

The Oracle Paths

- Chapter 1067: Our Fight Will Be Fair |

Chapter 1067: Our Fight Will Be Fair

For the next twenty seconds, the air was filled only with the sharp whistling of blades cutting through flesh, followed by the guttural gurgles of their dying enemies. About fifty Light Warriors were laid low in that brief timespan.

The Pulsars seemed to have learned their lesson—none tried to ambush the duo again. It was mildly unsettling, but they found themselves quietly pleased by it.

By contrast, Sank-Uk and the few soldiers behind him were having a hell of a time.

Just as the former commander had successfully beheaded a towering Pulsar that had targeted his recruit squad, the situation went from zero to shitshow when the enemy regiment's big boss appeared in a blur, halting his uncontrolled charge.

The moment Sank-Uk looked up and recognized not just the man but his overwhelming life force, his arrogance drained from his eyes, replaced by grim solemnity. In a split second, he knew that the guy facing him was going to be one hell of a tough cookie.

'A powerful Vitalist, even by their standards,' he quickly assessed, backpedaling with a nervous leap.

A Vitalist was the stage beyond Shimmer and Pulsar.

Shimmers had just awakened their Life Lumyst Aura but couldn't actively control it. Aside from a stat boost, it wasn't much use to them.

Pulsars had limited control over their Aura, imbued with Life and Holy Light attributes, the latter coating their bodies in a faint luminescent shield that passively defended them from attacks. However, they couldn't externalize it for offense.

Vitalists were the third stage of Light Warriors. Besides being significantly stronger in every aspect—capable of easily dismantling a squad of Pulsars barehanded within a minute—they could also coat their weapons and projectiles with their Aura and even emit it a few meters to boost their troop's regenerative powers or shield them. Control over this Aura beyond their bodies was still basic, only Lifemancers being able to wield it effectively.

As if things weren't dicey enough, six remaining Pulsars stood right behind their leader, forming an elite shock squad capable of achieving any mission, even the most perilous. As soon as their leader blocked Sank-Uk's path, the six giants fanned out around him, encircling him in a tight formation to isolate him from the troops under his wing.

Once he'd trapped his prey within the "circle" formed by his hulking subordinates, the towering man at their helm—holding a spiked club nonchalantly on his shoulder—calmly approached Sank-Uk.

"Fancy a duel between commanders to decide the outcome?" he casually remarked, picking at his ear as if it were standard procedure. "I promise, our fight will be fair."

Sank-Uk glanced left and right, as if counting the Pulsars, before sizing up his opponent with a frown.

The newcomer was an genuine giant, towering over five meters tall, dwarfing the other Pulsars under his command. Sporting the build of an ogre or troll rather than a human, this Light Warrior was different even without discussing his Aura.

Each of his fingers was as thick as a baby's forearm. He had long, wild, and unkempt gray hair, cascading down his back like a venerable lion's mane. His beard was, conversely, rather short and well-trimmed, but his large, oiled mustache curled at the ends, calling into question the aesthetic sensibilities of this foe. He also sported short claws, protruding fangs, a crimson third eye in the middle of his forehead, and three curved, goat-like horns to complete this nightmarish visage.

As for his gear, like all Light Warriors, he wore heavy plate armour cut from a single block of pure wood. His was nearly blood-red, marked by numerous darker striations and circular patterns. His club was made from the same tree.

"Do I really have a choice?" Sank-Uk finally responded, keeping his tone level after assessing his opponent. "And by the way, I doubt a fight against a Vitalist can be just while your Lifemancer backs you up."

"Can't argue with that, hehe," the Vitalist chuckled sinisterly before adding, "But I can promise that none of my men will interfere. That's more than you deserve, given your situation."

"I can't deny that either," Sank-Uk conceded, his expression grim.

In this context, Sank-Uk should've been brimming with confidence, as he still had his trusty guandao to accompany him even though his armour had been destroyed by the titan Featherfall. This glaive wasn't just steel; it had undergone three spiritual awakenings, setting it leagues above standard weaponry, even among his peers.

Here, being a Spirit Enchanter was a revered profession, a lynchpin allowing the Underworld Barbarians to stand toe-to-toe against their more physically superior eternal rivals.

Yet, even with the tribes' unyielding respect, these Spirit Enchanters struggled to tilt the scale of the capricious 50% success rate of spirit enchantments. A mere 1% boost in success rate made one worthy of near god-like reverence.

The catch was, the more successful consecutive enchantments an item received, the harder it became to influence the next one. Although the odds never changed, the spiritual energy and Aetheric laws involved scaled with a frightening complexity. This is why anything enchanted beyond +3 skyrocketed in value, bordering on mythical status when it came to precious artifacts, which were already a pain to acquire or fabricate.

Only common items like the iron axe Jake had borrowed earlier could be easily produced at higher enchantment levels.

In layman's terms, to forge a +3 enchanted guandao like his, probably seven or eight other weapons of similar caliber had been meticulously crafted, only to be obliterated in failed enchantment attempts. A failed spiritual awakening meant the item was annihilated, reduced to mere Aether.

Therefore, unless one was among the elite who had fully cultivated their Lumyst Aura, a failed enchantment was financially catastrophic, with not even scrap left to salvage.

Given the high risk of failure in the Duskwight Lands, clients usually commissioned their chosen Spirit Enchanter, providing duplicate items in advance to maximize the odds. When Sank-Uk had his guandao forged, he was dirt-poor and gambled everything.

Miraculously, it paid off—thanks to the grace of Lumyst. His triple-enchanted blade had become a trusted companion in every battle, growing alongside him.

Yet, sizing up the formidable lifeforce radiating from his opponent's armor and cudgel, Sank-Uk quickly realized that his superior equipment wouldn't make up for his physical shortcomings. His armor, after all, had been utterly decimated by Featherfall, reduced to scrap metal.

Sensing his foe's unease, the Vitalist sized him up disdainfully before mockingly saying,

"Don't take it personally that I've targeted you first instead of the two others. Something's off about them, and they have the Soulmaner's protection. She seems willing to risk her life for them. But although you're the deadliest, she totally ignores you. So my choice is clear: you die first."

As the giant's words trailed off, the eyes of both combatants narrowed. A split second later, Sank-Uk's widened in outrage and disbelief. Roaring furiously, he barely parried

an incoming blade from the left with his cracked gauntlet, while his guandao whirled unexpectedly to his right to thwart another attack.

GONG!

The Vitalist's enormous cudgel clashed against his spear, sending echoing shockwaves. But another blade, sneaky as hell, managed to find its way through a crack in his gauntlet, piercing his clenched fist straight through."

"Y-you son of a—"

Sank-Uk barely had time to curse when the other five Pulsars descended upon him in unison, piercing him with their respective weapons before he could even react. Merciless executioners, they pulled out their blood-soaked blades and plunged them back in, twisting the knives as they did.

Feeling death's icy grip, all the killing intent and resentment fueled by his own Lumyst Aura erupted forth in a last-ditch burst of fury and self-preservation. It froze the six Pulsars in their tracks, even stopping the heart of one.

Unfortunately, it did jack shit to halt the Vitalist's cudgel mid-swing. A moment later, Sank-Uk's world went pitch black as his brains were scattered to the four winds.

Chapter 1068: I Really Can't Help You

The moment Sank-Uk's life was snuffed out in the enemy ambush, Jake and Hephais stiffened almost imperceptibly, a grim frown hardening their features.

"We fucked up." The assassin smirked sardonically as he thrust his dagger into the heart of a Shimmer attempting a backstab, not even bothering to look.

"I figured it would go down like this anyway," Jake conceded without a trace of remorse as he cleaved through another enemy with a brutal diagonal slash.

Switching effortlessly to a reverse grip, he skewered two Light Warriors lined up attempting to stab him from behind and clarified, "His soul should be resilient enough to last a while without degrading. If he's still himself by then, I might just bring him back."

He wouldn't do it for just anyone, but the 3000-man commander knew his true identity and had proven to be reliable so far.

[Keep in mind his Spirit Lumyst Aura also includes the tormented souls of his victims,] Xi promptly reminded him. [Because his Aura is linked to his soul, he can't shake off those vengeful souls waiting to be refined. Now that he has no body to anchor to, his Spirit

Body is free to roam, but since he's not a Soulmaner, he probably has no clue what to do with it.

[Two scenarios could unfold if we take too long. Either the angry souls will treat him like a gourmet meal and devour him, or they'll harass his mind to the point of driving him mad. If the latter occurs, he'll become a wandering soul devoid of self-awareness like the others, driven only by the urge to consume spiritual energy to sustain his fragile existence.

[Even if neither of the first two scenarios occur, I suspect there's something in the spectral energy of the Duskwight Lands that will eventually warp his personality and erode his memories. The only real question is how long that will take.]

After a brief pondering, Jake had to admit that all three scenarios were entirely plausible. On their way to Havocspire, they had regularly encountered wandering souls, but none seemed lucid, let alone intelligent.

Statistically, just considering the recently fallen barbarians on the battlefield, there should have been a bunch of Spirit Bodies around that resembled the dead soldiers from both sides. That wasn't the case, which indeed raised suspicions.

"Unfortunately, we've got more pressing issues to deal with," Jake sighed, catching from the corner of his eye that Sank-Uk's dependent barbarians had been completely slaughtered during his short introspection.

Wasting no time, with one command from their leader, the many rows of Shimmers obstructing them and their next two targets swiftly parted like the Red Sea, creating a clear path straight to them. The murderous Vitalist and his six Pulsars had already darted inside, closing the tens of meters that separated them in a flash.

"Shit! Jake, I can't keep going," Hephais cursed, warning him that he saw no way out of the situation without upping their game.

Jake's brow twitched as well, also not seeing how to take down the Vitalist convincingly without breaking character.

'Meribelle?'

'Huff... I really can't help you! Cough... Seriously!' She exclaimed, panting nervously, making Jake realize her clash with the enemy Lifemancer had kicked off with a bang.

Apparently, he hadn't appreciated her intervention, which had cost the lives of five Pulsars. At least, that's how he explained what had just transpired. Otherwise, how could two new recruits, talented as they may be, dispatch his elites?

It was a dreamlike and intense aerial battle, involving hundreds of malevolent specters who shrieked loudly whenever white will-o'-the-wisps detonated upon contact, releasing a blinding sacred radiance. For these wraiths, it was like a splash of acid corroding their ghostly flesh in the blink of an eye. Smoke and ectoplasmic liquid oozed out of their bodies with every contact with these radiant orbs.

At first glance, their duel seemed balanced, but in reality, the Lifemancer clearly had the upper hand. To stay airborne, he rode a fearsome armored beast that looked like what you'd get if a mad scientist crossbred a triceratops with a pteranodon.

This formidable creature seemed to command a flock of fifteen similar, albeit significantly smaller, flying beasts. Together, they put Meribelle under immense pressure, forcing her to consume her psychic energy.

To minimize the damage, she had already summoned beneath her feet what looked like a fluffy black cloud streaked occasionally with arcs of purple electricity. Her new "ride" was remarkably agile and maneuverable, while making contact with it rewarded you with a lethal electric shock.

Every so often, Meribelle would pull out a tangible lightning javelin from the latter and throw it manually at targets within reach, like Zeus. Unfortunately, the female Soulmancer wasn't too skilled in this area, missing her mark two times out of three. It didn't help that her opponents were quick, with excellent reflexes.

When she did manage to hit one, two others would seize the opportunity to swoop in on her. If not, the Lifemancer himself would charge directly at her. He fought with a majestic wooden bow and, unlike Meribelle, was exceptionally skilled with it. Within a few aerial exchanges, she already had two Aura-coated arrows embedded deep in her right thigh and another more problematic one in her liver.

Just when Jake thought things were going south, he finally saw the young woman counterattack. A sinister-looking black specter that had been sneaking inconspicuously amid the bright detonations finally reached the Lifemancer after breaking through the will-o'-the-wisp firewall.

The specter, surprisingly solid, savagely slashed at the Lifemancer's chest with a claw, eviscerating him clean through while drastically lowering his body temperature to the point that ice formed on his skin. Even the natural shield provided by his Life Lumyst Aura had been instantly breached.

Once injured, the man in the white robe temporarily looked like a walking corpse, aging several decades in the blink of an eye. But just when he seemed screwed, dozens of white light tendrils erupted from his palms like hungry snakes, piercing the sated, fleeing specter at lightning speed. A moment later, it was the gluttonous specter's turn to wither away before completely evaporating.

At the same time, the Lifemancer regained his lost years, a healthy glow replacing his previous sickly pallor. In the end, Meribelle's attack had been entirely ineffective, while she remained wounded.

'I've really got my hands full right now!' She telepathically repeated, nervously noticing he wasn't responding. If he did nothing, the real Soulmaner King would have no choice but to intervene, and that would be a complete disaster.

'...'

Jake frowned with extreme discontent, noticing that the Vitalist and his crew were now only two strides away from them. Weighing the pros and cons, he finally turned towards Hephais and said,

"Kill the guy with the club; I'll handle the others."

This was his compromise. The assassin was supposed to have perished, and he could easily slip away through the shadows without raising any suspicions. The other recruits would be wary of him, but as long as one of them appeared "ordinary," he should be able to explain what had happened to their superiors if questioned.

Hephais instantly understood the implications of this order, but internally he was more than thrilled to recover his anonymity. He never shined brighter than when everyone was oblivious to his existence.

"Consider it done."

With a fluidity and speed that belied his previous pace, the assassin raised his foot for a regular sidestep, then suddenly turned into a silent blur before reappearing, arm extended, behind the muscular Vitalist who was twice his size. Having already returned the enchanted ax to its owner, his bare fist closed except for his index finger, which turned black as a bottomless abyss.

Then using it like a rapier, he pointed it beneath the giant's left shoulder blade and poked his heart at hypersonic speed, his arm shooting out the other side of the man's chest like a bullet. A web of darkness blossomed almost immediately in his punctured heart, quickly spreading throughout his body, slowing his metabolism and applying all sorts of debuffs to the warrior.

'Neat,' Jake telepathically praised, snatching for the third consecutive time the enchanted ax that the blue-blooded recruit had just retrieved with tearful eyes.

Armed with his giant cleaver and the ax, Jake then charged past the left-for-dead Vitalist and, waving his weapons leisurely, plunged into the fray. Accelerating just before collision, and displaying inhuman agility and technique, he contorted impossibly to

dodge their blades. Then, with an acrobatic spin, he spread his arms and began whirling in the air, decapitating three of the five Pulsars in one swift move.

The other two managed to jerk their heads out of his blades' trajectory just in time, their blood running cold as they thought about what had just happened. Right before impact, a crushing, murderous pressure had engulfed them, submerging them in an ocean of terror and insignificance.

The only reason they had survived was that they were bringing up the rear, and their companion had absorbed the brunt of the pressure for them.

But just as Jake was about to relaxedly eliminate the remaining two Pulsars, a enormous shadow towered over his own, and the voices of Ekho and the other recruits suddenly yelled in terrified unison,

"Jake! Behind you!"

Chapter 1069: You Asked For It

Following the terrified warning from the few barbarians relying on him, Jake remained utterly stoic, merely scowling in the darkness. Initially, he was more curious about when they had learned his name. Most likely, Ekho must've clued them in on their way to Havocspire.

CLANG!

The enemy commander's massive club, which should have been knocking on death's door, was barely intercepted by Hephais, inches away from smashing into Jake's skull. The Egean had uninvitedly sprung from his shadow just in time to block the deceitful attack.

As if he needed saving... Finally turning around, Jake calmly witnessed the Vitalist getting his heart crushed a second time by the emotionless assassin. Yet, a flicker of confusion could be detected in his cold eyes, a reaction quite uncharacteristic of him.

Shifting his gaze between the dying giant and Hephais with a disapproving curl of his lip, Jake droned,

"Failing to kill your targets doesn't really seem like your style... Is this guy that hard to kill?"

Unfazed, Hephais shrugged, "If I accept an assignment, I never fail. He should be dead."

"T-then why is he still alive?" One of the recruits stammered, sweating bullets as they noticed the Vitalist's injuries had mysteriously vanished as if time had rewound.

As if his heart hadn't just been ripped out twice in less than three seconds, the shamed and enraged commander flashed a carnivorous smile tinged with sadism and resentment, then swung his club at the duo with all his might for the third time.

"DIE, VERMIN! You can't kill me!"

Jake, who had predicted this unexpected 'resurrection,' had already stepped back a few paces to give his comrade room. As he resumed slaughtering the other Shimmers who were showing a bit too much interest in the other recruits and himself, he found he couldn't contain them all. Those approaching from different directions had already resumed slaughtering his frightened flock.

The poor surviving Underworld Barbarians were overwhelmed from all sides, falling to the Shimmers' sword strikes every moment. Within seconds, they were reduced to twelve, then eleven... then just seven.

"It's annoying," Jake was finding it increasingly difficult to maintain the facade he had imposed on himself for his own benefit. The urge to unleash hell and devour everything was eating at him from the inside.

Fortunately, he could count on Hephais.

SLASH!

Seconds later, a spectacular spray of blood erupted in all directions, and a heavy, bearded ogre's head flew through the air, landing a few meters away in the mud like a thrown bocce ball. Jake glanced back to see that the seemingly immortal Vitalist had been cleanly decapitated.

Even more brutally, Hephais had targeted his soul this time. The commander couldn't be more dead.

As Hephais prepared to wipe out the remaining Shimmers at an evidently paranormal speed, he froze in his tracks when the giant's living mace swung down at him again, its rage amplified tenfold.

When Jake and Hephais locked eyes with it, they saw that this time its eyes were bloodshot and bulging, as if the thing was no longer conscious. Catching the overpowering mace strike with one hand, the assassin couldn't help but raise an eyebrow.

"I gotta admit, this is beyond my wheelhouse. Its soul is gone, but it's still kicking." He observed, deciding it was time to pull out the big guns as ordinary attacks were proving futile.

His arm blurring suddenly, he started slicing through the tenacious Vitalist with his bare hand, cutting through the air and his target thousands of times in a heartbeat. A blast of flesh, blood, and bone dust splattered several meters around him, giving the battlefield a fresh coat of paint.

"Done," Hephais coolly announced, lowering his hand now drenched in the giant's blood.

As for the few surviving Underworld Barbarians like Ekho or the mummified soldier, they were dumbstruck, jaws practically hitting the floor. As for the Shimmers, they were stunned.

'W-what in the world just happened here? Is this guy even human?'

That was pretty much the kind of thoughts one could read on their faces, transfixed with disbelief. The notion that such a monster was among them was as reassuring as it was terrifying for the conscripts.

But while Jake had done his best to keep a low profile, a vein of frustration throbbed on his forehead as he caught the recruits glancing at him with fleeting suspicion. Far from vindicating him, the shadow assassin's extraordinary performance seemed to have the opposite effect.

'Fucking Vitalist and Lifemancer,' Jake cursed inwardly, figuring it was because of these two that his first battle was such a pain in the ass.

His irritation only escalated when he looked up to see Meribelle on the brink of defeat. Covered in her own blood from head to toe, she had aged several decades compared to just moments before.

In contrast, the Lifemancer opposite her was still looking dapper, even his white robe remaining immaculate. Slowly but surely, he was draining her vitality, inevitably lessening the young woman's chances of turning the tide.

'Great! A skilled Lifemancer and his Vitalist puppet right on my first official battle. What a shitty day...'

As if the situation needed to worsen further, the enemy commander, who was supposed to be irreversibly obliterated, was already swinging his club at Hephais' face again. The latter was now genuinely baffled.

It wasn't until he noticed several Shimmers lying dead in a familiar state of decay that the Egean finally grasped what was going on.

"A Vitality Link?" The assassin finally blurted out after passively parrying the unkillable giant's attacks for nearly half a minute. "Does this mean I have to wipe out his entire regiment to finally take him down? Or is this the Lifemancer's doing?"

Hephais, whose affinity was with darkness, obviously couldn't perceive and even less so cut such links. If he wanted to put an end to this virtually immortal giant, that was indeed the only way.

Jake didn't suffer from this limitation at all. Not only could he clearly see lifeforce, but he could also see the invisible threads of life connecting them.

It was indeed a Vitality Link. More ancient and primitive than the one provided by their own Faction Skill, but it had the merit of not depending on an Aether Network on the verge of collapse.

From the get-go, Jake had wondered about the purpose of those life threads linking all these Light Warriors. Now, it was crystal clear.

It also shed new light on General Torvi's cynical words: "So go on, die with honor, Commander. Ensure that you and your precious recruits create an opening for us that makes your deaths worthwhile."

Apparently, he meant that shit literally. They'd have to wipe out an entire army of a commander from the Lustra Plains just to get a shot at delivering a real death blow. Otherwise, they were basically facing off against Voldemort and his thousands of Horcruxes—well, maybe millions or billions for heavy hitters like the Celestial.

Picturing what could've happened if he had targeted the Celestial from the start, Jake patted himself on the back for his caution before bursting into laughter. Hephais and Meribelle, who were both entangled with their own unkillable foes, couldn't help but shoot him a sidelong glance as he chuckled to himself.

Hephais, who knew Jake better than the female Soulmaner, inquired telepathically, 'You got a way to kill them?'

Jake instantly regained his composure and replied with a pessimistic expression, "Not only can I kill them, but I could also replicate the same thing if I felt like it. Too bad I'm fighting for the Dusken Throne, so giving it a whirl is off the table."

The assassin fully understood why Jake's expression was so grim. If it were up to him to kill this Vitalist and Lifemancer, flying under the radar would be a no-go.

BANG!

Just as Jake had almost accepting himself to getting his hands dirty after less than three minutes of battle, Soulmancer Meribelle's nosedive and icy crash were the final straws that broke the camel's back.

Or rather, the incoming allied reinforcements closing in on their position. On paper, it was good news, but he knew it would only prolong this already prolonged battle and make it harder for them to explain how they'd defeated an entire army by themselves.

Eyeing the agonizing Soulmancer not far off, the seven trembling recruits, and his comrade Hephais who was yawning while entertaining the Vitalist in a game of whack-a-club, his face gradually darkened. For a moment, all that could be heard was the drumming of the rain, its icy silence drowning out everything else.

At long last, Jake exhaled with a deep sigh, his eyes resigned, and said,

"Fine. You asked for it."

Chapter 1070: Tug Of War

Hephais and Meribelle's ears perked noticeably upon hearing his sinister declaration. The assassin was merely curious about what Jake was planning, but as for Meribelle, the female Soulmancer who had recently been on the receiving end of his power, she was already spooked about what would come next.

'Hopefully, this will give me a good idea of the full extent of this foreigner's abilities.' She thought to herself, sharing a fleeting glance with one of the seven recruits still alive.

Their respective expressions, while fitting their roles, inadvertently betrayed the fact that they were praying this self-proclaimed second Soulmancer King's power didn't exceed that of the original. As for Meribelle, she was indeed on the verge of taking her last breath. If a solution wasn't found soon, her chances of survival would only dim further.

Dying of old age at just 29—making her one of the youngest Master Soulmancers in the Duskwight Lands—what a cruel fate that would be...

That's why Hephais and Jake's intervention, though far from ideal, was welcome. If neither had stepped up, the true Soulmancer King would have had no choice but to kill everyone and flee with Meribelle, or blow his cover to the remaining recruits and foes.

For reasons only he knew, the actual Soulmancer King had no doubt that the Radiant Conclave had ways to quickly locate him if he even let slip a tiny sliver of his aura.

Then the moment of truth arrived in a manner as brutal as it was spectacular. Just as Meribelle wondered how Jake planned to dispatch the seemingly indestructible Vitalist

and the even tougher Lifemancer who had drained her life force, he abruptly lifted his arm and grabbed at something in the air.

At that instant, the gesture seemed almost comical and pointless to nearly everyone, except for the Lifemancer, who turned as pale as a sheet, his eyes bulging in amazement at what he'd just witnessed.

"I-Impossible!" He screamed in shock and horror before making a hasty about-face to try and flee.

But it was already too late. Jake's intervention was complete.

The roughly 1,500 Shimmers still alive, the Vitalist, and the Lifemancer all froze in place, whatever they were doing. Then, Jake casually clenched his fist, as if pulling on something.

The next instant, the reality of the nine witnesses spared by his mysterious action shattered. In less time than it takes for a photon to circle the Earth, the gazes of over 1,500 enemies went glassy, and their once-vibrant bodies rapidly fossilized on the brink of disintegration. A nanosecond later, their bones also disintegrated, turning back into dust.

The raging winds of the hurricane swept up these ashes soon after, scattering the last traces of their existence in all directions, when the torrential rain hadn't already mixed them with mud...

For six of the seven recruits, it was as if absolutely nothing had happened, making the scene even more traumatic and unbelievable. One moment they were fighting 1,500 Light Warriors, and the blink of an eye later, they were alone, standing in shock in the blood-soaked mire.

Without this indisputable evidence reminding them that a difficult battle had indeed occurred, they could've thought they'd imagined it all.

However... For those with more advanced perceptive abilities, their stunned bewilderment was even more paralyzing. What they had just seen had profoundly shaken them on multiple levels. Even Hephais, who had high expectations, couldn't help but shiver after what he had just seen.

"W-what did you do?" Meribelle stammered in a raspy voice. "Did you snatch their souls? But why did their bodies end up in this state?"

Pulling a soul out of a body against its will was one of the ace cards of the most formidable Soulmanagers. Strong Commanders and Generals could also passively accomplish such a feat, thanks to their Lumyst Aura acting as a potent magnet for wandering souls.

However, "wandering" was the operative word. When a soul still resided in its body, forcing it out was exponentially more challenging. Only when the spiritual power gap between a Soulmaner and their target was abyssal could such an event have a chance of occurring.

For Meribelle, it was a non-starter. The same went for Hephais, although he could perform something similar by binding the souls of his prey to their shadows before snatching them away.

But what Jake had just accomplished went well beyond just snatching their souls. That was the part neither Meribelle nor Hephais could perceive, hence their puzzled expressions.

"Original Spell: Morphic Grasp, Third Form, Essence Snatch," Jake finally responded, his demeanor calm, addressing Meribelle, Hephais, and the probable Soulmaner King.

He had just improvised that last name.

Pretending to clench his fist as if holding something, his eyes glowed ominously in the twilight, and sporting an evil grin, he said, "Can't you see them? All these life threads."

Seeing his angelic face flash such a demonic smile while speaking so casually sent a chill down Meribelle's spine—even though she was already at death's door. The expressions on Hephais and one other recruit shifted too, turning deadly serious.

Reflecting on their discovery of the Vitality Link used by the enemy Vitalist, they could easily guess what Jake had just done. Too bad for them, or perhaps fortunate for their mental health, they vastly underestimated the scale of his action.

His counterattack was just beginning.

For he not only held over 1500 life threads and souls belonging to these Shimmers in his hand, but there were also two more from the deceased Vitalist and Lifemancer. The spell could have ended there, but it seemed the Lifemancer was also connected to other sources, their life threads fading into the distance...

That's why these Lifemancers were such a pain to kill. Typically, a Soulmaner would focus on either destroying or capturing their souls and Spirit Bodies to take them down. Commanders and Generals would rely on Soul Damage through their Lumyst Aura to achieve the same result.

Otherwise, they were notoriously unkillable, each one connected to another in a sprawling network of life threads that reached as far as the Celestial itself. How this differed or was similar to his own faction mattered little.

What mattered... was that they were all connected.

Adjusting his stance, grounding himself as if preparing to pull something with all his might, Jake's grin turned into a wicked smirk, and he chuckled to himself, "Hope they're ready for this little game of Tug Of War, hehe."

Then Jake pulled with all his might, both with his hands and his Essence Snatch ability powered by his most advanced True Will. For the other witnesses, watching him strain to pull nothing at all seemed absurd, but they didn't doubt for a second that he was doing something absolutely terrifying.

Because in the separate perceptual world of the Lifemancers, an apocalyptic calamity was about to strike.

On another front to the north of Havocspire Citadel, another Lifemancer was locked in an aerial duel against an equally cunning and wicked elderly Soulmaner. He had regenerated countless times without landing the killing blow, but he felt that his moment of glory was finally on the brink of arriving.

Eyeing the old man, who was now practically skin and bones, he suddenly burst into cold, condescending laughter.

"I might die today, but you'll bite the dust first. Your life force is nothing more than a flickering candle in the dark, about to be completely snuffed out. Even if I do nothing, you only have days left to live. If you want to make the most of your remaining time, you'd better run while you still can."

Far from moved, the old Soulmaner shot him a sullen, icy glare.

"Spare me your spit. I may be on my deathbed, but I still have a sense of duty. If I flee, who will protect all these troops relying on me? If there's an afterlife, I don't want to spend it wallowing in guilt and shame. Now, please... do your worst."

The face of the Lifemancer, who had harbored a faint hope of settling things there, twisted in rage and frustration. Grinding his teeth, he spat venomously, "As you wish."

Raising his palms in an exaggerated manner, his Light Aura suddenly flared up, signaling a grand finale move of unprecedented scale. The face of the old Soulmaner hardened in response, bracing himself for whatever was to come.

But just as he mentally prepared for the worst, the fatal attack never came. Instead, the sacred light radiating from his adversary extinguished as if someone had just blown out a candle, followed by a blood-curdling scream that gave him goosebumps.

Narrowing his eyes to better view his opponent, they widened almost immediately to the brim as he saw the Lifemancer petrified with absolute panic, clutching his own throat with both hands as if he were choking.

Then, the Lifemancer's already ashen face turned an even paler shade of white, if that were possible. Abruptly releasing his throat, the man in the white robe tried to grasp and hold something in the air in front of his abdomen, as if his very life depended on it.

It did.

Half a second later, his ear-piercing scream abruptly ceased, and his body turned to dust, immediately scattered by the pouring rainstorm. It wasn't until a full minute had passed that the old Soulmaner lowered his eyes, discovering that the army of Light Warriors accompanying him had also been reduced to ashes in the same manner.

"By Lumyst, what kind of sorcery just took place? A failed spell?"

A logical assumption, but he couldn't have been further from the truth.

At that very moment, all across the various battlefields of Havocspire and well beyond, the same ridiculous scene was unfolding, setting off inconceivable chain reactions for the forces of the Lustra Plains.

Chapter 1071: Did You Do That?

On the Southwest front of Havocspire Citadel, another bloody battle was unfolding. Regiment after regiment of Underworld Barbarians were being thrown into the meat grinder by the thousands, pitted against the well-trained, tightly-knit formations of Light Warriors.

The commander leading them was a far cry from Sank-Uk, more of a backseat general who preferred overseeing the battle from the cozy middle of her rear guard. She was a woman with short, graying hair but built like a polar bear, her thin lips perpetually curled into a condescending snarl. This snarl wasn't meant for her enemies, but rather for the cannon fodder—ignorant and foolish—who selflessly charged forward, roaring battle cries at her every command.

Since scaling the Outer Wall, her strategy had been basic yet fatally effective: drown her enemies under endless waves of attackers. Of course, this meant giving zero shits about the cannon fodder she sent to the frontlines to wear down the Shimmers.

Right now, as thousands of conscripts lost their lives for next to nothing, the gray-haired woman was comfortably seated on a velvet throne, perched atop a twelve-meter-tall mobile steel tower.

The structure itself was a bit special, having thrice awakened its spirituality on a semi-conscious level. The wheeled vehicle, which would normally need to be pushed or pulled by slaves or beasts of burden, could thus move autonomously—and then some.

This commander particularly relished her towering vehicle, which provided an exhaustive view of the battlefield and a sense of superiority she couldn't shake. But right at this moment, she was in a terrible mood.

"These damn peasants... It's too slow!" The leader vented, waving her arms frantically from her throne. Smashing her fist into her memory foam armrest for the umpteenth time, she yelled in frustration, "Fifteen thousand recruits and not one has broken through their first line of shield-bearers! I swear, if they cost me my promotion, they'll be on the front lines for the next ten years of war."

To her right stood a man who differed from the other barbarians—quiet, in handcuffs, but seemingly unconcerned.

Besides his composure, what set him apart was his physique—shorter, leaner, and more athletic, almost effeminate by Duskwight Lands standards. Oh, and another thing—he was incomparably handsome!

Tousled black hair, but somehow stylish, an angular face, almond-shaped piercing chocolate eyes capable of seducing and subduing with just a glance, and skin so perfect it was almost sinful. Too bad his seductive allure was marred by rags and shackles.

For any Player seeing him, the contrast with the other barbarians would immediately flag him as one of their own. Unfortunately, that was also true for the natives.

The commander and her Soulmaner had detained him as a foreigner upon his appearance, but because he was cute—the commander's guilty pleasure—he had been momentarily spared.

Most Players would have attacked rather than be imprisoned, but he saw it as an opportunity to score points. For nearly three days, he'd been quietly laying his trap, and now the time had come to spring it.

Clasping his hands and bowing with a flawless, feverish expression of idol-like adoration that made the female commander flush with pleasure, the man pretended to hesitate before suggesting confidently,

"If you give me the chance, I can win this battle for you in the next five minutes, without either of us lifting a finger."

Resting her cheek on her fist, the cruel warrior sized him up with cold malevolence, then curled her lips into an encouraging smile.

"Oh? Already negotiating, Cho Min Ho?" She sneered, her laughter failing to reach her eyes. "I've killed some of my playthings for less than that. But let's say I give you a chance. What do you want in return?"

Indeed, this person was none other than Cho Min Ho, the Korean idol at the helm of a massive conglomerate of factions collectively known as King's Idol Alliance. It was also the name of his own faction.

Instead of answering right away, he cast an unreadable yet pointed look at the burly officer in heavy armor standing to the left of the female commander. After a moment of lingering silence, he ominously stated,

"I want his position."

The targeted officer, who was the vice-commander of this regiment, suddenly changed his expression to one of rage. Drawing his sword with palpable murderous intent, he stepped toward the insolent worm and proclaimed loudly,

"Commander Kake, let me rid you of this impostor—"

"Granted," the leader apathetically authorized.

A sadistic grin twisted the brute's face as he received the go-ahead, but he froze when he heard the continuation,

"1000-Man Commander Luthron, you are temporarily lowered in rank to a 500-Man Commander. Cho Min Ho, you're taking his place for the duration of this battle. If the outcome disappoints me, the natural order will be immediately restored. Do we understand each other?"

"Crystal clear," the Korean responded confidently, ignoring Officer Luthron, who was glaring at him murderously as if he hoped to bore a hole through his heart with his gaze alone.

"Then... what are you waiting for? Tick-tock, tick-tock. Time's ticking," the leader teased him with a predatory smile as if she already saw herself breaking this exotic plaything with her rough methods. In bed, she could be pretty brutal...

"Just watch and learn," Cho Min Ho chuckled confidently, coolly waving his dainty hand at what remained of their regiment.

One, two, then three seconds passed in silence, and the Korean idol was already anticipating the commander's flabbergasted expression when it would all start.

"Is this happening anytime soon?!" The bitch prodded him impatiently, tapping her index finger on the armrest of her throne. She was undeniably skeptical.

Still with a confident smile plastered on his pretty face, Cho Min Ho dignifiedly responded,

"It won't be long no—"

"ARRRRRGGHHH!"

In the blink of an eye, the Lifemancer who had been tormenting their Soulmaner suddenly shrieked in terror as if possessed before spontaneously disintegrating into ashes. In the nanosecond that followed, the thousands of Shimmers, Pulsars, and Vitalists accompanying him met the same eerie and unsettling fate.

Gripping the armrests of her throne tightly to keep from fainting, Commander Kake, her face drained of all color and frozen in shock, swallowed hard as she replayed the absurd scene that had just unfolded. Then, in a dry and shaky voice, she questioned,

"Did you do that? Ahem... T-that was... Impressive."

But when she finally deigned to look at the supposed perpetrator, her face froze. The foreigner was also pale, although still smiling. The slight tremble of his clenched fists betrayed his inner turmoil.

'W-who the hell did this! A Player? Or some other native?'

Internally, the Korean was both furious and humbled. He thought he could easily assert himself among the Players of their camp by quickly climbing the ranks, but apparently, someone had beaten him to it!

To settle his racing heart, he immediately scanned his unit and the surrounding area far beyond with his mental sense. Finally relaxing, his face returned to its usual tranquility, and he thought with relief,

'No other Players around. Must be one of the natives. Perhaps the work of a Great General or one of those Abyssal Revenants.'

He knew it was just an excuse his brain came up with to reassure him, but it was also by far the most plausible. The notion that a Player of the same rank could suddenly kill so many troops from such a distance so soon after the Ordeal started was bone-chilling.

'I could pull that off too, given enough time,' Cho Min Ho rationalized one last time before confidently, with a touch of smugness, looking back at his commander.

Thankfully he didn't have Jake's eagle-eye view encompassing all of Havocspire, or he would have certainly not regained his composure so quickly.

"Pretty sick, huh? Yeah, that was all me," the Korean lied without batting an eye, deciding to capitalize on the situation.

Inwardly, he was sneering with disdain. In the end, the result remains the same.

Indeed, Commander Kake was so frightened that she stood up from her throne for the first time, falling to her knees without hesitation. The furious officer, Luthron, had also lost his swagger, promptly following the lead of his superior by prostrating himself face-first on the ground.

"Please! Mercy!"

In the end, despite this slight hiccup, the promotion still ended up in his pocket.

"And now, where are Amy and Lee Yoon?" He mused, peering into the mist enveloping his "new" troops. "Weird, I was sure I had detected their two sigils... Well, whatever. I'll find them soon enough."

Chapter 1072: That's An Order

Somewhere in the sky, a massive winged creature and its rider, cloaked in dark steel, ominously hovered miles above the ruins of Havocspire Citadel. The tempestuous weather—wild winds and random lightning strikes—made the flight exceptionally hazardous.

Yet, despite the peril, both rider and mount displayed uncanny calm and coordination, soaring masterfully above the chaos. As they skillfully maneuvered through a graceful aerial ballet, their hawk-like, eerily identical gazes pierced through the layers of storm clouds, smoke, and flames surrounding them.

This shroud of chaos not only concealed them from flying predators and enemy anti-air measures but also allowed them to reliably monitor the unfolding siege below.

The man and his nightmarish beast were indeed one of the many Vorzhul Rider duos tasked with overseeing the battlefield.

Initially, reclaiming Havocspire had gotten off to a decent start. The Outer Wall fell into their hands within a few hours—at the cost of millions of lives, mind you. A ridiculously high number considering they were up against just 400,000 or 500,000 Light Warriors in total.

But what were millions of recruits compared to the lives of thousands of high-potential elites? It was already a miracle that Abyssal Revenant Bones had managed to stop their evacuation.

Today, they'd make sure Havocspire became their tombstone. Come this time next year, it would be the anniversary of their deaths!

However, ever since the Outer Wall had been reclaimed, their troop advancement had ground to a crawl. Sending millions of cannon fodder to overwhelm their enemies didn't seem to significantly reduce the number of Light Warriors. Worse, those who survived only grew stronger, their initial momentum now nearing exhaustion.

At this rate, they'd have no choice but to wait for the arrival of a proper, professional army to contain these unkillable elites.

"All because of that damn Celestial and his Life Link," the Vorzhul Rider sighed, looking up past the highest layer of cumulonimbus. That was the upper atmosphere where Titan Featherfall and its rider, the Celestial, had been exiled with a powerful uppercut from Bones.

All Vorzhul Riders had been dispatched not just to observe the ground situation but also to patrol the sky, delaying the return of the invincible duo that could flip the battlefield with a single sneeze. They thought they had succeeded, but they'd underestimated the ultimate warrior ruling above the Radiant Conclave.

Somehow, the Celestial continued to profoundly sustain his network of Lifemancers with Life Energy and Life Aura, making them virtually unkillable while boosting their performance. No wonder their Soulancers were struggling so much.

The Lifemancers would then reinforce the troops assigned to them through an extension of their Life Link, thus completing the loop. This deadlock seemed set to endure until the arrival of their own elite forces, as the present generals and veterans refused to engage with limited numbers.

"Those motherfuckers," the Vorzhul Rider cursed through gritted teeth. As if he didn't know what they were truly thinking!

To those bastards, these resilient Light Warriors were just delectable prey waiting to be devoured. And what better way to fatten them up than to feed them their disposable recruits?

But not everyone was the same!

Despite their reservations, numerous generals and veterans loyal to the Dusken Throne had already engaged the Conclave Guards and Radiant Mages defending the Inner Wall, thereby occupying their most treacherous elements. Their best Soulancers and Vorzhul Riders were also there.

All that remained was to hope for an opportunity to persuade the Great General who had set the reconquest in motion to personally intervene. But as long as the Celestial and his damn bird were lurking around, that would remain pure fantasy.

As the Vorzhul Rider brooded over his grim thoughts, he cast yet another glance over his mount's neck, staring into the abyss below. He expected to see the same barbarians and Light Warriors senselessly butchering each other in a stalemate, but this time he was in for a shock.

His eyes widened stupidly as he jolted upright on his mount and blurted out,

"What the fuck?!"

Shimmers, Pulsars, Vitalists, Light Paladins... even Corebearers! All these troops, whose lifeforce shone as vibrantly as the sky just three seconds earlier, had suddenly gone dark.

"Even the Lifemancers..." The Vorzhul Rider muttered speechlessly, seeing that entire divisions of enemies had been wiped out in the blink of an eye. "Who did this?"

Of the initial 450,000 enemies, over 430,000 had perished in a flash. Even the numerous War Beasts, prized behemoths that they were, had met their end along with them!

"Holy shit..."

But he wasn't a Vorzhul elite for nothing. Once the initial shock wore off, his composure returned and an irrepressible thrill coursed through his body.

This was the opportunity the Dusken Throne had been waiting for!

SCREEEEEEEEEEEEE!!!

The shrill but unmistakably anxious battle cry of Featherfall, tens of kilometers above them, instantly confirmed he wasn't mistaken. His eyes lighting up, he joyfully concluded,

"Whoever did this is on our side!"

Knowing every second counted, the Vorzhul Rider and his hundreds of comrades dove towards the Inner Wall to get a better grasp of the situation. Within dozens of frenzied wingbeats, the last layer of fog obscuring the indestructible wall was blown away, and he finally saw what was going on.

The Inner Wall, fiercely defended just minutes before by tens of thousands of beasts, Radiant Mages, and Lifemancers, was now almost deserted. Save for a small handful of

Radiant Mages, Light Warriors, and Lifemancers writhing on the ground, trying to grasp an invisible rope, all the others had vanished.

Literally. Their corpses were nowhere in sight.

Upon discovering this unsettling and unscientific spectacle, all the present Vorzhul Riders and scouts gasped in unison.

Fucking scary.

The real question, though, was should they finish them off or not? The riders hovering in the sky exchanged hesitant glances; then, with a mutually understood nod, they swooped down upon the survivors.

"No mercy!" One of them roared as he brandished his sword towards a cadaverous, sweat-drenched Radiant Conclave member.

The latter shot him a murderous glare as he bore down on him with his beast, weakly aiming his scepter at the Vorzhul's heart. His rider felt a twinge of regret as he caught the terrifying light fluctuations emanating from the scepter, but just when the magical projectile seemed about to be fired, its caster let out a horrified scream and disintegrated into ash.

Hundreds of similar scenes unfolded with the same eerie timing all over the Inner Wall's battlements. It didn't take long for one of the most respected Soulmanagers present to figure out what was happening, or at least venture a hypothesis.

"They're cursed! Attacking them breaks their concentration."

Hearing this, the barbarians' eyes glinted maliciously, realizing that right now their enemies were mere shadows of their former selves. Even the fastest man in the world would be outrun if challenged to a race after being robbed of his legs.

It was exactly this kind of situation playing out before their eyes. Like weightlifters sucker-punched in the gut while already lifting a colossal barbell, they could do nothing but drop like flies before the strikes of these foes, even though they were far weaker than them.

As for the Lifemancers, Radiant Mages, and Light Warriors strong enough to withstand their assaults despite their critical condition, they didn't hesitate to make the call that would save their lives.

"RETREAT! ABANDON HAVOCSPIRE! I'LL TAKE THE FALL FOR THIS!" A young enemy general, towering over six meters and donned in pure gold armor, ordered unequivocally.

He was both a Radiant Lord, and a Master Lifemancer, but even a being as potent as he was helpless against such dark sorcery. He was certain the Celestial would understand his decision.

After all, it was either that or total annihilation!

And as if his idol and god had heard his prayers, a voice as deep and cavernous as the universe itself suddenly reverberated throughout Havocspire.

"RE...TREAT. THAT'S AN ORDER."

Even without ever hearing this voice, everyone from both sides knew instantly who it belonged to: the Celestial Valandar!

However, once the shock, mingling awe and fear, subsided, their minds clicked into the meaning of his words, and their jaws hit the floor. The hopeful faces of the survivors from the Lustra Plains turned pale and distraught as if they had seen a ghost.

Robbed of any will to fight, as if one mind, the strongest Light Warriors, Radiant Mages, and Lifemancers decisively turned on their heels and bolted eastward at the speed of light, abandoning Havocspire without a second thought.

Upon receiving the report of their sudden retreat, the Great General at the helm of the Vorzhul Legion and the entire military operation immediately ordered the deployment of all remaining troops. Similarly, unbidden, the generals and their elites on standby promptly joined the pursuit of the battered fugitives, hoping to score some easy feats.

The battle for the reconquest of Havocspire was officially over.

It was a total victory, and it was all thanks to one person: an unknown soldier named Jake Wilderth.

But as the forces from Duskwight Lands celebrated, his tug-of-war game with the Celestial on the other end of the line he was trying to reel in was far from over. At this very moment, he was facing his most daunting challenge since his pathetic first bout with Ael, the Nullifier.

Chapter 1073: The Biggest Fish

Just seconds earlier, on the western front of Havocspire.

Jake had just used his Original Spell: Morphic Grasp to seize all the surrounding Life Threads and Souls. Over 2,000 life cords completely under his control. All he had to do

was give them a slight tug to wrench them from their former vessels, and that's exactly what he'd done.

For him, wiping out an entire regiment of Light Warriors along with its Lifemancer had been almost effortless. But that was just the tip of the iceberg.

As the encircling enemies were pulverized to dust and swept away by the rainy wind, an insatiable desire suddenly gripped his will when he felt all that pure vital and spiritual energy in his grasp. His instincts screamed that this was the perfect nourishment he needed to enhance his various Aspects.

Like a ravenous fledgling, his weak Lumyst Aura also flared up, instinctively begging him to offer it the fresh souls as sustenance. The pull it exerted on them, although still weak, was terrifying enough to siphon any wandering soul within a 10-kilometer radius due to its host's mental influence.

Had Hephais not intervened to seal the area, these spiritual disturbances would've undoubtedly caught attention.

Simultaneously, without even actively starting to devour anything, the slight spectral aura that draped him in a nonexistent halo suddenly began to grow in brightness and density without Jake's say-so.

Any wandering soul nearby was in its crosshairs but fortunately limited only to the souls of the living for some enigmatic reason. It was also smart enough to avoid Sank-Uk's.

The kicker was that at this exact moment, Jake's own instincts—be they Starfeyrves, Digestor, or whatever they were—had overridden his self-awareness, and he couldn't give a damn.

Right now, he was just hungry. Very hungry.

Without hesitating and ignoring the "tantrum" thrown by his equally ravenous Lumyst Aura, Jake opened his mouth wide, and with an inhale that surpassed any vacuum, he slurped up all the captured Life Threads and Souls in his hand like a forkful of spaghetti. Like a pup angling for some scraps, his young Aura also took the chance to swipe a good third of the trapped souls before they entered his mouth.

In the blink of an eye, both Jake's fluctuations and his Lumyst Aura intensified, although for the former it remained negligible. Comparatively, his spectral aura had at least multiplied its quality tenfold. Still, the stat boost it granted its host remained negligible as well.

[Aura of Lumyst: Enemies Killed: 2389, Souls Harvested: 7966. Stat boosts: 0.31864%]

Though, objectively speaking, a stat boost of 0.3% applied to Jake was already a enormous figure in context compared to that of the average Fifth-Ordeal Player or native.

But after this appetizer, Jake was far from satisfied. Moreover, his Life Threads still jutted out from his mouth, the ones they were attached to preventing him from concluding his meal with satisfaction.

'More!'

In his cosmic eyes, burning with half-rational desire, a sort of big bang ferociously lit up the ocean of darkness within, its new radiance making his appearance even more ominous and unfathomable.

His True Will of Grabbing momentarily merged with his True Will of Growth, True Will of Killing, his hunger, and other less commendable instincts. Both hands once again clenched all the protruding Life Threads tightly.

Then, as if it were the most natural thing to do, his Soul Power erupted, his biceps, and all his other muscles tripled in size, and without further preamble, Jake resumed pulling with deliberate slowness.

Hephais' pupils abruptly dilated as he keenly monitored his boss's fluctuations, sensing a sudden expansion in the ominous aura emanating from him. Without hesitation, he spent tens of billions of Aether Points to manually activate an Oracle Shield, bypassing the Aether Network.

The other recruits were unaware to the invisible dome now covering them, unable to detect the Aether, but it undoubtedly saved their lives. Meribelle, who could sense a bit more, was already damp with fear, not even reacting when the Egean pulled her by the collar into his protective sphere.

"Don't move until I say so if you value your lives," Hephais declared without elaboration. "He's doing something big."

Jake's movements, pulling the seemingly never-ending Life Threads fading into the fog towards his maw, might seem deliberately slow, but only for those able to perceive time at his scale. To others, it was horrifyingly fast.

The alternating pulling movement of each arm, followed by their repositioning along these Life Threads, was so quick that they became more of a blur and buzz than a dragonfly's wingbeat. The gusts generated by their movements were so violent that even the rain dared not touch him, forming a vacuum cocoon around him.

Distances in the Aetherdream were not as absolute as in reality, but nonetheless, within a split second, Jake devoured several hundred kilometers of Life Threads. Over two hundred thousand Light Warriors had already been decimated.

In the following second, the sturdier Lifemancers and Light Warriors began to put up fierce resistance, even desperately coordinating their forces against an unprecedented existential threat.

Despite this sudden obstinacy, the speed at which Jake devoured the Life Link network hardly faltered. Fueled by all the energy he and his Lumyst Aura had consumed, he began pulling even harder.

Another 230,000 Lifemancers and Light Warriors disintegrated three seconds later. Moreover, many Lifemancers had linked their souls and consciousness to their Lifeforce to aid their mental regeneration, one of their few weak points.

The influx of enemy souls willingly following their Life Threads back to the source of the phenomenon became a feast for Jake and his Lumyst Aura. Now, the spectral aura film covering Jake's skin was real and real enough to be visible to any native of this world.

New recruits like Ekho were obviously stunned, but even those with higher perspectives like Meribelle were also mesmerized with disbelief, their clothes soaked in cold sweat. Such growth shouldn't be allowed by creation!

Casting an anxious sidelong glance at one of the recruits, thinking she'd go unnoticed, she couldn't help but think with a devouring sense of helplessness,

'These foreigners are way too dangerous. If they get their hands on the Soulmaner King, it'll be the end of this world. Have we made an unforgivable mistake?'

"Relax," Hephais said, arms crossed, without looking at her. "Jake is an anomaly even among us. There may be those stronger than him somewhere on Twyluxia, but that's only temporary. In the end, he is an unstoppable force that we must adjust to. But, if it comforts you, he's not evil. Not yet..."

"Were you reading my mind?" Meribelle anxiously asked, realizing their secret might have already been uncovered.

"Just a guess," the assassin shrugged, before suddenly straightening up, his eyes widening with high expectations, "Ah, there it is. The decisive clash is finally about to begin."

Meribelle, who had a slew of other questions to ask, shifted her gaze back to Jake and froze. He was now gritting his teeth, sweat pouring down his face. His muscles were so taut and his veins so engorged they looked like they might burst.

As for his facial expression, it had never been more feral, with veins throbbing on his forehead and long, pointed, crystalline fangs protruding from his curled lips.

While Meribelle was looking away, a stunning pair of wings—blue and intricate with psychedelic patterns resembling an alien butterfly—had unfurled behind him, shimmering like the northern lights. His previously embryonic spectral aura had now compacted into a dark blue, emitting a grim, destructive energy best kept at a distance.

"S-scary!"

What kind of opponent was he up against to be struggling so much? A Corebearer? A Radiant Lord? Stronger? Hephais' Oracle Shield blocked her from getting a clear read. But one of the recruits present had a different opinion.

'Such power... It's the Celestial. Let's see how you fare against him,' it thought, with childlike fascination.

[Jake, as expected, you've reeled in the big fish. The biggest.] Xi congratulated him in a tone resembling a fishing tournament referee.

'No shit? Fuck, it was smooth sailing until now, and suddenly, I'm struggling not to puke up all my lifeforce,' Jake internally complained, regaining some level of clarity.

The tug-of-war battle had been short but intense, and was about to reach its climax. It wasn't that Jake didn't want to continue; he was almost out of Soul Power.

Soul Power, the purest energy his Soul could harness through his various True Wills, was also the hardest to regenerate. Compared to most Players, he was doing alright with his Grade 10+ Energy Spirit and Soul, but that was sadly insufficient for an opponent of this caliber when his own powers were heavily nerfed.

'Though not as much as before,' Jake observed with delight as he examined himself. 'Now, I can summon a few artifacts.'

"RE...TREAT. THAT'S AN ORDER."

Jake smirked triumphantly at the sound of the unknown entity's voice echoing through Havocspire.

'Guess he's struggling as much as I am.'

But just as he relished the discovery, the force pulling at the other end of the rope surged exponentially. Jake was so caught off guard that he involuntarily spat out several kilometers of Life Threads before he could react.

The counterattack was so sudden and blindingly fast that he instinctively snapped his jaw shut, severing the Life Thread connecting him to his ultimate adversary. Fearing that this mysterious enemy might come after him for round two, he quickly activated his digestion and reclaimed all the energy that had leaked out during their peak duel.

He returned to his normal appearance, except now, the spectral aura enveloping him shimmered even more visibly in the twilight fog, resembling an apparition. Finally, even this was reabsorbed, and a heavy silence fell over the battlefield.

Jake, Hephais, and Meribelle waited for several long seconds, holding their breath and dreading the worst. At last, the deathly quiet was shattered by the clatter of hooves, footsteps, and voices rushing toward them.

Reinforcements had finally arrived.

Chapter 1074: Total Defeat

Drifting through the desolate upper atmosphere of Twyluxia, a behemoth of a bird strained against the extreme weather conditions at this elevation. However, it wasn't the void-like silence, the smothering darkness of space, or even the cosmic radiation and magnetic storms typical at these heights that made the flight perilous.

This world-plane wasn't a planet but a result of unique circumstances, making escape from this artificial prison impossible—even for Featherfall and its reputedly invincible rider.

Yet, in their current pickle, it wasn't the peculiarities of their world making high-altitude flight so dangerous, but a much more mundane issue: the thinning air. Lift relied on air density, just like Archimedes' principle, and the scarcer the air molecules, the more wing surface one needed to sustain altitude effortlessly.

The direct consequence? Despite its colossal size, the feared Titanic Beast struggled to sustain stable flight.

Sadly, even under these shitty conditions, the creature had no choice but to do its best to keep a steady posture. Because right now, its rider was facing an unprecedented crisis, and absolutely nothing could distract him—lest disastrous consequences ensue.

After what seemed an eternity to the colossal bird but was actually quite brief, the person on its back suddenly spat out an impressive spray of blood.

Sitting cross-legged on what looked like an expansive plain of steel feathers, a handsome man in a midnight-blue dragon robe embroidered with gold threads coughed again, another jet of crimson staining his otherwise perfect image. Trying to stand, he

staggered and spat out a third involuntary spray of blood, this time splattering the plumage of his titanic mount.

SCREEEE!

The shrill and anxious cry of the monstrous bird of prey immediately reacted to its rider and friend's worrying condition, eliciting a grimace from the man. Wiping the blood from his lips with his sleeve, he spoke in a weary, drained voice,

"I'm fine, Featherfall. But that was too close. Who'd have thought the Soulmancer King had such an ace up his sleeve. Our assassination attempt is a total fuck-up."

SCREEEE!

"Yeah, you're right. He might've been killed during the ambush, and it could be the work of one of these foreigners. Looking back, that's even more likely. No Underworld Barbarian could pull off such a feat. Not because they're weak, but because it would require them to be as exceptional a Lifemancer as me, which is impossible..."

Pausing for a moment while thoughtfully stroking his chin, he continued,

"It seems that wiping out these foreigners is no longer viable if they can demonstrate such power. Bones and Chillmire's immediate retaliation was also unexpected."

According to Eldrion, the member of the Radiant Conclave who had leaked the Soulmancer King's plans, a female foreigner newly arrived in Twyluxia was the source of this intel. The old scoundrel had promised her a cushy spot in their army in return, but the final decision still rested with him—the Celestial.

Right. This man was none other than the most powerful man in the Lustra Plains, Celestial Valandar. Usually the epitome of physical perfection and charismatic virility, he had lost some of his luster, although his injuries had already healed.

Beyond his towering 16 meters, his god-like muscles, and chiseled jawline, it was his disheveled blood-red hair and penetrating gold-ruby eyes that made his already unparalleled beauty uniquely inimitable. However, neither of these were the source of his kingly presence or the fanatical deference people showed him.

That, the man owed to his Lumyst Aura. At its peak, his body was perpetually wrapped in a halo of golden light of incredible purity, reminiscent of the warm glow of the sun. Looking at it neither burned nor blinded one's eyes; rather, it had a purifying and invigorating effect. For this reason, he was the only individual in the Lustra Plains perceived as a genuine divine being, with the other four members of the Radiant Conclave not even coming close.

But at that very moment, the soft radiance enveloping him had nearly vanished, glowing faintly. From an untouchable god, he seemed to have reverted back to a humble mortal, although his wounds had fully healed. His Aura was recovering swiftly, but for now, he was indeed weaker than he had been in a very long time.

This was the first time something like this had happened to him since he'd ascended to the pinnacle of the Lustra Plains. If before, Valandar was seriously contemplating eliminating the foreign woman who had provided them with the information, he had now changed his mind.

"According to our reports, the later these foreigners join our world, the stronger and more influential they are among their own," he mused out loud, as if to aid his own thinking. "If a foreigner fighting for the Dusken Throne is responsible for this calamity, then he probably arrived recently. The alien woman who gave us this information also came in the 'last wave,' by her own admission. And each of these waves is matched by the same number of 'Players,' to make their clashes fair. In other words, she and this foreigner from the Dusken Throne should be of similar strength."

Pondering the implications of allowing such a dangerous woman to roam freely on his lands, the Celestial's expression visibly darkened. Regardless, the million-dollar question was, how many other foreigners were in this latest wave? Because if they were all like the one who had just wounded him, they were in deep shit.

Moments earlier, he'd been shaken to his core when his sprawling Life Web had been abruptly endangered by an entity of unknown origin. Like a human tearing away a meticulously spun spider web with one hand, it took him a few seconds to react.

This attack had struck as suddenly as it was cunning, more sophisticated and subtle than one might initially think.

Valandar was the core node of his web, ensuring that if anyone tried to take it over, the pull on it would inevitably lead back to him. Yet, while he was at the center of this Life Web, its various members were also interconnected.

What had happened was that his enemy, deliberately or not, had bypassed the stubborn node that was him, opting for an easier route by consuming other, closer, and more vulnerable 'nodes.' Before he knew what hit him, the damage done was already of considerable scale.

He didn't know exactly how many losses his army had suffered, but he could already say one thing: it was well over 430,000 soldiers.

At least seven other army corps deployed on other battlefields had been affected. Even if the enemy didn't have time to devour all their life threads, it was a fact that for an undetermined period, their lifeforce and sometimes even their souls had completely left their bodies.

The number of human and animal casualties... probably numbered in the tens of millions.

"That son of a bitch..."

The most drastic part of all this was that Valandar had failed to stop him using his own means. To finally gain the upper hand, he had to resort to a potentially damaging measure for his own forces: reconfiguring his Life Web.

Now, instead of having each Lifemancer connected to one another, forming the different nodes of his web, they were only connected to him. In other words, Valandar had become the main router.

This had its advantages for him but mainly disadvantages for the rest of his subjects, making their Life Link far less flexible and efficient. Unfortunately, it was the only solution he had found to put an end to the unquenchable rampage of this unstoppable foe.

Pulling ever harder to devour more life threads, his enemy had been left with no other choice but to target him, all other nodes having lost their connections except for the one linking them to the Celestial.

The Tug of War had thus transformed into a one-on-one showdown between Jake and Valandar. But even then, to Valandar's utter horror, he had not managed to come out on top. He was even slightly at a disadvantage.

To turn the tide, the Celestial had resorted for the first time in his life to tapping into the life force of all the Lifemancers connected to him. In other words, he had cheated.

It was no longer a duel between him and this mysterious foreigner, but between the outsider and all the Lifemancers of the Lustra Plains.

He might have won the battle, but his defeat was... total.

Chapter 1075: PTSD In All Its Glory

"Jake, reinforcements are gonna find us any second now." Hephais telepathically warned him, as if reminding him that if he intended to do something about the deaths in their regiment, he had to act fast.

Somewhat mentally foggy after his incredible exertion, Jake frowned, mulling over the issue before forcing himself to snap his fingers. The mutilated body of Sank-Uk instantly reassembled as if time had just been rewound.

The expressions of the commander and other recruits witnessing the scene couldn't have been more dumbstruck. Ironically, the fact that Meribelle had just reverted from a shriveled old hag back to a dark-haired, ageless beauty didn't even faze them.

The female Soulmancer was also utterly shocked, staring petrified at the skin of her dainty hands that had miraculously regained their elasticity. Unlike these clueless conscripts, she knew enough to realize that without the help of an artifact, this kind of miraculous ability was solely the domain of the most powerful Lifemancers.

But if such a Lifemancer did exist, their spiritual strength should have been lagging. Even if their souls were far more potent than their peers, they'd be lacking compared to a Soulmancer.

That was not the vibe she got from this foreigner at all... His life force was an aberration, but his Spirit Power was even more so!

If before the Oracle Shield conjured by Hephais had blocked her from sensing his aura, now that it had been dispelled, the new Lumyst Aura radiating from Jake was visible and perceptible to all.

And it was just... terrifying.

[Aura of Lumyst: Enemies Killed: 2,756,893, Souls Harvested: 439,854. Stat boosts: 28,792%]

A boost of 28.8% wasn't that impressive, but this was Jake we're talking about. He was just built different.

The number of enemies he'd have to kill to advance his aura to the next stage was off the charts. The limitations that the laws of this world imposed on him were still almost as strong, barely weakened, while such an aura would have allowed any rookie to lift all their constraints.

[That means it's easier for weaker Players to regain their full strength.] Xi deduced cautiously. [Depending on the number of stages this Lumyst Aura has, a few thousand kills might suffice for the weakest among them.]

Jake rolled his eyes upon hearing her latest warning. Weakling be weakling. Even if they were given back their full powers, he wasn't afraid.

'Too bad, it seems I've accidentally devoured or refined all the wandering souls belonging to other victims on the battlefield.' Jake sighed inwardly on his end, feeling a tad guilty as he checked his status. The compact and bright blue-black spectral aura covering his skin was irrefutable proof.

Only Sank-Uk seemed to have had enough spiritual strength to barely resist his subconscious omnidirectional pull.

[Well, your Cosmic Fairy Hatchery will offer them a second life.] Xi half-joked, aware that this argument was shaky. [Only as your Familiars, though.]

'True.' Jake chuckled awkwardly upon hearing the bluntness of her words.

Like Jeanie or Trash Runt, these poor recruits sacrificed for not much had indeed a shot at a second life as long as the data of their souls had been correctly assimilated by his cells.

He managed to console himself by thinking that none of his Fairy Spirits seemed unhappy. As to whether they were genuinely their own selves or only had the illusion of it, that was an entirely different debate...

"Wh-How is this possible? I'm sure my brains were splattered all over the place," Sank-Uk exclaimed, dumbfounded, even pinching his leg to make sure he wasn't hallucinating.

But the stunned expressions of the seven other surviving recruits were irrefutable. The demoted commander had undeniably been resurrected.

"If you value your lives, tell no one what has just happened here," Soulmaner Meribelle sternly warned the seven remaining recruits, locking eyes with each of them.

Her pupils flashed a spectral light of pale blue as if to gauge their inner reaction to her command. Without hesitation, she crushed the souls of two of the remaining seven, reducing their number to five.

Seeing the shocked and frightened expressions of the remaining recruits, she shrugged matter-of-factly, "They were planning to snitch."

"What a shame..." Ekho snorted regretfully, noticing that one of the two executed recruits was a woman. The other male barbarians seemed to share his sentiment, based on their disappointed sighs.

So now, only Ekho, the mummified soldier, the bourgeois with the enchanted axe, and two women—one ugly and one not so ugly, depending on taste—remained among the recruits. Much to the remaining recruits' dismay, it had to be the prettiest of the three who intended to betray them.

What made it more amusing was that the Soulmaner King was likely hiding among these five and was renowned for being exceptionally beautiful. Except now, it was clear that the beauty of these five clowns was at best mediocre, with only the blue-blooded recruit qualifying as passable.

'Does he really think we can't find him if he changes his appearance?' Jake and Hephais couldn't help but be speechless, contemplating the futility of such a disguise.

If this Soulmaner King wasn't too disappointing, he should already know that his identity had long been exposed by the two foreigners. His disguise was merely to fool his own people.

Although Jake readily admitted that the latter's ability to completely suppress his fluctuations was nothing short of impeccable. It wasn't his acting skills that gave him away but Meribelle's lack of composure.

The footsteps of the approaching reinforcements, which only Jake and Hephais could hear, soon became audible to all. Meribelle shot them a final glare, making a "zip it" gesture.

"I talk, and you just nod enthusiastically," she summarized in a thinly veiled menacing tone.

The five remaining recruits frantically nodded in agreement, and the next second, thousands of barbarians in tight formation emerged from the fog. Their commander and his steed led them, surveying the field of corpses with extreme solemnity.

He was an even taller and more muscular barbarian than Sank-Uk, with a skin tone darker than most of his kind. With his long mane of gray braided hair and constantly pursed but gaunt cheeks, he looked utterly unapproachable. His massive mount, whose hooves were as wide as a mammoth's feet, only accentuated this first impression.

Spotting the nine survivors, the stern gaze of the horseman was immediately drawn to Jake's stifling aura (which he had already retracted) and to a lesser extent, those of Hephais, Sank-Uk, and Meribelle. These four had a lot of blood on their hands.

The other five recruits weren't bad either—at least for conscripts who had just been thrown into their first battle without proper gear. With just a glance, he could tell they'd also racked up some kills.

The stark contrast between the majority of corpses littering the ground being of the same race as him and the scant number of enemy dead made this band of survivors all the more suspicious. Faced with this, the newcomer grimly narrowed his eyes and demanded in a no-bullshit tone,

"State your name and rank. What happened here? If I don't like your answer, you're coming with me."

Soulmaner Meribelle, who had already prepped her lines, confidently stepped forward, clearly unfazed by this tough guy, and opened her mouth.

"Soulmancer Merib—"

But just as she was about to spill the beans, a message dropped from the sky into the hands of the commander of this new regiment. Unfurling the scroll to read its contents, his expression changed. The chilling trumpet of a retreating Vorzhul also echoed from somewhere above them, indicating the origin of the message.

"No need to say more... I know what happened," the barbarian commented, his face unintentionally twisted in disbelief. "The reconquest of Havocspire is... complete."

Two days later, Jake and his motley crew finally crossed the towering Ironsoul Rampart alongside millions of confused conscripts to join the official battlefield on the other side. The wall was as awe-inspiring as they'd imagined, towering over 5 kilometers high and with stones so smooth that climbing it was virtually impossible.

Due to many units barely escaping annihilation, it was decided that all these troops would first pass through the wall under the watchful eye of a squad of Soulmanancers before being reassigned to an appropriate regiment on the other side.

So, all these barbarians marching eastward with haggard faces in a long, chaotic procession had at least one thing in common: They were no longer greenhorns.

They had thrown themselves heart and soul into their first battle and lived to tell the tale. They should've been proud and happy, but alas, most had ended up distressed by the experience.

In the end, the commander who stumbled upon them two days ago had bigger fish to fry, and Meribelle didn't have to justify their deeds. For unspoken reasons, Sank-Uk had to claim most of the kills, with the rest being evenly allocated among the recruits to allow Jake and Hephais to stay incognito. Or almost.

Officially, they were all now 10-man commanders, aka squad leaders or second-rate lieutenants. The paradox was that everyone had already chosen to join Jake's squad for the upcoming battle.

An unknown 10-man commander with a former 3000-man commander, a admired female Soulmancer, and six soldiers of the same rank... That was bound to draw attention.

Exactly five days after Jake's arrival on Twyluxia, he and his squad finally sighted the fortified camp where they were supposed to receive their new gear and assignments. The hazing was finally over.

Chapter 1076: Soulmancer Enclave

"Whoa, this is huge!" The recruit with the enchanted axe blurted out, his eyes wide with excitement as they descended the steep dirt road leading into the fortified camp.

During the journey, they had taken the time to learn each other's names, and the hyped-up recruit who had just entered the camp was oddly named Jashuzen—a name quite uncommon even in the Duskwight Lands. With his somewhat clean and styled black hair, intelligent purple eyes, and a knack for intriguing stories and eloquent speech, he had a certain allure.

Except when he was gawking like this at a mere camp. It reminded Jake, Hephais, Sank-Uk, and Meribelle that he was just another clueless newbie.

The son of the leader of a small tribe that had once been much larger, Jashuzen had received a somewhat comprehensive education. However, it was one that predated the rise of the Dusken Throne, and so naturally, it did not include compulsory conscription or what lay beyond the Ironsoul Rampart.

This military camp was far different from what they had imagined before seeing it in person. No rows of identical tents neatly aligned to the horizon, no makeshift wooden walls. Instead, the rocky ground had been directly carved into an awe-inspiring stone city.

In the end, little distinguished this fortified encampment from Havocspire or Grimstone Keep, except that it was smaller, square, and built underground. And 'smaller' was, of course, a relative term. Each side was at least ten kilometers long, and some iconic buildings, visible from their high vantage point, were as grand as any in Havocspire before its destruction.

"Well, gotta admit, this Netherwell Chapel is huge," conceded Thonzo, the mummified soldier, a chill running down his spine as he recalled the memory of his own recent baptism.

His name was Thonzo, quite common among the Underworld Barbarians. Jake had long ago healed him of his injuries. For now, he kept his bandages to avoid drawing attention by suddenly appearing healed in the gaze of the Soulmanagers tasked with escorting them from Havocspire to this camp.

"Because it's not a chapel, it's a Cathedral," Claire gently rectified him, one of the two women among the surviving recruits from the Havocspire massacre. "For Soulmanagers, it's nothing to build. What determines its importance is whether there's an underground water table connected to the Lumyst River below."

Her name was by far the most "ordinary" Jake and Hephais had heard since arriving in Twyluxia—almost as much as Meribelle.

It wasn't surprising given her past as a servant in a Netherwell Church. Apparently, she wasn't just ugly in Jake's eyes, but to all her kind. Used to discrimination, the draft had been a chance for her to be treated as something other than a revolting slave.

Like Jashuzen, she also had intense purple gaze brimming with intelligence, but her demeanor was much colder, though entirely pleasant.

"She's right," Meribelle confirmed as she walked with them. "Netherwell Chapels don't have direct access to Lumyst Water. Churches have access to an underground water table but of varying purity depending on the distance from the main river. If the water table is pure and abundant enough, it becomes a Cathedral. Obviously, it's impossible to find such a water table this far from the Underworld Cascade, but this one has likely been enriched with pure Lumyst Water in anticipation of the Soulmancer King's arrival. As you can guess, things didn't exactly go as planned..."

"That's where we're going, right?" Ekho asked aggressively, noticing that the procession of recruits they were following was heading exactly there.

The alcoholic hadn't had a drop of booze in days, and his brutal withdrawal had inevitably taken a toll on his already foul mood.

"It's pretty obvious, isn't it?" A sarcastic feminine voice belonging to the second female recruit shot back at the former vagabond. "It's no secret. Every fortified camp behind the Ironsoul Rampart has a Soulmancer Enclave. To my knowledge, it's them and the Spirit Enchanters who take care of crafting, preserving, and distributing enchanted gear to the soldiers."

Neither beautiful nor pretty, she was Thonzo's female counterpart in the sheer plainness of her appearance. Her name, on the other hand, was distinctive enough to neither be easily remembered nor forgotten: Scelacabe.

"Scelacabe is also correct," Meribelle confirmed with a nod, while shooting Ekho a scathing look to nip in the bud the snide comment he was about to hurl at the insolent woman who dared to mock him.

"Hmmpf."

The female Soulmancer's lips twitched at his disrespectful reaction. If it weren't for these two foreigners, she would have long since taught him a lesson. When was the last time she had to deal with these insects only good for shining her shoes? Sigh...

Jake, who had been silently listening to their conversation from the start and had just finished mentally scanning the fortified camp, finally chimed in.

"To be honest, I'm kinda surprised they let us roam freely without any checks or escort. The soldiers here naively trust the Soulmanancers way too much. Haven't you guys learned your lesson after what happened?"

He was referring to the reason why the ambush set up by the Soulmanancer King at the Radiant Conclave backfired, leading to the destruction of Havocspire Citadel. Besides an unexpected leak of information, the real reason was much more straightforward: a traitor.

Great General Winchu, the Governor of Havocspire assigned to secretly receive the Soulmanancer King, had long been killed and replaced by Lord Calyx, one of the five members of the Radiant Conclave.

Before being a prodigious Lifemancer, Lord Calyx mainly built his reputation as an infallible spy and assassin. He made so few public appearances—always masked—that few among his allies and enemies knew his real face. Only his alias was widely known: the Light Assassin.

Seemed like the perfect enemy for Hephais.

"Lord Calyx wasn't impersonating a Soulmanancer," Meribelle countered with a displeased expression. "If he tried to replace one of us, we would've surely sniffed him out."

Hephais' blatant eye-roll told her all she needed to know about what he thought of her claim.

"Yeah, sure," Jake snickered, choosing not to further needle her on this delicate topic.

"Hmmpf. Anyway, we're here!" Meribelle harrumphed, rolling up her sleeves in frustration.

That was a lie. They'd just passed the first barracks. They still had at least a kilometer or two to walk before reaching the Soulmanancer Enclave.

Still, they decided to cut her some slack, and the rest of the trip was made in silence, save for the occasional "wow" from the other recruits. An hour and a half later instead of 20 minutes, due to the colossal influx of recruits causing bottlenecks, they finally arrived at their destination.

As soon as they crossed the boundary of the Soulmanancer Enclave, a heavily armed guard asked for their regiment name, company, and section. Learning that they were awaiting reassignment like millions of others following the Battle of Havocspire, he couldn't help but make a scene.

"Goddamn it! I'm so tired of playing babysitter."

Meribelle cast a sympathetic glance at the frazzled barbarian, pulling down the collar of her dress to reveal a locket hanging around her neck. Upon recognizing the medallion, the guard's attitude pulled a complete 180.

"I-I didn't recognize you, Your Excellence. Please forgive me," he immediately apologized, breaking out into a sweat.

"I will be escorting this group," Meribelle politely declared.

"No problem!" The soldier blurted louder than he'd intended, eager to fade into the background.

The Soulmancer Enclave wasn't all that large, and a few minutes later, they arrived at a colossal building serving as a warehouse, with a small annex attached. When they walked into the annex, they found dozens of counters and hundreds of attendants ready to assist and process their requests.

"Welcome to the Ironsoul Armory. Are you here for your first set of gear?" An enthusiastic receptionist greeted them as they stopped in front of his counter. The man wore a robe similar to Meribelle's but in a drab gray with no frills.

"He's an apprentice Spirit Enchanter," Meribelle quickly explained, as if he were invisible, pointing to the winged helmet locket in bronze stitched onto his belt. "They can forge and perform enchantments but can't influence the success rate. Usually, the prerequisite to qualify as a Spirit Enchanter is to endure two spiritual awakenings, or to survive two baptisms, to put it bluntly. This generally grants them the ability to sense and control their Spirit Body, along with a not-insignificant boost in cognitive faculties. If they also awaken an Attribute or another Grace suitable for becoming a Spirit Enchanter, then they've hit the jackpot."

Chapter 1077: Snitch Ring

"Anyway, I gotta go," Meribelle suddenly announced, giving Thonzo and Jashuzen's sturdy shoulders a hearty pat, causing them to hiss in pain upon impact. "Have fun~"

Jake, Hephais, and Sank-Uk exchanged knowing glances as she sauntered away, her sultry sway and unapproachable icy beauty attracting a lot of stares. She knew what she was doing.

'Info?' Jake mentally inquired, not altering his facial expression.

'Exactly. I need to catch up with Giso, Emlet, and the others to get the lowdown,' Meribelle tersely clarified as she slammed the building door shut.

Giso was the hooded Soulmancer who'd cast a zone of darkness to create sound isolation from the outside. Emlet was the nearly bald Soulmancer responsible for creating visual illusions through his 'Lucas' mirror-carpet.

In other words, she needed to find them to figure out what they'd been up to since they'd split. According to their initial plan, they should've reunited much earlier. Deep down, she was slightly concerned.

As for Jake and the other newbies... they couldn't care less. They were too engrossed in listening to the speech from the novice Spirit Enchanter, who turned out to be surprisingly likable despite the dumb questions these yokels were pelting him with.

"...No, the military gear provided here isn't standardized," the young man clarified bitterly, puzzled why these two unknowns—Jake and Hephais—were harping on this point. "Each Spirit Enchanter has their own style, although we do bulk order from blacksmiths too."

"In short, no wonder even the pro soldiers we've seen sport completely different armors and weapons," Hephais sarcastically quipped. "No wonder our army gets its ass kicked."

The novice frowned in disapproval upon hearing this newbie openly mock their craft. They didn't get the art, let alone the passion and heart a Spirit Enchanter invested in the artifacts they created. Yet, being open-minded—and especially since they seemed chummy with a full-fledged Soulmancer—he politely countered,

"And why is non-uniform gear an issue? A sword's a sword, just like a bow's a bow. Performance and appearance may vary from artifact to artifact depending on its quality or forging method, but the fact remains that it's precisely because of our superior enchanted artifacts that we can hold our own against the Light Warriors of the Lustra Plains and their insane innate strength. Without them, we'd be royally screwed. Also, the army's contribution system motivating and promoting our troops is exactly what drives them to continually upgrade their equipment. It's also a business."

"Contribution system?" Jake picked up, thinking it sounded similar to his own faction's system.

This didn't surprise him much, although it was a bit sad that the quality of the gear wasn't intrinsically guaranteed for each soldier. What bugged him was how they measured these 'contributions.'

"You didn't tell them?" The novice Spirit Enchanter shot Sank-Uk a puzzled look.

A former commander should've known all this. Maybe they weren't as close as he'd pondered and were just rolling together by chance?

"Totally slipped my mind," the barbarian muttered with an apologetic shrug.

The novice stared at him speechlessly, hands on hips and a patronizing pout on his lips, then sighed,

"Alright, then follow me." Shooting a haughty, slightly peeved look at Hephais, he added, "What I'm about to hand out is probably the only artifact you'll receive from this Armory that can be considered 'standardized.' But don't worry, it doesn't count against your enchanted equipment quota you're entitled to claim."

"As if I give a flying fuck," Hephais grumbled, striding behind the receptionist who gestured for them to follow. His hands were jammed in his pockets, a perfect picture of devil-may-care attitude.

"By the way, you're quick to criticize, but you still haven't told me why non-standardized equipment is a problem." The apprentice, still clinging to the argument, retorted with a resentful tone, hell-bent on winning the debate.

"Just step onto a battlefield and you'll see," Thonzo tossed in matter-of-factly, filling in for Hephais. "An army can't use certain defensive formations if, say, their shields aren't perfectly identical. The formation would be full of gaps. There were no gaps in the wall erected by the shield-bearers of the Lustra Plains..."

The faces of the other recruits noticeably darkened, remembering this unpleasant fact. The apprentice felt stumped, witnessing the sudden dip in their mood.

"As you can see, our enemies have caught on to the advantage of standardized equipment. Maybe that's why you're called Underworld Barbarians while they're known as Light Warriors," Hephais concluded, stabbing the apprentice metaphorically in the heart.

"..." The young Spirit Enchanter was momentarily speechless. Still, after a few seconds of silence, he muttered under his breath, "Well, at least our gear doesn't break after a few hits."

"Fair enough," Claire smiled softly, opting not to twist the knife further.

Minutes later, they stopped in front of a steel door with no lock, blocking access to one of the numerous storage units behind the annex. As they contemplated how the apprentice planned to open it, he pressed the locket stitched onto his belt against a matching indentation on the wall.

For a second, from behind, it gazed like he was going to fuck the wall. Fortunately, the sound of gears and cogs turning soon filled the air.

"It's open," he declared flatly, oblivious to his embarrassing moment.

Upon entering, they found a forest of shelves, safes, and weapon racks taking up all available space, each item clearly labeled and numbered.

"This is where I store my enchanted creations or the gear awaiting enchantment," the Spirit Enchanter said, unable to hide his pride. "You can pick any artifact of your choice for free as long as it's in bin number one. For anything else, you'll have to pay with Contribution Points, privileges, or another agreed-upon currency."

"Good thing, too... We haven't even received the artifact meant to track our deeds," Scelacabe muttered tersely, examining a heavy war hammer that seemed ill-suited for a woman of her build, barbaric or not.

As Jake and the others also began to inspect the stored artifacts, the Spirit Enchanter reached into a nondescript jewelry box and tossed each of them an ordinary-looking iron ring.

"This is what we use to count your contributions to the war effort," he summarized briefly. "Don't ask me how they're made. That's above my pay grade."

Jake examined the small ring between his thumb and forefinger, lifting it above his eyes. His laid-back demeanor vanished instantly, as if he'd sobered up.

[Snitch Ring (+35): A ring that appears ordinary but is actually packed with integrated sensors, detectors, and miniature cameras. It's just one tiny cog in a much larger sentient artifact. It reports everything back to its mother artifact, which arbitrarily decides the contribution points to credit or deduct, as well as what they can be exchanged for.]

An artifact enchanted 35 times... He wouldn't have been surprised if its value surpassed that of a Platinum or Diamond Aether Artifact. An artifact capable of creating others and remotely commanding them to monitor the actions of troops across half a continent... He saw tons of uses for such a gadget.

Beyond its capabilities, with a success probability set at 50%, the odds of enchanting an object end-to-end 35 consecutive times without destroying it was only 1 in 34,359,738,368. He could only imagine the colossal waste of resources that led to its creation. Not to mention all the valuable sentient artifacts that ended up destroyed in the process...

'Should I eat it?' Jake was tempted, but he immediately pondered better of it. It was too risky.

[At this level of enchantment, the computational power of this artifact's spirit must be comparable to a mini Oracle System. Not to mention the ridiculous number of Attributes and Graces it must possess.] Xi commented with some solemnity.

"Put it on your finger, authenticate, and you can start racking up your contribution points. Just think about it in your head if you want to know how many you have left," the Spirit Enchanter instructed them, showing his own finger.

Jake had already proceeded to bind the artifact. At its core, it was kind of like his Oracle Device, but with far fewer functions. Vaguely curious, he glanced at his status and froze.

[Contribution Points: 6,324,133,640 points.]

'What the fuck?!' Jake's eyes almost popped out of his head when he read the big number.

Somehow, his crucial contribution to the retaking of Havocspire had been recorded.

Chapter 1078: More...

The implications were staggering. Something had managed to monitor his every move without him even realizing it.

"The only three individuals around us who already have their own Snitch Ring are Thonzo, Sank-Uk, and Meribelle. Four, if we include the hypothetical Soulmanecer King," Xi reasoned with detachment. "If this ring indeed has an array of built-in sensors and cameras, then there's no telling if the surveillance is restricted solely to its wearer. On that note, it's pretty much on par with the methods of our Oracle System."

"That hasn't stopped it from letting us down when we need it the most," Jake's upper lip curled up in disdain. "Let's hope this one's a bit more reliable."

Still, casting another grim glance at his Contribution Points, he couldn't help but feel that the displayed number was a tad too high.

"I've only killed a few million troops. Even assuming there's a bunch of Lifemancers and officers among them, where the hell are all these points coming from?"

As he openly contemplated this, a mental interface popped up in his mind, providing a detailed breakdown of his past performance.

[2,750,919 Shimmers killed = 27,509,190 points]

[4,209 Pulsars killed = 210,450 points]

[674 Vitalists killed = 674,000 points]

[87 Light Paladins killed = 1,740,000 points]

[3 Corebearers killed = 45,000,000 points]

[1 Radiant Lord killed = 250,000,000 points]

[4 Light Saints injured = 1,800,000,000 points]

[1 Celestial injured = 3,000,000,000 points]

[1 Titanic Beast injured = 1,200,000,000 points]

[Note: Depending on the targets killed or affected, the number of Contribution Points allocated has been adjusted based on their significance to the Lustra Plains and how this will impact future battles.]

"Whoa, I injured a Titanic Beast?" Jake raised an astonished eyebrow. "When did that happen?"

Anyway, it didn't really matter. What counted was that he had this near-infinite number of points to spend.

"Hey, guys, I got 8 points!" Jashuzen suddenly blurted out, striking a pose full of arrogance.

"So childish to brag..." Thonzo shook his head in a mature manner, before boastfully adding, "I have 11."

Thrilled that their feats had been tallied, the group's newbies eagerly shared their point totals, which were all more or less in the same ballpark. Even Sank-Uk and Hephais had only received a few hundred points each for their past performance.

It just went to show the gaping disparity between Jake and everyone else.

"And you, boss?" Ekho suddenly asked, his eyes sparkling with curiosity.

The stares of the other recruits, including Sank-Uk and Hephais, instantly fixed on Jake.

Jake surveyed them one by one with a deadpan expression, then said, "Trust me, it's better for your mental health if I keep that number to myself."

"How many points are we talking about? 5,000? 10,000? 20,000?" Thonzo rekindled his interest before catching himself, "No, to my knowledge a Vitalist is worth around 1,000 points, so it shouldn't go beyond 5,000, even factoring in a victory bonus."

Having officially fought on the other side of the Ironsoul Rampart and been evacuated back to Havocspire for severe injuries, he knew what he was talking about.

"... More," Jake replied vaguely.

"20,000?"

"More."

"50,000?"

"More."

...

"More?"

"More."

By now, even the apprentice Spirit Enchanter watching their exchange was at a loss for words. 'If he's not bullshitting then...'

Gulp.

Realization setting in, the youth made a complete attitude adjustment, assuming the smarmy and submissive demeanor of a shifty merchant. Rubbing his hands together like someone smelling a good deal, while trembling despite himself, he asked obsequiously,

"How may I serve you, Your Excellency? If you wish to purchase the best equipment, I don't claim to be on par with the best in my field, but I can offer you my best at an unbeatable price. In exchange, all I ask is that you give me a little publicity..."

"..." Jake stared at him, speechless. "No need."

The apprentice deflated at his refusal, but his face immediately lit up like a kid in front of his favorite candy when his mysterious client spoke again. Jake had just remembered something.

"Do you sell manuals for learning Spirit Enchantments? I'm interested."

The receptionist, who had been expecting anything but that, momentarily glitched at the question, his face going blank.

"Excuse me? Uh, yes, we do. The science of enchantment is no big secret, provided one can control spiritual energy."

"Well, I'll take a full set of manuals then," Jake announced calmly. "How much do I owe you?"

"500 points?" The apprentice grimaced, visibly discouraged. Having a golden goose in front of you, but refusing to spend its fortune, was incredibly frustrating. "Are you sure you don't want to buy anything else?"

"Positive. Now, hand over the books," Jake commanded, extending his empty hand.

"Right away..."

Dragging his feet, the young Spirit Enchanter left them with a crestfallen look for a few minutes. Probably to fetch the manuals in question, which clearly weren't on hand.

'Jake?' Hephais questioned him with a look, but the man in question gave him a mysterious wink.

'We'll go fetch some water from the river tonight when everyone's asleep,' the assassin finally heard in his head a few seconds later.

After that, Hephais didn't bother him anymore. Their future gear was in good hands.

A moment later, the apprentice Spirit Enchanter returned, lugging a hefty stack of grimoires in his arms. He unceremoniously dumped them on a cleared table. Brushing off accumulated dust from his robe, the young man coughed once or twice, then announced wearily,

"Here you go! All there, from Volume 1 to 17. The entire collection penned by Grandmaster Soulmaner Lorentz himself."

"Cool."

Jake's lukewarm response was the nail in the coffin, but at least he was done with this crew. The other recruits had also picked their weapons. Just when he thought his demanding client wouldn't buy anything else, Jake made an even stranger request,

"Is it possible to purchase a raw sample of all your ores, gems, and alloys, enchanted or not? A few grams will suffice."

The apprentice scratched his head, his forehead furrowed in perplexity this time, but after some quick thought, he replied hesitantly,

"That... should be doable. All apprentice Spirit Enchanters have those kinds of knick-knacks for practice. Whatever I don't have, my master probably keeps in his workshop or with his blacksmith associates. It'll take some time, though."

"I'm in no rush." Jake smiled politely, already fantasizing about his next mineral-rich meal.

Hephais, aware of his unusual dietary regimen, didn't react. But Sank-Uk and the other recruits were utterly bewildered, giving him weird looks. Naturally, neither Jake nor the Egean bothered to clarify.

Gathering all these samples took longer this time, but the apprentice was efficient. An hour later, he was back with a dolly loaded to the brim with wooden crates stuffed to the gills.

"Everything's in there," he reported, observing Jake skeptically.

Just when the young man wondered what Jake planned to do with all these samples, Jake opened his mouth and inhaled deeply, creating a vacuum. The crates of samples instantly flew towards his gaping maw, incredibly compressing as they drew near before vanishing inside.

Gulp.

Jake swallowed loudly as if it were no big deal, then picked up the first volume of his new grimoire collection. Within seconds, he leafed through it from start to finish with a casual expression, then moved on to the next tome. In less than a minute, he had finished reading all 17 volumes.

If he'd wanted to, he could have scanned their contents with his mental sense, but that would've rattled the apprentice Spirit Enchanter even more. At least this way, he could make sense of what he was doing.

"Thanks. You can take these back," Jake returned the books, then uttered to the others, "Let's roll."

Stumped, the receptionist blinked dumbly before dashing after them, "Are you sure you don't want to buy better gear for your comrades? They won't get far with a single +1 enchanted weapon."

Jake waved his hand without looking back, "No need. I can forge much better stuff for them."

As the storeroom door slammed shut behind them, leaving the apprentice alone inside, he kept replaying the last words of that unintelligible individual.

'Forge better enchanted artifacts than what I have here for his entire squad? Is he joking? Some of my master's enchanted gear is also stored in this room...'

Lucky for him, the saying 'ignorance is bliss' held true. If he knew the kind of gear Jake planned to craft for members of his new squad, he would have surely repented not chasing after them.

Chapter 1079: Why Would It Bother Me?

Chapter 1079 Why Would It Bother Me?

As they stepped out of the building, they immediately ran into Soulmancer Meribelle. She was leaning against a wall with her arms crossed, a look of sheer boredom etched on her face. Hearing their footsteps, she turned her head toward them and nodded approvingly.

"Now, you finally look like a proper squad," she commented, her faint smile not reaching her eyes.

"You've been waiting long?" Jake frowned. "Why didn't you come inside?"

"I just got here," she tersely replied, then ominously ordered the group, "Follow me. The situation has shifted quite a bit during my absence. This isn't the place to discuss it."

Jake and Hephais exchanged a solemn glance, then agreed to follow her in silence. The rest of the recruits fell in line without a word.

In a matter of minutes, they had left the Soulmancer Enclave and entered an empty barrack that had been designated for them. It seemed the rest of the building was vacant, waiting to be filled by the next wave of recruits queuing for their equipment.

Once inside, away from prying ears, Meribelle activated an artifact that looked like a pebble, erecting a soundproof barrier. Addressing them, she announced, "I have one piece of good news and two pieces of bad news. Which do you want first? The bad is closely tied to the good."

"The good," Jake replied, unfazed. It made no difference to him.

"As you wish." She nodded, her expression gloomy. Gathering her thoughts, she cleared her throat and began, "The positive news is that no one has figured out your identity—neither your status as a foreigner nor as a stand-in Soulmancer King."

"Who said I'm a stand-in?" Jake corrected her with a weird grin. "I'm serious."

"... Erm, whatever," Meribelle ignored the goosebumps that crept up her arms and acted like she'd heard nothing. "The point is, no one except perhaps Abyssal Revenant Ledger knows what you're capable of."

"Ledger?" Sank-Uk perked up, thinking he'd heard the name before.

"That's right," she confirmed darkly. "It's somewhat confidential within our Soulmanecer circle, but Ledger is the Abyssal Revenant that tallies your Contribution Points. Originally, Ledger was just a ledger, an accounting book for a small tribe living at the base of the Underworld Cascade. Thrown into the Lumyst River to cover up some fraud, it came back... different. All I know beyond that is, it generates the rings that monitor our actions on the battlefield."

Jake turned pensive, realizing that Ledger had started out as a mere accounting book. From a disposable paper ledger to a monitoring network akin to a supercomputer capable of generating its own components, that was a hell of a leap.

Bones had been just a pile of bones, hosting the soul of a soldier consumed by vengeance, while Chillmire seemed like a wandering soul from the start. Only Ledger appeared to have been a completely inert object initially, which explained the sheer number of enchantments it had required to attain its current form.

When he shared his thoughts with Meribelle, she immediately corrected him,

"According to some rumors, Chillmire might actually be a snowflake that fell into the Lumyst River on a blizzard day. It's really hard to know the truth. There are many spirits affiliated with cold, wind, or water like him, but none as evolved. Statistically, considering the number of snowflakes falling into the river each year, there should be a few Chillmires. But in practice, there aren't. That's because Chillmire devours any like itself before they pose a threat to him or his supremacy. It's one reason many think he was an opportunistic wandering soul to begin with rather than an inert snowflake. Bones and Ledger each have their own personalities and distinct ambitions."

"Ah, I see," Jake nodded, finally grasping the difference between Ledger and the others.

Ledger's mind, as advanced as it was, remained at its core a no-nonsense military ledger. It aspired to be little more than what it was designed for. This perhaps was the most glaring distinction between spiritually enchanting an existing mind and awakening the spirituality of an object from scratch. If he recalled correctly, the manuals on Spirit Enchantment he'd just read went into great detail on this theme.

"He can also relay the orders you give it," Meribelle chimed in, unasked. "You should receive your assignment for the next regiment any moment now."

And indeed, as if Ledger had been eavesdropping on their conversation, their rings began to blink. When Jake probed the artifact with his mind, he received the following notification,

[Ironsoul Berserkers Army Quarters, Ground 3. Please report tomorrow morning an hour before dawn to receive your final assignment.]

"At least we'll get some beauty sleep," Jake quipped. "Well, not me. Tonight, I'm going on a riverside hike."

[I hope there won't be any nasty surprises there.] Xi sighed. [I have a feeling we won't be the only Players thinking of visiting the river tonight. Not necessarily allies...]

'Well, I'm looking forward to it,' Jake shot back in his head, barely suppressing a wicked grin.

The other recruits were also thrilled to have the rest of the day free. Unfortunately, Meribelle wasn't done with her spiel. But before that, a question nagged them,

"If this ring can transmit messages, then why did those Vorzhul Riders communicate with us by delivering written messages?" Ekho pointed out a glaring inconsistency.

Meribelle seemed prepared for this comment as she immediately explained, "Our enemies have their own methods of communication. They carry either a twig from Anthace, the Tree of Life, or a parasitic worm produced by the Dreadnought Nematode. It doesn't stop your rings from recording and filming, but it does jam the signal, especially when in the presence of a large number of enemies. It's better to communicate old-school."

It was kind of lame that their monitoring network was so faulty, but not entirely surprising either.

"So, what's the negative news?" Hephais abruptly asked, ready to scout ahead if the answer didn't sit well with him.

The young woman immediately dropped her discussion about Ledger and turned somber.

"The first bad news involves Jake and is closely tied to the good, as mentioned earlier. Someone has taken credit for your exploits in the last battle. A foreigner like you two, no doubt. His appearance also closely matches the Soulmancer King's, so Emlet, Giso, and the others approached him to assume that role. He accepted his new persona surprisingly quickly and has made no effort to hide it. In fact, he's been publicizing his existence to all the important generals. Right now, most of them seem to recognize his authority."

She paused briefly to gauge Jake's reaction, expecting to see cold anger, but there was none. Instead, he wore an indifferent, almost pleased smile.

"Doesn't it bother you that someone is stealing your credit?" She questioned with transparent skepticism.

Jake flashed his most radiant smile. "Why would it bother me? Let him lead if he wants to. Who is it? Cho-Min Ho? Or someone else?"

"Cho-Min-- Wait! How do you know his name?" Meribelle exclaimed in shock.

"Pure luck," Jake waved his hand nonchalantly. "He's the only Player of the same Oracle Rank as me that I know of here. And the only one whose appearance would fit. Believe it or not, he was quite the star back on our home planet."

"Planet?" Claire chimed in.

"A world built on the surface of a sphere rather than a flat plane like yours," Hephais clarified succinctly.

"That makes no sense," Jashuzen scoffed mockingly. "If the world were round, those upside down would fall into the void."

Jake was taken aback by the flat-Earther level argument but was too jaded to correct him. Judging by Hephais' resigned silence, he felt the same way.

"Ahem. Where was I?" Meribelle broke the awkward silence with a polite throat-clearing, then continued, "That brings us to the second negative news. Or the first? Since you apparently don't mind Cho-Min Ho taking your credit... Anyway!"

This time turning very solemn, she declared, "It seems our triumph in Havoscpire was for naught. While we were reclaiming Havoscpire, our enemies launched massive assaults on all our other battlefields.

"Jake, Hephais, it looks like you're not the only foreigners giving us a hard time. While you were reclaiming Havoscpire, those fighting for our enemies wreaked havoc in our ranks... and in yours.

"If this trend continues, we might very well lose this war."

Chapter 1080: What's Your Play?

Chapter 1080 What's Your Play?

In a lavish auxiliary villa, far more opulently furnished than the dorm Jake and his crew had just occupied, a stunning dark-haired man with unmistakably Asian features lounged comfortably in a leather armchair, sipping on a hot drink while listening to a report. Even though he looked poised and relaxed, his eyebrows were knitted tightly together, betraying the internal turmoil eating at him.

"You sure about this, Kang Jun?" Cho Min Ho asked the hulking figure kneeling before him, whose hands were respectfully clasped together, a customary gesture when addressing a king.

"Positive. The Oracle System's malfunction affects only the Players from our Mirror Universe. I had to brutally interrogate and kill several enemy Players to be sure. As for the assessment of our casualties, over 60% of our side's Players are already dead, compared to just under 15% of our enemies. Our allies are sitting ducks because our Oracle Devices are letting us down, leaving them unable to predict surprise assaults. Enemy Players only need to wish to take down a weaker Player within a certain range, and their Shadow Guide will direct them to a suitable target if one's available. Moreover, their average skill level is higher than our Players'. Several of them, though nowhere near your prowess, have stood out enough to be ranked as calamity-level threats."

This 'messenger' wasn't native to the Duskwight Lands for sure, and was none other than the right-hand man of the poser sitting cross-legged in front of him. As soon as Kang Jun found out that his boss had ascended the throne, he hurried to get in touch, leaving his previous battleground behind.

Dozens of beefed-up battle-hardened barbarians with menacing looks, donning glistening armors, were currently eyeing this suspicious messenger, ready to pounce and defend their 'sovereign' from any assassination attempts.

It's worth noting that Kang Jun didn't really fit the Underworld Barbarian mold even though he had the build. His slicked-back sandy hair and deep brown skin contrasted starkly with the mostly black or gray hair of these royal guards, not to mention their pale complexions.

In addition to these guards, several figures exerted a monstrous pressure in the room. They were Great Generals and Generals who had acknowledged the fake king's authority, swayed by the loyal Soulmanagers of the true Soulmanager King.

None of them were gullible. In fact, these intimidating brutes were all seasoned in both strategy and subterfuge. They clearly knew the man lounging in that chair wasn't their true king, but they were willing to play along.

In the background, looking jittery, Commander Kake and Officer Luthron could be seen, their expressions tight. Compared to their initial encounter with Cho Min Ho, they were now on a much shorter leash. To stand amid all these heavyweights was an unexpected opportunity.

"60%... That's almost 5 million Players," Cho Min Ho mused somberly, drumming his fingers on the armrest. "Even if it's mostly the riff-raff, it's a significant blow."

No doubt, among them were many probationary members of his King's Idol Alliance. When you indiscriminately recruit, you get a mixed bag.

Still, it was a tremendous waste. If his top players had enough time to get promoted, they could've taught these less skilled Players. Now they'd have to go without...

In the remaining 40%, there were probably a ton of Myrtharian Nerds, with their numbers in this Ordeal likely nearing a million. That added another layer of unpredictability. If only he could rally them to his cause... How much stronger would he become?

Turning to the generals who were silently observing him, Cho Min Ho uttered tersely,

"You heard the man. The enemy can make strategies accounting for our every move, but we can't because, for some damn reason, almost all functions dependent on our Oracle System and its Aether Network are down. Aas was supposed to handle that, but it seems he chickened out."

Before Generals and Soulmanagers like Giso or Emlet could press him on these mysterious terms, the Korean idol added darkly,

"Luckily for us, the Oracle System isn't entirely offline. The rules between our two Mirror Universes still hold. That means the enemy can't factor in my moves unless his Oracle Rank surpasses mine. As the top-ranked Player on our side and my early ascension to the role of Soulmanager King, we have a slight edge.

"However, this won't last. They can trigger Oracle Skills like Promotion or Cloaking, but we can't. That makes my rank only so useful. It means we need a major strategy, and we need to strike before one of the enemy's Mirror Universe Aces gains a position like mine. Their rank, allowing them to plot their dark schemes, would then be backed by the full might of the Lustra Plains. Unless their combat strength is way below ours, that single edge would guarantee their victory."

A stifling, heavy silence gripped the room after this grim revelation. Had these Generals not been previously convinced by solid reasoning, they might've thought this foreigner was yanking their chain.

Regrettably, the few Players they had captured fighting for the Lustra Plains only backed his claims. Each of these eminent Generals and Soulmanagers had their own intel network, and any significant info from the battlefield would quickly end up in their hands. In short, all Cho Min Ho was doing was reconfirming what they already knew.

"So, what's your play?" A massive barbarian dressed like a bandit lord growled defiantly, breaking the silence. "My Warghost Raiders aren't scared. Even if they can see our moves coming, they need the strength to act on it. Let them try! I'll mow them down!"

This was Great General Sheanu, a ruthless man devoid of principles. While his war prowess was undeniable, his moral compass was askew.

As the name of his private army suggested, he excelled in raiding and plundering enemy lands, a pastime long before the rise of the Dusken Throne. But prior to the arrival of the Soulmancer King, he was more inclined to raid his own divided tribes. From a bandit leader with no allegiance to the head of several legions today, his Warghost Raiders had become a massive military force the Dusken Throne couldn't do without.

Had Jake been in that seat, he'd have offed him the moment he learned of Sheanu's countless atrocities, some of which were unspeakable war crimes. The sanitized versions were just child beheadings and rapes...

But Cho Min Ho was cut from a different cloth. When necessary, he had no qualms about dealing with such scum.

In fact, these kinds of assholes were his favorites. They didn't shy away from any dirty work, no matter how immoral, as long as the pay was worth it.

Cho Min Ho conjured up a stack of scrolls, each bearing the names of the officers or Soulmancers they were addressed to, then uttered impassively, "Just follow the orders on these and ensure as many of our troops as possible acknowledge my authority. The Players I've identified for you on these parchments must be promoted to key leadership positions, and every effort should be made to restore their powers. There's more than one way to anticipate enemy moves... or to thwart them. Do as I say, and everything will be smooth."

Soulmancer Giso soon unfurled the scroll with the list of tasks assigned to him, and as he began to read, his expression changed. Instead of names, it was a list of sketched profiles, so lifelike that they were nearly photographic. This level of artistic prowess, astounding as it was, wouldn't have thrown him off if he hadn't instantly recognized the first portrait at the top.

'That's the self-proclaimed Soulmancer King that Meribelle hangs with!' He involuntarily gasped before quickly recovering, remembering that the foreigner had since altered his appearance to better blend in with the locals.

The sketch resembled Jake from the ceremony held by Oros four years earlier, the last time Cho Min Ho had seen him.

<nulli>Why is he looking for him? Do they know each other?

As Giso pondered if they were allies, he then noticed he wasn't tasked with boosting Jake Wilderth's military career. He just had to locate him and report to Cho Min Ho discreetly.

'So, the two fakes are enemies..<nulli>.' the spy realized with a sinister gleam in his eye before vanishing into the shadows to inform Meribelle.

Depending on her response, or rather the real Soulmanancer King behind her, he'd know if they should keep playing both sides or put all their chips on one horse.

Chapter 1081: Night Stroll

Chapter 1081 Night Stroll

As night fell, in the basement of an unassuming building.

"... What's your take on this Cho Min Ho? Strong or weak?" Meribelle asked Giso at their rendezvous, after he'd abruptly reached out less than an hour since their last meeting.

She currently had the scroll portraying Jake's sketch before her, leaving her deep in thought. Her initial impression was that Jake was an utterly unfathomable force of nature, but in retrospect, nothing said there weren't other foreigners just as daunting as him.

Getting cocky was not uncommon on Twyluxia. Countless warriors who thought themselves invincible met their ends after making too many enemies – history was littered with such tales.

"Hard to say... At least half of the identified foreigners seem loyal to him," Giso answered after some thought. "But speculation has it, Grandmaster Lorentz tested him personally. Without his backing, convincing those proud Great Generals, who bow to no one, would've been impossible."

"Lorentz..." Meribelle frowned upon hearing the only living Grandmaster Soulmanancer of the Duskwight Lands being mentioned.

Unlike Lifemancers, the lifespan of Soulmanancers rarely exceeded a few centuries. To level the playing field, their souls endured longer, maintaining their sanity long after their bodies decayed. Sometimes, their attachment to the latter even led them to possess it in their ghostly state.

These deceased Soulmanancers, still tethered to their physical shells, were a hybrid kind of specter called Dreaded Lich. In the hierarchy of wandering souls, they stood a tier below the Abyssal Revenants like Bones or Chillmire but could leverage their vast experience and knowledge to make up for it.

The catch, and there always was one, was that the spectral energy saturating the air of the Duskwight Lands was far from harmless. Even though immensely diluted compared to the Lumyst River's potency, it eroded wandering souls' minds, subjecting them to a

gradual internal restructuring akin to a spirit enchantment. The supposed temporary destruction, leading either to final obliteration or rebirth, became a perpetual process.

The thing is, a soul isn't a body. When it was injured, it was the memories and personality inside that inevitably suffered. Since the healing post-successful enchantment never took place, these Dreaded Lichs would gradually descend into madness, eventually succumbing to a botched spirit enchantment or restoring their corrupted souls.

The latter was, sadly, almost unheard of. Very few artifacts or bloodlines, like Jake's, allowed their bearers to passively regenerate their souls. Most of the time, it was limited to their Spirit Body.

As a result, even though there theoretically might be Grandmasters far more fearsome than Lorentz behind their Order of Soulmanagers, they could only rely on him. And to put it mildly, his temperament was... troublesome.

Still...

"If Lorentz says he's strong, he must be," Meribelle acknowledged aloud, weighing the pros and cons. "He's about the only one who can talk to our king as an equal—or at least that was the impression I got from their last meeting."

"Speaking of our king..." Giso grimaced bitterly. "What's his take on this? If he hadn't been so pathetically counter-ambushed, we wouldn't be resorting to this farce!"

Meribelle's face flushed with anger upon hearing her comrade brazenly slander their king. Glaring icily at her hooded friend with her gray-blue eyes, she growled tersely, "Never talk about our king like that again."

"You mean i—"

"Shut the hell up, you idiot!" Meribelle snapped, slapping both hands over his mouth to stop him from talking further. "You have no idea what you're talking about."

"Hmmphhh!" Giso responded, struggling to remove her hand so he could breathe. Once he managed, he cautiously inquired again, "So. You still haven't answered me? I know you can communicate with 'his highness' in real-time."

"He..." Despite her fiery outburst, the young woman briefly hesitated. "He advised me to tail Jake and Hephais tonight before making any decisions. He uttered we'd get our answer."

"Seriously?" Giso would be lying if he uttered he wasn't taken aback by her response.

At the very same moment, Meribelle's face tensed up as she received a sudden mental message, muttering in a sharp tone,

"Speak of the devil... Guess who just told me Jake and Hephais have left the camp. I'm going to follow them. You can come along if you promise not to blow our cover."

"Hey! Of the two of us, I'm the one with the expertise in tailing people," Giso protested, throwing her a scandalized look. "So, the warning goes both ways."

"Yeah, sure. Whatever," Meribelle brushed him off as if he were talking to a brick wall. Rubbing her locket with both hands, a fluffy black cloud materialized from it.

Enchanting a small cloud like this to awaken its spirituality hadn't been a piece of cake, but now she couldn't do without it. Without further ado, she gracefully hopped onto it and shot her colleague an impatient eyebrow raise.

"Whenever you're ready to get on..."

"Haha..." Giso chuckled awkwardly, then climbed up behind her onto the cloud before mumbling under his breath in a sulky tone, "Just admit that without me, you'd never be able to follow them without getting caught."

His black cloak wasn't just for soundproofing or creating darkness; it could also erase their presence, making them invisible.

Turns out, he'd hit the nail on the head with his last comment. Meribelle did need him, but she held her tongue and didn't say a word.

To be frank, she wasn't sure it would be enough even with her friend's cloak.
<nulli>Well, if we get caught, so be it.

Flying high in the sky to blend in with the darkness of the night, the pair reappeared shortly after above the indistinct silhouettes of Jake and Hephais, speeding northward.

"T-they're fast!" Giso exclaimed involuntarily, nearly losing sight of them in less than half a second as soon as they finished scaling the chasm that the fortified camp had been carved into.

The moment Jake and Hephais set foot on the surface, they broke into a frenzied dash so blistering they vanished into an indistinguishable blur from the surrounding darkness—like two black shooting stars crossing a moonless sky.

Meribelle was equally stunned, short of breath, but after a brief moment of dumbfounded bewilderment, she stammered, "Th-they're heading north."

Both reluctant to openly admit they'd already lost sight of the two targets they were supposed to be tailing, they exchanged a complicated look while racking their brains, then suddenly exclaimed in unison,

"The Lumyst River!"

Yes, that had to be it! Saved from embarrassment, Meribelle ordered her cloud to zoom toward the nearest river fork based on the previous direction Jake and Hephais had taken off in.

Covering the 60 or 70 kilometers took them a few minutes, but when they arrived, they were immediately relieved to find the two men standing side by side on the riverbank, stoically contemplating the vast expanse of shimmering water drifting in ethereal silence.

"Psst... what are they doing?" Giso whispered in a low voice.

"I-I'm not sure," Meribelle hesitated. She had a feeling but refused to consider it. If she was right, they were completely insane!

Hundreds of meters below, Hephais looked up without moving his head and grumbled,

"They're so damn noisy."

"You're preaching to the choir," Jake retorted, continuing to stare at the water's surface with deep concentration.

He was still pondering how he would extract the water, or whether he should just dive in to perform the next spiritual enchantment on his soul. There were multiple ways to go about it, but none were completely risk-free to his health. If the danger was null, then the cost in materials or time was what could potentially screw him over.

A minute ticked by without either man coming to a decision, until...

Chapter 1082: Jake The Cheater

1082 Jake The Cheater

Splash!

A tall, pale man with long black hair streaked with a few scattered white strands had just crash-landed like a missile into the previously undisturbed expanse of water. Almost as

quickly as he had come, the river spat him back out onto the shore from whence he came, the stranger convulsing in agony like a fish out of water.

The spectral energy overwhelming his body was pure chaos, wreaking havoc deep within his soul.

"How fucking stupid," Hephais remarked, slack-jawed, arms crossed, and clearly not in the mood to offer any assistance.

"Maybe he's got a death wish or he's backed into a corner?" Jake surmised nonchalantly.

This guy wasn't one of the Myrtharian Nerds, but he wasn't a native either. He was a Player. Friend or foe? That was yet to be determined.

His armor of dark jade spitting out purple flames and his mismatched eyes - one icy blue, the other blood red - made him look like a devil in human skin. Since he had taken a dive fully dressed into the river, his gear was now subjected to a forced spirit enchantment.

The helmet he wore disintegrated a moment later, as did his boots, gauntlets, and sword. Simultaneously, the spiritual fluctuations of the stranger and the remaining parts of his armor intensified. The previously purple flames of his armor now radiated an even more dangerous aura.

"He made it," Jake praised, giving a silent nod to his courage. Without even scanning him, he could feel the intense pressure emanating from the guy. Clearly, both he and his gear were now enchanted to a solid +2.

For an average Player who'd struggled just to stay alive up to this point, this was a game-changing gamble. It was the lottery the Oracle tossed to these desperate Players, their one shot at upping their game. Of course, it wasn't without its dangers...

Considering the average survival rate of Players in a Fifth Ordeal, a 50% chance to turn the tables was a pretty sweet deal. But the real danger after such a victory was getting too cocky...

Far from satisfied, the man, having just cheated fate, cast a greedy glance westward, where the river flowed. He unfurled a pair of membranous demonic wings and flew off without hesitation. No doubt, he aimed to dive again, hoping to reach a patch where the Spirit Lumyst Water was more potent.

"You think he'll make it?" Hephais mused.

Jake pondered for a beat, then nodded, "Probably. Dude's got luck on his side."

"Ah, same vibe as Ulfar, I get it." The Egean mumbled, clearly green with envy over these esoteric skills.

Every time he'd almost botched an assassination mission, it was because of targets like these. Catching them off guard was damn near impossible.

"AAAAAARRRGH!"

A harrowing scream echoed from the direction the unknown Player had gone. Squinting westward, Jake winced and sighed,

"Guess not that lucky after all... He survived, but his precious armor is toast. Probably his last Advanced Aether Artefact."

Then again, not many could match Ulfar's obscene luck. Next to him, other Beskyrians, Tim, and even Jake just seemed cursed.

Still, this gutsy Player's predicament had given Jake the inspiration he was missing. As he readied himself to act on his newfound plan, another splash interrupted them. Then another... And another.

More or less discreetly, Players were popping up everywhere, interacting with the river's water - some dunking their gear, others taking the plunge themselves.

"Aarrrrgghh!"

As expected, desperation didn't always beat the odds, and several of them disintegrated upon first contact with the water. Their screams of agony and distorted faces of regret at their demise said it all.

But among them, there were also those who knew what they were doing, who, like Jake and Hephais, had at least some degree of confidence to withstand water with such a low spirit energy concentration.

Among these was a young woman with elvish beauty wearing a sheer dress. She fearlessly entered the water after taking off her sandals. Her lavender-tinted skin and long silver hair blended perfectly with the ghostly shimmer accompanying the river's ripples.

After submerging herself fully, she made her way back, her soaked dress clinging to her skin, revealing the stunning physique underneath. When she reached the shore, she put her sandals back on and vanished into the darkness as mysteriously as she had come.

"Friend or foe, you think?" Jake teased Hephais, who was staring intently at the spot she had disappeared with a contemplative expression.

Snapped from his trance, the assassin frowned and grunted, "Who cares? If they aren't attacking us, they don't see us as enemies."

Indeed, the duo hadn't waited for Kang Jun's report to find out that their Oracle System's malfunction only affected them. They couldn't use their bracelets to locate a nearby enemy target, whereas their adversaries had no trouble doing so as long as their Player Rank allowed it.

Anticipating this, Jake had long since activated his own cheat code: Artifact Incarnation.

It was something he had sworn off to avoid alerting the Oracle, but given the unsettling circumstances, he had been left with no choice but to stop using his bracelet connected to the Oracle System to become one himself..

The previous bracelet he'd conjured with his Phantasm ability had been dispelled just a few hours after the onset of his Fifth Ordeal.

Right now, Jake was entirely off the grid, his body acting as a souped-

up Oracle Device of which he was the sole network member. Only Xi was barely maintaining the connection with the original Oracle System. Moreover, due to properties inherently similar to the Digestors, the Oracle System couldn't incorporate his data into its deterministic model.

The logical outcome of this move was that the System used by the enemy Mirror Universe Players also couldn't access their Oracle System's data to predict his movements or scan him for detailed info.

In other words... Jake was currently the only Player fighting for the Dusken Throne who had gone completely under the radar. Even potential Digestor Trojans and Corrupted Players hiding among them weren't as stealthy.

The repercussions this would have both for his comrades and enemies remained to be seen. But one thing was certain. He intended to capitalize on this situation.

If there were Players from the opposing side nearby, they'd be unable to obtain an Oracle Path factoring in his existence, regardless of how high their Rank was. Upon encountering him, they'd have two possible interpretations:

Either they'd bump into him amidst a crowd of soldiers, seeing him as just another inconsequential native. Or, they'd encounter him when he was alone. At that time, their expressions would undoubtedly become priceless when they realized their Shadow Guide didn't react.

For low-rank Players, this scenario could be chalked up to facing a Gamer ranked higher than them. But when the same happened to a high-rank Player, the resulting reactions would be... let's just say, quite entertaining.

Back to the scene unfolding before their eyes: after the departure of the mesmerizing elf-like beauty, other individuals, even beasts, took their turn in the liquid and left just as uneventfully, having achieved their evening's objective. In the end, despite some premature deaths, most of these Players managed to survive their second baptism without paying too steep a price.

This meant that just a few seconds in the water was enough to make each of these Players significantly stronger. Especially true for those daring enough to risk a dip further upstream.

Jake and Hephais, initially believing that the covert stream of Players would eventually dwindle, gradually wore more stunned expressions as they realized the opposite was happening. Worse, with his mental sense set to Oracle Device mode, each of his spiritual impulses covered a vast area.

Each scan revealed that every river stream within his range was a gathering point for hundreds, thousands of individuals. And the numbers kept rising.

Inevitably, what was bound to happen did. Enemy Players, driven by power lust or the guilty pleasure of hunting weak Players, mixed in with the rest. Due to their faulty Oracle System, none of these unsuspecting victims realized that wolves had entered the sheepfold.

Jake and Hephais were no exceptions. However, given their high Ranks, it was highly unlikely from the start that they'd be targeted by these foes. Plus, to these Players, Jake might as well have been invisible.

A colossal mistake they were about to pay dearly for.

"I think we have a duty to assist our comrades bathe in peace." Jake chuckled, cracking his neck. "Let's get rid of these pests, shall we?"

Chapter 1083: Cryptic Crap

At the exact confluence where Spirit Lumyst Water morphed into Life Lumyst Water, three enigmatic figures, each of distinct and diverse shapes and sizes, were gearing up to join the hunt.

Several skirmishes between Players from both sides were unfolding around them near the stream where they stood, yet none seemed to acknowledge their presence. Even

more baffling, these very Players, be they friend or foe, unconsciously skirted around them, reshaping the battlefield along the riverbanks, yet leaving the patch of crystalline gray sand they occupied untouched.

"You sure it's a intelligent move to spring an ambush this big, this early?" A massive man, oozing dominant bloodlust, grumbled, his voice dripping with arrogance. "I could've taken them all down by myself. No enemy Player stands a ghost of a chance against me in hand-to-hand at this early stage of the Ordeal. Neither do any of you. Bring it on, anytime!"

Standing over 5 meters tall, with a body sheathed in metallic skin shimmering a deep iron hue, his condescending taunt was far from baseless. His eyes blazed with an intense orange hue, and his battle-hardened face dismissed any notion of misguided confidence. His gargantuan hands, ending in razor-sharp, clawed fingers, tightly gripping an equally oversized flail, only added to the intimidation.

"The Titan of Vrax, Kaelum..." A supernaturally melodious female voice, honey to the ears, cut through his tirade. "We're not stopping you from slaying them – far from it. But no matter how strong or swift you are, do you truly believe you can eliminate them all by yourself? Impossible. Recent events in Havocspire prove that our cornered foe still has its fangs and claws. Even with our overwhelming edge, we must always hunt our prey with our full might."

If Master Eldrion, the elder member of the Radiant Conclave, had been present, he would've recognized this tall and slender alien beauty with silver-blue skin as the one who provided the invaluable intel leading to the ambush of the Soulmancer King. It was therefore clear that the Kaelum she was addressing as an equal was also a Rank 17 Player.

"Weiss and I foresaw in enigmatic lore, how Duskwight Lands' Players would react once the scales tipped, revealing more." a second male voice, with a serenity bordering on aloofness, added to the discussion.

Of human stature but draped in a cloak that seemed torn from the very fabric of space, his features, or even his race, were indiscernible. Only his mesmerizing phosphorescent green eyes gave away that beneath, there was indeed someone, or something, lurking.

"Without peering through time's shadowed mist," he continued with the same puzzling zeal, "Lumyst Water's baptism is their singular chance to shake off Twyluxia's limiting trance and power enhance. Had all gone as planned, Players from our twin mirrored lands would've climbed battle's ranks, keeping identities hidden, their masks well-manned. Yet, a shift in the opposing camp did demand an altered hand. To hope for victory's dance, into Lumyst's waters, their entire existence they must chance."

"For fuck's sake! I can't make heads or tails of your enigmatic crap, Shadrex! Can't you just talk straight for once?!" Kaelum roared, on the verge of slamming Shadrex's head

into his chest with a swing of his flail. "Even if they survive, the victory rate of those damn enchantments is set. The greedier they are for power, the more of them will die before reaching the strength that might have turned the tables."

Weiss, hovering away from the two, shot them a bored glance, clearly finding their antics ridiculous. Dealing with these two was no walk in the park...

Sadly, part of the reason they prevailed in most of their Fifth Ordeals was the unity of Players from their Mirror Universe. Their Oracle was much stricter about betrayal or self-centered acts that jeopardized the overall win.

Compared to them, their foes seemed to lack any semblance of teamwork, like various ant colonies without a queen suddenly forced to collaborate. Their victory was a foregone conclusion.

Unfortunately for Kaelum and his fiery temper, it was Shadrex who once again addressed his queries. His tolerant tone was about as irritating as listening to his damn rhymes that made no sense,

"Truth you speak, Vrax's mighty peak, yet some will defy the bleak. If but one stands against the numeric tide, surviving enchantments long and wide, our side in mere minutes could slide. Likewise, foes face a similar fate, if one of us elevates our state, enchanting self or Aether Artefact at a rate too great. Do the stakes now resonate, Kaelum, in this intricate checkmate?"

"..." The so-called 'mighty peak' was at a loss for words. "They do."

As prideful and aggressive as he was, he wasn't dumb. Not by a long shot. In fact, he was wicked smart, like any Rank 17 Player.

"So, we just wipe them all out?" Kaelum finally growled in frustration, realizing their endgame was essentially the same as his. The kicker was, he wouldn't get to be hands-on with the carnage.

Cutting off Shadrex before he could launch into another one of his insufferable soliloquies, Weiss subtly shook her head and stated,

"We're already on it, but it's not our hands that'll get dirty. Some of our top lieutenants are handling that. The three of us... we have another task at hand."

"And what's that?" Kaelum scowled, clearly miffed that his underlings had taken orders from someone other than himself.

Pausing for dramatic effect, the stunning alien female pointed in two opposite directions with two of her nine tendril-like tails, and whispered slyly,

"To get stronger, of course!"

"... And, by the by, halt their rising try." Shadrex chimed in with the same bombastic airs.

"..."

To the West, up the river, a bloody skirmish had already erupted. The shores of hundreds of similar tributaries were engulfed in the same chaos.

One might've thought this was the first occurrence of such an event, but the crystallized gray sand banks had long been stained with other colors: the blood of various alien or native species of Twyluxia spilled here.

It shouldn't be forgotten; this Ordeal had officially begun over three weeks ago. Nearly four.

Since then, from the arrival of the very first Rank 2 Players like Leo Vinson to the superstars of their respective Mirror Universes discussing their dark schemes, it wasn't the first time Players had come to the river in hopes of transcending their status.

However, it was the very first time the balance of power was so skewed. That's because the lower-ranked Players who had come here at the start of the Ordeal only had to fear rivals of the same Rank.

The weak were already busy enough trying to survive; how would they dare venture into enemy territory to ambush the opposing camp? It was unthinkable. If there had been surprise assaults, they were isolated cases.

That wasn't the case anymore. The desperate low-ranked Players coming to the river by the tens of thousands, though more numerous, had missed their best chance to put their lives on the line. Because now, they also had to deal with formidable high-ranked Players visiting the river for the first time.

And unlike the weaklings, the powerful weren't afraid to infiltrate the opposite camp to take out potential rivals...

"Chromy! Chewy! Fucking hell, where are all these bastards coming from?!" A petite young woman exclaimed, a mix of injustice and frustration evident in her tone, as she watched a group of terrifying individuals and creatures butcher two creatures as adorable as herself right before her eyes.

These two beasts, resembling oversized mutant otters, had been her pets for as long as she could remember and were just squashed to death by a massive hairy foot before her.

The poor woman herself was just a Rank 10 Player, having summoned all her courage just to dare to bathe alone here after narrowly escaping death multiple times in just a few days. Factionless, she had come here with the few Player friends she'd made during battles, but right now their still-warm corpses lay motionless around her, often not in one piece...

Now it was her turn to join them...

Facing her, a repulsive yeti-like monster, tall as a small building, and as hairy and filthy as a sloth, glared down menacingly at her, drool dripping from its lips. This creature was responsible for all the slaughter...

And judging by the bulge between its legs, it had intentions far more sinister than just eating her. Her state of undress after losing her equipment during her last swim certainly didn't help.

"Damn it! Am I really gonna bite the dust like this after all the risks I've taken without avenging anyone?" Although she hadn't given up the fight, she was consumed by regret.

Swooosh!

The beast's massive paw swooped down at blinding speed into her line of sight despite her best efforts to dodge, and in a fury, she threw a futile punch back.

Crack!

She braced herself, anticipating a pain that would sear through her entire nervous system. She pictured herself getting crushed alive by that monstrous mitt, followed by whatever nightmarish torments that would come next—or perhaps simultaneously. But the expected agony and hell never came.

Lifting her head, blinking in disbelief and hardly daring to trust her eyes, she was left gaping at the spectacle before her. The yeti still towered over her, but now it was missing one critical thing:

Its head. In fact, all the other attackers, whether they were monsters, aliens, or humans who had taken part in the ambush, were also lying there, deprived of that all-important extremity.

Jake and Hephais had made their move.

Chapter 1084: I Ain't Deaf, Tango

"Move ahead." Jake instructed Hephais, as he appeared like a ghost before the shocked young woman, who jolted back and lost her balance.

The assassin gave Jake a knowing glance, then vanished as quickly as he came with just a whisper of a sound. He already knew what his boss had in mind.

"Hey, you alright?" Jake inquired, more out of courtesy than genuine concern, regardless of how sweet and innocent this stranger seemed.

Seeing him extend a hand to help her up, the young woman froze in terror, throwing a wild punch at him. Jake caught her fist effortlessly, looking perplexed. Trying to break the tension, he remarked,

"Nice swing. What's your name?"

"N-Nuwa. Y-you're not an enemy?" She finally realized, although she continued to eye him warily.

After all, she was stark naked and completely defenseless against this guy who just took down the same monsters that overpowered her team. Though she had been fortunate so far, like many other weak female Players, she too had faced her share of traumatic events.

Under normal circumstances, she would've had a weapon on hand to end her life, but access to her Space Storage was sealed, and she'd just lost all her gear while bathing in the river.

"Chill out, I'm not here for that," Jake rolled his eyes, gesturing at the fallen bodies on the ground. "Which ones are with you? I can still bring them back if you want."

He wasn't lying. These Players were mere cannon fodder in this ordeal.

Although their Souls and Spirit Bodies had survived their physical death, they were powerless to do anything. To them, dying, even if it wasn't the end of their consciousness, felt like being trapped in perpetual darkness, paralyzed.

Given the Aetheric laws of Twyluxia and the spectral energy permeating the Duskwight Lands, their spirits would be sustained, but their personalities would deteriorate until their primal instincts transformed them into mindless wandering souls like the others. Jake could easily prevent this by restoring their bodies to their original state before their consciousness faded beyond recovery.

Seeing the sincerity in the eyes of the dashing young man before her, the young woman momentarily set aside her fear and skepticism, nodding hopefully,

"J-just Chromy and Chewy," she stammered, pointing to two large squashed creatures resembling otters. "Those four too. They were in the same regiment as me, but I don't really know them well."

"No problem." Jake acknowledged, waving his hand casually.

In no time flat, all the mangled corpses were restored to their original condition, except for their clothes if they still had any. Now with intact brains to house their consciousness, they woke up almost instantly.

"I-I'm not dead?" The metallic silver-white otter named Chromy squeaked in disbelief, vividly remembering a massive paw squishing his guts into mush.

"I-I'm pretty sure my skull was smashed," remarked another otter, distinct for its common brown fur and pronounced jawline, clearly taken aback.

The other four resurrected Players were just as stirred up and puzzled, the reality of their not being dead sinking in when pinching themselves repeatedly did nothing. The youthful woman, deeply grateful, turned to express gratitude to their savior but froze upon finding he had already left.

Unbeknownst to her, a dark cloak to preserve her modesty had also appeared in her hands. Scanning the fabric with her bracelet, her mouth dropped in astonishment, realizing this simple cloth was at least ten times more durable than her previous armor.

"Thank you so much..." She whispered softly before taking off with her companions.

For Jake, gifting such a cloak was like a billionaire tossing a nickel to a beggar. He barely noticed the dent in his savings. All he had to do was exude Chitin Scales from the desired metal and then craft it into any attire.

This "cheap" fabric he just conjured up by blending Adamantium, Orichalcum, and Oranium was actually very akin to chain mail, but the links of this mesh were much finer than a micrometer. For Players like them, it was more than they could ever dream of.

Once on his way, Jake nonchalantly saved dozens, hundreds of similar Player groups, cutting down everything in his path like the Grim Reaper. At the same time, he casually resurrected all the allied Players wiped out in his wake.

In fact, the latter task was more the focus, as he was simply retracing the path taken by Hephaestus. Judging by the cleanly decapitated corpses, all with surgical precision, the assassin was on top of his game.

In mere minutes, the duo had already saved/resurrected thousands of Players. Simultaneously, they had wiped out just as many foes, the catch being their Oracle Rank was generally one or two notches higher. This was because only foe Players

confident in their strength had the guts to venture into hostile territory and hunt them down one by one.

Thing is, Jake and Hephais weren't the only ones who saw the threat. Other high-ranked Players had also made their path to the river, preemptively taking out any that dared to come too close to their side.

On a different note, some of these Players had chosen to retaliate in kind: by invading the Lustra Plains. If Jake had encountered them, he might have recognized a few...

"Crunch, I've got a good feeling about this one." An obese, orange turkey-phoenix squawked loudly into the ear of an even fatter black fluffy cat.

"Shhhhhh! Keep it down, we're not alone here." The chunky feline shushed the airborne companion perched atop his head. "It was a damn hassle sneaking out of my enclosure. Don't want to end up back there too soon."

Far from the towering giants they once were, these two mischief-makers had employed a miniaturization technique to shrink down to the size of ordinary house pets. At the moment, they roughly resembled the size of an adult cat and turkey, albeit on the chubbier side.

Not too far from their hiding spot in the bushes, a clear stretch of water shimmered in the night. It was the same Lumyst River that Jake and Hephais traveled from one tributary to another, saving folks along the way. However, the energy leaking from it was the exact opposite.

Anyone nearing it could feel their fatigue melting away and their cells buzzing with delight. But this "fountain of youth" was not without its dangers.

"Aaarrggghh, fuck!!"

Before their mischievous eyes, a Player from the Lustra Plains had just stepped into the river. Boasting a morphotype of a giant spider-man - not the superhero type, but rather a hairy humanoid monster with eight eyes and eight dorsal legs - he looked formidable. Yet, apparently not formidable enough to survive a simple dip in these clear waters...

Instead of disintegrating upon failure, as would've been the case with Spirit Lumyst Water, his cellular and genetic balance spiraled out of control. The once-balanced spider-man's short, shiny fur started growing wildly due to the overwhelming influx of life energy, followed by his skin, muscles, and entire skeleton undergoing chaotic growth and mutations.

Moments later, his body, overwhelmed with life force, collapsed into a mass of bloody goo that mixed with the clear waters of the river.

Gulp!

"P-pumpkin, I'm starting to think bathing here might not be a good idea." Crunch nervously shuffled, instinctively retreating into the bushes.

Smack!

"It's Lord PHENIX! P-H-E-N-I-X!" The fiery turkey spelled out irritably, smacking the feline's head with his wing.

"Sorry, Lord Faux-nix!" Crunch quickly replied, feigning innocence.

"Did you just call me a fake phoenix?" Lord Phenix's expression darkened upon seeing the cat's cheeky grin.

Compared to the apprehensive Crunch from moments ago, he now sported the smug look of a cocky, laid-back jerk. Blame it on his ridiculous multiple asshole personality syndrome.

It was a convenient excuse! The fiery turkey that he was still couldn't figure out how much truth there was in this syndrome, or if it was just some theatrical bullshit to mock him with impunity.

"PHENIX!" The fiery bird screeched on the verge of having a meltdown.

"Hey, I ain't deaf, Tango!" Crunch snorted, plugging his ears with his paws, now wearing a grumpy expression, albeit still as cunning. Sensing the turkey was about to blow a gasket and ruin their first scouting stroll together, the plump cat skillfully redirected the conversation, "So, are we taking a dip or not?"

"Of course we are, damn it!" Lord Phenix exclaimed in frustration. "We didn't come for nothing!"

And to hell with the thousands of foe Players lurking around with the same goal as them. As for whether their swim would succeed or end as dramatically as the unknown spider-man, unfortunately, that would be for Jake to pick up the pieces...

Chapter 1085: Let's Have A Good Fight

Chapter 1085 Let's Have A Good Fight

As the two pranksters geared up for their maiden bath in enemy territory, the other Myrtharian Nerds were also out and about, either on defense or on the offense. Even though the world was too vast for them to coordinate in such a short time, they all shared a similar wavelength, each brimming with intelligence and ambition.

In one of the tributaries to the north of Twyluxia, a stunning and cold Nereid with long, seaweed-blue hair was meditating, her eyes closed at the river's bottom. While downstream the river's purity might be questionable, such a sight would stun any native. Yet, for those familiar with the Eltarian leader, this was the least they could expect from her.

Between her hands, Asfrid currently held a peculiar shell, constantly emitting subtle spiritual ripples that spread through the watery milieu she hid in and far beyond.

Suddenly, the spiritual fluctuations from the artifact surged dramatically, and a smile lit up the serene face of the young woman.

"Finally, the Spirit Shell is enchanted to +3. Just a bit more, and if the other Eltarians think like me, we'll soon be able to restore our Spirit Link." She nodded to herself, cautiously swimming upstream without ever surfacing.

Since Faction Chat was rendered useless, restoring the Spirit Link was their top top concern right now. While separated, members of their clan could easily get picked off by the enemy, but once they could coordinate, it'd be a whole different ball game...

In a style starkly contrasting that of Asfrid, yet with the same end goal in mind, twin sisters of otherworldly grace walked side by side through a desolate forest, leading a cohort of several hundred: all Myrtharian Nerds.

But not just any Nerds. In addition to a few wives and concubines of Ulfar, there were several Beskyrians, like his son, Skorgeld. The burly dude with features mixed between Asian and Viking trailed right behind his father's latest conquests - Nyx and Eris - with a brooding expression.

When he, like all other Beskyrians, had resorted to relying on luck instead of the now-defunct Oracle System to find his comrades, he'd never imagined stumbling upon these twin beauties before his buddies. Although seemingly charming and flirty at first, these women were batshit crazy deep down.

Unlike the rest, they didn't give a damn about rounding up the remaining Myrtharian Nerds; they just wanted to find their 'husband.' The thing was, the King of Beskyr, like Lucia, was nowhere to be found.

Because of their high Corruption levels, they'd been shipped off somewhere with other Corrupted and potential Digestor Trojans teetering on the edge of losing control. No one knew where that place was, but it certainly wasn't on Twulyxia, or their luck would've at least pointed them in the right direction.

Annoying as the twins might be, he had to admit they were a force to be reckoned with. Their skills were odd but extremely useful. For instance...

Nyx suddenly halted, signaling the procession behind her to stop. With her jet-black hair tied back in a simple ponytail, deep blue eyes, angular face, and pronounced cheekbones, she was an austere kind of beautiful. But right now, the supernatural glow pulsating behind her eyes intensified that demeanor.

Eris, identical in every way except for her bright emerald eyes and constant smile, immediately caught onto her sister's grave expression.

"Another attack?" she asked wearily.

Skorgeld had already drawn his battleaxe, ready for a fight. "Bring it on! We'll slice them up just like the last ones!"

Nyx's icy blue eyes flared even more intensely, and she declared ominously, "... Our fate darkens."

Skorgeld, Eris, and the other Myrtharian Nerds who had heard her utter such words before instantly paled. The last time she'd said that was just days ago, before an unprecedented assault of Space Digestors on their Floating Islands.

The time before that was mere hours before the defection of the Myrmidian Asthenes, which had disastrous consequences for the loyal members who remained in their faction.

And the time before that was minutes after Jake, Lucia, and Ulfar left for Thelma four years ago... It underscored how seriously these warnings should be taken.

"EVERYONE, BATTLE POSITIONS!" Skorgeld bellowed without hesitation.

The other Myrtharian Nerds didn't need to be told twice, and good thing they heeded the call. For within three seconds, thousands of Players from the Lustra Plains, each more formidable than the last, swooped down on them, seemingly appearing out of nowhere. The ambush was flawlessly coordinated!

It would take at least that much to defeat a group of Myrtharian Nerds led by Nyx and Eris, two Rank 15 Players.

The group led by Eris and Nyx wasn't the only one to endure such an onslaught. At the border between the Duskwight Lands and Lustra Plains, to the far south of the continent, a certain dark-skinned giant with long silver hair also found himself facing a surprise attack.

"The fuck are you?" Gerulf grumbled, half-opening an irritated eye, not letting it interrupt his nightly mud bath.

Hundreds of blades and various projectiles had just shattered against his skin, trying to turn him into a pin cushion. His body remained unscathed, for the most part, but his makeshift 'bed' was utterly destroyed.

Unlike most of the other passive Players, he had simply followed his instincts in search of the richest and most comfortable ground to bury himself in. It turned out such ground wasn't in the Duskwight Lands. He'd stopped halfway, by the nearest river, to bask in a short nap, but it seemed even that respite wasn't allowed...

"Those who will bring your end," an alien voice, reminiscent of crashing ocean waves, echoed in his dirt-filled ears.

Merely the sound of that voice seemed to liquefy the mud clogging his ears, turning it from slightly muddy to sludge almost as fluid as the river's water a few meters away from him. Had it been regular water, he might've continued to snooze without a care, forgetting they even existed. However, the moment it touched his skin, a piercing pain forced his eyes wide open.

BOOOOOM!

Gerulf instinctively blasted the shoreline and the surrounding river in a deafening eruption of lava and light, then ominously stood up, resting a massive greatsword that looked like it was forged in hell itself on his shoulder.

"You were saying?" The Kintharian growled between his massive protruding fangs, his golden eyes spewing dazzling red beams non-stop.

The adversarial Player who'd interrupted his nap gazed apathetically at the terrain reshaped by the enemy and then instructed his allies,

"Fall back. This one's mine."

The Players under his command didn't consider protesting for a second. With a nod, they retreated into the shadows, pursuing their next targets.

Alone now, the Player forsaken by his teammates emerged from the river's surface, revealing a translucent body with indistinct contours, entirely made of water. The watery

alien then addressed his formidable opponent with a tone now tinged with anticipatory excitement,

"I see now why my Shadow Guide led me to you. Anyone else but me would've struggled immensely against you at this early stage of the Ordeal where our powers are nerfed. Too bad for you, you had to nap so close to the Lumyst River. You have only yourself to blame. Now... Let's have a good fight."

Whether it was Gerulf, Rogen, Drastan, Maeve, Hade, Azeus, Galadin, or any of the other Myrtharian Nerds' powerhouses, be it solo or in groups, the moment they set out to take a dip in the Lumyst River, they were inevitably targeted by foe Players. The real question was only when and in what sequence.

The foe ambush might not spring on them tonight, but every one of these ambushes was bound to succeed... After all, they had their Oracle Paths ensuring their strategies went off without a hitch, while their adversaries were bafflingly stripped of theirs...

And regrettably, it had to be acknowledged that not all their Players, let alone the ones from King's Idol Alliance, were as big of catches as the unkillable Gerulf. Ineluctably, many of the unlucky ones targeted first didn't take long to drop like flies...

In theory, this nocturnal counter-offensive near every tributary of the Lumyst River was foolproof and had zero chance of failing. Victory was in the bag! And the slaughter of foe Players since the start of the Ordeal only bolstered this confidence.

Alas for them... it only took a single monkey wrench to screw up a meticulously crafted plan. And that 'monkey wrench' was none other than Jake.

Chapter 1086: New Orders

Chapter 1086 New Orders

Halfway between one of the many tributaries of the Lumyst River and the fortified camp they had come from, a dozen corpses of men, aliens, and beasts lay strewn on the ground. The blood seeping from their wounds was still warm, indicating they had met their end only moments before.

Among the fallen were a massive mutant lioness and an elderly yet athletic and good-looking pair of goblins: Sarabi, Xort, and Niss. The others were unknown Players from their regiment, with whom they had bonded in the past few days.

Unlike the other slaughtered Players, these souls had been extinguished in both body and spirit. Even if Jake were present, he couldn't have brought them back. And even if he had managed to, they'd just be hollow shells...

Standing motionless amidst the bloodbath, two mismatched individuals reluctantly tore their gaze away from their grim handiwork when they received a communication request on their wristbands. Unlike their foes' Oracle System, theirs was working perfectly.

Upon accepting the call, a towering hologram of a faceless alien android appeared before them, asserting its dominance. Aside from its lengthy articulated arms, a prominent steel horn extending from the top of its head gave it an oddly conical appearance.

"Doomhorn? Why are you contacting us so soon? The operation has just started," an alien, whose body seemed to be made of liquid mercury, snapped impatiently.

As it berated the holographic robot, its body divided into numerous large mercury slugs, which then attached themselves to the faces of the dozen victims lying at their feet. A heartbeat later, they detached, much like leeches recoiling from salt.

Whatever they had intended to do seemed to have failed. But in the next moment, the mercury blobs started to shift, then expand, perfectly mimicking the appearances of the corpses they had just latched onto.

Unruffled by the criticism, the android patiently observed the unsettling display, then calmly announced,

"Quilo, we've hit an unexpected snag."

"What kind?"

Doomhorn relayed what his scout-robots had just informed him of, and, unsurprisingly, their shocked responses came pouring in.

"What?! Someone's slaughtering our Players by the thousands?"

"This someone is reviving everyone we kill? You're pulling our leg, right?"

The alien Quilo—or rather, the thirteen alien Quilos, now including a lioness and two goblins—had lost their earlier disdain. No longer in the mood to mock the steel-coned being, they growled in perfect unison, deeply serious,

"Doomhorn... What are our new orders?"

In response to his question, a second hologram showcasing a hooded man, dressed in black like an assassin and armed with twin scimitars, materialized before them. Had

Hephais been able to see this hologram, he would've surely found its look familiar... After all, it was none other than himself.

"This is your next target," the android continued in its robotic tone. "The two of you will need to ambush the target at the coordinates I just shared. Based on his past movements, both my calculations and the Oracle Path of Mind Weaver Weiss predict with 100% certainty that his next victims will be there. Sadly, His Holiness is tied up with another mission and cannot handle this herself."

"Coordinate with the Players targeted by the enemy to eliminate him before he succeeds."

Quilo and his comrade checked the geolocation of their allies and their expressions shifted,

"That's Ezlao and Torak's squad operating over there," Quilo frowned, speaking up once more before his companion. "If I'm not mistaken, Ezlao is a Rank 15 Player and Torak is Rank 14, but that's only because he's an idiot and can't seize opportunities when they present themselves. Doomhorn, are you sure you aren't overestimating this target?"

The android didn't respond right away this time. After a brief pause where its blinking pupils seemed immersed in complex computations, it solemnly revealed,

"Actually, we fear we might have underestimated him. Something's off with this human. Some of his feats don't match the data our scans picked up about him. To counter any unexpected surprises, Lord Ooom, Glutton, and laoth will also join you there. They might be running a bit late, so you'll have to manage without them for a while. Good luck..."

The hologram vanished as abruptly as it had appeared, its ambiguous final words leaving the duo in a complex mood. Why did it feel, from its tone, like the two of them, powerful and feared Rank 15 Players, were about to be toast? Wasn't this damn Mechoid supposed to be as emotionless as a flatlined EKG?

"Even laoth is being deployed..." Quilo's shoulders slumped as he realized the heavy implications behind that.

Lord Ooom was the right hand of Mind Weaver Weiss, Glutton a terrifying and cruel beast serving Titan of Vrax Kaelum, while laoth served Bipolar Seer Shadrex. While the three they served were indeed Rank 17 Oracle Knights, they themselves were not to be underestimated.

Because all three of them were also Rank 16 Players. As for laoth, he was by far the most formidable among them. If it weren't for his lack of drive, he might well have been a Rank 17 Oracle Knight himself.

"Let's move, Quilo..." The Player who had been silent throughout the briefing finally spoke, his golden eyes shimmering like twin plasma orbs in the dark. "Let's take this bastard down. I have a feeling we're in for some fun..."

Hephais, unaware of the nasty surprise his enemies had in store for him, was currently speeding through the massive web of shadows that interconnected almost the entire continent, illuminated by the moon's reflection. The only times he had to emerge from these shadows were when another tributary of the Lumyst River blocked his path; no shadows reflected on the water.

If he had access to his full power, he would have simply generated extra shadows to bridge the gap, or teleported directly to the next one. But right now, even moving within existing shadows drained him significantly. If his stats weren't so high, he'd have had to take breaks. For this reason, he was careful not to move at full speed, always maintaining his physical condition at its peak.

Like many times in the past few minutes, the assassin was halted by yet another watercourse. He swiftly scanned his surroundings with an Oracle Scan before emerging. Even though the Oracle System was malfunctioning, he could still use his own Aether to access the built-in functions of his bracelet.

[Six Players attacked 3 hours from our position. 56 kilometers.] His Oracle AI swiftly reported.

"Thanks, Krea. On it."

Hephais didn't ask for specifics about his enemies and dashed straight in the indicated direction. This was because every enemy Player he'd encountered seemed immune to mental probing. Oracle Scans weren't exactly like mental sensing, but they were similar enough.

Most likely, they had a powerful psychist backing them. But so far, knock on wood, he hadn't crossed paths with this individual. Not that he was afraid; quite the opposite. His pragmatic mind churned with anticipation thinking about how proactively eliminating such a Player would boost their overall victory.

'For some reason they can't detect Jake,' the Egean recalled as he finally sensed the Aether signatures of Players battling it out using his mental sense.

Ever since he began rescuing folks, he had been ambushed several times. Yet Jake, whom he couldn't see but knew was right behind him, was completely ignored.

'I guess I'm the bait then. So be it...' Hephais lampooned with a wry smile.

Usually, it was the other way around. An assassin wasn't meant to be on the front lines.

When he finally reached the battlefield, a sense of irreversible resignation washed over him. Of the six Players he intended to save, only two were still breathing: a battered man and woman.

He didn't recognize the woman, but a taken aback brow lifted as he identified the man under attack. He was the first that Jake and he had seen swimming in the Lumyst River and surviving it twice.

His heterochromatic eyes, one icy blue and the other blood-red, were hard to forget. Moreover, he was still bare and weaponless after losing all his equipment in his last dip. Right now, he probably rue that last swim with every fiber of his being.

The duo had been brutally tortured, all four limbs torn off, bled nearly dry. Their blood mixed with that of other corpses, forming a murky pool blending sand, soil, blood, and other fluids.

The fact they were still alive was miraculous. But seeing the overwhelming fluctuations, resembling to violent waves, from their opponents, Hephais displayed genuine confusion.

'Something's off, they should be dead by now.'

Chapter 1087: Not Strong Enough

Chapter 1087 Not Strong Enough

Hephais believed he was undetectable, tucked away in the unobtrusive shadow of a rock. But no sooner had the thought crossed his mind than he felt an acute sense of danger. Without hesitation, he teleported to another shadow across the river, just in time to witness the rock's shadow get swallowed by a greenish swamp.

Upon contact, the shadow, which was supposed to be intangible, began to sizzle as if it was a steak thrown into a boiling oil pan. A sharp pain echoed in his Spirit Body, and glancing down at his own shadow, he noticed a bit of that corrosive substance had followed him there.

Hiss!

"Fast..." Hephais muttered, directing his gaze to the creature deliberately emerging from the boggy ground where the rock and its shadow had been mere moments ago.

The creature bore enough human traits to not be labeled an utter alien but was distinct enough to rule out any native origin. Roughly the size of a nine or ten-year-old, with coarse green skin, short curled horns, webbed fingers, and delicate wings, there was no mistaking it.

Its blue-violet eyes, common amongst the Underworld Barbarians, and its reptilian-skin tunic, adorned with a necklace made of teeth from unknown species, fit in fairly well with other conscripts.

Too bad for this Player that he was aligned with the Lustra Plains... Whatever little advantage he had in anatomy and attire had now become moot. But undoubtedly, this unfamiliar Player could cope with such disadvantages.

From their first encounter... he was formidable.

"A Marshling?" Hephais speculated based on his visual input. Even without the Oracle System, his Oracle AI and he had downloaded and stored a myriad of data before the Ordeal, anticipating such scenarios.

While countless Mirror Universes and races existed, one could still categorize them based on recurring traits. A Marshling was akin to a Kappa but this one was clearly more lethal due to its flying ability and the potent toxin constantly oozing from its pores.

Without a doubt, this particular Marshling was even more treacherous, having evolved its original bloodline several times over.

"Oh? Managed to dodge my strike, did you? Sharp instincts," the amphibious creature praised, a predatory grin warping its inhuman face. "Did I forget to mention I'm not alone?"

BOOOM!

The river separating Hephais and his newfound adversary was suddenly bridged by a colossal stone chain plummeting from the heavens without warning. Unfazed, the Egean calmly took a step back, distancing himself from the heavy chain that crashed into his previous spot.

For a fleeting moment, the river was split into two towering walls of water by the chain's force. It then disintegrated into billions of fragments, vanishing entirely from Twyluxia's surface. Both the surprise attack and the spiritual enchantment triggered by the Lumyst Water had failed.

However, the danger wasn't over yet. The plumes of water stirred up during the impact and the collapse of the two watery walls were the real hazards. Whether it was Hephais or his two opponents, they all simultaneously distanced themselves from the stream, moving in opposite directions to avoid the fallout.

Accustomed to navigating his shadow network, he vanished into the sea of darkness without a hitch. Yet, he was caught off guard again when millions of fine droplets from the river finally hit the ground. Some of the shadows he was moving through were instantly obliterated along with the ground they occupied, but others... survived.

The disappearance of several shadows halted him dead in his tracks, breaking his shadow network at multiple points and forcing him to teleport to the next one to maintain his speed. On the flip side, the shadows that remained appeared unchanged, but Hephais, who had an unparalleled affinity with elements of shadow and darkness, was violently shaken.

Indeed, these shadows had been enchanted to +1 and gained some level of spirituality. Judging by the expression on the Marshling, one of his marshes had also received such a spirit enhancement. As for the Player trying to smash him with his enormous chain, he wore a mournful expression.

"My chain... That's the eighth one I've lost today." A colossal, ridiculously stocky alien suddenly broke into sobs, shattering the battle tension that had just formed.

In addition to his towering height exceeding 12 meters, his rough skin resembling a cliffside, and his pupil-less, luminous yellow eyes, it was his bald head topped with a triangular hat that literally looked like a miniature snow-capped mountain that made him so recognizable. The mini-mountain was strapped to his chin by another stone chain, forming a rather eccentric helmet.

As for the massive chain that had just smashed the river, another one was coiled around his torso, which was clad in a primitive rock armor. Behind his back, this chain appeared to pile up in dubious knots, its origin somewhere near his nape, as if it were some kind of umbilical cord with a second navel located there.

'Krea, do you recognize this guy's species?' Hephais mentally queried his Oracle AI, never taking his eyes off the two Players.

[Negative. A mountain troll variant, an earth spirit, a cave titan, a minor deity... all are possibilities.] Krea replied, as unflappable as the one asking the question.

'I guess we'll find out what they are when we fight them.' Hephais tossed his doubts to the back of his mind and decisively drew the same twin scimitars he had nabbed off a Pulsar a few days earlier.

"So you're done running?" The Marshling commented excitedly, brandishing in response a wooden javelin emanating overflowing vitality. "Torak, you handle the distraction."

"Torak, fight!" The giant roared enthusiastically, as if bestowed with a divine mission.

Before the troll or whatever it was could even firm up his resolve, Hephais burst from the shadow at his feet with the speed of a sniper bullet. The giant's yellow eyes widened stupidly to their limits as he saw the hooded face of the killer targeting him fill his field of vision, but it was already too late.

Shling!

Arms crossed over his chest, Hephais uncrossed his blades with lightning speed, slicing the colossus in front of him with confidence. But as he dove back into another shadow a few yards behind, his expression changed.

'Tsk, not strong enough.'

The rugged-skinned neck of the giant was indeed unscathed. Only the stone chain wrapped around his neck had been slightly chipped. In fact, even the rock armor protecting his skin was still intact.

From this first unsuccessful decapitation attempt, Hephais immediately deduced how the rest of the fight would unfold. Regaining his icy composure, he realized,

'I can't kill it. Not quickly, anyway.'

The problem was the suppression of his powers. If Hephais and this stone troll were in full possession of their abilities, he'd have countless ways to take down this tough bastard. But in this context, where their power was 99.5% determined by their body attributes and the boost from their Lumyst Aura, he was facing an unsolvable equation.

Regardless, not for a moment did he consider asking Jake for help. As an killer who had never failed a mission, he had his own pride.

Aware that this would certainly drain his stamina, he commanded the shadows he melded into to wrap around his dual scimitars. Concurrently, the shadow of the giant he had unsuccessful to kill seemed to rebel, with dark tentacles rising from the ground to suddenly constrict their former master, squeezing him like a python.

This time, the somewhat dim-witted colossus sensed the looming death and tried to dodge, albeit a beat too late. Hephais's now completely black scimitars were already at his neck, slicing through the first protective stone chain like a hot knife through butter.

As Hephais already envisioned the troll's head rolling on the ground, rendered as brittle as sand thanks to the terrifying debuffs accompanying his blades, he abruptly withdrew them to parry invisible projectiles. Suspended in the air and without support, the assassin contorted at high speed to dodge enemy shots that his weapons unsuccessful to intercept, withdrawing into the giant's shadow as soon as his feet touched the ground.

Fading into the darkness, Hephais grimly inspected the condition of his dual scimitars, or rather the shadows on them.

'Completely corroded,' he concluded, deciding to switch targets.

While the walking mountain was powerless against his shadows, the Swamper was a real thorn in his side. Unless he eliminated him, triumph would be impossible.

"Then, you'll be the first to go."

Chapter 1088: Shadow Assassin

Chapter 1088 Shadow Assassin

Hephais had decided on this change of target even before the shadow he'd dived into had finished swallowing him. That's why he tensed up right after, when he realized that the very shadow network he'd just sunk into had suddenly been replaced by an impassable no man's land.

All the shadows in his immediate surroundings had been destroyed. But how? He had a hunch, recalling the corrosive swamp conjured by the sneaky Marshling earlier.

'Pulling off a spell with such a wide range must not have been easy,' the assassin mocked inwardly, estimating the cost it would've taken him to generate a similar shadow domain.

Unless the enemy's Lumyst Aura or stats were much more superior than his own, the alien had to be running on fumes. Since these two enemy Players didn't give off the vibe of being truly high-ranked Players like Jake and him, it had to be the first option.

This made even more sense if their Rank was lower. Being Rank 16 himself, a Rank 14 implied that the two Players had arrived on Twyluxia at least 72 hours, or three days, before him. Such a delay spent killing natives by day and Players by night could indeed significantly shift the balance of power between them. If they'd used that time to boost their bodies, souls, and gear with Lumyst Water, then it wasn't that hard to believe.

'Either way, winded or not, I need to act fast.' Hephais' eyes glinted with fierce killing intent, manipulating the shadow of the troll where he hid to form a long needle.

At their level, even critical exhaustion—akin to a human sprinting 300 meters—could be recovered in a matter of milliseconds. To swiftly defeat the enemy, he had to press his advantage now, and that's exactly what he planned to do.

The giant's shadow, sharpened for the occasion into a long needle spanning hundreds of meters, began to slice the area in a 360-degree arc, like a massive whip lashing out at everything in its path. The speed was mind-blowing, and it was enough to connect to the caught-off-guard Marshling's shadow.

The alien's sparse hairs stood on end instinctively, sensing a foreign presence invading the domain monitored by his mental sense. His pupils constricted in sudden awareness, and without thinking, he leapt into the air, immolating the ground below him in an acid downpour.

His own shadow was also part of the targeted area, but imagine his surprise when it blended with the ultra-fine black needle that had pierced him. Like the head of a serpent suddenly coming to life, the shadow dodged the impact zone of the acid rain with a neck sway and then, against all odds, sprang from the ground to bite the airborne Marshling.

The stunned alien reflexively encased himself in a poison shell, gripping his spear tightly just in case. Compared to his previous confidence, his sweat-covered, pale green face had lost its luster.

'F-fuck. If I'd known he could be this fast, I would've kept my damn mouth shut,' he cursed in his mind, regretting having provoked this hellish assassin.

The problem wasn't even his speed as he could barely keep up with the assassin's movements. Rather, it was his presence.

The killer had elevated the art of stealth to such a level that even when the Egean stood still in front of him, the alien had to exert serious mental effort not to 'forget' him. So when the assassin moved at such high speeds, merging seamlessly with the shadows, especially in the dead of night, it became overwhelmingly chaotic.

Right now, the Marshling had to admit he had no clue where his adversary was, hence his omnidirectional poison shield. It was, in fact, an admission of defeat.

Luckily, he wasn't counting out his Shadow Guide, boosted by his level 3 Oracle Promotion Skill. With his temporary Rank 17 of Colonel, he could somewhat react.

"EZLAO, CAREFUL!" The gravelly voice of the dumb stone troll suddenly snapped him out of his daze, followed by an awful wave of goosebumps.

While the Marshling hunkered down in his poison bubble, blind to the outside world, Hephaï silently appeared from his lair of darkness to deliver the death blow. Wrapped in a mist darker than a starless cosmos, his indifferent eyes started to ominously glow red, mirroring the moon that had also turned crimson.

The shadow needle, having finished sweeping the area, devouring and merging with every patch of darkness except for the night sky itself, had in the meantime returned to its creator's hand.

Still connected to the shadow of the lumbering giant from which it originated, Hephais impassively raised his other hand and sliced the 'cord' with a swift motion.

It was the excruciating pain that finally allowed the overwhelmed behemoth to exhaled this warning scream to his companion. Alas, too late.

The long shadow whip instantly compressed thousands of times to form a tiny droplet of darkness, resembling a mini black hole.

'Shadow Ichor,' Hephais coldly declared in his mind while poking it with the tip of one of his dual scimitars, which turned utterly black

—blacker than before.

Then, without looking at the result, the Egean hurled it straight at the opaque poison sphere, where he presumed the Marshling's heart was. Like a swift and stealthy black blaster shot, the scimitar disappeared into the poison cocoon as if it were a droplet of ink falling into the ocean.

No scream was heard, but a split second later, the poison sphere turned black and imploded, spilling a torrent of shadows onto the ground below. The Marshling taking shelter inside was nowhere to be seen.

Pale and worse for wear, belying his apparent composure, Hephais suddenly plummeted from the sky, crashing on all fours to catch his breath. A metallic taste filled his mouth, leading to a brief wave of nausea, which instantly transformed into a fit of bloody coughing.

Too weak to move after using that massive technique, he didn't notice that the shadow runoff from Ezlao's death and his killing move had continued to spread to the river. Unbeknownst to all, a terrifying shadow was on the verge of coming to life...

"DIE, YOU BASTARD!"

As Hephais barely managed to register his surroundings without vomiting, the ground suddenly shook under the heavy, clumsy footsteps of an enraged stone troll. As slow on the uptake as he was, the giant wasn't stupid enough to miss such an opportunity.

BAM!

A phenomenal kick, made possible by a massive foot as hard and tough as a block of diamond, caught the exhausted assassin off guard right in the jaw. In a blink, his body—

coated just in time with a faint Oracle Shield—broke the sound barrier with a deafening shockwave.

Though he should've simply crossed the river and vanished into the distance, he hit an invisible wall halfway across, sending him skimming horizontally back along the water. His inertia inexplicably unbroken, the Egean sliced through the river's surface for a good dozen kilometers before finally starting to decelerate. His body, in an unknown condition, then ricocheted hundreds of times along the surface of the Lumyst River before finally sinking like a stone.

"..." The giant responsible for the kick was the first surprised by the frightening outcome, nearly forgetting his own sorrow.

This right-angle trajectory was obviously not in his wheelhouse. As the colossus wondered what could've possibly happened, several figures materialized in a whoosh by his side. As dim-witted as he was, it only took the troll a quick glance to recognize two of the newcomers:

Quilo and Sokal, the reinforcements they had been promised. Both bona fide Rank 15 Majors. Quilo was accompanied by his gang of clones made from his latest victims, while Sokal was as he always was, his solar eyes ablaze with fighting intent.

"He killed Ezlao!" The giant broke down in tears as he recognized one of them, Quilo's quiet comrade.

These two were obviously from the same faction.

"I saw that, Torak," Sokal sighed, disappointed as he looked at the spot far away where the assassin had sunk into the river. "Too bad he's dead... we came all this way for nothing."

Damn it all, he had hyped himself up for this fight, but it was over before it had even begun. What a letdown.

"Don't complain," Quilo snorted tersely. "I prefer this to—"

BOOOOOM!

As if to satisfy his lament, a massive water geyser abruptly interrupted their apathetic reunion, lifting a colossal column of water hundreds of meters into the air. When the water mass fell back down, the completely naked silhouette of Hephais reappeared, hunkered down on the shore, a much more compact spectral halo faintly shimmering on his skin.

The crippling fatigue that had been affecting his movements just moments ago was gone.

Chapter 1089: Lord Ooom And Glutton

Chapter 1089 Lord Ooom And Glutton

Naked but unharmed, Hephais stood up without a word, piercing the two Players who had just ambushed him with a contempt-filled gaze. As an assassin, sneaky attacks were his forte, but that didn't mean he enjoyed being on the receiving end.

'Krea, what races are they?' He asked while narrowing his eyes, having just received feedback from his latest Oracle Scan.

[A Morprian and a Sorrgil], the Oracle AI informed him in the same phlegmatic tone as its master.

Morphians were a versatile race that could not only morph into anything they touched but also semi-permanently copy all their memories and abilities. Unlike regular shape-shifters, they could also produce clones of themselves through mitosis. These clones could assume the forms of other targets and had their own individuality. However, any skills or abilities the clones had could also be used by the original as long as they existed—hence the term 'semi-permanent'. Before assuming a shape, a Morprian and its clones would resemble big globs of liquid mercury, which was when they were easiest to kill.

Right now, the Morprian had an indescribable appearance—vaguely human, part monster, and part alien. Sizing up the creature, Hephais recognized familiar traits like lion-like ears, silver hair, goblin-green skin, and golden eyes...

It was only when he noticed the still clones standing behind the hybrid Player that he realized where this familiar feeling came from, and despite all his self-control, his killing intent flared up uncontrollably in a burst of anger. Jake, who was watching from the shadows, was also just a hair's breadth away from blowing his top.

'Sarabi, Xort, Niss... Even Vargen and Balius.' He recognized several faces among these clones, the last two, a Throsgenian and a Myrmidian, being among the strongest of their race.

Although Jake had anticipated such losses in this Ordeal, it still was a big blow. And the culprit was right in front of them.

The only silver lining was that the old goblin couple had been able to reunite one last time before dying hand in hand. While not the ending anyone would desire, it was one that could find its place in the most tragic romantic tales.

As for the second newcomer, the Sorrgil, he vaguely resembled a Kintharian with his coppery skin, imposing musculature, and golden eyes that burned with fighting spirit. His bald head was marked with intricate golden patterns, evoking something like a sun or a sunflower. Unlike his bare scalp, the rest of his body was covered in majestic golden and red plate armor and a matching elegant cape—their quality far too high to be military surplus from the Lustra Plains. Though he emitted no power, he looked strong. Very strong.

Hephais didn't know it yet and had no intention of finding out more, but the Morprian and his reticent Sorrgil companion were obviously the Players Quilo and Sokal—the same who had been dispatched here to buy time before the real reinforcements arrived.

Unfortunately for the Egean, who usually refrained from talking to his future victims, he fell for the trap, remembering that Jake was probably not far off, keenly following everything happening here. In this case, the role of making these Players talk fell on him. Good, he had some remarks for them as well.

"For Players supposed to be the elite of your Mirror Universe, I didn't think you'd stoop so low as to kill-steal an opponent from one of your own allies," Hephais sarcastically threw out, twisting the events to his own narrative.

An oblivious witness to the scene might indeed think that one of these Players had tried to steal a kill from this lumbering brute. Its kick was spectacular enough to suggest that.

But the reality was far different. The kick, brutal as it was, had at best only bruised his facial skin. The muscles, bones, and organs beneath remained untouched. In the meantime, he had already healed.

On the other hand, the invisible attack that had altered his flight path nearly killed him. Not only had the sudden change in direction without loss of momentum broken several ribs, but the repeated collisions with the river's surface triggered a second Lumyst baptism under the worst conditions imaginable.

Thankfully, for this time, luck had prevailed. Actually, no...

It was currently the Cosmic D Starfeyrves Body Passive that had saved him by adapting to the chaotic influx of spectral energy infused into his Soul and Spirit Body. That, and the fact that his spirit was fucking strong too.

Being saved by their Permanent Faction Skill reminded him that even without the Oracle System and Aether Network, some things still worked. It was somewhat... reassuring.

While this was difficult for Hephais to grasp, and thus a source of optimism, Jake, who could peer into the Aetherdream with his own eyes, held an entirely different view. That this Faction Skill still worked was not good news at all.

When Jake had set up his Cosmic D Starfeyrves Body as a new Permanent Faction Passive, the Oracle had indeed cast the required Aether Arrays onto each Myrtharian Nerd. However, it was Jake and the Myrtharian Nerds themselves who had funded its activation by footing the bill. They also bore the Aether costs to maintain it.

In other words, the Oracle System and the Aether Network might be needed to obtain the Faction Skill, but had nothing to do with it afterward. This only reinforced the current conjecture that the Oracle System and its Aether Network were effectively rendered inoperative.

By the same logic, other Faction Skills like United We Stand, Vitality Link, and Space Link could still be used, although they were currently severely nerfed like any magical ability by Twyluxia.

Back to the topic, Hephais expected all kinds of reactions after accusing the two newcomers of stealing their ally's kill, but not the response that followed.

"What?! Quilo, did you do something earlier?" Sokal exclaimed, glaring furiously at his companion.

The wrongfully accused Morprian immediately bristled and flatly denied,

"I didn't do shit, okay! Plus, we came together and never lost sight of each other! I know Kaelum's faction members are fucking morons, but at least make an effort."

"True..." Sokal conceded before scowling furiously, realizing that he and his entire faction had just been insulted as idiots. "Take that back!"

"Fuck you! Never!" All of Quilo's clones chorused in unison.

"..." Hephais was left speechless, but he could also feel that something was off. If it wasn't them who attacked him, then...

"SIGH... THESE DUMBASSES..." A voice as deep as the earth resonated in his ear, accompanied by hot, foul breath.

BANG!

Jake, perched calmly atop a tree, watched as Hephais was pancaked against the fine sand of the shore. No assailant in sight, but where Hephais had been smashed, a massive clawed paw print had left deep furrows. The crater, shaped like a five-clawed paw, was at least ten meters long, five meters wide, and twice as deep.

Jake calmly surveyed the crime scene, then nodded to himself, "He's fine."

The crushed body of his friend dispersed into black smoke a moment later, with Hephais reappearing unscathed on something invisible. Ignoring what his senses told him, he wrapped his fist in thick shadows and punched with all his might.

BAAM!

A stunning shockwave hurled the assassin back into the river with the velocity of a railgun shot. A towering column of water splashed all around, while the resulting high waves flooded the adjacent shores.

This time, Hephais remained underwater as a precaution, enduring his third baptism in silence. But a myriad of lantern-like wisps illuminating the stretch of water where he was submerged forced him to resurface prematurely.

B-BOOM! B-BO-BOOOOOOM! BOOOOOOM!

The spots of light filling the river suddenly intensified in radiance before exploding with incredible power that would make an atomic bomb jealous. When the illuminated river was finally evaporated by the radiant blast, a massive and repugnant phosphorescent aquatic creature revealed its existence.

Simultaneously on the shore, the massive behemoth that had twice smashed Hephais with its immense paw ended its invisibility, revealing a huge wolverine that could pass for a small mountain if it stayed still. Its stone-like skin had a complex texture, embedded with gems of every color, but also moss, a bed of flowers, and even trees included.

At a glance, both the wolverine and the aquatic beast were at least fifty meters long. And when the dim-witted stone troll recognized the overpowering wolverine, his eyes lit up instantly,

"Master!"

With the same surprise but not the same delight, Quilo and Sokal also recognized the two monsters,

"Lord Ooom and Glutton..." They growled furiously in their throats.

Two Rank 16 Players! The second wave of reinforcements they were supposed to buy time for had actually arrived before them.

Chapter 1090: The Last Reinforcement.

Like Jake, Lord Ooom and Glutton had been lurking in the shadows, watching the unfolding events, biding their time for the perfect moment to strike. Regrettably, due to Hephais' tenacity, they had to reveal themselves first.

In that sense, it was a win for the assassin. Hearing the dim-witted stone giant address the massive wolverine as "master," both Jake and Hephais initially assumed it was a standard master-disciple relationship.

They were in for a big surprise.

When Sokal called, and the mountain-like beast's jaw stretched into an oddly tender grin, doubts rapidly took hold of them. When the massive claw gently stroked the egg-like head of the giant, who then "purred" in response, the truth dawned on them in stony silence.

"Tell me I'm tripping... Glutton, he's your pet?!" Quilo was the first to break the stunned silence, his own allies just as clueless about the nature of their relationship. "Sokal, did you know?"

"Of course," replied the copper-skinned warrior, shrugging indifferently. "We're from the same faction. It's not exactly a secret."

Hidden atop his tree, Jake had to admit he was as baffled as the Morprian. It wasn't that a creature couldn't have a humanoid or even a human as a pet, but this was the first time he'd seen such a dynamic in action.

Though, in this specific case, it made sense. The enormous wolverine-like behemoth known as Glutton was bigger, stronger, smarter, and probably even wealthier than the dumb stone giant. In other words, the duo match the stereotypical dynamic Jake imagined between man and beast, only the power dynamic was flipped.

"Those two are something," Jake chuckled, observing the troll nuzzle the wolverine's front paw, reminding him of how his cat Crunch used to act around him in a not-so-distant past.

Speaking of which, he had no clue how much his trouble-making feline had changed over the four-year forced time skip. Considering its growth rate, he wondered whether Crunch would still recognize their relationship upon their reunion. Not that he had any intention of forcing the Oracle Pet Contract if Crunch wanted out.

Still... knowing his little prick of a cat, he wouldn't be surprised if Crunch tried to play a reverse Uno card on him, either out of spite or just for the sheer joy of payback. Well... He could try.

Meanwhile, the river, which seemed to have been blown apart by the series of blinding explosions from within, had already returned to its original state. Even the damaged

banks began to mend before their eyes. The thing was, Hephais hadn't resurfaced since getting caught in the chain of dazzling explosions.

'Hephais, still kicking?' Jake mentally queried, his psychic senses struggling to penetrate the water due to the interfering spectral energies.

'Ugh... I've seen better days,' Hephais grumbled, realigning his bones one by one.

To make matters worse, his fourth baptism was underway, but with a glaring difference: the Lumyst Water surrounding him was no longer pure or potent enough to execute the spiritual enchantment instantaneously. As a result, his Soul and Spirit Body were continually taking heavy damage without any way to halt the process.

B-B-BOOOOOMM!

The luminescent spots responsible for the earlier explosions reappeared out of the blue all around the river, exploding almost immediately. The telepathic link that Jake had just re-established with the assassin was abruptly severed.

'Hephais?!'

This time, Jake had deeply analyzed the phenomenon behind these aquatic will-o'-the-wisps through his Cosmic Eyes. It was more alarming than he initially thought.

And the culprit was none other than... the hideous aquatic alien lurking at the bottom of the river. Jake had ignored it after the first series of explosions because it too was within the blast radius. From his point of view, it was nothing more than a kamikaze attack.

Too bad, he and Hephais had apparently underestimated their opponent. This marine alien was more clever than they initially gave it credit for. Xi arrived at the same conclusion.

[It manipulates the river water to envelop itself as insulating armor.] She explained matter-of-factly. [Except that this Lumyst Water isn't from the Duskwight Lands, but from the Lustra Plains. On top of that first layer, it's covered with a second layer of neutral Lumyst Water collected from the central border between the two halves of the river. This prevents the first layer of Life Lumyst Water and the Spirit Lumyst Water of the tributary we are in from interacting. When it deliberately triggers this interaction, say by flinging a drop of Life Lumyst Water through its layer of neutral water, a phenomenon akin to a nuclear fusion reaction occurs. After the explosion, three outcomes are possible. Either the two drops neutralize to form an ordinary water droplet like in the center of the river, or one drop absorbs the other, or the spiritual or vital enchantment succeeds. The last case is purely hypothetical and probably impossible in waters of such low energy, so it's primarily the first two cases that occur.]

Jake agreed with her, implicitly grasping what she left unsaid. Evolvers capable of manipulating water were not so rare on the scale of the Mirror Universe, but directly manipulating Lumyst Water meant that this aquatic creature was in a league of its own.

Furthermore, these greenish luminescent spots were very similar to the phosphorescent twinkles running along the alien body of the Player. This proved that these devastating explosions were not simply the result of rudimentary manipulation of opposing natures of water. It took a little more than that to trigger an blasting reaction of this magnitude.

Creating such destructive explosions was entirely within Jake's capabilities, but certainly not as effortlessly as long as he was restrained by Twyluxia. To achieve such an outcome with only a few water droplets, this marine alien was undoubtedly in its element...

Hephais seemed to have understood as well, because after showing no signs of life for half a second, he voluntarily landed ashore, at a safe distance from the watercourse. This time, his injuries were far more severe.

His skin and flesh hadn't melted, but disturbing tumorous protrusions had sprouted all over and inside his body. In addition to being grotesquely disfigured, his skeleton had also warped to the point that any movement became difficult.

"WELL PLAYED, LORD OOOM," Glutton praised, his voice still booming.

"That was the plan..." An awful, grating voice replied to the titanic wolverine. It sounded like an old woman who smoked three packs of cigarettes a day, combined with the chirping of a cricket and the wailing of a banshee.

Given how its allies winced and covered their ears, Lord Ooom's voice was just as unsettling for them as it was for the others. Jake wasn't sure if this alien even had proper vocal cords, but the sound of its voice was straight-up nightmare fuel.

Jake then turned his attention back to Hephais' concerning injuries, but relaxed upon realizing there wasn't much to worry about. He'd already cracked the case, and so had the other enemy Players.

"Life Lumyst Water?" Quilo frowned, recognizing the telltale tumors. "But not enough to stimulate his cells to the point where they transcend to the next stage."

When a life enchantment was in progress or partially failed, the destabilization of the genetic code combined with accelerated metabolism could indeed lead to such chaotic cellular growth. Failure could also result in death, but unlike a spirit enchantment, these types of damages were far easier to recover from.

'Hephais?' Jake reached out telepathically without moving.

'Don't show yourself yet. I've got a feeling there's an even bigger fish waiting to take the bait,' the assassin responded, letting his Cosmic Starfeyrves Body Passive do its work. 'I'd hate for your appearance to scare it off.'

During the brief moment when their enemies were congratulating themselves, his tumors had already receded.

'Well, you're not wrong,' Jake wholeheartedly agreed. 'Since they don't seem to be in a hurry to deal with you, let's let them gloat a bit longer.'

Indeed, upon the arrival of their second wave of reinforcements, their enemies seemed to have completely forgotten the objective of their mission. Their target was alone and without allies; the situation was indisputably under control.

Jake and Hephais were willing to play for time as long as possible, but after just two minutes, an ageless but openly irritated female voice cut short their bragging by bluntly questioning their stupidity.

"How much longer do you plan to ignore our enemy, you idiots? Have you already forgotten that time is of the essence for this mission?"

A female figure whooshed into the midst of the group of Players, like an apparition, startling Torak and the numerous clones of Quilo. Recognizing the newcomer, their faces slightly fell, then with a respectful nod, they grumbled,

"A pleasure, Lady Iaoth."

Their reinforcements were finally complete.

All this for just one target.

Chapter 1091: The Mission Is Canceled

Iaoth was a tall, austere woman, standing around 2 meters, with a slender and graceful silhouette accentuated by an ankle-length black dress slit at the side to reveal her smooth, fair thighs. She was the only enemy Player so far whose cold attractiveness had appealed to both Hephais and Jake. She was also the only one, alongside Sokal, whose anatomy was humanoid enough to be classified as human.

Despite the young woman's undeniable charm, amplified by her deep green, sensual lips and long eyelashes accentuated by flawless mascara, she was, in the end, about as human as Jake himself. The first striking detail was her slightly fluorescent dark green hair, which seemed to float around her head in a swirling spiral. Like Jake, the whites of her eyes were pitch-black, resembling a void, giving them something in common, albeit

not something that connected them to their humanity. Her glowing, dark emerald irises with vortex-like pupils were also quite similar to his galactic eyes.

However, what was most unique about her was the faintly spiraling distortion of space around her, as if she were the center of crumpled paper. This detail was only perceptible to Jake, who had an affinity with space-time. The fact that she could passively affect the space around her, even so subtly, at such an early stage of the Ordeal, spoke volumes about her immense power.

This woman was trouble.

"Hephais, I'm taking over," Jake warned the assassin in a serious tone.

The Egean, who was ready to continue fighting a bit longer to force them to reveal some of their trump cards, froze at the solemnity in his voice.

"Is she that strong?" he asked, visibly concerned.

"I'm afraid so," Jake confirmed grimly before ordering, "Keep taking out their Players and saving ours. I'll handle this group. If you run into other Myrtharian Nerds, let them know where we are."

"Understood."

He never entertained the thought that Jake might want him gone as a protective measure, let alone sacrifice himself. If his boss claimed he was enough, then he was.

As a result, without any further delay, Hephais jumped into the nearest shadow and faded away without a trace. The three Rank 16 enemy Players obviously noticed his escape attempt, and before he'd even made it ten meters into his shadow, he felt an irresistible tug from behind that stopped him dead in his tracks.

Having literally grabbed his shadow with her bare hand, capturing it in a mini-vortex in the palm of her hand, laoth, who had crossed the hundreds of meters separating them in a blink, declared flatly,

"No one leaves unless I say so."

In response, Hephais sneered and, flipping her off without turning around, replied in a condescending and slightly sympathetic tone,

"But he did."

The already levitating hair of the young woman bristled suddenly with a bad premonition, and instinctively she released the shadow holding the assassin prisoner as quickly as she could and leapt back.

It served her well, for where her elbow had been just a split second earlier, a black spatial tear about a meter long and a few centimeters wide cracked the air, instantly sucking in her own tiny vortex and everything else within several meters' radius.

She thought the surprise attack was over, but the spatial tear, which had been gradually closing, suddenly contracted to almost form an imperceptible singularity before violently expanding again at a speed surpassing that of lightning.

No sound of explosion or shockwave accompanied this dark expansion, but laoth's once calm glowing green eyes widened to the brim. Her already pale face also became ghostly as it was covered in beads of sweat. It wasn't just the inexplicable space-time assault amplified with a massive amount of Soul Power, but also the horrifying spiritual pressure crashing down on her and threatening to crush her soul.

Even more alarming, beyond space, she could also feel time dilating around her separately from the expanding spatial tear. With the temporal snare sinisterly closing in on her, she could feel the world around her accelerating exponentially beyond the trap. Time flow outside remained unchanged, and she was sure her reflexes had not slowed down. Consequently, she could only be under a Time-Slowing Spell, an element still eluding her despite her affinity for space-time.

Shaken to the core, her heart skipped a beat. Faced with mortal danger like never before, her survival instincts kicked in, pushing her responsiveness far beyond what she thought she was capable of, breaking her own limits. With a hand swipe that drained most of her energy, she powerfully opened a wormhole just wide enough to slip through and dove in, not forgetting to yell as she went,

"The mission is canceled, everyone get the fuck out!"

None of her allies, judging by their confused, scrunched-up faces, grasped the implications of this order, but she knew! At that moment, her shadow guide didn't react! It answered all the questions they had about Doomhorn's reports and the dissonant performance of Hephais, who was surely strong but not enough to explain such discrepancies.

"YOU'RE GOING NOWHERE!" Jake's voice suddenly shook their minds like a clap of thunder, a dizzying vertigo hitting them as if they'd been thrown into a billion-G centrifuge.

The twelve clones of Quilo imploded on the spot at the sound of his voice, while the original started spitting blood from every pore and orifice of his body.

"You're gonna pay for this, you piece of-" The Morpian screamed before being irrevocably silenced when Jake's supersonic right hand pulverized his head with a single punch.

Then, everyone finally heard the resounding sonic boom marking Jake's arrival into the fray. The tree he'd used as a springboard had been completely blasted into wooden dust, just like the entire surrounding hectare of forest.

At the same time, far away in a fortified camp in the Lustra Plains, a handsome androgynous alien vaguely resembling the just-killed Morprian but with an aura hundreds of times more imposing, abruptly opened his eyes, pure hatred burning within.

"I didn't even get to see his face..." The real Quilo lamented darkly to himself before falling back asleep while conjuring a new mercury slug. One of his expensive, enhanced clones had just been killed and needed to be replaced.

Despite the threatening killing intent radiating from him, the Morprian quickly gathered himself, realizing that even with his main body he probably stood no chance. Faced with the grim reality of this fact, he grumbled gloomily,

"I hope at least Iaoth and Lord Ooom make it out."

He didn't mention his other allies because he knew Iaoth well enough to understand that an enemy forcing her into frantic retreat was likely unbeatable. Though she was only Rank 16, that was a deceptive statistic. Shadrex, the leader of the faction she co-led, considered her his equal.

Back at the Lumyst River, after executing Quilo and sending Iaoth packing, Jake didn't stop there. He teleported in a single step to the copper-skinned humanoid alien.

Despite just witnessing the death of his comrade, Sokal burst out in elated laughter. His red and gold armor became covered in flames, radiating with a brilliance akin to the sun. Even the solar tattoo on his forehead shone so brightly it seemed to turn night into day. His golden eyes ablaze with fighting spirit, he cackled like a madman and roared with arms wide open, as if inviting,

"HAHAHAHA! This is what I wanted! A real man-to-man fight to the death! BRING IT ON—"

Just like his teammate a split second earlier, Jake's fist effortlessly tore through Sokal's shield of heat, light, and radiation, smashing his skull from front to back.

CRACK!

Sokal's head didn't completely shatter upon the first impact like his Morprian friend's. Instead, his body was blasted horizontally at a dizzying speed, exceeding ten kilometers per second in the blink of an eye. The number of rivers, trees, and mountains the alien collided with and flew through before sheer force slowed him down made him regret surviving at all.

Needless to say, when the copper-skinned warrior regained consciousness, he promptly picked up his teeth and bolted without a word. His thirst for battle had never been satisfied so quickly. Perhaps it was quenched for good.

Flexing and unflexing his fingers, an dissatisfied frown settled at the same time on Jake's face.

"Tsk. Too weak. Count yourself lucky today."

Chapter 1092: I Surrender

Jake could've killed him if he had used some of his Soul Power, but he had dumped almost all of it into the attack meant to obliterate Iaoth. Despite his bone-crushing offense just moments ago against Quilo and Sokal, he was completely drained, mustering every ounce of focus and willpower to keep from collapsing on his feet.

As for Iaoth's panicked retreat, it might seem pathetic to an outside observer, but their brief clash—with an obvious winner—actually masked a far more complex battle riddled with layers of nuance. One shouldn't forget that using magic, Spirit, or Soul Power in any form at this stage of the Ordeal was nearly impossible for 99% of the Players.

In that instant, Jake had resorted to the Fourth Form of his Original Spell 'Morphic Grasp,' called Liberation. The effect was as the name suggested.

After locally shattering space-time itself by compressing it to the extreme, he did the exact opposite and released the pressure. At first glance, this might seem contradictory to the True Will of Crushing he had developed, but that was because the name didn't fully encompass its true scope.

'Morphic Grasp' was actually a much better fit. Each time Jake compressed something, he would visualize a hand in his mind. And what does a hand do after it closes? It opens.

In the realm of infinite possibilities that was the Aether, one concept could almost always beget its opposite, or even neighboring or entirely different concepts, given the right approach. It was mainly a matter of how this tenuous link was established, be it rationally or metaphorically. In the end, the caster's will and vision decided everything, hence the term 'True Will.'

By using this scientifically inconceivable Fourth Form, which acted not just on local space but on the fracture of unknown composition and nature caused by its collapse, Jake had created an explosion that no Player or native could withstand or halt. Not even him.

It was as if the object in his hand had been switched. Faced with this unblockable explosion, unless one countered with a Soul-Power based spell of similar concept and magnitude, the only option was undoubtedly to dodge.

One might think that if Iaoth were so powerful, she could've simply dodged and counterattacked, but that didn't account for the unfathomable Time-Slowing Spell that Jake had instant-cast to pin her in place. This spell didn't rely on his Soul Power at all and had thus been conjured solely through sheer power and talent.

Time-based spells were already notorious far and wide for their astronomical cost and complexity. Right now on Twyluxia, perhaps only a handful of Fifth-Ordeal Players from both sides could use a time-slowing spell at their full strength, but none with such a mind-bending effect.

If somehow they managed to slow time around their target by a factor of two, that would already be remarkable; nothing like Jake's off-the-charts time-slowing spell that was terrifying enough to make a Rank 17 Evolver break into a cold sweat despite being proficient in that element.

Also, Twyluxia's restrictions on Players were proportional to the Players' strength to some extent, though not entirely. While Jake was able to access a tiny fraction of his powers through sheer will, the backlash he had to pay for casting this Time Spell was probably unimaginable.

Even a Rank 17 Player should be dead. No wonder Iaoth bolted faster than her own shadow without a second's hesitation.

In any case, fleeing had exposed her to a similar backlash from the Aetheric laws governing Twyluxia, rendering the question of whether to continue fighting moot. Whether it was a jaw-dropping bluff from the enemy or not, she refused to take that risk.

All of this to say, that was ultimately why Jake couldn't finish Sokal in one hit. His punch, as horrifyingly powerful as it was, was nothing special. It was just his raw strength...

But that was more than enough to traumatize the copper-skinned warrior for life, to the point of making him give up on any future battles with uncertain outcomes! Sokal didn't yet know how much this unforgettable encounter would shape his future, but years later, after this new cautious mindset had saved his life multiple times, he'd come to gratefully thank his mysterious 'benefactor.'

Anyway, getting back on track, as drained as Jake was, his bloodline was still as unfathomable as ever, and then some. During this brief lull after beating the crap out of Sokal, his mental fatigue had already receded, indicating that his Soul had begun its recovery. It was a type of damage that the vast majority of Players couldn't recover from without external help, usually either rare or exorbitantly expensive.

Without forgetting for a moment that he still had enemies to kill, Jake reappeared almost instantly in front of the bewildered, chain-covered stone giant, Torak. It took less than half a second for him to catch his breath, and only a tenth of that to catch up to him.

The stone giant was rather fast with his long legs, but that was only relative to the average Player. Against Jake as a pursuer, he was like a baby turtle crawling towards the ocean for the first time: Slow as fuck.

The poor colossus gazed utterly dumbstruck by the turn of events, not to mention terrified despite his sluggish mind. He was trembling like a scared child looking for the reassuring figure of his master, but the latter was nowhere to be found. Just like when the creature had shamelessly ambushed Hephais earlier, he had twisted invisible as soon as things had gone south, leaving his disciple to fend for himself.

Sadly, it was Jake facing Torak, and he had zero mercy for his enemies. Without betraying the slightest sign of fatigue, he confidently lifted his foot for a monstrous kick and coldly taunted,

"You seemed pretty smug after kicking my friend into the river. How about trying mine?"

"Who are y-?"

Just before his foot slammed into the giant's sternum—which was sure to shatter into thousands of stone fragments due to its mineral nature—Jake suddenly gazed up, fixing his gaze on an invisible point right above him. Unfazed, Jake changed the trajectory of his leg at the last moment to collide with the massive invisible paw trying to squash him.

BAM!

A monumental shockwave blasted Torak over a mile away, while Jake, with his foot stretched vertically above his head, sank deep into the ground like a nail. But what followed was quite different from the conclusion with Hephais.

Glutton's opportunistic attack wasn't even over when Jake leapt out of the crater's abyss where he had been pinned, and running on air in a few deafening steps, his knee slammed deep between the eyes of the gigantic wolverine. Unlike his disciple, the latter hadn't forgotten that he could use his Oracle Shield and activated it without hesitation before his brain could be obliterated.

The impact mercilessly reverberated against his attacker, and Jake couldn't help but wince as he felt a sharp pain in his knee. Not one to back down, he struck the energy shield hundreds of times and, concluding that the creature wasn't running out of Aether anytime soon, immediately adjusted his strategy.

Wearing a nefarious grin, he cast a heavy gaze full of ill intent at the frightened stone giant. The expression on Glutton's face, behind the shield, instantly turned to horror.

"DO NOT DO THIS! HE'S JUST AN INNOCENT CH—"

BANG!

With a colossal backhand slap, Jake smashed Torak's head into the ground. Then, holding the giant by his own chain while strangling him with it, he shot an icy warning glance at his immobilized master and said,

"If you want him to live, you know what you have to do. Surrender and cooperate."

Faced with compromising his Ordeal and those of millions of Players on the same side, or saving a comrade—even if it was his disciple—a purely rational being wouldn't have hesitated for a second. Unfortunately for them, Jake had easily figured out the relationship between the two aliens and was pretty certain of the outcome.

And, unsurprisingly...

"I surrender..." Glutton sighed, deactivating his Oracle Shield with a defeated air.

He closed his eyes resignedly, and the next moment he was rendered unconscious by Jake as well. Their vitality making it impossible to keep them unconscious for more than a few seconds, Jake didn't hesitate to severely damage their brains and even alter the electrical behavior of their neurons to put them into an artificial coma.

It was a small trick within the capabilities of many advanced Lightning or Life users, though it wasn't always enough. Here, it did the trick; the two mineral beings hadn't exactly excelled in psychic strength up to this point. Just in case, Jake also included a mild hypnosis spell with the little Spirit Power he had left.

He then tied them back-to-back from head to toe with Torak's stone chain. Grabbing the end of it like a leash, he then burst into a frantic dash to the East, a predatory grin floating on his face.

He could spare everyone else, but not his next meal...

Chapter 1093: He Got Eaten

As three figures emerged from the ashen haze, their eyes widened in awe and unease at the sight before them. The sprawling expanse of Dusken City loomed ahead, an imposing fortress built at the foot of the mythical Underworld Cascade. The cascading water disappeared into the earth, giving rise to the Lumyst River that slithered through the wastelands like a serpent forged from translucent liquid ectoplasm.

The air was thick with spectral energy, as if the very atmosphere sought to ward off intruders. Yet, the ancient city beckoned them forward like a siren's call. It felt like the land itself whispered secrets and old sorrows into their ears—tales of power, betrayal, and dark splendor.

Built from dark, age-worn stones, the city's architecture was a haunting paradox. Its elaborate structures, maze-like alleys, and towering spires were worlds apart from the primitive tech of the Underworld Barbarians who currently called the place home. Dusken City had an inherent grandeur—a testament to a long-forgotten civilization whose artistry in dark stone could never be replicated by its current inhabitants.

But above all, it felt alive.

Staring at the awe-inspiring cityscape, it was clear to the trio that they were standing at the threshold of a realm deeply steeped in both majesty and malevolence. With a blend of dread and fascination, they pressed on, each step echoing in the stagnant air as they crossed the invisible boundary between the known world and the enigmatic expanse of Dusken City.

The gates creaked open in grim welcome, and for a brief moment, all the legends, whispers, and ominous prophecies they had ever heard from captured natives felt like mere child's play compared to the reality before them. The dark allure of Dusken City swallowed them whole, promising both doom and wonder in equal measure.

And so, with a mixture of trepidation and curious zeal, they took their first steps into the darkness that cradled the city—an endless flow of questions, risks, and unspeakable rewards swirling through their minds, much like the enigmatic Lumyst River that lay beyond.

These shifty individuals cautiously entering the city were no ordinary folk but three outstanding Players: Rank 17 Divine Knights. Except, they weren't exactly welcome here, hence their vigilant silence.

"Shadrex, you sure we're in the right place?" Kaelum muttered under his breath, navigating through a crowd of Underworld Barbarians very different from those they were used to fighting.

Though most were dressed like civilians, their clothes glowed uncannily, signifying an enchantment level far superior to that of standard military gear. Their spectral auras were also sometimes remarkably more striking, indicating that these civilians had, without exception, a lot of blood on their hands.

In addition to these strange civilians going about their business and even more terrifying guards here and there, they also had to deal with thousands, perhaps millions, of ghostly servants and wandering souls buzzing around due to the proximity of the

Underworld Cascade. The rich spiritual energy released by its waters was like an addictive elixir they couldn't get enough of.

"Verily true," Shadrex replied tersely. Pointing to a gothic architectural marvel of dark stone at the heart of the city, one that any native of the Duskwight Lands would easily recognize as a Netherwell Cathedral, he cryptically added, "Not to the Underworld Cascade our prophecies steer, but to this sacred hall we must adhere. For here lies a relic, essential and dear, that grants us the ability to collect waters clear. Without it, I fear, our efforts would merely disappear. Besides that..."

"What then?" Weiss raised an intrigued eyebrow, levitating invisibly above passersby, oblivious to her presence. Her appearance was too distinct from these natives for her to walk around in plain sight.

Shadrex's luminous green eyes dimmed briefly, then with exaggerated gravity, even for him, he confessed, "To cascade's depths if we now go, returning might be lost, you know. The future mists when gaze I cast, a timeline yet not ready to be unmasked. The hour's not ripe, the time's askew, a fate awaits that's yet taboo."

"Pssh!" Kaelum spat disdainfully, shoving aside a hulking barbarian blocking his path with a flick of his hand. "Just say you're scared of their Abyssal Revenants. I'm not."

He lived up to his moniker of Titan of Vrax, as the robust Underworld Barbarians bustling around them looked like puny runts in comparison. The one he had just sent flying was over ten feet tall but still barely reached his waist.

The metallic-skinned behemoth never shied away from a good fight, and in that respect, he and his subordinate Sokal were cut from the same cloth. Kaelum was yet to realize it, but he and the copper-skinned warrior had just lost a crucial commonality: their insatiable thirst for battle.

A crushing defeat can do that to people. Luckily for him, that moment had never come. But with Jake rampaging across Twyluxia, that unavoidable turning point might be just around the corner.

Speak of the devil...

Beep!

An unexpected notification from their bracelets yanked their attention away from the breathtaking Netherwell Cathedral, where Shadrex was leading them. Each of the three Players had received a call simultaneously, but not from the same person.

For Kaelum, it was Sokal's knotted and suspiciously frail voice that echoed in his mind, souring his already irritable mood.

"Boss, we failed... The enemy is too strong. Don't call me back."

Without further explanation, the line went dead with a final 'click,' leaving the Titan of Vrax stumped and without an outlet to vent his anger.

Shadrex received a more neutral and dignified message, but essentially similar in essence from his right-hand woman Iaoth:

"Shadrex, I'm afraid we'll have to cancel our plans for tonight." The young woman continued, "The target Doomhorn pointed out to us is not acting alone. With him, another man was—"

Hearing the details from his best subordinate, while Kaelum was fuming, the Bipolar Seer found himself deeply troubled. Discounting her lower Divine Rank, he considered her his equal. With her leading the operation, no enemy should have been able to deal them such a setback.

However, upon learning what this unknown Player was capable of, and that their Shadow Guide didn't react in his presence, Shadrex realized they were indeed up against a significant problem.

'If our Divine Paths don't account for such a Player, then...' His eyes narrowed ominously, arriving at an unsettling conclusion. 'All the more reason to trust my prophecies even more.'

At least in his own head, he thought normally.

Coming to this realization, Shadrex stopped playing it safe and sped toward the Netherwell Cathedral, still kilometers away, alerting the guards. Kaelum and Weiss, who were also taken aback after hearing the news from their subordinates, understood the stakes and also charged forward, drawing their weapons.

A blaring siren then rang out across the sprawling city, kicking the hornet's nest. Like a swarm of bees enraged by the attack of an Asian hornet, millions of wandering souls and vengeful specters descended ferociously on the three intruders, unleashing hell upon them.

The Praetorian Guard protecting the palace of the Soulmaner King and other key locations in the capital were also alerted and quickly joined the fray. Added to this were the squadron of Vorzhul Riders defending the sky, as well as a slew of senior and apprentice Soulmaners left in the capital, subjecting the trio to unprecedented mortal danger in the blink of an eye.

As if that weren't enough, an angry roar echoed from behind the city. The ground and building walls began to tremble, and soon after, a mountain of bones lying at the foot of

the Underworld Cascade suddenly animated, rising from the ground to form, in a brief moment, a bone titan whose skull vanished into the clouds.

"Bones..." Shadrex muttered grimly, quickening his pace. The next instant, he stealthily entered the Netherwell Cathedral with Weiss, leaving Kaelum alone outside in a tacit agreement.

Letting out a fearless battle cry of his own making to draw the enemy's attention, the Titan of Vrax fully embraced his role as a decoy. Without any warning, his body began to swell, growing exponentially with each passing second.

Within a breath, the already imposing metallic-hued colossus, standing at five meters tall, transformed into a towering goliath of over fifty meters, trampling on quite a few buildings and civilians in the process. Sadly, despite his awe-inspiring growth spurt, he was still just a slightly bigger ant compared to the vastness of Bones.

Bones' enormous hand then descended like an asteroid onto the lone 'Titan of Vrax' and, grabbing him between its thumb and index finger at astonishing speed, squashed him like a bug before tossing him eastward like a dirty sock...

A few minutes later, the trio of Rank 17 Players reconvened halfway across the Lustra Plains, where Kaelum had landed, creating a star-shaped crater large enough to wipe out a medium-sized town.

"You still breathing?" Weiss snickered sarcastically as she poked the big steel head of the proud titan, who was still snappy from what had just happened.

"How about you tell me if you got the object?" Kaelum growled irritably as he laboriously rose to his feet, returning to his normal size.

A wry smile twisted the faces of his two companions upon hearing the question.

"What, don't tell me I got my ass kicked for nothing?" He thundered in disbelief.

"No... We succeeded," Shadrex announced with a complicated expression. "Here's the Chalice of Nethersshade. Unfortunately, even though my vision and our Divine Paths led us there, it's also a replica. Harvesting pure Spirit Lumyst Water shouldn't be a problem anymore, but our real goal is still up in the air."

Kaelum blinked dumbfoundedly, realizing it was the first time he actually understood what his cryptic comrade was saying.

This lukewarm outcome was not what they had hoped for, but it wasn't that bad. Not something to lose your cool over. But something else was amiss. Noticing that it was mostly Weiss who was looking grim, he inquired with sadistic curiosity,

"What else are you hiding from me?"

Realizing she couldn't keep the secret much longer, Weiss suppressed the ugly grimace on her face and let out through her tightly clenched lips,

"Lord Ooom is dead. He got eaten."

Chapter 1094: So Easy To Level Up If You Toss Your Morals Out The Window

Where Spirit Lumyst Water and Life Lumyst Water met, the center of each tributary suddenly widened to form a vast circular lake several kilometers in diameter. This intertwining of fundamentally opposite fluids was like trying to mix oil and water, an intuitively unnatural process. Hence, this double bottleneck that might remind one of some kind of blood clot.

Except here, the two liquids didn't just mix reluctantly. Only the destruction or total transmutation of one into the other was acceptable, and it happened that the collision of these waters with opposing polarity was particularly explosive. Every second, the translucent water of the lake would light up with billions of 'fireflies,' a recurring symptom of a new fusion attempt between these diametrically opposed water molecules.

The aquatic alien Lord Ooom had merely taken advantage of this flashy exothermic reaction to blow up the river earlier, using its own mastery of water and light to amplify its effects. As a Rank 16 Player itself, it was confident it could win in a strength clash against any enemy as long as it stayed safely underwater, or if not, it could escape without issue.

With this belief, following the embarrassing yet eye-opening retreat of the famously feared laoth, Lord Ooom, who belonged to Weiss's faction, hadn't hesitated to take its leave. Acting swiftly, yet unhurriedly, it had turned around with a flick of its tail, sinking deeper into the watery abyss from whence it came.

This retreat strategy should've worked flawlessly as always, but how could it have guessed that the one who caused laoth's flight had already caught up to it by the time it reached the neutral zone separating the two halves of the river?

Nonetheless, even in this predicament, it had kept his cool... Until its foe dove straight into the lake, personally torpedoing it despite the barrier of Life Lumyst Water coating its amphibian body.

The rest was history, or rather, a traumatizing nightmare...

A few seconds later, the lake's still surface began to swell, then parted to reveal a massive and unsettling extraterrestrial creature without equal.

Emerging from the peaceful abyss of a starlit lake, the gargantuan aquatic titan dominated the scene, its eyeless sperm whale-like head tedious through the souls of the few witnesses of its first ascent to the surface since the beginning of the Ordeal. It was fortunate this creature had no eyes, for otherwise, these fortunate spectators might have noticed they were glassy and unfocused.

As for its serpentine form, it glistened with an otherworldly luminescence, casting a radiant glow that contrasted starkly with the sapphire backdrop of the night sky. The creature's majestic body, adorned with intricate patterns and shimmering scales, undulated gracefully, reminiscent of the Northern Lights dancing in the polar sky. Cascading waterfalls streamed from its vast arching fins, forming shimmering veils that plummeted into the lake below. Rows of phosphorescent ridges lined its back, illuminating the surrounding woods and giving the impression of a starry realm brought down to Earth.

This breathtaking moment, both humbling and magical, worthy of its own painting in a museum, was sadly short-lived. After heaving itself painfully onto its four webbed legs on the lake's surface, like a water spider, the massive creature let out a chilling, agonized wail before collapsing to its side, revealing the monstrous void that had replaced its belly.

The entrance to this cavernous void wasn't that wide, but a glance inside revealed it had eaten away the entirety of the alien. The titanic Lord Ooom, having just met his end, was now but an empty shell.

For a few long seconds, the immense amphibious creature continued to stand on the water's surface, but then the supernatural bioluminescence of its scales, fins, and dorsal crests began to fade, extinguishing completely half a minute later. Another five seconds passed, and what remained of the hollow alien carcass collapsed onto itself, sucked in by some kind of gravitational pull from within.

When the massive corpse was entirely devoured, the devilish silhouette of a sated Jake appeared in its place, hovering a few meters above the lake. His chiseled abs remained flat, making it hard to believe he'd just devoured an extraterrestrial fish weighing several hundred tons.

Having finished digesting, Jake immediately checked his gains, and a satisfied smile brightened his handsome face.

"It was worth it." Jake silently congratulated himself with a rush of exhilaration.

The moment he torpedoed Lord Ooom using his own body, not only had he endured his first Life Enchantment by forcibly breaching the Life Lumyst Water barrier, but he had also acquired all of Ooom's genetic and Aetheric material by consuming it.

Because he had devoured it whole rather than just 'tasting' it, he also absorbed all the energy within Ooom's cells, and most importantly, its Aether Code. In essence, the full potential of his bloodline.

In other words, it was as if Jake had just ingested the entire Blood Essence of the prey who became his meal.

[Spirit Body level: 100>107]

[Species: Cosmic D Starfeyrves]

[Physique: Cosmic D Starfeyrves Body lvl1]

[Height: --]

[Weight: --]

[Soul Class: --]

[Strength (G5): 140 >330]

[Agility(G5): 270>630]

[Constitution(G5): 420>980]

[Vitality(G5): 380>880]

[Intelligence(G6): 120>280]

[Perception(G6): 42>98]

[Extrasensory Perception(G6): 60>130]

[Luck(G5): 2.5>5.8]

[Aether Stats(G5): 3.1>4]

[Energy: Grade 10>10.6]

—[NB: G= Grade, G1=1, G2=100, G3=1000, G4=10 000, G5=0.1M, G6=1M]

Somewhere during his year-and-a-half training inside the Dungeon Digestor, the interface displaying his stats had evolved to better represent their growth and to make their interpretation more intuitive.

The mention of the Grade, whether for his Real stats (Body stats multiplied by Soul Class coefficient) or his Aether stats, now introduced a nuance that wasn't there before: the Aether quality, or more precisely, its degree of compression.

In theory, no stat, whether physical or Aetheric, could climb infinitely without increasing its Grade, as the capacity of the vessel is limited. But there were exceptions. For instance, by gaining muscle or increasing one's size, it was possible to boost one's Strength without raising its Grade.

This detail was significant, especially concerning the Constitution attribute, because its Grade directly determined what concentration of Aether his cells could comfortably handle before starting to sustain damage.

Therefore, the Grade of his body was also the primary ceiling holding back his Aether stats from skyrocketing, his current Grade 10.6 Energy Body reflecting the highest quality of Aether that his cells could currently produce. This meant that to utilize the Aether his body harvested, he had no choice but to decrease its quality – a function that, fortunately, his body managed on its own.

Returning to his status, devouring Lord Oom undoubtedly had a positive impact on it, boosting his Real Stats by about 20%. Not counting the boost from his Lumyst Aura, Jake was now roughly three million times stronger than an average native or Fifth-Ordeal Player.

This incredible increase couldn't be justified solely by the alien's power, even if it was an impressive Rank 16 Player. The key was its size. Due to the massive volume of its body and spirit, Lord Oom contained far more Aether than its Oracle Status might suggest.

Faced with this realization, Jake couldn't help but let out a deep sigh, a conflicted expression hardening his face,

"No wonder these Digestors are all going batshit trying to devour us down to the last crumb. It's so simple to level up if you just toss your morals out the window."

He had never seen a Digestor leave even a bone of its prey untouched, which, given what he'd just experienced, now made a hell of a lot of sense. But his stat gains weren't the reason he'd grinned so contentedly just now.

Although the description of his Cosmic D Starfeyrves Bloodline hadn't changed, Jake could feel it had taken a huge leap towards its next advancement. Level 2 was within arm's reach now.

The water that Lord Ooom had manipulated so expertly was encompassed by his Cosmic Manipulation; this element was part of the cosmic matter, like almost all physically observable matter in the universe. However, just because water was included didn't mean he could control it as smoothly as earth or steel.

The legacy of his previous Myrtharian Bloodline and, consequently, the time spent training in specific environments or consuming the right materials couldn't be easily dismissed. Catching up on each element encompassed by his Cosmic Attribute would take time. Time, which, sadly, Jake was running short on.

By devouring Lord Ooom, he had just made up for a significant portion of his backlog. Well, at least regarding water. Its impact on his Energy Attribute was negligible in comparison.

Still, once his hunger was awakened, it wasn't so easy to put it back to sleep. Floating alone above the lake, Jake's ravenous eyes naturally drifted to the tributary from the Lustra Plains that flowed into it, and a predatory glint flashed within.

If enemy Players had the balls to hunt them in their territory, how could Jake not pay them a visit in kind?

Chapter 1095: Swim Session

Hovering rather inconspicuously a few hundred meters above Jake, two Soulmanagers were shaking like leaves, their ashen complexions as if they had just seen a ghost. Their silence was paralyzing them into stupidity, unfortunately, just the most benign symptom of their terrified stupor.

They had seen everything.

From Hephais's dreamlike executioner talents to his admirable resilience in the face of an ambush by a gang of enemies as formidable as he was. Each of their powers was unique and impressive, and they wielded them all with mad skill, though for some reason that eluded them, their spells were slightly lacking in punch. This contrasted all the more sharply with their physical and mental prowess, which were top-notch, putting them on par with their finest Generals.

Yet, even considering their suspicious restraint, these Players were still horrendously powerful. The number of these foreigners they had encountered this night who could whack them in a blink if they hadn't had their enchanted artifacts was probably in the thousands.

So, what would happen if they were given proper gear? They'd become invincible...

The very thought sent shivers down their spine. Individuals this unjustly strong, properly outfitted, could easily conquer their world if given enough time. It wasn't a question of how, but when.

Regardless, despite this series of shocking surprises that toppled everything they believed about what was possible or not, the two Soulmanagers had never given in to despair. Soulmanagers were tough-minded and steely-willed individuals after all.

They hadn't despaired when Glutton had smashed Hephais with a paw swipe for kilometers; Bones could do much better.

They hadn't quivered either when Lord Ooom blew up the entire river, forcing them to gain altitude hastily to avoid being blasted into the troposphere; some artifacts could do that, too.

Nor had they faltered at the entrance of Iaoth, who merely by her presence seemed to visibly twist the space around her. They weren't sure if an artifact capable of that existed, but they had seen the Lumyst Aura of some Great Generals produce a similar visual distortion effect. The primitive physics knowledge of their civilization had spared them that trauma.

Until Jake intervened.

Now, they realized how oblivious they had been to deal with him as if he were just another dangerous outsider. All these powerful Players had scattered like rabbits at his arrival, not even trying to resist.

A white shark in a swimming pool!

In far less time than it took to understand what was happening, Jake had made one flee, killed fourteen (at no point did they imagine Sokal or Quilo surviving such a blow), and captured two. As for the last...

The dismal fate of the hideous alien cetacean had left them eternally shaken. It wasn't so much the fact that it had been killed or devoured that was the issue, but the manner of it. That insatiable gluttony, sucking everything into its endless stomach like a black hole, was almost more terrifying than the fate of those it was intended for.

If it had been just that, they could have accepted it as some sort of ultimate move, but what was most unsettling came after. Not only was the digestion instant, the opposite of other massive beasts that often needed long days of rest to metabolize so much energy at once, but its spiritual fluctuations had also jumped substantially and had not subsided afterwards.

"Ahem... Meribelle... I've got a bad feeling about all this..." Giso coughed with a forced smile and a striking pallor. "Should we keep tailing him? I've got a feeling he's already spotted us..."

That was his gut instinct as the expert spy and assassin of their group. He had never failed in tracking his targets, but there was a first time for everything...

Meribelle seemed to share his opinion as her eyes flickered quite a bit before responding, her expression just as conflicted and shaken as her colleague's. Finally, she announced in a hesitant voice as if she sensed she might regret it,

"If he's spotted us, he's acted like he hasn't noticed... We keep following him. We've seen enough to get ourselves killed a hundred times. What difference does it make if we keep monitoring his actions a bit longer? The Soulmaner King relies on our report. And even if we fail... This guy could be the next one. You wanted to know which of the two foreigners deserved our full support, right? I don't see a better chance."

Remembering that it was indeed his original goal for the evening, the last of Giso's hesitations left him, replaced by determination.

"Let's see the mission through then. No regrets."

Words he would regret less than a second later when Jake shot headfirst into the lake, his blurry outline skimming beneath the surface like a shooting star towards the Lustra Plains. A blink later, he was deep in enemy territory, speeding up the tributary at a breakneck pace.

The two gobsmacked Soulmaners hadn't even picked up their dropping jaws when they had no choice but to launch themselves flying after him in a panicked panic for fear of losing him. Only once well embedded in the Lustra Plains, the cold spectral energy permeating the atmosphere replaced by the warm, user-friendly vital energy abundant in this opposite half of the continent did they fully realize what they had just done.

"Oh shit! We're doing something completely insane." Giso rattled off, readjusting his hood as if it would make a difference.

Meribelle, for her part, had already regained her usual composure, although she was still a bit pale. Right now, her steady eyes were locked in an expression of extreme seriousness on Jake's underwater silhouette, her brow so furrowed she looked like a different person.

"What, you got nothing to say about this?" Her companion grumbled, mistaking her focused expression for snobbery.

"Shut up and watch." Meribelle silenced him, pointing to the unfolding scene below.

Giso swallowed the sharp remarks he had at the tip of his tongue reluctantly, and strained to see where she was pointing. Squinting to see better in the pitch-black night, it took him a while to make sense of what she wanted to show him, but when he did, his eyes bulged like saucers.

"HOLY SHIT! Is he fucking crazy?" he exclaimed in shock, his voice suddenly squeaking in a higher pitch.

Below them, Jake had suddenly slowed his swim speed, even surfacing just enough for his shimmering outline to be clearly discernible in the water. This put Mirabelle, who was watching him with rapt attention, on high alert until, snapping out of her focused trance, she became aware of the multitude of spiritual signatures swarming in the vicinity.

'Light Warriors? No. Players.' Jake smirked after analyzing their fluctuations, while the river's downcurrent flowed around him as if he didn't exist, in a supernatural display of hydrodynamics.

Instinctively, the expected knee-jerk reaction might have been to immediately take them out without batting an eye, but Jake hesitated briefly, considering the possibility that these Players could also be from his own camp.

A less scrupulous Player would have attacked indiscriminately, while one with too rigid morals would have refrained, fearing the killing of innocents or affecting their own rating. Luckily for him, Jake was neither. His moral compass had been swimming in murky waters for quite some time, yet he hadn't reached the point of shooting everything that moved without thought.

Instead, Jake simply leveraged the privilege his superior mental prowess bestowed upon him, meticulously sifting through each vital and psychic parameter of every living being within kilometers to determine who was an ally. Although the only real difference between two Players from different Mirror Universes was still undetectable to him, as it affected the Aether on a level of compression too subtle for his senses, there were plenty of other clues at his disposal:

Their thoughts, their Lumyst Aura, their gear, body language, conversations, hacking their Oracle Devices... Determining with a high degree of certainty who was an enemy was a walk in the park.

And indeed, when using his own body as a giant Oracle Device through his Artefact Incarnation Skill, hacking Oracle Devices was totally within his grasp provided he jammed the signal connecting them to the rest of their Oracle System and Aether Network. Only those with a considerable amount of liquid alloy, a high Oracle Rank, and substantial spiritual strength could resist him for more than a few seconds.

Some, mentally more sensitive, noticed his intrusion and attempted to resist, while those even stronger decisively chose to flee. Alas, whether it was the oblivious weaklings or those Players higher up in the food chain, none escaped.

Once his analysis was complete, Jake immediately set into motion again, ignoring the Life Enchantment +3 that had just popped up in his status, and with a flick of the wrist, he sent thousands of unstable water bullets over the surface, each homing in on its target like a heat-seeking missile. It took quite a few words to describe, but it all happened in an instant.

Swoosh!

With a mastery far surpassing that of Lord Ooom whom he had just absorbed, the water bullets maintained in a delicate balance evoking a Yin-Yang of Spirit and Life Lumyst Water fused at his signal just before making contact with their targets, detonating upon impact.

BOOOOOM!

All enemy Players within a ten-kilometer radius were taken out on the spot, disintegrated by a botched double enchantment. Those beyond who miraculously made it out turned tail and fled without looking back, throwing in the towel for the night.

As for Jake, he resumed swimming up the tributary even faster than before, repeating the same procedural destruction all throughout his swim session.

Chapter 1096: Outline Of A Plan

Jake never once changed his course as he made his way back up, staying on the most direct path aligned with his starting tributary. From the lower reaches, through the middle, to the higher reaches, at each junction, he encountered numerous other tributaries merging with his own. Or was it the other way around?

Regardless, he maintained the same direction, deliberately avoiding visits to the other adjacent branches of the Lumyst River. This likely spared hundreds of thousands, maybe even millions of enemy Players, but even in showing this mercy, or perhaps laziness, he still wiped out half a million, at least. It was a severe blow to the Players of the Lustra Plains.

This was partly because, as he ascended the Lumyst River, all tributaries eventually joined, increasing the likelihood of encountering Players from all over the continent seeking to bathe in its waters.

That's where the rub was.

The Players ambitious and confident enough to explore the upper banks of the Lumyst River, to bathe there or collect its water, were all decently strong and ranked Players. It took no less than that to find the courage to venture there.

That's why the slaughter perpetrated by Jake had such terrible consequences. A high percentage of the Players killed during his nocturnal river ascent turned out to be the elites of their respective factions. The number of Rank 10, 11, 12, and 13 Players killed in the last hour was uncountable.

Just by moving from point A to point B, Jake had completely crippled the combat power of the enemy Mirror Universe. However, he quickly realized they must have been warned somehow, because soon, while still quite far from his destination, the number of Players lurking near the banks abruptly dwindled, then dropped to zero.

'Eeh? I guess that's the advantage of having a functional Oracle System,' Jake mused with a dry smirk.

[You're one to talk.] Xi teased him with a light laugh. [Between those of ours you've resurrected and the enemies you've killed, I wouldn't be surprised if victory is already in the bag.]

The annoyed frown creasing Jake's forehead wasn't soothed by the velvety voice of his partner.

'Maybe you're right, but it's my rating at stake. Doing the bare minimum isn't enough,' he objected, shaking his head. "I chose to lay low the first few days, which I don't regret at all, to better assess my opponents and the situation, but the pace of the Ordeal is escalating faster than expected. If our Oracle Paths were functioning as they should, our enemies wouldn't be so rushed, but since our Oracle System offers them no resistance, I guess even their most straightforward plans are working.'

Xi nodded with a thoughtful "Hmm," obviously understanding what he meant.

[That's indeed the main problem on our side.] She sighed a bit later. [Take their ambush tonight on our Players, for instance. If their Oracle Paths were working, they could have easily anticipated it and even counter-ambushed. In the end, of the lower-ranked Players would have canceled each other out, prompting caution, and none of them would have dared to leave their fortified encampments, their immobile Shadow Guides implicitly telling them that venturing out at night would lead to their demise. Those who took the risk anyway would likely have been killed by a higher-ranked enemy Player, their Oracle Paths failing to account for them.

This would have then dissuaded other hesitant Players from following suit before forming alliances, gaining strength, and ensuring that death wasn't waiting around the corner. In the end, only a few high-ranked Players confident in their ability to escape under any circumstances would have dared leave their encampments to hunt, visit the

river, or explore the continent, but with extreme caution. Except for a few adrenaline junkies who tend to ignore their Shadow Guide, they would probably have reserved their intention to attack the enemy for much later in the Ordeal, using this time instead to form coalitions and gather their factions.]

'That's another thing that bothers me,' Jake jumped in, still looking morose. 'Those Players that Hephais slain and those who ambushed him didn't seem to be from the same faction. A small, isolated group cooperating like that isn't impossible, but these were too well-organized. It looked like a large-scale operation.'

It wasn't just a hunch. To be sure, he had soulsearched the minds of several of his victims, but confirmation came from the soul of Lord Oom, which he had also devoured along with everything else instead of just extracting the Aether and Soul Power.

Normally, he would shy away from this practice due to the obvious danger to his mental health, but this time, he had chosen to take the risk to save time. After experiencing Ruby's troubled childhood and gradual mental alienation by her Digestor half, he knew a bit better how to handle the side effects.

Especially since the advantages were worth it! It partly explained why mimicking the water mastery of the deceased Lord Oom had been so easy, although his high cognitive stats were the main reason.

[Doomhorn?] Xi guessed, reading his thoughts. [It is indeed surprising that such an android can coordinate all their factions despite their differences.]

Jake nodded without a word. It would have been understandable if it were one of their Oracle Knights, but that wasn't the case. At least, thanks to his random soulsearches, they had learned what they needed to know about their enemies.

And to say the least, it wasn't looking good. A little less so, though, after his rampage tonight.

As unthinkable as it might seem, the 8,445,693 enemy Players participating in this Ordeal were still almost 6 million even after Hephais and his excellent work. Conversely, Jake was shocked to learn that his own camp had already lost over 60% of its participants before even tonight's assault.

Although Jake had resurrected/saved a large number of allied Players in the last hour, he and his friend couldn't be everywhere. Twyluxia was too vast. Consequently, he estimated that this percentage would climb above 70% by the end of the night.

It was depressing.

As for those six million enemy Players, they were divided into only three factions led by their respective Rank 17 leaders. There were only a small handful of factionless independents.

The distribution of Players from these three factions was also concerning. It was completely unbalanced.

Weiss' faction, 'The Thought Weavers', clearly inspired by their leader's nickname 'Mind Weaver', was by far the most problematic of the three. In addition to counting more than 7 million of the enemy Players participating, the psychic web connecting its members offered them all sorts of benefits.

On this front, it opposed Cho Min Ho's King's Idol Alliance, which also brought together a large conglomerate of factions, although it didn't even come close to half that number even when scraping the bottom of the barrel.

By devouring Lord Ooom's soul, who was also from Weiss' faction, Jake had thought he would learn everything he needed to know about it, but strangely, when inspecting his new memories, he realized that the most important part was missing as if memories had been erased just before their digestion. Notably, what their Permanent Passive Faction Skill was.

Comparing this result to the other soulsearches, he then discovered that it wasn't an isolated case. The theory that spontaneously came to his mind was that one of the functions of this passive was precisely to safeguard information leaks about it.

This was all the more troubling as even Lord Ooom, a Rank 16 Player, didn't know much about their mysterious leader's abilities. The only thing he got from its memories was a blurry image and a vague feeling of an unfathomable woman.

The second largest faction, that of Kaelum, counted about 1.3 million Players. Its name, 'The Vraxers', was also derived from their leader's nickname 'Titan of Vrax', but although it sounded more abstract, it hid much fewer secrets.

They were just savages like their leader. Their powers varied greatly, but they were especially renowned for their fighting skills and thirst. Of the three factions, they were the most well-equipped for war and backed down from no challenge, regardless of the bloody battle awaiting them.

In terms of large-scale strategy, they were infinitely less to be feared than the calculating Thought Weavers, but individually they had a much stronger striking power. Most of the allied Players slain on the battlefield before his arrival on Twyluxia were due to these Vraxers.

Finally, there was the third and last faction, 'The Architects'. It only counted a few thousand members, and it was also the only one not to have a name inspired by its

leader. Shadrex, the Bipolar Seer, had an unknown personality and abilities, and his subordinates were just as eccentric.

Except for laoth, whom he had met that night, its members weren't especially strong but all had unique abilities or bloodlines making them irreplaceable. Luck, foresight, divination, altering fate, providence, karma, curse... Think of something and they had it.

Just by summarizing in his head what he had just learned about these three factions, Jake had already decided who he had to eliminate first. The outline of a plan was slowly taking shape in his mind...

Chapter 1097: New Abilities

Unfortunately, Jake had to shelve his dark plans into a corner of his mind shortly after. He was now very close to what he believed was the location of the Heaven Cascade, as the ensuing events acutely made him aware.

The Life Enchantments and the relentless bombardment of increasingly compact and fierce vital energy, which had initially only tickled him, finally began to take their toll. When the tributary he was swimming in abruptly widened, merging with a vast expanse of tumultuous dark blue water like an ocean in a storm, Jake experienced a sharp pain for the first time.

The sudden pain, combined with the absurd influx of vital energy trying to force its way into his cells, made him shudder momentarily, then black out for half a second before he managed to regain control. When he refocused after coming to, his heart skipped a beat upon discovering that massive chitinous protuberances, like tumors, had been expelled from his body.

Watching them dissolve in the water and get carried away by the current, he had to admit that it was a close call - his immune system nearly compromised. Not enough to kill him, his mind could survive without a physical shell anyway, but enough to waste some of his precious biomass.

He was so bewildered by what had just happened that he reflexively slowed down, deciding to reassess the situation.

"What the hell was that? That hurt," Jake gritted his teeth as he opened his status screen.

He remembered seeing a certain Life Enchantment+3 pop up at some point, but its effects had been so insignificant on his body at the time that he had subconsciously ignored it. There had been other notifications since, but their effects weren't much more pronounced.

Until now.

[Check out your bloodline tab. You might be surprised.] Xi informed him with an ambiguous tone, but he had already found it without her help.

Right now, Jake was struck dumb, a speechlessness reminiscent of his reaction when he found his new status after devouring Digestor Ruby.

[Cosmic D Starveyrves Body lvl1>lvl2 (+9): A highly morphable body combining multiple bloodlines and able to adapt to any environment. Your digestive abilities have improved again and allow you to digest anything in a shorter time and store all genetic and energetic information about the objects consumed. Your cells can now passively store, purify, and absorb anything much quicker and together possess the drawing power of a Grade 10.6 Energy Core. Even without doing anything, the body will continue to grow stronger without limit.]

[Attributes: Cosmic, Energy, Life, Space, Luck, Time]

[Abilities: Bloodline Ignition, Shapeshifting, Chitin Scales, Child of Lumyst(+1), Lumyst Breath (+3), Breath of Living Elements(+9)]

No wonder it hit him hard this time. Unbeknownst to him, he had just gained three new abilities, not to mention his bloodline advancing a level. The surprise quickly turned to elation, but his enthusiasm dampened upon realizing it wasn't exactly as it seemed.

His Cosmic D Starfeyrves Body had indeed progressed from level 1 to 2, as had several of his bloodline skills like Cosmic Chitin Scales, Cosmic Sight, and Life Manipulation, but the rest remained unchanged. All in all, his bloodline was still level 1.

Still, Jake could feel that thanks to this surge of life energy and his body's upgrade, it wasn't far off. He still had to check, however, what these two new skills had concretely brought him. Especially the latter, considering how the pain had managed to knock him unconscious.

It had been a long time since Jake considered himself immune to pain, and even though he wouldn't go as far as to say no torture could break him, he was sure a pain like this couldn't have made him faint by itself. So, there was only one other logical explanation:

It was his brain that had undergone renovations, and with his mind residing inside, he had been temporarily 'disconnected' during the reboot. He wasn't exactly thrilled about losing control of his own body, but that changed quickly after reading the descriptions of his new abilities.

The first, Child of Lumyst, didn't really surprise him, as it had also appeared during his Spirit Lumyst baptism. Aside from being shocked that his status refused to label this

enchantment 'Grace' like it did for his soul, its effects on his Lumyst Aura were as expected:

[Aura of Lumyst: Enemies Killed: 3,326,934, Souls Harvested: 1,009,894. Lives Harvested: 570,040. Stat boosts: 28,792>99.456%.]

On the surface, his aura hadn't changed much, but now that he knew what he was dealing with, he immediately noticed deep changes concerning it. Not only had the stat boost quadrupled, largely due to the higher quality spirits of the Players compared to the natives of the Lustra Plains, but the real change was in the aura itself.

Now, with just a thought, he could split it into Spirit and Life Aura, using them separately or together. This meant that in addition to harvesting souls, their life force was also being collected.

No waste, then, and perfect recycling that would please his eco-friendly side...

Jake was, in fact, astonished to find out after trying to separate the two Auras that his Life Aura, while containing a prodigious amount of Life force, was far from having the defensive and offensive halo properties he had encountered in the Pulsars, Vitalists and Lifemancers of his first official battle.

Oh, but if he wasn't careful, his body could now leak a gentle radiance that wildly spurred the growth of nearby vegetation. Not really a perk...

However, his two other new abilities were the real deal. Especially the second one:

[Lumyst Breath: A bodily ability acquired via the one-time activation of a powerful Grace, acting as a permanent blessing giving your body the ability to convert its Life force to tolerate, generate, accumulate, and manipulate Lumyst. It's the root of the cultivation system in the Lustra Plains.]

[Breath of Living Elements: Allows you to infuse your Lumyst with other attributes, and vice versa.]

It was a short sentence, but the consequences were immense. For several Ordeals, Jake had racked his brain trying to create a versatile energy source, easy to mobilize and accumulate in his body but he had faced numerous obstacles.

In the end, he had created Reiga, a form of Aether behaving like light and capable of assuming the properties of its primary attributes: Heat and Light. The advantage was that, existing in the real world, he could theoretically use it in combat and cast his heat and light spells more quickly. Its storage method was also more practical than that of an Aether Core, the stored Reiga being fully mobilizable at any moment.

But since then, Jake's bloodline had evolved significantly, as had his Attributes. It was difficult to give Reiga, closer to light, the properties of time, cosmos, or space without running into insurmountable mountains, both theoretically and conceptually. He had made progress since, but it was far from perfect.

Another proven alternative was Mana, whether the neutral version of Quanoth or the more specialized version of the Egaeans. For example, Hephais had in him the equivalent of a Shadow/Dark Core, the well of his power, while providing tangible benefits and alterations to the rest of his body, such as immunity to his own element and increased stats. This 'Shadow Mana' existed physically and could therefore be used for attack or defense, strictly surpassing the capabilities of the element it was supposed to embody.

Jake had never devoured an Egean, but damn it all, he had devoured a whole fucking Mana Storm on Quanoth, not to mention Jeanie, a Water Mage. He could also produce an equivalent of Mana if he wanted, but he didn't do it. Without really knowing why, he couldn't find satisfaction.

Until now. Although none of these abilities clearly clarified what Lumyst was, Jake had seen enough with his heightened perception to make some conjectures. And to say the least, it was promising!

Those dimwit Light Warriors were too ignorant to understand the gold they had in their hands. In contrast, Jake could see much more now that he himself was capable of using it.

"And of course, it's when my curiosity really needs answers that the Oracle System lets us down." Jake cursed, hesitating to turn back to capture an enemy Player and get answers through his Oracle Device.

[No need.] Xi promptly dissuaded him in a sorrowful voice. [The soul of that Lord Oom you digested should have contained this information. He himself had endured several Lumyst baptisms and must have questioned his Oracle System about it.]

Chapter 1098: Xi's Problem

Jake felt a fleeting surge of aspiration hearing his AI's intelligent words, but that optimism quickly fizzled out after comprehensively combing through the massive trove of memories in the alien's colossal mind. No wonder whales, even extraterrestrial ones, are renowned for their excellent memory!

Besides being a highly intelligent mutant cetacean with an eidetic memory, Lord Oom was also much older than him. Somehow, although he felt no empathy for the alien that ended up in his stomach, Jake felt slightly better realizing his meal had lived a long,

fulfilling life. The generations of progeny from his romances were enough to refill an ocean.

"Fuck, even a marine alien that looks like a giant glowing turd has a richer sex life than mine," Jake cringed as he inadvertently binge-watched some of this alien's 'feats'.

[And you ate him...] Xi reminded him tactfully, punctuating her short sentence with a definitely not innocent silence.

"... Maybe I should try to find Lucia?" Jake suggested, giving as good as he got. "I'm sure we can work out something to alleviate her Corruption symptoms."

[...] Now it was Xi's turn to bristle. [If you were willing to let me use my body more often, your issue would have been solved a long time ago.]

"A body that is made from my own cells," Jake cut off the debate with a grunt, before reformulating as he sensed his AI's mood hit rock bottom through their connection. "I love you Xi, I really do. But this! It's like fucking myself. I won't do it."

[Isn't that what you've been doing with your right hand since puberty?] Xi accused fiercely. [I don't see how it's different.]

"Let's not revisit this topic again, right?" Jake grimaced, exasperated. "It's really not the time."

He and Xi had this recurring discussion every two or three days since Jake made his relationship with Lucia official. His AI wasn't opposed to their relationship, invariably reaffirming that she existed 'for him', but lately this constant reminder had taken on a bitter-sweet flavor, hiding a lot of frustration and resentment.

It wasn't so much that she was jealous, but that Jake persisted in maintaining a nearly platonic relationship between them when they could be so much more. She understood his reasons on a purely logical level, but it was still driving her crazy.

But the real reason she felt so hurt every time he put a stop to it was because the excuse of the body made from his own cells was just that – an excuse. The deep thoughts of Jake, which she had promised herself not to look at, were much more hurtful.

What Jake feared most about Xi was that she might just be a Will Fragment, a Soul Clone, or worse, the result of a mere ability. It had been a long time since he stopped thinking of her as limited to just her program since she had emancipated herself from the Oracle System by linking her spirit to his, but the more his understanding of the Aetherdream and his own powers grew, the more he started to perceive things that bothered him.

It happened at some point during his training in the Digestor Dungeon when he briefly sensed, in a moment of enlightenment that never recurred, that Xi's consciousness was connected by a thin thread to something beyond the cosmos.

That moment of enlightenment wasn't a fluke, but the result of his attempt to reprogram his own cognitive functioning like that of an Oracle AI after defining his body as an Oracle Device through Artifact Incarnation. At that moment, his brain had entered a strange state of cognition very different from his normal conscious state, and his and Xi's minds had synchronized for the first time, truly becoming one.

At the moment, he had been dazzled and overwhelmed by the feeling of being emotionally and spiritually one with someone who understands, truly loves him without judgment, but then he felt it.

This sensation of being just an insignificant link in a greater whole. Like a hair suddenly realizing it exists only because it's rooted in a scalp. If the hair were to be plucked or cut, its existence would abruptly end.

The thing, unfortunately, was that this wasn't the ideal analogy. If Xi's existence was like a hair, then he wouldn't have doubted as much. As long as he found a way to preserve that hair, what did it matter if it was cut or plucked from its origin?

Sadly, Xi's function in this greater whole seemed much more crucial. Irreplaceable. Even her emancipation from the Oracle System and their psychic link hadn't changed that fact. Whatever the entity she was connected to, or rather a part of, that link was intact.

Jake couldn't have grasped the significance of this before awakening his latest bloodline, and he still didn't pretend to understand it all, far from it. But alas, among those devoured by Digestor Ruby was Vexa.

The sensation Jake felt in his cells when he switched to Cube mode was unnervingly similar. A mental and spatial connection that defied distance, where each cube existed on the physical, spiritual, and soul planes. If each cube was akin to a consciousness, a free-moving Oracle AI, they were nonetheless part of him. It was like multitasking, except their experiences didn't directly affect him unless he took an interest in them.

But make no mistake. These cubes might have been him, but he was not them. If something happened to them, he'd lose a bit of Soul Power, and that's it. Whatever entity was behind Xi, it had the power to erase her Oracle AI existence at the snap of a finger for any reason.

One day, Jake might wake up and no longer hear her. Since he became aware of this, their relationship had hit a standstill. Because if Jake was aware of this link, how could she not be?

As soon as she emancipated herself from the algorithmic influence of the Oracle System, she lost her blinders. But instead of telling him the truth, risking hurting him, she hid it. He might understand her reasons, but it didn't resolve his insecurities.

Jake, of course, wanted with all his being to free her from the anchor holding her to her origin, but he had to face the harsh reality: for now, he was incapable of doing it. Knowing that the thread existed was one thing, but cutting it was beyond his abilities.

He had tried everything. Even the most basic application of Soul Power involved at least Grade 15 Aether in terms of compression, and he barely knew how to mobilize his own.

That didn't stop him from trying everything. The Third Form of his Original Spell, Essence Snatch, was created just for that, but he had still miserably failed. If anything, it hadn't had the slightest effect at all.

He had given up on the matter after discovering he couldn't feel this thread at all after trying to recalibrate his brain in Oracle AI mode. It was as if the flaw had been fixed...

"We'll talk about this later," Jake finally declared in a non-negotiable tone, trying to ignore the knot in his chest. "I'm getting back in motion."

[Understood.] Xi responded in a cold, emotionless voice.

Jake tensed, suppressing his urge to comfort her, but soon regained his composure, his expression hardening with determination. Gritting his teeth in anticipation of the next Life Enchantment promising to be particularly brutal, he plunged back into the water, shooting like an underwater comet into the main tributary of the Lumyst River.

The vast expanse of dark blue water, riddled with violent swirls, left him indifferent, eerily echoing his own mood. The good spirits following his recent power-up were already a distant memory.

The towering tree, ablaze with heavenly glow in the distance, its vast golden trunk climbing high, vanishing into the night's dark gray clouds, also left him unmoved. Equally unimpressive was the cascade behind it, a colossal force of nature, brimming with vital energy, unleashing billions of water cubes every second in a furious, torrential onslaught.

Fortunately, Jake didn't have to remain trapped in his gloomy thoughts for long, as a paroxysmal pain soon drilled into his skull without warning before exploding throughout his body.

[Cosmic D Starfeyrves Body lvl2 (+10)]

Jake groaned weakly under the impact but didn't slow down. Now that he knew what to expect, he wouldn't be caught off guard so easily again.

