing his still-alive regimental, company, and platoon commanders, he barked, "Be ready to take up arms at a moment's notice. This battle will be bloody hell. I fear it'll be a massacre, not just for our rookies but our vets too. Our seasoned troops are invaluable... So, when the order comes, you know which regiment to send to the front."

Jake and Sank-Uk, who had been entirely overlooked since General Torvi and his army's arrival, had heard every cold-hearted command.

Jake remained cool as a cucumber, knowing he had nothing to fear, but the same couldn't be uttered for the commander. His face paled in fury to the point of going white, and his fingers squeaked as he gripped his guandao's hilt so hard.

Jake wanted to subtly advise the fuming barbarian to pull himself together, but it was too late. Perhaps the General felt his killing intent, or maybe it was the squeak of his knuckles, but the General's murderous gaze suddenly locked onto them.

"Hmmm? Almost forgot we had two other soldiers here," the man in gleaming plate armor remarked sarcastically. "I slipped up. My bad. Apologies if my words came off strong, but that's the responsibility of command. Next to my elites, your lives are, indeed, worthless."

Jake stood unfazed, barely keeping his contempt in check. Sank-Uk, however, at his breaking point and recognizing the hierarchy gap between them, forced himself to swallow his pride and clasped his hands. With a voice laced with thinly veiled threat and hatred, he retorted, "With all due respect, I'm also a 3000-Man Commander, and I don't think the lives of my recruits were disposable. Failing the baptism is one thing, but today they met their end without even getting a chance to fight. Who's to say one of them wasn't the future savior of the Duskwight Lands? Maybe we just lost our only hope. While it's good to cherish our elites, the new blood should also get a chance to rise. Sacrificing them the instant stakes go high defeats the very purpose of our rigorous training. A more capable soldier should shoulder more, not less."

A brief, tense silence followed his fervent plea, only to be shattered by the boisterous laughter of the bulky General and his officers. It lasted but a brief moment, just long enough to drain all of Sank-Uk's righteous anger, leaving only a somber disappointment behind.

As General Torvi was about to retort, an even more bloodcurdling scream than before pierced the air, closely followed by the blaring of a war horn. At the sound, even the fearless warrior's expression turned sour.

One of the massive, hideous flying creatures Jake had seen departing from Grimstone Keep suddenly swooped down over them, coming so close that the supersonic shockwave accompanying its flight nearly burst everyone's eardrums. Had the squad of Soulancers not promptly shielded most of the army with a protective magical formation, many soldiers would've suffered severe injuries.

"That's downright nasty!" Meribell shouted, deactivating the long-range spell once the Vorzhul and its rider were at a safe distance.

However, when the dust settled and their attention shifted back to whatever General Torvi was going to retort, they found his eyes already glued to a parchment he had just darkly unfurled. After skimming through it for a few tense moments, an irate snort escaped his lips.

Turning towards Sank-Uk with a dire expression, he snapped, "So, you're all about protecting the rookies? I'll grant your wish. You were a 3000-Man Commander, right? Your regiment's no more, and lucky for you, I lost a good number of officers during our

retreat from Havocspire Citadel. I could assign you another, but since you believe the strong should shelter the weak, 'rewarding' you after your failure in such a manner would go against your principles, wouldn't it?"

"..."

From this point on, anyone with half a brain could discern the General's intentions. Sank-Uk might not have been the sharpest blade in the Duskwight arsenal, but he definitely wasn't a dull one either. As he was gearing up to retort, a telepathic message from Jake stopped him cold.

'Let it slide. We'll survive anyway!

...So you'll fight on the front lines with the other recruits, exactly as you wish," General Torvi initially terminated in a condescending tone. His demeanour then changed drastically, a shadow flitting briefly across his eyes, "But, you're sorely mistaken if you believe that we, the higher-ups and elite troops, are not putting our lives on the line. Our lives are far too valuable to be used as cannon fodder..."

He then flung the unrolled parchment with the missive at Sank-Uk, revealing the orders he'd just received for all to see. In bold letters, it clearly stated that he and his force were tasked with taking down at least one of the enemy Generals.

Deflated yet resolute, the haughty General then spat out coldly, "So go on, die with honor, Commander. Ensure that you and your precious recruits create an opening for us that makes your deaths worthwhile. Because make no mistake, in the grand scheme of things, it's us, the elites, who will be diving headfirst into the jaws of the enemy."

Chapter 1057: It's Just An Oversized Turkey

1057 It's Just An Oversized Turkey

Moments later, the army of 150,000 barbarians, complemented by Sank-Uk, Jake, and the booze-addled vagrant, were back on their feet, marching in the opposite direction towards the Havocspire Citadel. Now that the mountain and hill chain concealing the frozen ruins at Chillmire was no more, each force could faintly discern the movement of neighboring allied armies converging on the same target.

And to put it mildly, they were attacking in droves!

It was hard to picture without having visited Havocspire Citadel when it still stood tall, but it was a sprawling, gigantic warrior city. Its outer wall extending over 100 kilometers in diameter, this military bastion could comfortably accommodate hundreds of millions of troops, and even more if it was a short siege.

When the Radiant Conclave launched its blitzkrieg assault on Havocspire with the sole purpose of assassinating the Soulmancer King, more than half of the stationed troops met their end during the onslaught, but the remainder managed to flee, suffering heavy losses. The force commanded by General Torvi was just one of those armies that escaped the city in time.

Of course, not all the surviving armies were as massive or well- equipped. Some consisted of just a few companies, depleted to one- third of their original strength, and sometimes without their leader, while others had several regiments, divisions, or even entire legions at their disposal.

A division was any force composed of two or more regiments, whereas a legion consisted of at least two divisions. The army corps led by General Torvi contained the merged remnants of four massive legions, but now only two remained...

No matter the size of these armies that managed to flee and then endure the wide-range wrath of the Featherfall Titan, they all had

something special, be it a Soulmancer shielding them from the deluge

of giant feathers or exceptional warriors. This was particularly true

for those isolated squads that had survived without the protection of

a Soulmancer.

And at this very moment, all these armies were making a U-turn towards Havocspire Citadel, ready to fulfill the mandates that fell from the sky, or more accurately, dropped by the apathetic Vorzhul Riders.

The close flyby of these ominous flying beasts had killed quite a few unlucky soldiers in the process, earning the ire of a large number of survivors.

In addition to these survivor armies numbering in the millions, Jake also noticed that after the departure of the Vorzhul Riders, another heavily armed force had also left Grimstone Keep. Each of these soldiers was muscular and fierce, their arms and faces often crisscrossed with scars bearing witness to the bloody battles they had endured.

'Career soldiers.... perhaps even elite troops! Jake realized immediately, his gaze lingering briefly on one of the Vorzhul Riders perched atop the highest tower of Grimstone Keep.

The flying beast was decidedly larger and uglier than the rest of its kin. However, what set it apart were the thick black steel plates covered in spikes that shielded its face, chest, and other vulnerabilities.

A rider sat confidently at the nape of its neck, gazing down at the departing army from Grimstone Keep with a cold indifference dripping with contempt.

[That's the Great General spearheading the counterattack, no doubt about it.] Xi surmised thoughtfully before adding. [It would be enlightening to see him in combat up close. Great Generals rank among the most powerful beings on Twyluxia, second only to the

Soulmancer King and the Radiant Conclave. If you can take one down with confidence, this Ordeal will be as good as over for us. Of course, I'm excluding those Abyssal Revenants and Titans. Until you're back to full strength, I suggest steering clear of them...]

Jake's lips quirked at his AI's last remark. Damn, for something that shared his mind, wasn't she selling him a bit short? If he let loose, chucking all caution to the wind, he was confident he could whoop Featherfall's ass without breaking a sweat.

'It's just an oversized turkey, anyway, he ruminated, marching alongside the barbarians of his 'new' regiment.

Truthfully, he could understand why Xi had uttered that. Defeating such a creature was one thing, but taking it down unnoticed was a whole different game. The moment Jake took out a monster like that, he'd have to say goodbye to his low profile.

It had its ups and downs. On one hand, rallying the rest of the Myrtharian Nerds would be a cakewalk. On the flip side, it'd paint a glowing target on his back.

'One thing at a time...

Turning his attention back to his 'new' regiment, Jake studied the faces of his newfound comrades. Every soldier around him wore a look that was nothing short of grim and resigned, if not downright hopeless.

It made sense. Their unit was on the front lines. To make matters worse, Jake, Sank-Uk, the drunkard, and the ill-fated strangers with dead eyes alongside them were front and center of one of the three lead platoons.

Their odds of survival couldn't be grimmer. In a clash of this magnitude, a regular foot soldier had almost no shot at making it out alive, let alone terrified greenhorns with questionable gear.

Half of them didn't even have shields, and none sported any standard armor. The only exception was Sank-Uk, but after getting skewered by Featherfall's onslaught, his gear had seen better days.

It was bitterly ironic that in contrast to their prior disarray, now General Torvi, his officers, and elite troops brought up the rear. It seemed they were more than willing to throw as many rookies to the wolves as needed to achieve their goals.

The situation was downright shameful. It was even more striking as the 28 remaining Soulmanagers had tacitly spread out among the various regiments and divisions.

Several of them, like Meribelle, hadn't hesitated to position themselves on the front lines. Their reassuring silhouettes hovered hundreds of meters above, ready to swoop in during any supernatural ambush.

Unsurprisingly, Meribelle floated right above their regiment, further fueling Jake's suspicion that the real Soulmanager King was close by. It narrowed his search to his new regiment, but for now, he had to play dumb.

"I have to hand it to you; your moral compass is something else," Jake joked, chatting with Sank-Uk. He walked so casually with his rusted sword in hand; one might think he was out for a leisurely stroll.

"And here I thought I wasn't that righteous," the former commander replied with a gloomy look. "I've got a gut feeling this is going to come back and bite me real soon."

Jake and Sank-Uk walked a pace or two ahead of the rest, disregarding all semblance of order. They weren't even bothering to lower their voices, and thus the disheartened recruits trailing behind listened as if they were dealing with total oddballs.

Right behind Jake, the previously drunk wanderer, now newly revived, was currently sticking to him like glue. During the healing process, alcohol had been purged from his system, leaving him fully sober.

His memories were hazy, but clear enough to know that if he wanted a shot at survival in this hellhole, he'd best latch onto this miraculous powerhouse. Up until now, he'd never believed in any higher power, but after his improbable rescue by Jake, his worldview had been turned upside down.

'Why drown my sorrows and drink to forget when I can follow him and take back what's mine by my own hand?'

In the end, their trek to Havocspire Citadel consumed the better part of the day. By the time they reached its imposing, miraculously intact walls, the storm had long since broken.

A torrential downpour hammered against their skulls, deafening their ears, while a biting and icy wind constantly slapped them, forcing them to squint. Added to this was the reality that the sun was on the brink of setting, its light having been long eclipsed by a thick blanket of cumulonimbus clouds. From the North, near the Lumyst River, colossal tornadoes loomed in plain sight, dancing at the edge of their vision-a terrifying aftermath of Chillmire's icy maelstrom.

But the real horror show was ahead of them, beyond the towering walls. Whether by luck or misfortune, they weren't the first regiment to arrive on the scene.

Stretching as far as the eye could see, a sea of Underworld Barbarians occupied every inch of free ground, from their position right up to- and even beyond-the ramparts.

Scattered everywhere were the more or less undamaged corpses of

men and beasts, alongside numerous hollows from devastating

explosive impacts. In some spots, the earth had been completely

upturned, while in others, remnants of fire or even molten

rock replaced the ground. The battlefield was so littered with debris-

arrows, spears, cannonballs-that one could hardly set foot without

getting injured.

To make matters worse, due to the pouring rain, pools of blood and entrails from the dead had mixed with the water, creating the beginnings of a morass. To reach the walls now meant wading knee- deep in a murky muck of questionable composition. The only bright side was that the rain masked the stench.

There was no doubt about it... The siege of Havoscpire Citadel was already in full swing.

Chapter 1058: They've Lucked Out

1058 They've Lucked Out

While calm on the surface, Jake was immediately struck by the absence of enemies. The landscape's devastation, marked by swamps of blood awash with corpses from both sides, testified to the brutal clash that had taken place. But now, only their allies remained.

Clearly, the outer wall had already been reclaimed. On the other side of it, though, the clash of metal, agonizing screams, and the blast of explosions told a different story.

Endless waves of these Underworld Barbarians, stretching as far as the eye could see, were relentlessly scaling the tall wall like a horde of ravenous zombies, vanishing over the edge with battle cries once they reached the top.

While the extent of the carnage left Jake unfazed, the same couldn't be uttered for the other recruits, many of whom were barely holding it together to not piss themselves in fear.

Witnessing the vast expanse of death and desolation up close, some instantly snapped from terror. Their reactions ranged from being petrified to wetting their pants, to outright dropping their weapons and bolting.

When General Torvi caught sight of this from the backlines, his face remained chillingly indifferent. But with just a glance at the deserters, he marked them for death. Several elite barbarians from his personal guard silently acknowledged the order, then vanished in a blur, causing a gust of wind.

Swooosh!

Moments later, they reappeared before the fleeing deserters, brandishing their swords overhead like executioners and intoned in unison, emotionless,

"The penalty for mutiny is death."

SLASH!

Their blades descended as inexorably as a guillotine, instantly cleaving dozens of bodies in two, with the spilled blood spraying tens of meters beyond the victims. In the blink of an eye, the executioners were back at their General's side.

Gulp!

Audible gulps echoed through the ranks of recruits from various regiments. But after that ruthless display of the consequences of mutiny, no one dared entertain such an idea again. Not even those on the front lines.

At least on the battlefield, they had a slim chance of survival. Besides, most had families to feed back home. If they deserted, what would become of them?

"Damn it! They're all damn bullies..." The former alcoholic vagabond spat out with all his venom. Apparently, sobriety hadn't made him any less sharp-tongued.

Before any more troops got any ideas about following the deserters, one of the senior officers standing next to General Torvi stepped forward. Clearing his throat humbly, he then bellowed with an authoritative voice that echoed for miles,

"CHARGE!"

Amplified by his tyrannical and murderous Lumyst Aura, the roar made every soldier's hair stand on end. But it was in their eyes that a shift occurred. The intense killing intent saturating his order should've paralyzed them, even taken out the weakest-minded instantly. Instead, it seemed to resonate within them, bolstering their spirits.

In a matter of seconds, Jake watched, skeptical, as the tens of thousands of previously demotivated and terrified recruits started roaring with bloodthirsty fervor, as if they'd just mainlined adrenaline.

The cynical vagabond, who'd been so jaded moments earlier, now bore the same lunatic fury. Only Sank-Uk looked somewhat normal, although Jake could see him gritting his teeth, a prominent vein bulging on his forehead.

'So that's how they get them to obey, Jake thought appreciatively, feeling inspired. 'Pretty slick move!

At that moment, Meribelle's voice chimed in his head, explaining, "This is one of the ultimate forms the Lumyst Aura can take - The General's Aura. It's a mix of killing intent, authority, and charisma that can rally and influence allied troops while intimidating the enemies. Depending on the army's size it resonates with and the esteem the troops have for their commander, its power and reach are exponentially boosted, which in turn enhances the user's combat ability. It's a terrifyingly virtuous cycle.

"Completely broken," Jake remarked sarcastically at the end of her rundown, glad he'd kept a low profile. It wasn't a Fifth Ordeal for nothing.

[These locals aren't as powerless as they seem.] Xi agreed silently in his head, a distinct note of seriousness in his voice. [If they control enough troops and their authority is acknowledged, a General with this type of Lumyst Aura can become far more formidable than they inherently are. It's manageable with just a few thousand troops, but what about the Great General overseeing all these armies? What if they're already strong?]

Instead of replying, Jake cast a look behind him, his gaze now more intense than ever zeroing in on the distant Vorzhul Rider perched atop Grimstone Keep. If this native's mental reach and voice could span far enough to encompass all the armies stationed at Havocspire, then he'd be one hell of a difficult nut to crack, even for Jake.

And if their side had its own Great General... then the enemy definitely had theirs.

'So, diving headfirst and trying to take down the dragon's head isn't the brightest idea after all, Jake concluded, suppressing his last traces of reluctance.

These Titans, Abyssal Revenants, and Radiant Conclave members had always banked solely on their individual strength. Sure, one-on-one, their power dwarfed that of these generals. But when backed by their armies, it was a whole different ball game.

Maybe that's why entities like the Soulmaner King or the Celestial needed massive armies as their backbone. They acted both as a shield and a power source to ramp up their own capabilities.

Because it essentially meant that before you strike at a General, you've gotta chip away at his army, thinning their ranks. General Torvi's words to Sank-Uk took on a whole new meaning.

But before Jake could ponder any further, another booming command snapped him back to the now.

"CHARGE!" The commander, who had bellowed the initial order, roared once more, and like a primal beast stirred from its slumber, the vast army responded with raw ferocity.

The sinew of 150,000 soldiers tightened, veins bulging in exertion, and with bloodshot eyes, every last barbarian, without exception, surged forward in a frenzied charge. Jake, at the frontline, had no choice but to get swept up in their momentum.

'Are they high or just plain stupid? We're at least a kilometer or two away from the fortification, Jake ranted internally, dumbfounded.

Unlike him, and no matter how strong these barbarians were, under this world's gravity they were just lumbering brutes. Stamina and speed? Not exactly their forte...

At least, that was true for the untrained conscripts yet to develop their Lumyst Aura. But ironically, when Jake glanced back, he noticed the seasoned troops forming the rear guard had already slowed down, leaving the bulk of the army made up of greenhorns to face the brunt of danger.

'Figures, Jake thought, sneering as he kept pace.

Huff! Huff!

Barely fifteen or twenty seconds passed before the first signs of weariness emerged. First came rapid breaths, then gasping, and finally, wheezing ensued. Confronted by their stark physical limitations, their blazing sprint fizzled out, and already winded, they began to jog, or more accurately, drag their feet towards the walls.

A fleeting look of scorn clouded Jake's face as he witnessed the rookie mistake unfold before him. These naive recruits could be pardoned, but not the commander who sent them on this fool's errand...

Because here's the kicker: these rookies were still under the influence of his Lumyst Aura. Even gasping, faces swollen and turning a bluish hue, these barbarians were still continuing their mindless charge without breaking stride. It was merely their physiological boundaries reining them in.

And as expected, some couldn't hold the line...

After just over a kilometer, several barbarians, already tested by their brutal baptism, dropped dead, victims of sudden cardiac arrests. Perhaps they had underlying heart defects or weaker wills that stripped them of basic self-preservation, but the grim reality stood clear.

They had literally run themselves to death, trying to obey an order at any cost. The cost? Their very lives. And still, they failed, perishing namelessly long before reaching the wall....

Jake wanted to keep a low profile, but with Meribelle helming his regiment, he could at least lend a hand to those nearby. An unseen thread of lifeforce darted out from his fingertip, and with a flick, he connected it to the rest of his regiment, mimicking a rudimentary version of the Vitality Link from his faction.

Instantly, he felt a portion of their fatigue transfer to him. But compared to his titan-like constitution, it was a mere drop in the ocean. Thanks to this simple spell, not only was their regiment the first to reach the wall, but they also suffered the fewest casualties.

General Torvi, keeping tabs on Sank-Uk's regiment, raised an eyebrow in surprise at their uncanny advantage over the others. Far from suspecting Jake or Sank-Uk, he instead eyed the young woman soaring above them.

"It's rare to see those damn Soulmanagers waste their energy like that. They've lucked out," he remarked loudly, not bothering to conceal the contempt dripping from his words. "But being first doesn't mean they'll meet a more honorable end. Quite the opposite, actually..."

Chapter 1059: So Much Effort Just To Blend In

A few heartbeats later, the most nimble and athletic of the recruits finally reached the infamous wall.

The Outer Wall, encircling Havocspire Citadel, was fabled for its impenetrability. It had thus far lived up to its name. Even the rampaging force of two Titans and two Abyssal Revenants hadn't left as much as a scratch, while almost every other structure within the city lay in ruins.

And for good reason... This wall was towering. Unbelievably tall... and thick!

Soldiers, who seemed possessed just moments before, had already regained some of their sense, their faces a mix of confusion and terror as they gazed up at the wall's immense shadow cast upon them. With the sun setting and the ongoing storm, the ambient light was practically nil.

Gulp!

"Haah... Haah... H-how the hell are we supposed to... Haah... climb this shit?" A barbarian wheezed, his bloodshot eyes wide in disbelief.

Catching his breath after the inhuman sprint, he was doubled over, drenched in sweat. His shaking arms barely supported him on his knees, preventing him from collapsing backward. His heart thudded painfully against his chest, and he had this sinking feeling that he'd pay the price for this exertion sooner rather than later. Maybe even in the next few minutes...

He wasn't alone in his plight. Now, as the effects of mass hypnosis and the boost from the General's Aura began to wane, the greenhorn soldiers realized they were utterly ill-equipped to scale such a daunting barrier.

"It's gotta be 60 meters, at least..." Jake muttered, placing his hand on the lukewarm, somber gray stone that comprised the wall.

For him, this so-called challenge was virtually non-existent. He could clear it with a simple leap. But for these barbarians, only strong enough to move comfortably under this gravity, the near-smooth wall was pretty much insurmountable.

Well, almost...

Here and there, armored barbarians of better quality could be seen scaling the wall effortlessly, leaping from one rocky foothold to another. It resembled the way mountain goats traversed near-vertical cliffs but on a superhuman scale.

Luckily for the less physically gifted recruits, they didn't have to rack their brains for long. Thousands, if not millions, of conscripts in the same predicament as them were also scrambling to ascend this barrier.

"They're using grappling hooks and ladders!" A recruit exclaimed, smugly thinking she'd cracked the code first. Unfortunately for her, all she got were eye rolls and dismissive glances.

"Idiot, do you see any ropes around here?" Another recruit retorted irritably. "Looks like out of all the spots we could've chosen to climb, the ropes either got wrecked by the enemy or nobody's been this way before."

It made sense. With Havocspire Citadel having a diameter exceeding 100 kilometers, its Outer Wall was mathematically 3.14 times that in length. Even considering millions of troops constantly swarming here to scale it, it wasn't impossible to hit a section no one had climbed yet.

It became even more obvious when considering their 150,000-strong army had picked a clear spot to initiate the assault more easily and avoid adding to the ongoing mayhem.

"So, what's the plan? Walk the wall till we spot some leftover ladders or ropes?" A frustrated barbarian suggested with a gloomy face, though inwardly he was all for this strategy.

The reason being, any wall section currently fitted with ladders and ropes was swamped by other armies trying to scale. This meant if they went this route, they'd inevitably have to wait their turn, granting them all the time and the excuse they craved to catch a breather. With some luck, the battle would even end before they had to risk their necks.

"Sigh... Quit dreaming," Sank-Uk chided, though his rebuke was meant for everyone. "Knowing that bastard General Torvi, if we don't start making a move up this wall soon, he'll make sure we do, and trust me, it won't be a pretty sight."

The barbarians shuddered, recalling how they'd been pushed to the brink just moments ago. They needed to act. Fast.

Yet, as much as they all knew what needed to be done, nobody wanted to voice the glaringly obvious. With tensions rising and a stalemate of mutual silent stares, Jake telepathically communicated,

'Meribelle. Ropes.'

'... On it.'

Dozens of ropes and grappling hooks suddenly rained down in front of them. The icy voice of the young woman followed, dripping with sarcasm, "Now you've got no damn excuses."

"Sank-Uk, you're up," Jake directed.

"... On it."

As long as General Torvi and his crew were breathing down their necks, Jake couldn't flex too much.

Reading the situation, the former commander lightly gripped the top edge of a stone block his height. With a simple flex of his legs, he propelled himself two blocks higher. The tip of his boot grazed the lower edge of another block, and with just a slight push, he gained momentum as if he'd just walked on thin air. Before anyone could blink, he was on top of the wall.

"Wow! Just what you'd expect from a 3000-man commander," recruits who overheard their previous banter exclaimed with a mix of admiration and jealousy.

Their excitement was quickly doused as dozens of ropes dropped before them, waiting to be scaled...

"Shit... Even with a rope, this is gonna be a real pain in the ass," a young man grumbled, despite his bulging biceps.

"Tell me about it... My arms are already toast after that sprint," another recruit lamented, almost shedding a tear as he held up a trembling arm gripping his spear.

Jake kept his poker face, but discreetly reactivated the superficial Vitality Link he'd conjured earlier to give them a leg up. Leaving them to their fate, he then grabbed the nearest rope and began climbing at a "reasonable" speed.

'So much effort just to blend in...' He grimaced bitterly, intentionally slowing down halfway up to feign muscle strain and heavy breathing.

[Don't forget to sweat if you want to sell it,] Xi playfully reminded him, failing to stifle her laughter.

"Tsk. If I find out none of the Players on my side or the opposing Mirror Universe come close to matching me, and I've been downplaying my skills for nothing, I swear I'm gonna lose it... Jake grumbled as he "struggled" to reach the wall's summit.

He was pretty irked at that moment, but as soon as he got a clear view from the other side of the wall, a surge of elation hit him,

"Flames, smoke, and fog! Awesome!" He exclaimed with delight, even though he was outwardly wiping away the fake sweat dripping down his forehead.

"Indeed... The limited visibility gives the enemy the upper hand. This is gonna be one hell of a fight," Sank-Uk remarked with a heavy sigh, apparently not picking up on Jake's thrill.

A few minutes later, the first wave of recruits reached the top of the wall, and their expressions morphed into one of horror, mirroring that of the former commander.

"How the hell are we supposed to spot our enemies through all this smoke?" A soldier, armed with only a rusty blade and a shoddy leather helmet, started shaking as he gazed upon the sprawling battle before him.

Despite the thick smoke, one could make out millions of humanoid or beastly figures, fighting to the death in the tumultuous chaos. Distorted by the flicker of flames, sporadic lightning, and the creeping twilight, these roughly outlined shadows appeared even more grotesque and unsettling.

"G-guess we're better off up here," another recruit stammered, looking queasy after peeking over the edge and seeing the chaos and abyss below.

"There are stairs," Jake noted, rolling his eyes.

Damn right. The very point of a wall was to make it hard to scale from the outside. But if the soldiers meant to defend it couldn't climb it either, that would've been sheer idiocy.

And sure enough, now that Jake had pointed out the stairs, a quick scan revealed them to be scattered around every twenty or thirty meters.

"Phew... At least we don't have to go through that ordeal aga-"

BOOOOOM!

The soldier, caught off-guard, hadn't even finished his sentence when a massive flaming projectile slammed into the parapet out of the blue. A deafening explosion echoed, followed by a blaze that spanned several meters in radius and an even more powerful shockwave, torching everything in its path.

As for the poor soul caught directly in its path, his body was instantly vaporized, leaving only his charred feet anchored to the ground and a piece of his axe as a chilling reminder that he was alive just a heartbeat ago.

One by one, the soldiers, still dazed and deafened from the blast, struggled to their feet, staggering as their brains tried to process what had just happened. It had all gone down so fast that they were left clueless.

Then, the searing pain from their burned flesh and the smell of burnt meat snapped them out of their daze, waking them to a living nightmare. As they struggled to understand the unfolding chaos, the air began to whistle forebodingly once more, and Sank-Uk's deep, thunderous voice, tinged with panic, bellowed,

"EVERYONE TO THE STAIRS!"

Chapter 1060: I Hope We Won't Regret This

He'd barely finished barking his command when three more pressurized fireballs plummeted like meteors onto the battlement, detonating this time in a densely populated area. The hapless recruits caught in the blast were instantly reduced to ash.

"Fuck! Mother of God... RUN!" A soldier cursed as he staggered away, his hand covering the right side of his smoldering, completely bald face. The flesh had almost entirely melted away, exposing the bone underneath.

A slightly more educated recruit lifted his dazed, oscillating eyes toward the sky. Catching sight of the sky filling with orange "shooting stars" on an unmistakably parabolic trajectory, his eyes widened like saucers, and he screamed at the top of his lungs,

"H-Holy crap! Grenadier Bugs! RUN!"

This second barrage, combined with the imminent approach of an even more devastating third volley, was the jolt needed to snap the fear-paralyzed recruits out of their stupor.

Shaking their heads or slapping their own cheeks to regain composure out of sheer will, the more lucid soldiers-or those whom fear did not paralyze but instead propelled-began to sprint without hesitation toward the nearest stairs.

As soon as the first few bolted, the rest followed like a flock of desperate sheep. In a split second, the scene devolved into utter chaos.

The mass of soldiers, who had been spread out with a semblance of order and unity along the battlement, instantly lost all cohesion, as if molten lead had been poured into an anthill.

Zzziiiiiiip!

Jake, who hadn't moved yet but was intently staring at a point far to the East through the fog, heard-or rather 'anticipated'-the sizzle in the air long before anyone else. Squinting, he didn't see any fire projectiles this time but visualized, as if in a premonition, a thick beam of dazzling purple lightning cutting through the fog and covering the distance in the blink of an eye.

The lightning's trajectory was almost horizontal, as if it had been emitted from the top of a building or wall slightly higher than theirs. With his keen eyesight, Jake instantly identified the source of these fiery and electric projectiles as Havocspire Citadel's Inner Wall.

'So that's why they abandoned the Outer Wall, Jake realized, spotting several massive, insectoid alien creatures with long, tubular protrusions as abdomens. With their long-range artillery targeting our walkway, they can pick us off the moment any of our armies appear on it.

The unsightly things that had produced the explosive fireballs looked more like tanks than bugs. Their sixteen-legged beetle-like bodies were encased in an exoskeleton as tough as reinforced steel, a blend of deep obsidian and rust, giving them the semblance of ancient, heavy-armoured war beasts.

Without getting into the nitty-gritty of their appearance, it was their elongated and hollow abdomens that served as living, biological artillery cannons. These horrors were flexible enough to arch over their heads, allowing them to 'fart' in any direction.

As for the lightning beam bearing down on them- that came from the maw of an ugly and putrid eel-like monstrosity as large as a truck, wallowing in a makeshift pool filled with greenish water.

The back of its body was covered with electrogenic plates, faintly glowing in the twilight fog and running up to its jawline. Since an electric eel normally electrocutes its prey by making contact, Jake could only guess how many genetic mutations and manipulations had been required to spawn such an abomination.

In addition to these two types of nightmarish beasts, there were also numerous humanoid figures appearing minuscule beside them, seemingly coordinating the creatures. These men and women were dressed in white combat robes combining high-quality leather, fine steel mesh, and select pieces of light armor protecting their vital organs and joints.

'Radiant Mages and Lifemancers specialized in beast taming and cultivation,' Jake also identified for himself, a glint of innocent curiosity in his eyes.

But where he was relaxed enough to take the time to observe their attackers, for the only other individual capable of understanding what was happening, it was an absolute catastrophe.

"T-too fast!" Sank-Uk thought, horrified, as he watched the enormous lightning bolt descend upon them, his face etched with resignation. He knew that even if he wanted to, he'd never have time to order the soldiers to get out of its trajectory.

After all, its speed was near that of light. By the time you realized it was there, it was already too late.

To add insult to injury, because of Chillmire, the torrential rain currently pouring down had long ago soaked every surface of the wall. From the battlement to the stairs, the entire wall was covered with puddles of water.

If that lightning bolt hit its mark, every troop on the rampart within a fifty-meter radius would be zapped to oblivion. The danger was exponentially higher for those wearing conductive armor pieces or standing in the direct path of the electric blaze.

The only way to dodge electrocution: jumping off the wall before impact. Even if some soldiers managed to pull it off in time, they'd likely shatter all their bones, crashing at the foot of the wall.

"WE'RE SCREWE-"

Just as the vast majority of the recruits hadn't even registered the mortal threat looming over them, Jake subtly tapped the ground with his heel, as if taking a step forward. His figure blurred, and he reappeared instantaneously at the presumed point of impact for the bolt.

The electrogenic plates nestled within the eel's maw that fired that devastating laser hadn't even fully activated, and he was already in its path. A fraction of a second later, a blinding flash of light, followed by a deafening thunderclap, resounded, stunning the entire regiment.

Sank-Uk was the first to regain his senses, and when his vision cleared, he was gobsmacked to find that everyone was unscathed. It was only when he saw Jake standing unassumingly where the lightning was supposed to hit that he regained his composure, quickly retreating into solemn silence.

Meribelle, who had just selflessly intercepted the third salvo of flaming projectiles without the regiment being any the wiser, was the only other witness to what had just transpired.

To say she was utterly shocked would be an understatement. Besides her astonishment, her pallid complexion also revealed traces of barely-suppressed fear.

'I hope we won't regret this. We might have unwittingly handed over the throne to this foreigner, she sighed gloomily, a shadow of regret and bitterness crossing her beautiful face.

"TO THE STAIRS! MOVE YOUR ASSES!" Sank-Uk's voice yelled again, reminding the disoriented and blinded soldiers that they were still under enemy artillery fire.

Biting their lips hard enough to draw blood to shake themselves awake, one by one, recruits and veterans alike started moving, feeling their way like the blind with the tips of their swords for guidance. Despite this, in the chaotic shoving and stumbling, several barbarians unluckily tumbled into the abyss- the stairs being devoid of any handrails.

In that brief span, they faced two more onslaughts of lethal fireballs before finally getting off that damned wall. Meribelle managed to intercept most of the projectiles, but some of them still managed to wreak havoc among their greenhorn ranks.

By the time the last soldier, Jake, stepped off the final stair, their regiment of about 3,000 troops had been slashed in half. Jake had seriously debated pulling off a full-blown rescue, but alas, from atop the wall, General Torvi and other top brass had a bird's eye view of the whole ordeal.

In the end, he chalked it up to collateral damage-unavoidable canon fodder. His moral fiber and the itch to flex his true power gnawed at him, but if it made it easier for 8 million Players from the opposing camp to identify and conspire against him, the gamble wasn't worth the candle.

And Jake had another compelling reason to stick to this strategy... Due to some unanticipated anomaly he wasn't yet sure about, he had shifted gears dramatically upon entering Twyluxia.

He'd need to come across another Player to ensure his situation wasn't unique, but for now, he'd basically resorted to 'cheating'

"Hopefully, I'll run into other Players on this battlefield," Jake thought with a glint of optimism.

None of the recruits, including Sank-Uk, were aware that these 'foreigners' spawned every 36 hours according to their ranks. However, based on the time he'd spent in the Red Cube, Jake had some inkling.

Including the baptism, it had taken over two days, almost three, to reach Havocspire Citadel. Following that logic, it wasn't impossible that other high-ranking Players were still around, or that lower- ranking Players had been temporarily pulled back here due to injuries or leave.

There were numerous citadels like this one along the Ironsoul Rampart, but only one where the Soulmaner King had been ambushed. Knowing the Oracle, it wasn't likely a coincidence that he'd appeared here. He logically expected to cross paths with other Players who shared some kind of fate with him.

And little did he know how right he was... For he had barely taken a few steps beyond the Outer Wall when his shadow suspiciously began to ripple.

Chapter 1061: Long Time No See

The subtle quiver across the surface of his shadow was like the after-ripple of a stone plunging into a still pond. Silent, almost motionless, but distinctly altered. Most notably, it now harbored a presence it lacked before.

No one picked up on this-except for Jake. It was his shadow, after all.

"Hephais... Long time, no see," Jake said with an enigmatic smile, leaning against a section of the wall hidden from prying eyes. With all the smoke and surrounding chaos, it wasn't hard to go unnoticed.

Once sure that the only mental sense-less discreet than she'd like to believe-was Meribelle's, Jake scoffed sardonically and said to seemingly no one, "You can come out."

The Shadow Assassin needed no further invitation. Slowly rising from the pool of darkness, his hooded face was as stoic and grim as their last encounter. Both men sized each other up for a few seconds before Hephais acknowledged with a nod,

"Boss. I've come to report."

Jake wasn't offended by the Egean's blunt and informal tone. Without pretending to know him well, it was typical for an assassin to be cold and sparing with words, if not downright introverted or antisocial.

And that suited Jake just fine. He had always appreciated people who got straight to the point.

Without wasting time on pointless pleasantries, Hephais extended his right wrist, and Jake, understanding his intent, synced his bracelet with his assassin's. The moment their forearms touched, he received a prompt to accept a data transfer, and Xi immediately downloaded the packet.

A nanosecond later, the transfer was complete, and Jake quickly scanned the compiled intel gathered by the assassin.

"I see... That answers quite a few of my questions," Jake said, closing his eyes briefly before reopening them, a newfound gravity darkening his gaze.

Not even the dominant Titans and Abyssal Revenants he had seen go berserk since the onset of the Ordeal had managed to elicit such an expression of deep solemnity from him.

Unlike Jake, Hephais had no fears about being detected when he moved through the shadows. Stealth and intel gathering were his specialties. When he chose to erase his presence, no average native could sense him. This went far beyond invisibility.

Like Jake, his operational window before the battle was limited, and he couldn't stay away for long without arousing suspicion. The sudden plan to reclaim Havocspire Citadel had shifted the playing field.

Jake's regiment had been cut in half just scaling a wall. Hephais, who had arrived 36 hours earlier, was just reaching the Ironsoul Rampart when the Soulmaner King got ambushed. By the time they'd returned, Havocspire Citadel was already a raging inferno, and like everyone else, they were greeted by Featherfall's omnidirectional steel rainstorm.

His entire regiment, commander included, had been wiped out. Hephais was the only survivor.

For many Players looking to keep a low profile, this would be disastrous, but for the Shadow Assassin, it was a golden opportunity. The anonymous recruit he portrayed was officially KIA, giving him the freedom to move as he pleased.

Still, he had the same agenda as Jake and didn't hesitate to join the impending siege of Havocspire. It was the perfect chance to rack up his first kills and scout out potential Players.

Besides Jake, he had definitively identified 22 Players fighting for their side and 39 in the enemy camp. All these Players were keeping their heads down, but through the 'darkness' of their shadows, he could easily differentiate them from the crowd.

Unfortunately, no other Myrtharian Nerds.

According to Hephais, considering the size of Twyluxia and the number of citadels like this one, they should count themselves lucky to have bumped into each other. Beyond troop numbers, it was because the only players who hadn't crossed the Ironsoul Rampart even once were at least Rank 13.

This meant the odds of encountering a heavy-hitter here were comparatively higher. Weaker Players could be found, but they were usually sidelined, shipped off the battlefield due to debilitating injuries.

As for Jake, according to the assassin, his shadow was especially 'deep'. To someone with Hephais's senses, he stood out like a lighthouse in the dark.

'Xi, we need to find a way to slip under the radar of Shadow Users,' Jake noted mentally, realizing this could become a snag. If it had been someone other than Hephais, his cover would've been blown.

[No problem. I can use the Purgatory simulation to create an environment conducive to developing such an ability,] she assured him firmly before making another suggestion. [However, if I may, the simplest solution would be to consume Hephais's genetic and

Aetheric material. You don't need his Blood Essence. With your bloodline, a single strand of hair would suffice.]

Jake shot a sheepish glance at the deadpan Egaeon, but he'd be lying if he said it wasn't already part of his plan. He had intended to ask for a blood sample from each of the Myrtharian Nerds upon their return. If it was feasible, why not do it here?

His Cosmic D Starfeyrves Bloodline had the unique feature of letting him rearrange his genetic makeup like he was flipping through a wardrobe. High-quality Blood Essence was not required as long as he had their Aether Code. What really mattered was advancing his own bloodline to its peak potential.

Still, even if his power for adaptability and morphing made him more versatile than the one-way evolution of Digestors, his end goal was the same: crafting the ultimate bloodline. Not everything was fair game; there was a finite number of Aether Runes that his Aether Code and body could accommodate.

If he wanted to go beyond that limit and make room for additional lines of code, his only option was to level up his bloodline. Accumulating energy the right way would allow him to slightly condense it with each level-up. When that was no longer possible, all that remained was to condense his Aether Code to the next Grade.

But right now, that was the least of his worries. Something far more pressing was on his mind.

"So you can't use your Oracle Skills either, except for the functions tied to your bracelet?" Jake asked the assassin for confirmation, again.

"I hate to say it, but yeah," Hephais nodded grimly. "All the Oracle Skills linked to our access levels are completely fucked right now. It's like the Aether Network's been given a digital lobotomy. The Oracle System's archives? Sealed tighter than a drum. We can still use Oracle Paths, but without the Oracle Cloaking and Promotion Skills, we're basically sitting ducks. The other side's Players will have us outgunned. As for whether our enemies are dealing with the same crap or if it's just us getting the shaft? Your guess is as good as mine."

"Does this mean Aas has run out of APs to spend?" Jake frowned. "Or for some godforsaken reason, he's decided to renege on his commitments. I don't like this."

"Or an external interference," Hephais added. "Either the other Mirror Universe is playing dirty tricks or—"

"Digestor. Fucking hell, I hope not," Jake spat, his voice dripping with contempt. Just as he did, he looked up to see the twilight sky erupt in a hailstorm of flames and arrows.

Swoooooosh!!

BOOOOOM!

The bombardment, which had initially targeted only the upper ramparts where they had just been, had adjusted its trajectory. Now, the ground itself was in the crosshairs, along with the soldiers fighting for their own side.

Barely recovering from the initial shock, the ground troops were instantly riddled with arrows, like pincushions. Explosions stole the lives of many more. In a few seconds of slackening focus, another two-thirds of their remaining half-regiment were obliterated.

It was only then that Jake and the other survivors observed the enemy soldiers they thought they had seen from atop the walls were nowhere to be found. The bloody scuffle at the base of the wall, which they could vaguely make out through the fog, had evidently reached its conclusion.

The Dusken Throne was going to win this scrap.

Except that implied there were hardly any Light Warriors from the Lustra Plains left standing.

The few who remained had dropped their weapons and started bolting into the foggy depths as if they knew the grim fate that awaited them if they stayed.

"CHARGE FORWARD!" Sank-Uk roared, pointing his glaive at the fleeing enemies.

Everyone wasn't stupid, and most immediately grasped his intent. The enemy wouldn't dare shoot their own, so following them was the best bet to escape the kill zone.

What they hadn't yet realized was that it was like jumping from the frying pan into the fire. A vast, well-formed army awaited them at the end of their path.

Leaning casually against the wall, Jake sighed after peering into the fog. Breaking into a run to catch up with the regiment, he uttered apologetically to Hephais,

"We'll pick this up later. For now, follow me."

Unsurprisingly, after a few hundred meters of frantic sprinting, they escaped the death zone. The hailstorm of projectiles ceased, but soon after, the disorganized group of survivors skidded to a halt.

Before them, a far larger army of blood-soaked Light Warriors stood in eerie silence, forming a wall of shields. Behind them, hundreds of archers awaited their signal, arrows already nocked.

The battle they had feared was about to kick off for real.

Chapter 1062: It's Hopeless

Now halted in their tracks by an imposing army, the Underworld Barbarians could only watch helplessly as the Lustra Plains soldiers they had been pursuing slipped through their fingers.

It was the first opportunity for many to see what the infamous Light Warriors of the Lustra Plains looked like, and the stark reality shattered their already slim hopes for survival.

"H-h-huge," a frontline rookie stuttered anxiously, taking a timid step back.

"Fuck! Fuck! FUCK! By Lumyst, why does every one of these bastards have such insane lifeforce?" A bandage-covered veteran from another shattered regiment completely lost his cool upon sighting the formidable army.

Others who had barely survived their first skirmish wore similar expressions of outrage, as if they were the victims of a cosmic injustice. In a way, they were.

After coming down from the walls, Jake's unit had immediately reinforced the scattered remains of other beleaguered units. Among them were soldiers like the ones just mentioned, who had already tasted real battle but had been sent back to Havocspire Citadel due to severe injuries.

Though they initially had a significant numerical advantage, the Dusken Throne was losing four to ten times as many men for every inch of Havocspire they managed to reclaim.

This was not just because the Lustra Plains warriors were playing defense. The troops mobilized to assassinate the Soulmancer King and seize Havocspire Citadel were all hardened professionals.

Their exact numbers were unknown, but Jake estimated it to be around 500,000 from what he could see. Among them were a high proportion of elite troops conditioned for suicide missions, along with an array of genetically modified beasts, Radiant Mages, and Lifemancers calling the shots.

To make matters worse, if Jake had once thought the Underworld Barbarians looked tough, it was only because he hadn't yet seen what those from the Lustra Plains looked like.

Unlike the native Duskwights, Light Warriors didn't have to risk their lives in a perilous baptism to enhance their physiques. The abundant vital energy suffusing their half of the continent was more than sufficient.

In contrast, Underworld Barbarians, after millions of years of evolution, had only just adapted to the harmful spectral energy emitted by their river. Without readily available vital energy, there was a limit to what could be achieved by evolution and sheer grit alone. Not only did Underworld Barbarians have shorter lifespans, but they were also generally smaller and appeared more frail.

"And they're all well-trained and experienced, unlike our rookies," Jake observed, stifling a sigh. He felt like his new unit was about to get decimated for the second time.

"They've also survived their first initiation," Hephais added placidly, unsheathing a rusted sword that lacked a guard.

"Light Warriors who've undergone their first initiation and awakened their Light Lumyst Aura are called Shimmers," Sank-Uk announced loudly for all those who could hear. "Brace yourselves. This is going to be a hell of a fight."

Unfortunately, regrets were useless now. As soon as the last fleeing survivor from the Lustra Plains joined this out-of-nowhere army, their presumed commander gave the order to open fire without warning.

"LOOSE!"

Sank-Uk, who stood at the front, instantly yelled in response, "Take cover!"

He refrained from shouting "shields up," knowing that their pathetic wooden bucklers wouldn't do jack. Regardless, those who had one had already raised it to protect their faces, which didn't save them from an arrow to the knee.

Swoooooosh!

It was an utter bloodbath. Over two hundred soldiers and rookies were pincushioned before they could even react.

This volley of arrows had two components: one horizontal and another arcing.

The second enemy line, shielded by their frontmen, consisted of experienced archers who meticulously picked their targets. Meanwhile, the rear line fired blindly into the sky, creating an imprecise but far-reaching barrage designed to hit the troops at the back or those trying to flee.

These archers were, without exception, half-giants at least ten feet tall, sporting bulging and chiseled muscles. Their bows were nearly as tall as they were, carved from dark wood teeming with vitality. Watching their muscles strain to the max each time they nocked an arrow, Jake had no doubt that the draw strength of these bows was akin to bending a steel rod.

A well-aimed arrow from these giants was equivalent to artillery fire. Against these green, already terrified recruits, it was complete overkill.

"Aaarrgh, fuck! My thigh!"

"Holy shit! Right in the heel!"

"Aaaarrrrrrrrhhh! My eye!"

"Every man for himself!"

Seeing the recruits panic and turn their backs on the enemy, Sank-Uk gritted his teeth, cursing his luck for being saddled with such dead weight, then roared furiously,

"WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU DOING! If you want to live, charge at the enemy!"

Snapping back to reality, the terrified recruits who were getting picked off by enemy arrows turned on a dime and sprinted in the opposite direction, their courage suddenly reignited.

"Kill!"

"KILL THEM ALL!" Sank-Uk bellowed again, leading by example as he plunged like a missile into the enemy shield formation.

Jake and Hephais, standing motionless and stoic amid the chaos, exchanged a determined look. It was time for them to take their first steps in this war. Beyond the ramparts, General Torvi couldn't monitor them, but that didn't mean they could let loose without restraint.

"Let's take these guys out, but keep it low-key," Jake said before sprinting at the same speed as the other barbarians toward the enemy's shield formation.

"Sure." Hephais nodded.

They felt no guilt, for while the recruits were oblivious to what transpired above, he and Hephais could clearly see that Soulmaner Meribelle could have intervened to save them multiple times. Instead, she chose to twiddle her thumbs and monitor the various battlefields separated by kilometers of ruins and fog.

Sank-Uk was the first to clash with the enemy shield-bearers. These foot soldiers guys were walking tanks, towering over most of the barbarians. Seeing him approach, they confidently lowered their hefty rectangular shields, tightening their formation.

Big mistake! A mistake they immediately paid for dearly. With his right shoulder leading, the former commander crashed fearlessly into one of them with the force and speed of a runaway freight train.

BAM!

The soldier's wooden shield instantly caved in, folding before exploding into splinters. His body followed suit, getting flung back dozens of meters, taking out several of his comrades in the process.

Their formation shattered, Sank-Uk wasted no time lunging in, and with his heavy guandao, he instantly cleaved all nearby enemies in two with a swift, 360-degree horizontal slash. Shattered shields flew in all directions, accompanied by spurts of blood and guts.

Witnessing the spectacle, the Light Warriors gasped but quickly regained their composure, showcasing their extensive experience. With a tacit agreement, they backed away and took aim with their spears, forming a tight surrounding around him.

"SPEARS! THRUST!" Their commander bellowed with a voice that reverberated like an explosion.

The command was meant just as much for those who had encircled Sank-Uk as it was for the rest of the shield-bearers who were waiting, braced for the enemy recruits' charge.

Tragically, the outcomes were worlds apart.

While Sank-Uk effortlessly dodged the omnidirectional skewering with a leap into the air, what remained of his unit crashed miserably against the enemy wall of shields and spears.

Agonized gasps from the front line were punctuated by spurts of blood, like gruesome fireworks, as their glorious charge was brought to a screeching halt. Only those who were directly behind the former commander managed to slip through the crack he had momentarily created, only to find themselves mercilessly impaled soon after.

Witnessing this while still airborne, Sank-Uk, who had been nursing a sliver of hope that he could save at least a few, completely gave up.

"Dammit. It's hopeless."

Just as he envisioned the remaining wounded soldiers and recruits meeting the same gruesome fate—slaughtered like cattle—Jake and Hephais chose that moment to throw themselves into the fray.

As if casually strolling through their own backyard, the two men effortlessly reached the enemy shield-bearers, blending in seamlessly with the frenzied mob around them. Then, with an air of apathy that contradicted the gravity of the situation, they lifted their swords...

BANG!

It quickly became apparent that even when they tried to blend in as mere warriors, they couldn't help but radiate like the sun. From the moment they joined the battle, the entire course of the war, which had seemed set in stone, took an abrupt and game-changing turn.

Chapter 1063: Unstoppable Duo

Just a few paces away from the wall of shield-bearers, Jake and Hephais watched in stunned silence as six frenzied rookies lunged at a single shield-bearer, their eyes bloodshot and full of manic desperation. It wasn't a terrible strategy if their goal was to punch a hole through the enemy lines, but the disparity of strength was just too damn wide.

Unperturbed, the heavily armored foot soldier they had targeted sneered under his visored helm and surged forward, viciously ramming his rectangular shield into the soldier directly before him. Simultaneously, his spear-wielding arm executed a lightning-fast horizontal sweep, cutting down all the 'weeds' daring to clutter his field of vision.

Four conscripts were instantly bisected at the waist, while the one who took the brunt of the shield was violently hurled fifteen meters back, heading straight toward Jake and Hephais. The sixth fool, who'd launched himself skyward in an acrobatic leap, plummeted just as miserably, his legs severed at the calves. His pitiful jump saved him the fate of being sliced in two but did little else.

Feeling a touch of sympathy, Jake caught the airborne rookie with one hand, shaking his head as he felt the soldier's shattered spine and pulverized ribcage. He was still breathing, but his fighting days were over.

Witnessing the brutal six-on-one that had just unfolded, Jake and Hephais exchanged a complicated look before nodding in mutual understanding. 'At this rate, if we keep our heads down, we'll be the last men standing in a minute or two,' their faces seemed to say.

Yet, they had no intention of altering their course. Reinforcements were still pouring in from all directions toward Havocspire Citadel, and the closer they got to the Inner Wall, the more likely they'd link up with friendly regiments.

"Let's see how this plays out for a minute or two," Jake decided, striding purposefully toward the shield-bearer who had just annihilated six men with chilling ease.

Still brimming with confidence, the imposing Light Warrior readied his shield to block Jake's sword and thrust forward with the practiced precision of a master spearman.

Whoosh!

The anticipated thud of his spear piercing a ribcage followed by the buttery ease of a punctured heart didn't happen. Confused, he cautiously peered over his shield, his eyes widening in alarm as he realized Jake had vanished.

'Where did he go?'

No sooner had the thought crossed his mind than a rusty blade looped around his neck, severing his head cleanly from his body. Landing gracefully after a dizzying aerial flip over the enemy, Jake found himself perfectly positioned between the first and second lines.

The sinister archer behind the now-headless shield-bearer barely had time to aim his already notched arrow before Jake crushed his windpipe with a swift karate chop. Jake's nails morphed into razor-sharp claws in the same motion, severing the archer's spine with surgical precision.

The two flanking archers, caught equally off guard, managed to draw a bead on Jake and let their arrows fly. Without missing a beat, Jake twisted himself into the blind spot of one archer using the falling corpse of his second kill, dodging the other's arrow with a casual tilt of his head.

The stray arrow lodged itself into the shoulder of the keeling archer, causing him to finally collapse. Just before the body tipped over, Jake, his back turned, snatched the arrow as if pulling it from an imaginary quiver. In less time than it takes for a nerve impulse to travel from eye to brain, he flicked it back at its sender, burying it deep into his forehead, feathers and all. The archer's inch-thick steel helmet made no difference.

At the same moment, Hephais effortlessly deflected the piercing lance thrust from the shield-bearer in front of him, then delivered a powerful front kick to his right knee followed by the left, shattering both. The hulking warrior crumpled forward as if someone had just yanked the rug out from under him. Just as his body became horizontal, Hephais nonchalantly stepped on his head and launched himself parallel to the ground toward the archer right behind him.

The same archer who had just missed Jake with an arrow, one that Jake had momentarily spared him from. Hephais's hiltless sword effortlessly pierced the archer's heart, emerging from the other side of his back. Coincidentally, the shield-bearing foot soldier hit the ground with a heavy thud at the same time, as if it were choreographed.

Nearby archers, who thought they had a advantageous position for easy kills, hastily ditched their bows upon realizing the danger, drawing nimble scimitars instead. This was what happened when they put too much trust in their shield wall.

"Eh, nice weapons," Hephais coolly praised, tossing aside his rusty blade to snatch a scimitar from his last victim.

With his new weapon, he skillfully deflected the incoming strikes from three scimitars all at once, then, in a fluid motion, skillfully slid his blade along theirs and slit their throats. He then snatched another scimitar from one of his latest kills and, glancing at the shield-bearers who had turned their backs on him, took a step back to line up and hurled his second weapon like a frisbee. The heavily armored warriors, blissfully unaware, were decapitated in an instant.

Well, that's how it should have happened. Instead, a deep gash appeared at the back of their necks—enough to break their spines and render them quadriplegic, but not quite a clean decapitation. Still, it was a hell of a strike.

"Tsk, they have tough skin," Hephais sighed, picking up another scimitar to transition into a dual-wielding combat style.

Meanwhile, Jake had been systematically decimating a whole squad at the leisurely pace of one kill per step, or rather, per swing of his blade. He shared the sentiment.

Of course, he didn't include himself in that analysis. For him, it was simply a matter of putting a bit more heart into it or not.

"However..." Jake's eyes sparkled contemplatively as he witnessed the souls of his victims being siphoned by his non-existent Lumyst Aura. "I underestimated the potential of this spiritual enchantment."

[Aura of Lumyst: Enemies Killed: 17, Souls Harvested: 17. Stat boosts: 0.00068%]

The boost to his physical and cognitive abilities might seem negligible, but that was because he was already monstrously powerful.

In his current base form, Jake estimated his physical strength—after accounting for all his Aspects but excluding special abilities—to be equivalent to 100 billion Earth-born grown men. The ratio dropped to 2.5 million if it were humans capable of withstanding this world's gravity, amplified 40,000 times.

This was roughly on par with an average Fifth-Ordeal Player, as well as untrained natives. While there were other factors to consider, such as size, muscle mass, or race, the quality of their souls should be relatively similar. Meaning, the boost he could expect from a harvested soul was likely to be fairly consistent.

At least, as long as he stuck to cutting down small fry like these Shimmers.

Though professionally trained and bursting with vitality, their souls were nothing special. In contrast, the inexperienced Underworld Barbarians from his squad might be getting slaughtered, but their spiritual force was markedly distinct.

More importantly, although the overwhelming majority of recruits were getting steamrolled, the few barbarians like Sank-Uk who managed to incredibly finish off an opponent saw their spectral aura and killing intent noticeably increase. What was a negligible boost for Jake represented an immediate stat boost of about 1% for these untrained recruits.

It wasn't enough to revolutionize their combat performance, but that bit of passive killing intent was sometimes sufficient to momentarily rattle the Light Warriors they faced. It could buy them the split second they needed to dodge and sometimes even counter-attack.

In other words, even though 95% of their troop lay in pieces, soaked in their own blood, the remaining 5% saw their odds of survival skyrocket with each additional kill. More importantly, their spiritual power was also visibly surging.

'Should I switch sides?' Jake pondered seriously for a fleeting moment, realizing that harvesting the souls of his comrades-in-arms would probably be more time-efficient. He grimly dropped the thought when he acknowledged that his Main Mission made it impossible.

"In that case, I'll just kill them faster," he concluded, his voice tinged with melancholy.

Resigned, Hephais and Jake, who were both on the same wavelength, resumed their killing spree, slicing through their enemies like a chainsaw through wood. Their agility wasn't necessarily superior to that of their foes, but miraculously, their blades always found their marks.

At a pace of one kill every one to two seconds, they each took down more than forty Shimmers in under a minute. An irreversible gap had torn through the well-oiled killing machine that was the enemy's army.

Losing a single Light Warrior didn't make a huge difference initially, but when the death toll escalated to wiping out an entire platoon, a chain reaction was bound to unfold.

Because if the enemy was conscious of what was going down, so were their allies. The moment the few survivors on their side grasped the situation, they ceased throwing their lives away in futile charges against enemy lances. Instead, they frantically poured into the breach carved out by the unstoppable duo.

Chapter 1064: Life Lumyst Aura

"W-who the hell are these guys?" A wounded soldier blurted out, his voice tinged with awe, as he witnessed their combat prowess unfold in real-time.

He was one of the lucky few who had survived a battle beyond the Ironsoul Rampart, before being sent back to Havocspire due to his injuries. In this living hell, he had managed to kill a Light Warrior, thus setting himself apart from the run-of-the-mill newbies. And yet, his brain struggled to process the spectacle unraveling before his disbelieving eyes.

He was far from alone. The remaining fifty or so barbarians who were still alive after just one minute of battle could pat themselves on the back for hanging on this long. Whether they were greenhorn conscripts or pseudo-veterans who had survived a battle or two, all could see their adversaries were far from ordinary.

Each of these Light Warriors dwarfed them in size, strength, and skill. As if that weren't enough, their teamplay was on another level, flawless. Even their gear was top-notch.

The battle-hardened soldiers who had returned from the frontlines behind the Ironsoul Rampart knew all too well how dire their situation was. These rookies might not realize it, but once they had crossed the Ironsoul Rampart, they would have normally been endowed with at least one piece of spiritually enchanted gear to level the playing field.

This was to counterbalance the overwhelming physical advantage the Light Warriors had over them, not to mention that spirit enchantments were the only real edge they had over the warriors from the Lustra Plains. Armed with these magical weapons, defeating a stronger foe was within reach.

That's why the battle felt so damn hopeless. Not only had these recruits never seen combat, but they were still lugging around their shoddy gear from their basic tribes.

That was also why the veteran soldiers who had fought beyond the Ironsoul Rampart could still hold their own despite their apparent injuries. Otherwise, a kill or two wouldn't have been enough to offset their physical inferiority.

So, the grim tally was this: Of the fifty or so troops still alive, nearly half didn't even belong to their own unit but were soldiers who either had or had received at least one enchanted weapon.

The other recruits had made it either through sheer luck or by exploiting the breaches created by Sank-Uk, Jake, and Hephais to score some easy kills amid the chaos in their formation.

Which brings us back to two of their three main lynchpins: Jake and Hephais.

What the hell is wrong with these dudes? It was the unspoken question written all over the faces of the bewildered barbarians fighting in their wake, rushing to pick up the scraps. On one hand, they were relieved to still be alive; on the other, they couldn't shake the feeling that something was profoundly off.

Yet, among them was one who found their performance utterly expected: the formerly alcoholic vagabond.

His name was Ekho, and before today, he could never have imagined witnessing—much less surviving—such an event. His encounter with Jake was nothing short of divine intervention.

By sticking as close to Jake as possible, he had managed to finish off two severely wounded Shimmers who had miraculously survived the blade of the self-proclaimed Soulmaner King. It had been so easy that he was still disoriented.

Another paradox: despite penetrating deep into enemy ranks, he and the other recruits felt virtually no danger. The two monsters wrapped in human skin before them commanded the full attention of their opponents, drawing them in like moths to a flame.

Riding the wave of slaughter unleashed by the fearsome duo, the vagabond and other soldiers had all the time they wanted to closely observe them.

"It's unnerving," a soldier, looking like a mummy wrapped in bandages, finally blurted out. "I feel like these rookies aren't much faster or stronger than me, but somehow these big guys can't lay a finger on them. Are they one of those great weapon masters of legend?"

Ekho remained silent, finishing off a decapitation on a Shimmer rendered paralyzed by Hephais's pommel strike to the nape. Inside, however, his thoughts raced. With this third kill, he already felt a power surge.

"Wrong." A recruit, one Ekho recognized for having once envied his enchanted axe, spoke up solemnly. "They're even weirder than that. You may not have noticed, but with each kill, their physical skill and Lumyst Aura noticeably increase. That's normal enough. But here's where it gets freaky. Have you noticed they're not even winded after a minute of slaughter? Hell, they're not even breaking a sweat!"

The other recruits blinked in collective stupidity before exclaiming in unison, "Holy shit, you're absolutely right."

The mummy-like soldier squinted thoughtfully at Jake and Hephais's backs, then nodded gravely. "Now that you mention it, I notice something else. Normally, when your blade hits a bone, your arm is supposed to slow down or go numb. Since their speed

seems normal, they should have the same human limitations as us. Yet, even though their arm moves at an average speed, their blade never slows down while cutting through enemies. Whether it's flesh, rib cages, or skulls, they finish their stroke without any apparent slowdown. The only way to do that is if the motion is already so effortless that bones or armor in the blade's path make no difference."

Jake, who was half-listening while hacking through his fiftieth Shimmer, stiffened in embarrassment.

Hephais, yanking his scimitar from the eye socket of another Light Warrior, had the same guilty grimace. Damn it, do you think it's easy to restrain our strength against these weaklings? It feels like I'm acting in a freeze-frame scene...

However, taking note of these observations, Jake and Hephais immediately adjusted their micro-muscle control. Their skin grew slightly moist, their breathing quickened, and so did their heart rates. It was too late to fool these recruits, but with Meribelle covering their backs, it was an acceptable risk.

'If they survive, they can just join my regiment,' Jake internally concluded after recalibrating his persona.

Whether fortunate for him or unfortunate for the recruits, they soon had no time to pay him any further attention. Decimating a platoon in a minute might seem intense, but they still faced nearly 3,000 Light Warriors.

About 70 seconds after joining the battle, their entire recruit unit had already been wiped out. The handful of survivors had regrouped in one of the three breaches created by their three champions.

With no more reinforcements to clash against the wall of shield-bearers, the focus of all the enemy soldiers swiftly shifted to the three troublemakers.

"Pulsars, wipe them out before their reinforcements arrive!" bellowed the commanding officer in a razor-sharp tone, pointing at Sank-Uk, Jake, and Hephais.

Sank-Uk narrowed his eyes when he realized where the enemy commander's attention was fixated. Though he was undoubtedly causing the most devastation, having slain over 300 Shimmers and five Pulsars, the enemy general only had eyes for Jake and Hephais.

'Tsk. As expected from a Vitalist. The guy's got an eye for detail,' the former commander commented grimly.

In the realm of Light Warriors, "Shimmers" were those who've just awakened their Light/Life Lumyst Aura. Though it only provided a marginal boost to physical stats, it

only boosted their body without any perks for the soul or Spirit Body. In a low-tier skirmish packed with expendable grunts, it was a game-changer.

But here's the kicker: rather than soul-snatching, these guys vampirically siphoned life force to juice up their own Lumyst Auras.

"AAAARRRGH! Stop, for fuck's sake!"

Jake whipped around, his eyes widening at the nightmare unfolding behind him. One of the recruits was being torn limb from limb by a Light Warrior who was a beast among men.

Standing taller than a utility pole, this armored behemoth had muscles so chiseled they looked like they were carved out of stone, pulsating with grotesque veins. Unlike the other Light Warriors, this dude was wrapped in a veil of white light, as if donning a celestial aura.

In a flash, before Jake could even think of playing hero without breaking character, the recruit—already one arm short—was lifted overhead by the towering brute.

Gripping his prey with both hands, the behemoth then clenched his muscles as if about to tear through wet paper. With a bone-snapping crunch, the recruit's body split in two, unleashing a torrent of blood.

Blood splattered onto the giant's face, who then slurped it up like some distorted sommelier, savoring a vintage red. He then tossed aside the still-conscious halves of the body.

The moment they hit the ground, they withered instantly, like rotten fruit, and the radiant halo around the Light Warrior intensified, however slightly.

It was at this sobering moment that Jake, Hephaïstos, and the remaining recruits realized the appalling truth. Nearly three thousand of their comrades littering the battlefield were nothing but hollow husks.

And those shield-bearers and archers, the architects of this bloodbath? Their Lumyst Auras had all brightened, some teetering on the edge of evolving, just like the monstrosity that had just made a spectacle of his brutality.

Chapter 1065: Raw Desperation

The complexions of the surviving recruits immediately turned ashen with terror, realizing their decimated regiment had served only as fuel for the Lumyst Auras of these

godforsaken Light Warriors. These bastards had started with a physical, material, and technical edge, and now that gap had widened like a chasm.

'Judging by their auras, these so-called Shimmers had only 3 to 20 kills before this showdown,' Jake quickly assessed, gauging the intensity of their Lumyst Auras against his own. 'Now it's more like 11 to 30. Hell, some of these shield-bearers and archers have racked up over 50. As for this... Pulsar? Dude's on another level.'

We were talking about a physical stat boost ranging from 10 to 50%, give or take, based on their baseline attributes.

For Jake and Hephais, it made zero difference, but for the recruits who depended on them, it was a matter of life and death. Thanks to the leftovers, these newbies had managed one or two kills, but the resulting stat boost was laughable in comparison. They'd need to devour way more souls to turn their Lumyst Auras into game-changers.

Not that they'd have the chance if things kept going south. Neither Jake nor Hephais gave a flying fuck about these recruits, but they needed them as a smoke screen.

The gap between showcasing monstrous combat skills and single-handedly wiping out an army of well-trained and equipped Shimmers and Pulsars was vast. In the former case, the higher-ups would see their potential; in the latter, they'd get outcasted faster than a speedrunner glitching a game.

"The problem is these Pulsars," Jake surmised, his face grim as he sensed 11 lifeforces comparable to the brute who'd just torn their comrade in half.

[Apart from their Lumyst Auras, these Shimmers are two to three times stronger than our Underworld Barbarians, thanks to the nourishing atmosphere of the Lustra Plains. We can handle that with good swordplay and footwork], Xi recapped gravely, then added, [But these Pulsars are a whole different beast. Judging by the lifeforce in their aura, they've committed at least a hundred to five hundred murders each. At the very least, they're eight to fifteen times stronger than our guys and three times faster, not to mention their heightened durability. No matter how flawless your technique may seem, besting such adversaries would raise eyebrows. Unless...]

"Unless we rack up enough kills to make such a victory believable," Jake finished. "Got it. I'll keep killing, heading away from those big guys and let the chips fall where they may for the rest."

Whirling his wrist skillfully, Jake beheaded another Light Warrior in his path. With a swift mae geri, he kicked the still-standing corpse away and roared at the other recruits, "If you wanna live, stick to me like glue!"

Without further explanation, he broke into a sprint and rammed into the Shimmer in front of him, plunging his blade deep into the soldier's plexus up to the hilt. The enemy

soldier's feet momentarily lifted off the ground from the sheer force of the blow, but Jake continued his charge, using his new burden as a human shield.

Realizing Jake's intentions, the fearsome duo moved in perfect synchrony. Hephais dashed just behind him, slicing and incapacitating enemies in their path with surgical precision, never breaking stride.

The recruits, already strung out from the impending threat of the Pulsar, were paralyzed only for a nanosecond before their brains processed Jake's directive. Their eyes shot wide open, fueled by a gushing adrenaline rush. With only a moment's hesitation, they sprinted after their two saviors.

Ekho, already hot on their heels, was the first to snap out of his stupor. Knowing full well the lethal capabilities of Jake and Hephais, he understood these two juggernauts couldn't care less if he lived or died. Survival meant playing by their unforgiving rules and seizing every opening they offered.

Two steps behind Hephais, Ekho's blood pumped through his muscles like rocket fuel when a Light Warrior, superficially slashed by the assassin, began convulsing in his path.

"AAARRRH! Die!"

Rather than dodging, Ekho accelerated, piercing the dying soldier through the heart in a single thrust, much like Jake had done a moment before.

'Four kills,' Ekho tallied in his head, pivoting to yank his blade free without losing pace.

The recovering alcoholic wasn't the only one clinging to life. Close behind him, several other barbarians pushed to keep up. Among them were the mummy-wrapped soldier and the blue-blood recruit fighting with an enchanted ax.

The latter had managed to take down two Glitters without assistance. Compared to the other recruits, whose combat skills equaled that of peasants, at least he knew how to wield his weapon effectively.

Besides these two, there were several other male and female warriors clinging to life, their blades also slick with blood. In the Duskwight Lands, the scarcity of resources and the tribe system had eradicated any gender discrimination when it came to bearing arms. Though women weren't conscripted, they were free to enlist.

It partly explained why the three remaining women were so calm and determined. Unlike many other recruits, they'd chosen to be here. No one had forced them to risk their lives.

Still, they were Underworld Barbarians like the rest. An Earthling would need to have particular tastes to appreciate their "masculine" curves. Only one among them might be considered pretty by Earthling standards, but that was assuming they were into women over seven feet tall with a crossfit build.

Alas, despite their quick response to Jake's command and their strong will to live, their tiny cohort was soon overtaken by the Pulsar. They had hoped to slow him down using the other Glitters as a natural barrier, but they had underestimated his cunning leadership.

"Move, you worms, unless you want to die!" The giant, bathed in the blood of his latest kill, roared with a sinister gleam in his small red eyes, looking like a vampire on steroids.

Hearing his command, the Shimmers in his path instantly moved aside as if they had just been pricked.

A chilling premonition soon washed over the lagging recruits, their hairs standing on end at the diabolical roar of the monster they dreaded encountering again. One recruit risked a glance backward and upon seeing the unfolding scene, his eyes widened to their limits. Without explaining anything to his peers just ahead, he mustered every ounce of strength into his legs and bolstered forward with a desperate howl.

"What the fuc—"

Before his jostled comrades could question him, the giant's massive hands ominously closed around the skulls of two among them. Their faces turned ghostly pale as they understood whose hands these were, just before those hands twisted violently, like opening a stubborn bottle cap.

Crack!

The audible crunch that resounded when their necks snapped was unmistakably the same. In a blink, while the giant's hands were still clamped on their skulls, their bodies withered as if all the water had been drained from them.

The guy who had just hurried past them a moment ago nearly crapped his pants at the sight of his comrades dying a death he wouldn't wish upon his worst enemy.

"Fuck! Goddamn monster!" He cursed, sprinting even harder, overtaking one recruit, then another.

Unfortunately, after blowing past seven or eight more comrades, his turbo mode fueled by raw desperation couldn't get him ahead of the pack. The other recruits running in front of him had the same life-or-death urgency. While he had waited for a deathly trigger to go all-in, the others had been pushing at 120% even before the return of the Pulsar.

Less than fifteen seconds later, despite Jake and Hephais' determined efforts to clear a way through the mob, the recruit finally shit his pants for real when the gnarled hand of the Star finally closed around his skull...

Chapter 1066: Switching Gears

Jake, who hadn't missed a beat of this twisted turn of events, cursed under his breath as he saw a recruit barely seven or eight meters behind him get snatched up by the Pulsar on their tail. In a fit of frustration, he momentarily broke character, cleaving through both the helmet and skull of his opponent with a downward slash so ferocious that his rusted sword shattered upon impact.

"...Fuck. Just my luck," he muttered, examining the considerably shortened remnants of his blade.

It was a miracle that his piece-of-shit sword had lasted this long, given the ferocity of his strikes and the tough hide these Shimmers had for skin. He had to act, and fast; otherwise, in ten seconds, he'd have no choice but to go nuclear once the rest of his unit was wiped out.

'Maybe that's for the best...' Both he and Hephais sighed inwardly, exchanging a knowing nod.

The shadow assassin continued to carve a path for them, blade dancing in the dark. As for Jake, he abruptly turned, hurling what remained of his sword like a shuriken aimed straight for the eye of the Pulsar about to crush the traumatized recruit's skull.

Well, that was the plan. Instead, the giant tilted its head slightly, redirecting the sword's trajectory. The faint halo of vital energy around its face suddenly narrowed, focusing on the anticipated point of impact.

Cling!

The broken sword instantly shattered into even more shards, leaving nothing but a slight reddish mark on the enemy's forehead. Worse still, either out of reflex or sheer rage, the Pulsar's grip on the recruit's skull intensified exponentially, collapsing the head as easily as if it were an overripe tomato.

Thus, the recruit who had already stained his shabby clothes in fear met a gruesome end, staining them once more—this time with blood and brain matter.

Still, Jake was dead set on not letting things slide further downhill. His face an icy mask of apathy, he dryly inquired of Meribelle through their telepathic link,

'When are you planning on being useful? When the only recruit still breathing besides me and Hephais turns out to be the Soulmancer King you're so pathetically trying to hide right under our nose?'

Meribelle, whose soft gray eyes had been fixated on the Inner Wall—where an even bloodier battle raged—jolted at hearing this, her heart growing cold. What, he's already figured it out?!

Only then did she cast a confused glance downward, letting loose a stream of curses as she took stock of the situation. In barely 75 seconds, almost the entire recruit unit had been massacred. She'd been so busy watching the skies that she'd forgotten these recruits weren't yet fully equipped, and the enemies they faced were no ordinary foes.

As she assessed the handful of survivors still standing behind Jake, Hephais, and Sank-Uk, she instantly realized how endangered her king's true identity had become. Even if that cunning foreigner was bluffing, this slaughter had considerably narrowed down the list of suspects.

Evaluating the battlefield below with a sweeping gaze, she finally replied with an unconvincing calm, 'If I go down there, their Lifemancer will make his move. It'll only make things worse.'

'Then what can you do? Make up your mind, fast,' Jake retorted aggressively.

Seeing the Pulsar already on the move to drain the life out of its next victim, Meribelle's thoughts raced before she telepathically shouted, 'I can immobilize it temporarily.'

'How long?' Jake fired back.

'Long enough.'

'Very well. Be ready.'

Without another word, Jake broke into a stoic sprint towards the Pulsar, a behemoth nearly twice his size. Ekho and the other soldiers were stunned as they watched him abruptly change course. But it was the blue-blooded recruit armed with an enchanted axe who was most caught off guard when Jake effortlessly snatched the weapon from his hands, as smooth as a master pickpocket.

Twirling his new weapon without breaking stride, Jake cracked a satisfied smile, intrigued as he checked its attributes.

"Damn, with this battleaxe, I could've single-handedly defeated that Pulsar without Meribelle's help," he grumbled, tinged with bitterness.

[Iron Battleaxe (+4): Attributes: Wind (strong), Metal (strong). Graces: Enhanced Durability, Cutting Wind, Self-repair. A sacred heirloom from the White Ash Tribe. An ordinary iron axe, yet one that has endured four consecutive spiritual enchantments upon accidental and repeated contact with Spirit Lumyst Water from the Middle Shores. Its spiritual essence is awakened enough to sense and follow the intentions of the wielder without being sentient.]

In a few quick strides, Jake was face-to-face with the giant. The Pulsar had razor-sharp instincts and, sensing Jake's palpable killing intent, had already drawn and swung his own weapon, a massive butcher's cleaver with uniform brown striations.

"Too naive," the giant sneered, only for his expression to shift as a malevolent spectral force swooped down from the sky, freezing his mind and sending his consciousness into a stupor.

His vision blurred, and a crushing dizziness enveloping him, the Pulsar didn't even have the chance to feel wronged before his viewpoint whirled chaotically. Headless body, sky, and earth rapidly alternated in his field of view until the fetid darkness of blood-soaked mud became his final tableau.

Standing atop the decapitated head of the giant—now further embedded in the muck—Jake swung his new axe once more to shake off the blood. The crescent-moon twin blades looked ordinary, even a bit worn, but their bluish glow suggested otherwise.

"Not bad. It's not as good as my own gear, but with this, even a rookie could easily slice through a Light Warrior way out of his league if luck serves him right."

At the moment he'd struck the Pulsar, Jake had braced for multiple attempts to decapitate the giant without blowing his cover. Yet, in the end, it hadn't been necessary. A single axe stroke did the job.

Inches before making contact with the brute's neck, it had begun to split apart as if an invisible cutting force preceded the axe. In the end, the sword never even touched the enemy's skin.

"Too bad it's not my weapon," Jake grimaced, tossing the axe back to its grateful owner who had feared he'd never see it again. He would have been a dead man walking without it.

Not willing to go unarmed, Jake reluctantly picked up the massive cleaver from his most recent kill. He had hoped a Pulsar's weapon would be decent, and he wasn't disappointed.

[Great Wooden Cleaver (+2): Attribute: Wood. Graces: Enhanced Hardness, Living Weapon. Carved from a single branch of a massive tree growing somewhere in the Lustra Plains. Its vitality has been awakened twice, making this wood stronger and

sturdier than ordinary wood. It neither rots nor deteriorates as long as its vital needs are met.]

The +2 was deceptive. It might suggest a likeness to the +4 of his previous axe, but the effects were markedly different. The former granted life or increased vitality to an object, promoting mutations and evolutions, while the latter infused spirituality into an object, its effects generally less foreseeable but often more spectacular.

A spirit, not being dependent on its vessel, could theoretically be attributed to anything, whereas the reverse wasn't true. Bringing life to an inherently inorganic or artificial object was far more challenging.

As such, the Lustra Plains warriors had little choice but to use weapons made from plant material to somewhat compete with the equipment crafted by the Spirit Enchanters of the Duskwight Lands. The outcome was inevitably inferior.

"But at least, it's hard and big enough," Jake mentally consoled himself as he hefted the enormous cleaver onto his shoulder.

The only major snag: the souls of these far more menacing Pulsars barely offered more sustenance to his Lumyst Aura than the insignificant Shimmers he'd been slicing and dicing by the dozen. Turns out, lifeforce didn't help the soul that much at lower stages.

Catching up to the other recruits who had drifted away from him in pursuit of Hephais' breakthrough, Jake kept swinging his new cleaver to annihilate any Shimmer daring enough to wander too close.

"Jake, two Pulsars on your right," Meribelle's voice rang out abruptly in his head.

"On it."

Hephais must have gotten a similar heads-up because, without hesitation, he snatched back the axe he had just handed back to the newbie. He then leapt, weapon clutched in both hands above his head, toward an armored colossus bathed in a faint luminescent halo.

Just like before, the towering figure froze momentarily before the strike. With a swift and savage motion, the assassin cut in half him, splattering gore in every direction.

In the same fluid sequence, Jake reached his targets. Dodging a claymore with a nimble sidestep and cursing Meribelle for not stunning them properly, he summarily slayed both giants.

Just like that, with the interference of a Soulmaner and a better arsenal, a situation that seemed fucked from the get-go was suddenly back under control.

