

The Oracle Paths

Chapter 1101.1: Jake Versus A Titan (part 1)

[If I were you, I wouldn't prolong this out too long.] Xi reminded him tactfully, his unfocused eyes and absent demeanor a clear sign he was spacing out.

Of course, he wasn't. Jake was just pondering how to extract the two clowns from the belly of the Titan. If possible, he'd prefer the cephalopod to just regurgitate them, and everyone could go their separate ways without hard feelings.

If that option failed, then he'd have to force it, and if even that proved impossible, slicing open its belly would be the next step. No doubt this marine behemoth wouldn't take kindly to that.

Still, he owed it to at least give it a equitable shot. Undeterred, Jake closed the several-hundred-meter gap between the giant monster and the river behind it with a swift stride and, slowly looking up, he confronted it with steadfast composure,

"Do you understand what I'm saying?"

The enormous cephalopod, whose skin and sucker colors constantly changed, blending with the trees it was uprooting and the almost translucent rock of the bank, momentarily ceased its attempt to crawl back to the water. Then, with an unbearable slow heaviness, it turned its focus onto the tiny gnat addressing it.

To the gigantic sea monster, known as the River's Bane Titan by the natives of the Lustra Plains, that's indeed what Jake and all other humans were in its eyes: microbes. And if they were a bit bigger and plumper, food.

Unlike other Titanic Beasts and Abyssal Revenants Jake had heard of or encountered up to now, this Titan obeyed nothing and no one, posing a threat even to other Titans. This was, in fact, the norm, with Titans and Revenants collaborating with humans being the minority.

This was all the more true as without these human-allied Titans and Revenants, their societies would have long since collapsed. This was less true for the Radiant Conclave, which had the powerful Celestial at the helm and four other Saints to stand up to these monsters, but an undeniable truth regarding the Duskwight Lands.

Before the rise of the Soulmaner King, they were indeed just a myriad of tribes constantly warring among themselves over meager resources. As soon as a tribe grew

enough to establish a nation or kingdom prosperous and stable enough to federate its neighbors, it would then become ripe food for all the wandering souls and sentient beasts tyrannically dominating their territory.

It happened so systematically and periodically that no Underworld Barbarians still believed in the hypothesis of simple bad luck. To survive, they had to intentionally limit their own expansion. The incessant wars were therefore not only due to the simple greed of these tribes but also their most honorable and legitimate means of regulating their populations.

The rise of the Soulmaner King had put an end to this decadent stagnation they were mired in, which explained the unanimous reverence the natives of the Duskwight Lands had for him.

Returning to the cephalopod towering before Jake, this River's Bane, was by far the most famous of these calamities ravaging the Lustra Plains. The fact that this 'kraken' had dominated the higher reaches of the Lumyst River made it a real thorn in the side of both the Radiant Conclave and other beasts wishing to approach the river to bathe or drink.

Jake didn't know it, but the Radiant Conclave had long forbidden its citizens from approaching the Heaven Cascade and the higher reaches of the Lumyst River without authorization. Not to monopolize access to the purest Lumyst Water, although that was one of the unspoken reasons, but for their own safety.

Even when the Celestial journeyed to the Underworld Cascade, with Featherfall by his side and under the watchful boughs of Anthace, caution was paramount. Drawing from the fathomless depths required a constant vigilance, for a moment's distraction could lead to being ensnared and dragged down into the murky abyss.

So close to the Heaven Cascade, the ensuing Lumyst baptism would undoubtedly kill him. There were horrors in these waters that even the most powerful Lifemancer of Twyluxia couldn't take lightly.

And this kraken was one of them... As Jake still awaited a reaction from the river monster, the cephalopod suddenly moved.

With a slow, deliberate motion, the kraken suddenly reared up, its gargantuan tentacles lifting off the ground, casting long, ominous shadows across the landscape. Each tentacle, a monstrous entity in its own right, was lined with rows of pulsating suckers, capable of crushing metal and bone alike.

As it rose, Jake got a clear view of its head, a nightmare-inducing fusion of an octopus and something far more ancient and malevolent. Its maw, a gaping abyss ringed with razor-sharp teeth, dripped with a viscous, dark liquid, as if salivating at the prospect of the impending battle, or rather the next meal.

The kraken's eyes, now level with Jake's, bore into him with an intelligence that was both alien and unnerving. They were dark pools of enmity, fixating on him with chilling intensity. In that moment, Jake felt as if he were not just being seen, but thoroughly examined by a being whose existence defied the laws of nature.

Despite its monstrous form, there was an undeniable majesty in the way the kraken held itself. It stood as a conqueror, a titan displaced from its aquatic realm, yet unyielding in its might. The air crackled with the tension of the imminent clash, a silent standoff between man and monster, each assessing the other.

Jake, standing resolute in the face of this primordial adversary, knew right away that negotiations had failed.

'This monster can't be talked with...' Jake sighed wearily. 'Then a fight it is.'

Either way, a glance into the creature's acid-filled stomach reminded him mercilessly that he didn't have much time left. Crunch and Lord Phoenix had finally begun to dissolve, their muscles and skeletons fizzing like an effervescent tablet in the hostile liquid. Seeing them grit their teeth, curled up against each other to better endure their pain, even Jake found himself feeling a twinge of sympathy for the two troublemakers.

"These two idiots..." Jake muttered, shaking his head in exasperation. But then, in an instant, his demeanor shifted dramatically.

The fight wasn't supposed to happen so soon... In a blink, Jake's previously subdued but untamed spiritual pressure exploded around him, now fierce and lethal, marking a drastic change from the calm before the storm. It was combined with his overwhelming and unified Lumyst Aura, now very near to completion.

The release of his aura detonated with the obliterating majesty of a nuclear bomb of at least a megaton, affecting everything within a three-kilometer radius. The enormous kraken was hit full force by the psychic blast, stunned silly, but that was just the beginning.

Understanding that the Titans of the Lustra Plains had insane physiques and lifeforces, but comparatively weak minds, Jake had to take advantage of that to end the fight quickly.

It wasn't just an isolated omnidirectional blast but an uncontrolled release of spiritual energy. Unaccustomed to controlling such a wild quantity of Spirit Power at the same time, it took Jake a short millisecond to channel such a release, but when he did, the radiant spiritual pressure disappeared completely, descending like a celestial vise on the kraken.

"Sorry, but I don't have time for a fair fight." Jake spat, his two palms raised in front of him aiming at the shrieking cephalopod. "SOUL CRUSH"

His right fist clenched and under the command of his True Will, a significant chunk of his Soul Power was drained from his body, merging with the dense spiritual energy with multiple attributes crushing the enemy Titan's spirit.

The kraken let out a harrowing howl in response, and immediately after, its huge malicious and hateful eyes became glassy, the aquatic monster clearly losing consciousness. Jake knew, however, that as weak-minded as the monster was compared to the quality of its body, its Spirit Body was no less titanic. It would take a lot more than that to wipe its soul, although it would undoubtedly take months or years to recover.

Despite this, less than a second later, dark circles filled the bags under Jake's eyes, and he soon turned pale. His Lumyst Aura began to flicker like a candle about to be blown out by the wind, and he knew he couldn't maintain his Soul Crush indefinitely. His mind recovered quickly, which was his major asset, but not to the point of maintaining a True Will-based Spell of this magnitude.

Focused on his task, Jake ignored the stream of sapphire blood reminiscent of liquid lightning flowing from his nose and finally clenched his left fist.

Chapter 1102.2: Jake Versus A Titan (part 2)

"Essence Snatch."

On the surface, nothing happened, but an impressive bulge violently rounded the kraken's muscular sac where its stomach was. The half-dissolved forms, made unrecognizable by their tumors, slammed against the inner walls of the monster, deforming them from the inside under the effect of the inconceivable attracting force striving to pull them out.

When it seemed about to fail, Crunch and Lord Phoenix crossed the skin holding them prisoner as if they were ghosts, literally passing through. A tired but satisfied smile curved Jake's lips, his mission in the bag.

Relaxed but still vigilant, he prepared to catch the two ragged troublemakers, guiding them to him with his telekinesis, but at that very moment, his mind was struck by an inexplicable backlash, breaking his concentration and causing him to lose contact with the released aura.

"RROOOAAARRR"

Jake staggered, the deafening roar hitting him like a shockwave, forcing him to step back. His face twisted in a rare mix of disbelief and confusion, he struggled to shake off

his daze, his eyes now burning with a predatory and vindictive hatred, a stark contrast to his earlier expression.

Because, somehow, at the last moment, the Titan had managed to rouse itself. To Jake's great annoyance, he could sense an impenetrable veil of energy, undetectable to ordinary senses, now shrouding the kraken's body and mind. Its dense and unfathomable nature seemed capable of stopping anything in its tracks, like an ocean halting bullets.

"Lumyst..." Jake growled grimly.

As soon as this mysterious aura had enveloped the cephalopod, the cat and bird, on the verge of escape, had immediately been whipped towards its maw by one of its tentacles, then swallowed again like a pair of peanuts, a loud gulp echoing through the air.

"WHO... DARES... MESS... WITH... ME?" boomed a voice as deep as an earthquake and as untamed as the oceans, bursting with indescribable fury. It was the first time anything had inflicted such a wound on it.

Usually, no physical injury, not even the most debilitating, plagued the monster for long, but this time it could feel that recovery wouldn't be so easy. The convalescence would be excruciatingly long, fueling its wrath.

But now that the kraken deigned to speak, it was Jake's turn to keep silent. Disregarding the Titanic Beast's display of anger, he coldly wiped the lightning-blue blood trailing from his nose with the back of his right hand, his visage regaining its usual vigor. In the brief lull between the monster's roar that interrupted his dual Morphic Grasp and the moment he wiped away the blood, he had already regenerated the bulk of the lost Soul Power.

"Ah... So you can speak, fucker," Jake finally remarked, livid with anger, a creepy grin revealing his sharp, crystalline canines.

The Titan known as River's Bane must have sensed that the mere speck before it was not to be underestimated. It didn't immediately counterattack, taking the time to cautiously size up the vermin daring to disrupt its peace—a miscalculation Jake swiftly made it regret.

Soul Crush and Soul Snatch, rendered ineffective by the Lumyst halo coating the aquatic behemoth's skin, Jake decisively resorted to a bigger gun. Having probed the solid aura several times with his mental sense, he'd concluded that Spirit and Soul Power alone would be too feeble to penetrate it.

The Titan's mind might have been laughably weak compared to the robustness of its colossal body, but reaching it was another matter. The Lumyst that the kraken had just deployed around itself was evidently enough to achieve this feat.

But was Jake the type to be deterred by such? Hell no... In fact, he struck back even more fiercely! This time, he gave the enemy no quarter and struck to kill, aware his formidable foe was now on guard.

With a scornful, twisted look directed at the deep abyss-like eyes set atop the cephalopod's head, he clenched his fists with thunderous force and thought with a death sentence tone in his mind,

"Morphic Grasp, First Form, Singularity."

It was the bona fide Morphic Grasp based on the True Will of Crushing, from which all other forms were derived. This attack had never failed before. Not against the Nullifier, not against the Voidshifter Digestor when he was much weaker than he was today.

Jake could already envision the kraken's head being compressed to a subatomic pulp, then shredded and sucked into a spatial rift after space itself had collapsed. It had always been so.

"ROOOOOOARRRRRR!"

When nothing happened after a second, except for the monster's enraged bellowing escalating exponentially, Jake, for the first time, lost his cool, his cold anger giving way to genuine confusion... and resignation.

'Now, it sucks...' Jake's heart sank as the scenario he dreaded unfolded.

[Did you see what just happened at least?] Xi checked in with a voice shaded with unprecedented seriousness.

'I did,' Jake responded grimly.

He had previously identified that the energy composing the shield aura around the Titan was Lumyst, the source of power he'd recently unlocked and was able to cultivate through his Lumyst Breath ability. He just didn't know what made it different from other Light Warriors and Lifemancers he'd encountered.

That was now clear! It was Water Lumyst, perhaps combined with some kind of two-bit Bruce Lee philosophy like 'Be formless, shapeless, like water.'

Usually, such concepts were the domain of Soul Classes, True Will, and Soul Power, but that didn't mean such powers didn't exist in reality. The major advantage of True Will was that it was only limited by one's imagination and personal experience. No need for a specific bloodline to awaken a specific True Will.

Moreover, this Titan, as evidenced by its giant size and phenomenal life force, was extremely ancient. Even if its mind lagged behind its body, it wouldn't surprise Jake at all if this kraken had awakened its own Soul Class without the aid of an Aurae Stele.

"I really don't like where this fight is going," Jake growled in a low voice, frustration etched on his face, a glance at the beast's stomach telling him that the two knuckleheads had finally lost consciousness, the corrosion having begun to attack their vital organs.

[No time to dilly-dally! FULL POWER!] Xi commanded, pushing out a war cry that was uncharacteristic of her. [KILL IT! NOW!]

Jake's blood boiled when he heard her firm voice filled with killing intent reverberate in his skull. It was as if he'd been waiting for a long time just to receive the green light to finally let loose.

"... Oh, and fuck caution!" Jake cast his common sense into the abyss and unleashed the suppressed urges of violence, hunger, and murder that had been smoldering deep within him.

BOOOOOM!

Bloodline Ignition!

Chitinous Scales!

Cosmic Sight!

Lucid Aetherdreamer!

These were the only bloodline and soul-class abilities he could muster under the constraints imposed by Twyluxia, but they were more than enough to morph him into a devilish calamity. The giant squid known as River's Bane felt it first.

THUD!

Jake, having only bothered to slip into unremarkable black trousers upon emerging from the water, surged in size in an instant, his thunderous heartbeat resonating outward in a twenty-meter radius. The Titan, poised at a safe distance, remained unharmed but felt its Lumyst Aura quiver dangerously. Even sheltered within, it could faintly hear the human's heart beating.

In the blink of an eye, Jake loomed over twenty-five meters tall, his weight exceeding thousands of tons. His impeccably sculpted muscular body was riddled with lesions, his face ghastly pale from the repercussion of Twyluxia after drawing so much biomass from his Inner Space.

It was akin to diving naked into boiling water—tolerable if you dipped in for just a second, but lethal if you stayed any longer. Right now, Jake was spitting in the face of Twyluxia's rules, shattering the balance established between the natives and the Players.

He had to pay a price. And had his Lumyst Aura not been on the cusp of emerging from its embryonic phase, that price would have been even steeper!

But none of that mattered! With his stats, anything that didn't kill him in one blow wasn't worth mentioning. Especially when his goal was to precisely reclaim biomass that could serve as replacement cells.

His wounds healed, his Spirit and Soul regained their otherworldly luster, and a giant, no longer merely human, reappeared, soaring high in the sky, his wings unfurled in boreal blue, momentarily eclipsing the moonlight.

In the wake of his transformation, Jake stood defiant against the nocturnal backdrop, his presence an oxymoron of otherworldly allure and intimidating wickedness. His skin, now a tapestry of minute chitinous scales sparkling with a blend of absorbed metals, radiated an alien glow against the night canvas. The scales, black as oblivion, traced across his alabaster flesh like tiny serpents, seemingly absorbing the light around him, bestowing upon him an aura of menacing elegance.

His wings, expansive and unfurling like those of a banished fairy, throbbed with veins of electric blue, stark against the deep, abyssal black of his newfound shell. Despite their grandeur, they bore an eerie charm, as though forged from the night itself, interlaced with cosmic lightning.

Jake's eyes, once dimly lit, now bore the vastness of galaxies, swirling with stars and nebulae. Their radiant silver-blue cut through the darkness, emanating an energy that was undeniably not of this world.

When River's Bane met his gaze, it saw the universe, but also the chilling emptiness of a predator from an origin far more ancient than its own. For the first time in its long existence since it was nothing but a tiny newborn squid, the giant squid felt a shiver of fear.

Only now did the giant squid begin to realize that it might have provoked an entity that should never have been disturbed.

Chapter 1103.3: Jake Versus A Titan (part 3)

Regret washed over the cephalopod, but it was too late to turn back now. Once his transformation was complete, Jake wasted no time launching his attack.

Physically.

Standing a towering 25 meters tall and weighing thousands of tons, his muscle fibers denser than lead, Jake contracted and with an explosive push off the ground, he lunged forward, closing the gap between him and the kraken in a flash.

Caught off guard, River's Bane reacted with remarkable speed, three of its enormous tentacles whipping through the air, swooping down on the now much larger human to hinder his movement. Yet, compared to the massive volume of the invertebrate creature, it remained but a slightly larger nuisance, akin to a cockroach or beetle against a former ant or gnat.

Expressionless, Jake merely tilted his torso slightly, letting one of the tentacles aiming to pierce him glide by his shoulders, while his two wings acted as separate limbs to deflect the other two. When the wings and tentacles clashed, sparks flew, and a horrific metallic screeching noise echoed for miles around, generating a devastating shockwave.

Taking advantage of Jake's slight slowdown from the initial interference, the Titan viciously slammed its other tentacles down on its audacious prey, their considerable size and weight ensuring their point of impact would become the epicenter of a catastrophic earthquake for the surrounding flora and fauna.

BANG!

Jake's knees buckled slightly under the weight of the impact from dozens of tentacles, each weighing hundreds, thousands of tons, but that was the extent of it. Sure, the ground beneath him collapsed, large fissures forming and then a deep crater temporarily engulfing him, but soon he broke free from the tentacles' grasp and leapt onto the back of one.

Before the cephalopod had time to marvel at how this 'gnat' had survived, Jake stomped down on the tentacle with all his force, nailing it savagely into the ground with a mighty kick. The struck tentacle crashed like a meteor into the crater Jake had just vacated, significantly widening it while raising a cloud of rock and dust.

The giant monster, not expecting its insignificant adversary to be so heavy, was deeply destabilized, its brain not even registering the agonizing pain from its battered limb. The Titan only avoided sprawling face-first into the dirt thanks to its many tentacles reflexively rooting into the ground around it for support.

After crushing the tentacle with all his mass and power, Jake didn't immediately press his advantage, a deep frown marring his handsome face. The sensation from the impact felt a bit light. It was as if all the force of his kick dispersed into water, unable to reach its target.

And indeed, although he remained impassive throughout, a glance beneath his feet revealed with grim solemnity that the tentacle had suffered no damage. At best, it was slightly swollen, a condition from which the sucker-covered appendage was rapidly recovering.

Just as Jake outrageously quickly recovered from his own wounds, the monster's tentacle regained its original appearance so quickly that he almost wondered if he had imagined its injuries.

RRRROOOOARRR!

His initial shock passing, the Titan reacted with a roar tinged with indignation and shame, its other tentacles stiffening uncannily like steel spikes, suddenly converging on the arrogant human with the sole intent of riddling him with holes. Their synchrony was so perfect it became eerie.

Sensing the attack with his heightened abilities, Jake didn't panic despite his growing irritation, twisting his torso, sidestepping, and pirouetting just enough and as necessary to calmly dodge or repel each deadly assault. Soon it was River's Bane's turn to grow impatient.

Unfortunately, as frustrated as the old Titan might be, it was Jake who was far more anxious about this situation. The fate of Crunch and Lord Phoenix depended on the outcome of this fight, and although he was confident he could survive whatever came his way, the two troublemakers didn't have the same luxury.

[You're going to have to hit harder than that.] Xi stated the obvious, annoying him to no end.

'No shit! Tell me something I don't already know.' Jake snorted, stifling a hideous growl after once again failing to cut through one of the tentacles with his claws.

Every time he was sure he'd succeed, his claws, wings, or whatever chitin blade-like growth he managed to produce would slow to a crawl, coming to a complete halt before even nicking the creature's flesh.

It was all the more depressing since he had tried to summon the armor and saber he had specifically forged for this Ordeal, to no avail. Oh, he had managed to bring them forth, but in their state of repression by Twyluxia, they were about as useful as a stick. Disheartened, he had no choice but to stow them away.

That's when things went well. Other times, if the angle of assault was even slightly off, his talons would just slide along the creature's skin as if it were a soapy surface.

It wasn't a question of strength or technique. Jake was already using everything he could, given the meager proportion of powers at his disposal: Sharpening Aether, True Will, Killing Intent, weak elemental spells, cosmic fairy force... everything.

It would be different if he could use the full power of his Grade 10.6 Energy Body and mental force, but Twyluxia's restriction limited his usage to barely 1% of his usual output. That his Lumyst Aura had grown so much, or that his body had withstood more than 9 consecutive enchantments, made only a slight difference.

However, one shouldn't be mistaken. It was only because it was him. 1% of his true power was more than what even a Fifth-Ordeal Player in the top 5% could ever produce. If it were any of those Players in his place, they would have regained their full powers long ago.

That was all the more true because the more Jake tried to use powerful magic by trying to access his own energy by delving his consciousness into the Aetherdream, the more violent the backlash was, like a slingshot being pulled back further and further before snapping back in his face. Since the start of his duel against River's Bane, Jake had already injured himself multiple times just trying to breach the barrier of Water Lumyst covering the monster, but all for naught.

BOOM!

After thousands of dodges, acrobatics, and hellish ripostes that reshaped the region's topography between the two stubborn adversaries refusing to yield an inch of ground, Jake was finally buried leagues underground after being blasted by an unexpected water laser – there was no other word for it.

Without warning, the nerve-frayed Titan suddenly went berserk after Jake had barely managed to scratch it, at the cost of yet another backlash that literally caused his organs to implode and pulverized his skeleton. Apparently, enough Strength and Sharpening Aether, combined with enough Soul Power and Cosmic Fairy Force could do the trick if he put his self-preservation instinct aside.

Ah, not to forget the True Will of Destruction...

The invisible halo enveloping the cephalopod that Jake could only sense through his mental sense had suddenly become visible, radiating a bright, translucent blue radiance resembling clear water. He could almost imagine waves stirring its surface.

Before he could marvel at this entrancing spectacle, all the Water Lumyst coating the monster had instantly converged at the tip of a tentacle aimed at his head, like morning dew accumulating in droplets at the tips of leaves. The next thing Jake knew, he was buried kilometers underground, feeling like he'd been hit by a train, or rather struck by some kind of battleship jumping into hyperdrive.

Plunged into darkness and covered with kilometers of rock, Jake reinhabited his body, staring in astonishment at the massive gaping hole that had atomized his skull. The upper half of his body had been atomized by this out-of-nowhere water cannon. The only reason he was still alive was that he had dodged at the last second with his Spirit Body, cowardly abandoning his flesh just before it gave way.

That's right. This Water Lumyst beam, he felt it in his guts, represented a mortal danger to his spirit as well.

He tended to forget, given his overconfidence, but as powerful as his Spirit Body was compared to other natives and Players, it remained fragile compared to his physique. His soul even more so.

The only reason it wasn't usually a concern was that very few physical attacks could directly damage these, except for certain elemental attacks and spells specifically designed for that purpose. It was one of the reasons why Players like Jake were so hard to kill, their bodies able to recover almost instantly even from near obliteration, making them practically indestructible.

All of this obviously became moot if it was the spirit that was targeted.

Chapter 1104: Lumyst Breath

Like many top Players, Jake had learned to protect his spirit as he just did by discarding his doomed body at the last moment, just as he had learned to infuse Spirit or Elemental energy like lightning or fire into his attacks to ensure his enemies wouldn't resurrect to stab him in the back.

Jake waited patiently for the upper half of his body to regenerate, his expression growing increasingly grim, until it fell into utter despondency as he realized his cells were desperately struggling to divide. Normally, they would have possessed enough energy gathered in their Aether Code to support over 16 instant regenerations without deleterious side effects.

Finally grasping the full extent of his grave predicament, Jake, in his Spirit Body state, meticulously scanned what remained of his pelvis and legs for the cause. A searing pain jolted him out of his body instantly, an invasive energy 'drowning' and 'diluting' his mental sense like a flood or tsunami.

Startled and recognizing the grave danger, Jake quickly severed the link with his projected mental sense and let his surviving cells carefully purge the Water Lumyst that was swelling what remained of his body from within. Observing this water-attributed energy brimming with lifeforce, light, and other murkier concepts, while sacrificing another copious amount of Spirit Power, he eventually figured out how it worked.

[This kraken has also enchanted its body until it was profoundly transformed from within by the Breath Of Living Elements Grace,] Xi commented, arriving at the same conclusion. [Nine enchantments were your limit, but that doesn't mean this kraken couldn't have been luckier. With enough time and other methods, I think it's possible to go further in enchanting one's body with relative safety. Even if this Titan started as a mere squid, I wouldn't be surprised if after a certain number of enchantments, it transformed into a creature capable of manipulating and conjuring water.]

'I think the same,' Jake nodded grimly. 'Except I need a lot more Lumyst Water than most natives and Players to reap the benefits of a baptism. I wouldn't be surprised if it took this monster well over 9 baptisms to unlock this mutation. Either way, thanks to the Lumyst Breath Grace altering its physiology and judging by its size and lifeforce, it must have cultivated Lumyst in its body over a very long period. Much longer than any Light Warriors we've encountered. Since Lumyst seems to be generated largely from the conversion of our cells' lifeforce, it must have gathered a formidable amount. Enough to render my already weakened spells ineffective.'

[And that's not to mention that by making the Lumyst River its territory, it could cultivate faster by having all this Lumyst Water already imbued with its own attributes,] Xi added with extreme gravity. [Lumyst Water contains, besides its enchanting properties, fabulous amounts of vital energy and, to a lesser extent, light energy. With the Breath of Living Element Grace and its own aptitude for water control, it must have succeeded in infusing this attribute into its Lumyst, giving it the troublesome properties we're currently facing. By the way, the Lumyst Aura derived from the Child of Lumyst Grace is also an aura that grows and evolves according to its user's actions. After a long life as an aquatic predator so close to the Heaven Cascade, it's no wonder its Water Lumyst Aura is so special.]

Changing the subject abruptly, she then asked, [Did you see earlier how its Lumyst was stored? It matches the different stages of Light Warriors referenced in the minds of the natives and Players we've soulsearched.]

Shimmer, Pulsar, Vitalist, Light Paladin, Corebearers, Radiant Lords, Saints, and the mysterious Celestial. Ordinary Light Warriors rarely surpassed the stage of Light Paladin, with Corebearers and above being the purview of Lifemancers. The condition to aspire to this status was to survive three or four baptisms, depending on the individual.

In other words, obtaining the Lumyst Breath Grace, remolding their organism to produce, cultivate, accumulate, and manipulate Lumyst. The term Corebearer was key here, or rather Core.

Without the body's innate ability to condense this unique Lumyst Core, which was a physical organ in its own right, exceeding the Light Paladin stage was impossible. Regular Light Warriors, regardless of the density of their Lumyst Aura and quality of their lifeforce, had far too shallow control over their Lumyst to cause such a miracle.

And unlike an Aether or Reiga Core, not without drawbacks, the Lumyst Core was a slightly less versatile but more effective organ existing in the physical world, in the sense that it also nourished the cells and spirit of its host like Elemental Mana does.

The Lumyst Breath Grace hadn't done things by halves, and Jake could clearly feel that his body now possessed microscopic channels connecting each of his cells to one another. His cells themselves were also slightly different.

Sadly, he couldn't help but notice that these meridians were currently closed. They converged somewhere in his heart, where an atrophied core impossible to detect without his superhuman senses slept in silence, waiting to be finally irrigated. His cells, supposed to be now capable of converting their life force into Lumyst, weren't producing any yet, making him doubt the usefulness of this Grace for the moment.

What Jake was sure of, though, was that he had to be capable of it, or the ability wouldn't be listed in his Oracle Status. Like any innate ability, it might require a bit of practice, but it was definitely within his capabilities, like learning to walk or chew.

And if it was a technique that could be learned, he could undoubtedly nail it faster than snapping one's fingers. Seeing the terrible damage this Water Lumyst was causing to his organism, Jake suddenly felt enlightened.

'Since my other sources of energy are basically sealed, I might as well start this Lumyst cultivation,' he concluded with cold determination.

'[I agree,]' Xi concurred.

Worried about the fate of his cat, Jake waited impatiently for the adaptive energy emitted by his cells to finish consuming the enemy's Water Lumyst, and when it was done, he urgently returned to his body, which had immediately regenerated as soon as the foreign energy had been purged from his system.

Despite his joy at regaining the use of his limbs, Jake's expression quickly fell as he perceived a faint, strange weakness seeming to come from the very depths of his DNA. A sensation of fatigue and regression as insidious, he had already experienced it several times in extracting his own Blood Essence and immediately identified it as the damage to his Aether Code.

"Fuck. This healing cost me the equivalent of 20 regenerations." He could only weep as he realized he had already lost almost all the benefits of having devoured Lord Oom in a matter of seconds.

Water Lumyst was dangerous! The next lethal injury of this caliber would probably cause his bloodline to regress a level in addition to taking much longer to recover from.

"I could die for real," Jake realized somberly.

[Then make sure it doesn't touch you again,] Xi admonished him sternly.

'Hmm, it won't.'

As if to prove his point, Jake sank his consciousness inward and manually took control of each of his cells. Listening to their signals and monitoring every metabolic and Aetheric reaction occurring within each one, he soon found what he was looking for.

Out of nowhere, his cells, emitting only a fraction of the Aether they were supposed to provide, suddenly erupted with pure Life Lumyst, all their cellular activity from whatever source being magically converted into this similar but superior quality energy source.

In any case, Jake felt the difference right away. Unlike Aether, Reiga, Mana, Life Energy, or any other element, this source of power was not rejected by Twyluxia.

'Hahahaha! That's it! This is the kind of power I'm used to!' Jake laughed as he felt the strength of his muscles multiply as the freshly produced Life Lumyst spread throughout his organism, irrigating every part.

[Crunch and Lord Phenix,] Xi reminded him impassively.

Jake's jubilation abruptly ended, his face darkening again.

"Let's teach this fucking squid a lesson," Jake declared sinisterly.

The vitality of his cells, combined with the Aether produced by his Grade 10.6 Energy, even nerfed, was something unimaginable. The amount of Lumyst produced in a few seconds had already surpassed the cultivation of the average Vitalist.

But this was just the beginning. As soon as the Life Lumyst finally reached the atrophied organ nestled in the middle of his heart, the Lumyst Core came to life, and the speed at which it attracted Lumyst was immediately amplified. Like a second heart, the small Lumyst Core began to pulsate, and the filtered Life Lumyst was sent back into his system, nourishing the emitting cells in return, forming a virtuous circle.

In the blink of an eye, Jake regained physical capabilities close to when he infused all his Red, Orange, Yellow, and Green Aether into his muscles to their limit.

He had finally found a way to bypass Twyluxia's restriction. The kraken could sit still and wash its neck for him. Jake was coming for its head!

Or at least its stomach...

Chapter 1105: Jake Versus A Titan (End)

River's Bane wasn't as at ease as it tried to pretend. Despite being a revered Titan, a Kraken ruling the higher reaches of the Lumyst River, it had never come so close to death at the hands of a human. Not even when ambushed during its centennial hibernation by the Celestial and the four Saints.

Back then, it had sacrificed a few tentacles to escape, but at no point did it feel in mortal danger. It was a bit more tense when Featherfall, Dreadnought, and Anthace cornered it, but with guile and ferocity, it escaped.

Even against three Titans, it had survived! So why was this human, whom it had just blasted to kingdom come with an ultra-laser of the purest Water Lumyst, troubling it so much? Its tentacles, usually unfazed by cold, were now bristling...

Then, it remembered a detail it had overlooked: the two prey in its stomach!

At first, it seemed like a golden opportunity. The two creatures had almost failed a Lumyst baptism, barely surviving with severe injuries and tumors. Their lifeforce was abundant, and they weighed much more than they appeared, giving River's Bane a glimpse of their true size.

To River's Bane, these two foolish prey ticked all the boxes for an exceptional snack! So, it had swallowed them whole without hesitation. But now, it was starting to have regrets...

'Should I spit them out and call it quits for tonight?' River's Bane pondered for a moment before scoffing at the ludicrous thought. It feared nothing and no one!

'Besides, I won! It's impossible that it's not dead...' it reassured itself, though seemingly doubting its own affirmation.

That's right. That human must have died after taking that hit! No creature from the Lustra Plains could survive complete annihilation of all vital organs! Not even the Celestial!

Except perhaps Anthace... or Dreadnought. But this human was neither plant nor worm. It wasn't an expert in anatomy, but from devouring various prey, it had learned some facts: Humans couldn't survive without their heads and brains...

Unfortunately for River's Bane, its anxiety was not unfounded. Just as it began convincing itself that it had indeed defeated its adversary, a familiar silhouette burst forth like a streak of black, silver, and blue light from the dark abyss created by its watery laser.

"..."

River's Bane was too stunned to curse. It was captivated by the dazzling, thick layer of Lumyst shining on the surface of the resurrected human's body. Its appearance had changed significantly from the previous generic and unremarkable Lumyst Aura.

"You...!" The Kraken's enormous bulbous eyes widened in horrified astonishment, realizing immediately with its vast experience what had just happened. "You weren't using any Lumyst earlier? That was just your raw physical strength?"

The cephalopod dismissed the thought as soon as it formed. The human had definitely used various powers to reach it. Especially that last attack where it managed to scratch it by piercing its Water Lumyst Barrier.

That evil black miasma incinerating both its flesh and spirit had hurt like hell... Just thinking about it made it break out in cold sweat, a physiological reaction it thought it had long been immune to.

Moreover, this wasn't the first time it encountered such destructive energy, deeply hostile to all existence. Throughout its long life, it had encountered such individuals several times, and each time the events that followed had been catastrophic for their continent. Only a Titan as ancient as itself could have such memories.

Contrary to what the natives imagined, wars between the Duskwight Lands and their Lustra Plains were nothing new. Every time these foreigners appeared, an era of chaos would inevitably follow.

Opportunities were numerous, as were chances to die. When it all ended, the victors were usually too few to even consider it a victory... As a lone Titan, it had long learned not to meddle in foreigner affairs...

Foreigner... Foreigner... A shiver of dreadful realization suddenly ran through the Kraken's massive frame.

"You're a foreigner!" River's Bane shrieked, instinctively erecting its tentacles into an impregnable defensive grid out of sheer terror. "So this Lumyst... You just cultivated it?!"

Jake, quickly acclimating to his newfound Lumyst reserves in silence, looked up in response, smirking evilly.

"Too late."

Five seconds of Lumyst was more than enough. That time had given him more than he needed not only to master this new energy source but also to learn the ins and outs of the Breath Of Living Elements. The contrasting colors of his Lumyst, dancing between sapphire blue, mercury silver, abyssal black, and blinding white, were blatant proof.

"I'm coming," Jake warned laconically, his smirk vanishing from his face.

The disappearance of that smile scared the Kraken even more than when it looked at him like a squid on a sashimi board during their first round.

"I DEFEATED YOU ONCE, I CAN DEFEAT YOU TWICE!" River's Bane yelled in pure denial, launching its tentacles in an attack like a volley of arrows.

BOOOOOM!

The already ravaged ground shattered like a smashed plate as the heavy tentacles penetrated deep into the earth like massive spears, so taut and sheathed they were. The protective Water Lumyst enveloping them exploded like a tsunami, sending ripples and tides flooding the devastated area, seeping into every crevice and crack.

Whooosh!

In an ultra-fast comet blur that made its heart skip a beat, Jake reappeared unharmed in the air at eye level, taunting it with a look of pure disdain.

"You should have fled when you had the chance instead of swallowing my friends," he declared coldly before ominously adding, "Be smarter in your next life."

Before the Kraken could retort or even defend itself, Jake landed on top of the beast's skull and raised his right arm in the air, his fingers together and outstretched as if mimicking a knife.

The five seconds of Lumyst he had produced, a mishmash of his various attributes due to his limited experimentation time, suddenly converged from the rest of his body towards his raised hand. His Lumyst Aura appeared to dim quite a bit when he did this, but the concerned hand, in contrast, began to shine like a dark-blue sun, a terrible screeching noise tearing the air and distorting space-time by its mere existence.

Then Jake lowered his arm with serene killing intent, and a dark arc of light with some tones of lightning blue struck the monster, colliding with the Water Lumyst halo isolating its skull. The two very different types of Lumyst immediately clashed, one trying to destroy the other, and for a very brief moment, River's Bane thought it had a chance of winning.

The energy contained in this Lumyst arc, as terrifying and baleful as it was, seemed far too insignificant compared to its thousands of years of accumulation. As soon as its Water Lumyst Aura showed signs of yielding, the Kraken immediately reinforced it by releasing astronomical amounts of Lumyst cultivated in its Lumyst Core since it was but a tiny squid.

Its survival depended on it!

Thanks to this prompt initiative, River's Bane even temporarily regained the upper hand, with Jake's emitted Lumyst blade appearing almost extinguished like a damp firecracker in the face of the deluge of Water Lumyst emerging like an infinite, increasingly violent tide.

Hard to believe, but during the few tenths of a second their clash lasted, their environment had been thoroughly replaced by icy water, the entire region terraformed into a gigantic artificial lake. The Kraken was going all in.

"I WIN!" the cephalopod roared, infusing with a single thought the Water Lumyst it continued to release unrestrainedly to take control of all this water.

With another thought, it commanded all the water in this vast expanding lake to unleash itself upon and only upon Jake.

A double whirlpool of several kilometers in diameter collided brutally with his tiny human body stuck in the middle, the torrential violence of the current trying to mince him like a steamroller. Even with his body enhanced with Life Lumyst, Jake felt it.

Yet, a condescending victory smile subtly curved the corner of Jake's lip just before the twin water rolls put him through the wringer. No doubt that if River's Bane had succeeded, he would have been like that infamous lost sock that is never found...

"That was a good plan. Too bad you don't know much about me," Jake sighed, then teleported without warning beneath and behind the monster where its stomach supposedly was.

Without hesitation, he concentrated the Grey and Red Lumyst he had just freshly produced during those few milliseconds into his fist and punched forth with all his strength. The Water Lumyst halo, a bit thin at that spot but dense enough to stop the first-round Jake, was immediately perforated, shockwave-like ripples clearing the aqueous energy from its path.

The Kraken's not-so-fragile skin caved in, shaken by an impact of immeasurable violence, but did not give way. However, that was all Jake needed to end the fight.

River's Bane, having never taken such a blow to the liver, lost all concentration, its Lumyst losing all cohesion in the blink of an eye. The rollers and columns of water several kilometers high remained eerily suspended motionless in the air before beginning their descent.

Even if the Titan hadn't made such an embarrassingly rookie mistake, it wouldn't have changed anything. Without Water Lumyst to stop his mental sense, Jake was liberated to employ the second and third forms of Morphic Grasp.

"Soul Crush/Essence Snatch," Jake murmured darkly, clenching his two fists outstretched in front of him.

The awareness of River's Bane froze, a searing pain like liquid fire spreading through its entire soul. That was all it took for the abandoned Lumyst arc at the top of the Kraken's skull to counterattack.

The colored energy blade, which seemed on the verge of extinguishing, suddenly flashed with a bright dark radiance reminiscent of a reanimated star during its supernova, and the next flash split the Kraken's body in two. Space was sliced, a black line of nothingness forming in the middle, and then the sound of a thunderclap evoking the birth of the big bang destroyed what remained of the Kraken in an cataclysmic explosion.

Chapter 1106: A Thank You Would Have Sufficed

Holding his cat and turkey friend by the neck like two lost puppies, Jake reappeared sitting atop a tree over twenty kilometers from the ravaged area. From his vantage point, he could clearly see, through his cosmic vision, the spatial rift gradually closing, leaving nothing in its wake. Conversely, the blast of the residual explosion that had disintegrated River's Bane continued to spread, quickly expanding towards the periphery of Lustris City...

The capital of the Lustra Plains was still smoldering, evidently still engulfed in flames... It shouldn't make much difference if kilometers of water pushed by the explosion's blast unexpectedly showed up at their windows. Probably...

Jake felt bad for the civilians who had nothing to do with their Ordeal or this continental war, but he didn't let remorse weigh him down. After all, it wasn't his fault that the damn cephalopod had released all the Water Lumyst in its Core before kicking the bucket...

All that waste of Lumyst and lifeforce... Just thinking about it gave him a headache.

Fortunately, Jake hadn't come out of it empty-handed. Remembering what he had managed to steal from the Titan just before its destruction with his Essence Snatch ability, he couldn't help but chuckle proudly. Beyond that, his Lumyst Aura had also done its job of collecting...

As for his lack of guilt, it wasn't just because he was heartless and devoid of humanity. If he wanted, he could still save them.

But it wasn't necessary. Lustris, being the capital where the Radiant Conclave was located, was more than adequately defended. The ongoing fire had surprised him, but he could see with his sharp eyes that whatever caused it had already been neutralized

or forced to flee. The fact that the flames and smoke were extinguishing one by one was the most telling sign.

Jake took the time he had before the wall of water pushed by the blast reached him to quickly inspect the injuries of his cat and turkey, but lost interest just as quickly upon realizing that their lives were no longer in danger.

As the saying goes, it's often the worst scoundrels who live the longest. Or was it the other way around?

Nah, it must be that. Somehow, he was sure those two troublemakers would still be there to annoy him even after 100 Ordeals...

As Jake anticipated, long before the blast – preceded by its giant tsunami – reached Lustris, millions of radiant roots, several meters in diameter, sprouted from the ground in front of the city, intertwining in no time to form a towering, impassable barrier.

The wall of water crashed into it at several times the speed of sound a split second later with a dull thud, wooden splinters flying in all directions. The true blast propelling all that water came right after, crashing against the tough wall of roots.

CRACK!

Half of the roots shattered, with split wood literally raining from the sky over half the region, but the other half held firm, albeit severely damaged. Once the danger passed, the roots retracted underground as they had come, leaving only gaps behind as reminders that it wasn't a dream.

Ironically, it was Jake, much closer to the epicenter of the explosion than Lustris, who absorbed the tsunami and the accompanying blast second, having let it come to him. Naturally, he could have moved further away, but he wanted to check something.

By his own admission, he hadn't expected his last attack to be so spectacularly devastating and he wanted to be sure...

As the wall of water was about to slam into him, Jake deployed his mental sense and closed his eyes. Almost simultaneously, the wall of water lost a substantial portion of its inertia, the resulting impact from their collision proving much weaker than expected. The tsunami then continued past Jake, losing momentum until it collapsed into a foamy wave that submerged hundreds of hectares of the surrounding forest.

This tsunami, impressive as it was, was far too slow to harm Jake, and as expected, he emerged unscathed, the deep-blue Cosmic Lumyst faintly emanating from his body repelling the water around him like an anti-gravity generator. The real danger of this tidal wave was the residual Water Lumyst inside.

Before dying, the damn Kraken had released thousands of years of cultivation to create all that water, but a good half was actually used to control it. Jake wondered why his Lumyst Blade had suddenly gained so much power, resulting in such a destructive chain reaction, but he now had his answer.

At that moment, although the wave was far behind him, all the Water Lumyst supposed to have mixed with the liquid was no longer there. Instead, it floated in suspension like a galaxy of pale blue light particles around Jake, who had become its center of gravity.

"Phew, just as I thought," Jake elucidated, not without astonishment.

[Lumyst is an energy belonging to no one.] Xi concurred. [Depending on the attribute of the Lumyst and the cultivation level of its host, it is possible for the latter to adapt to a very specific form of Lumyst and gain a remarkable level of control that does not depend on other parameters like mental sense. It's like a human having fine control of their own limbs thanks to their nervous system. Their mental strength has nothing to do with it.]

"Indeed, that's exactly it," Jake smiled before adding more seriously, "But it's not without drawbacks. Since this Water Lumyst no longer belonged to this Titan as soon as it lost control, anyone with an affinity for this type of Lumyst can then claim it. If two Lumyst cultivators with the same type of Lumyst clash, with equal body and spirit, the one with the most advanced Lumyst Core could theoretically seize the Lumyst of their opponent and make it their own without any counterbalance. The control of Lumyst weakens as it moves away from the Lumyst Core, meaning a Lumyst cultivator of a lower stage is completely powerless against a stronger one."

Finishing his last sentence, Jake raised his arm in front of his face and thoughtfully stared at the back of his hand shrouded in a halo of dark blue Lumyst. With a thought, the Water Lumyst suspended around him began to flow towards him, merging with the deep blue light of his hand.

Logically, one might have expected a clash between the two different natures of energy, but nothing happened. Instead, the dense current of pale blue light siphoned from all directions, reminiscent of a levitating river, obediently entered his hand, the dark blue Lumyst coating it gaining furiously in brilliance, changing from a timid flame to a fiery blaze.

"Earlier, while fighting that Titan," Jake continued calmly, "I immediately realized that my 5-second-old Lumyst Core was nothing compared to its thousands of years of accumulation. If my psychic faculties weren't so overpowered, my Lumyst would have been just a rigid mass of energy good only for nourishing my organism and supporting my close combat attacks and defenses. I knew my Lumyst was of superior quality, but that should have just allowed me to buy time."

"As you saw, I was far from the mark. My Cosmic Lumyst includes almost everything that makes up the cosmos, and water is part of it. Instead of clashing with its Water Lumyst, my Cosmic Lumyst simply swallowed it. As long as River's Bane tightly held the reins of its Lumyst, the balance was maintained as it could be the case between two Water Lumyst cultivators of equal power, but as soon as River's Bane lost concentration after my counterattack, the winner was decided. All the Water Lumyst it opposed to my Lumyst Blade and me in an attempt to kill me was engulfed inside, exponentially increasing the power of my Cosmic Lumyst. I didn't have much time to experiment with Breath of Living Elements, so this Cosmic Lumyst contained almost all my attributes, including Space and Time. Hence this result, cough, how should I say... spectacular?"

For someone unfamiliar with Jake, his tone might almost sound embarrassed or repentant, but Crunch and Lord Phoenix, who had silently regained consciousness a while ago, rolled their eyes disdainfully.

"Master is truly shameless, but I like it," the Himalayan black cat praised with its comically flat-faced look growing even more stupid over time.

Not to be outdone, his partner in crime sweetly overplayed, "Only true shamelessness can lead to immortality! Hail our shameless leader!"

"..." Jake dropped the two idiots into the void, suddenly regretting having saved them. "A simple thank you would have sufficed."

Chapter 1107: He Is Stronger...

"Thaaaaanks, master!" The two clowns shrieked half-heartedly in unison, landing with an audible splash in a mud puddle about fifty meters below.

The passing wave had drenched the entire region, turning the ground into pure sludge, although right now it looked more like diarrhea. To illustrate, the tree on which he perched was slowly sinking into the ground, which had become too soft to support its weight despite its widespread roots. As for the fact that it was leaning dangerously, its trunk might have been damaged by the wave...

Temporarily ignoring the two idiots, Jake moved from one spot to another with supersonic steps in the air, collecting all the residual Water Lumyst. It turned out to be a substantial amount. From just a few seconds of Lumyst accumulation, he had gathered the equivalent of several weeks of cultivation in an instant.

However, Jake soon discovered that converting Water Lumyst into the far superior Cosmic Lumyst left something to be desired. At a guess, the tsunami had contained hundreds of years' worth of Water Lumyst, against the few weeks of Cosmic Lumyst at the end.

Moreover, converting one type of Lumyst into another wasn't instantaneous either. The Water Lumyst easily integrated with Cosmic Lumyst, serving as fuel to amplify its performance, but the actual fusion took much longer. A bit like water and oil struggling to mix.

That was, among other reasons, why his current Lumyst was composed of several colors. When he had urgently experimented with Breath Of Living Elements, he had produced various types of Lumyst quickly, hence the result.

All these different Lumysts now had to coexist in his body. Each time they were concentrated at the end of a circulation cycle in his heart to be filtered by his Lumyst Core, Jake felt a slight discomfort in his chest.

Nothing to worry about at the moment, but enough to understand that all these different types of Lumyst in the same body did not make good bedfellows. In the end, Lumyst was not also the ultimate energy source without drawbacks he had dreamed of.

'Fortunately, Cosmic Lumyst can assimilate most elemental Lumysts.' Jake rationalized, deciding to rethink this problem later when the time was more appropriate.

Added to this was the default Life Attribute with which all Lumyst was partly impregnated, giving the sense of vigorous life force in the natives of the Lustra Plains. The term 'Living Elements' in Breath of Living Elements wasn't there for decoration.

Despite his advances, Jake had a hunch that he had only skimmed the surface of the potential that Lumyst offered, as well as its possible drawbacks. At least for now, there were two significant drawbacks confirmed, or advantages depending on the viewpoint, of which he had already seen the effects on the battlefield.

A hybrid Lumyst containing all sorts of properties like his Cosmic Lumyst, could not be used to conjure specific spells and elements for which its nature theoretically made it capable. To produce fire or light, he would be better off generating Fire or Light Lumyst directly.

That was why his Lumyst sword had caused such unpredictable impacts on the environment. It contained so many elemental and magical properties, ranging from traditional elements, to the rarer elements of life, space, time, and energy. At some point, he had even subconsciously mixed into it a trace of what he thought to be Destruction Lumyst.

Which led him to the second unpractical point: Lumyst of a given attribute could physically produce the element corresponding to it. Water Lumyst essentially released its energy in the form of water, but in what form did Jake's hybrid Cosmic Lumyst release its own?

They had seen the outcome a little earlier: A spatial rift affecting local time and space, followed by a lethal explosion reminiscent of the creation of the big bang.

If Jake based his first result on this, certainly satisfying at the moment, he would have a hard time using this Lumyst for anything other than annihilating his enemies, or mass destruction.

Nevertheless curious about the result, Jake, having verified that Crunch and Lord Phenix were no longer in danger, flew towards the epicenter of the explosion to examine in detail the aftermath of his fight against River's Bane. Apart from a smooth crater two kilometers in diameter where the rock seemed to have been completely vitrified by a very high heat, everything seemed okay. He noted, however, the alarming levels of radiation saturating the area.

[The vast amount of liquid conjured by this Titan before its death served as a buffer for your attack.] Xi expressed on his behalf, taking the words out of his mouth. [The tsunami that hit us was much lighter than expected.]

If Anthace, the protective tree of Lustris that had sacrificed many of its roots facing this tsunami, had heard his comment, he would have undoubtedly unleashed a tirade of curses and venomous words against the impudent woman.

There were also two aghast Soulmanagers up there in the sky, witness to the whole scene, still trying to cope and make sense of what they had just witnessed...

"Ahem... Meribelle... I think we have our answer... Right?!" Giso swallowed anxiously, trying to maintain a forced smile, his voice so hoarse one might think he hadn't spoken in several years.

The young woman floating concealed high in the clouds had stopped reacting a long time ago, not even registering her companion's words. It was only after he repeated his phrase several times, shaking her violently, that she emerged from her stunned bewilderment with great difficulty.

Pale as a ghost, she recovered her bearings as best she could, then whispered in an unstable voice,

"He's..."

"W-what? I didn't hear what you just said. Speak up." Giso had heard very well regardless the barely audible whisper of the young woman, but honestly? He would have preferred to be deaf.

A trace of resigned anger flashed in the haggard eyes of Meribelle, the blood flow bringing a little color back to her ashen face, then she snapped icily,

"Cut it out! You heard very well. Jake is stronger than the Soulmaner King!"

Giso's stiff smile collapsed at once upon receiving this admission from his usually stoic and composed comrade. If this fake Soulmaner King was stronger than the Soulmaner King himself, then knowing who among this guy or the other outsider deserved their support was no longer relevant...

Their plan had backfired!

"Are you sure about that?" Giso's voice almost broke as he made her reconfirm, his black hair drenched and whipped by the frozen wind of high altitudes making him look miserable.

The Soulmaner specialized in infiltration and tracking had long since lost his cloak during the explosion. Their stealth depending on this artifact, the pair had become visible a long time ago, but neither of them cared.

Meribelle remained silent for a short time, lost in her thoughts, then nodded with extreme solemnity,

"More sure than I've ever been. You saw like me what just happened. If my eyes do not deceive me, he just killed River's Bane. Even for the Celestial it was a thorn in the foot that he had been carrying in vain for several thousand years. This man-eating squid was part of the scenery like the sun and the moon and no one dared to question his impunity regardless all its crimes."

"I feel like the Soulmaner King and the Celestial are still stronger..." Giso contested hesitantly, more for not giving in to despair than real conviction.

Meribelle gave him a sidelong look without saying a word.

"What?! " The assassin was vexed, realizing the stupidity of his remark.

Not taking offense at his lack of respect, the young woman projected her gaze where a Jake still measuring over 25 meters high was carefully inspecting his 'work' with a black cat and orange turkey waiting patiently for him to finish. Her gaze then drifted to the vitrified crater, then the rest of the region devastated by the passage of the tsunami and its blast, and declared with glum resignation,

"Even if you were right, it will no longer be the case in a few days or weeks. These foreigners progress too fast. And that one is an anomaly even among them. Unless we can assert with 100% guarantee that we can eliminate him here and now, we must face the facts. His rise... is unstoppable."

"So what do we do now?" Giso asked gloomily, suppressing his deep despair. "We continue to observe him?"

"... We go back. All we have to do now is faithfully report to the Soulmaner King everything we have just witnessed. H..e will decide the rest."

Chapter 1108: A Raid That Went Wrong

When the two Soulmaners had left, Jake serenely turned his head in their direction.

"Finally, some peace." Jake mumbled to himself, slightly soothed now that he no longer felt eyes probing at his back.

He had also finished gathering all the dispersed Water Lumyst in the devastated area, even absorbing all the radiation that rendered the region completely uninhabitable. He certainly didn't want to be labeled a world destroyer.

Jake then descended to the ground, where his two annoying companions had fully recovered from their injuries. As he approached, Crunch and Lord Phenix, enjoying a well-deserved mud bath, promptly stood to attention, flinging mud in all directions as they shook off their fur and feathers. Jake, standing right in front of them, became the primary target of these 'projectiles'.

"...Master?" Crunch stammered tentatively, seeing a vein throbbing ominously on the forehead of the 25-meter giant towering over them.

Jake glared at them angrily, then, with a fed-up expression, he exhaled wearily, "Whatever... It's not worth getting mad at them."

"We can hear yo-mphhhff!" Lord Phenix squawked indignantly before Crunch forcibly clamped his beak shut with his paws, almost strangling him. From a distance, it looked more like an attempted murder.

Jake, having no time for these shenanigans, ordered in an irrevocable tone, "I deduce from your earlier tumors that you bathed in the Lumyst River? How many baptisms?"

"Ten!" The two pranksters bragged loudly in unison.

"Well, don't do that again without my permission unless you want to die."

"At your command, boss!"

"Follow my orders from now on." Jake immediately ordered without giving them a chance to relax. "If I find a way to extract this water, I should be able to analyze it and find a solution for these baptisms. At least, the next few."

Initially, the two beasts weren't keen on following orders, preferring to roam free, but they quickly plastered the most insincere, obsequious smiles on their faces when they heard his offer to help with their next baptisms. Having personally endured their last near-death experience full of excruciating pain, they took the matter very seriously.

Their only regret was that they hadn't even managed to wreak havoc on the enemy's camp. Before even reaching Lustris, they were devoured by a damn squid during their baptism. To make matters worse, Lustris was already in flames when they arrived. Other Players had attacked the city before them.

It was truly a crappy night...

I guess we're done for today. The two creatures pondered internally, accepting fate, but their boss's next words aroused them up with excitement,

"What?! For real, master? You're not kidding?" Crunch exclaimed, enthusiastically rubbing against his leg, or rather his ankle. All the while purring like a scooter on its last legs.

"I'm quite serious." Jake nodded. "The artifact I need can only be found there. If we don't find it on-site, we can always look elsewhere. And anyway, we need to know what's happening there."

"Hahaha, count on us, master!" Crunch laughed, jumping gracelessly onto Jake's shoulder without asking for permission.

"The immortal Lord Phenix will show that bird Featherfall what I'm made of, boss!" The orange turkey retorted, perching on the black cat's head without asking for permission either.

Jake glanced sideways at his cat and asked, "Your pet?"

"... Not even close..." Crunch almost cried. With just two words, his master reminded him of the difference in status between them. His tough-guy persona took a hit.

"Hold on tight to me; it's going to be fast." Jake suddenly announced, sprinting across the muddy ground at an ever-increasing speed.

They broke the sound barrier on the second step, but no shock wave was generated. To avoid telegraphing their arrival to Anthace, he had to limit air movement with his telekinesis. The plant Titan had already proven to be very reactive to external threats endangering Lustris.

Regardless, the capital was only about 70 kilometers from their position. A stone's throw away for Evolvers of their level.

One and a half minutes later, they arrived. The only reason they had been so slow was that Jake had to slow down to avoid detection. If he didn't care, he could have arrived in less than five seconds, but the resulting blast would probably have killed all the innocent civilians in the capital and alerted all their enemies.

A moment later, a man, a cat, and a turkey walked inconspicuously down one of the crowded streets of Lustris, casually observing the citizens and local Light Warriors actively participating in extinguishing the flames. Most fires had been controlled, with only a few buildings still smoking.

The architecture of this city, while exquisite in its details and ambition, was quite strange. On one hand, imposing white stone buildings carved masterfully reminded one of the famous fortress cities of some western fantasy literature masterpieces, but on the other, Anthace's tree presence was felt everywhere.

Whether it was the paved streets, buildings, walls, noble palaces, or the high tower dominating the city from its central height, the roots of the Titan tree intertwined with these human structures in an almost symbiotic manner.

Here, there was no indication of planks, logs, or beams. It was as if the giant wooden disc on which the city's foundations were built was part of a single gigantic base. All the wood constructions and growths integrating with the stone seemed to have grown that way by some sort of miracle, without anyone ever having to cut or trim anything.

At that moment, all these wooden structures were gradually recovering from the fire, the black smoke Jake had noticed from afar coming from Anthace's body. The good news, though, was that the other stone buildings with which it seemed to form a delicate symbiosis were comparatively intact.

He was ready to bet that the Titan tree had preemptively protected Lustris with its own roots as soon as danger manifested, as it had done with the previous tsunami.

"Their defenses... aren't too bad." Jake reluctantly acknowledged, continuing to nod left and right like a curious tourist not wanting to miss anything.

Crunch and Lord Phenix were even less subtle, not hesitating to steal a snack here and there from each street stall still open at this hour. If they weren't admirably discreet during their shameless thefts, Jake would have surely discarded them.

Along the way, they frequently encountered formidable patrols of Light Warriors searching Lustris and its surroundings for any remaining enemies who might have stayed hidden after the escape of their comrade. As expected, though not particularly

welcomed, the Lumyst cultivation of these guards was quite high, with the weakest among them being at least a Vitalist.

Light Paladins, Corebearers, and Radiant Lords were also not an uncommon sight, especially once they entered the noble district of the inner city. Corebearers and higher ranks were typically Lifemancers or incredibly talented and seasoned soldiers among their peers. Lustris wasn't the capital city for nothing.

Interestingly, Jake hadn't given up his giant appearance to blend into the environment. Instead, he had compressed his body as much as he could, reducing his size to about six or seven meters.

The rich vital energy saturating the air near the Heaven Cascade ensured that everyone here, including civilians who had never cultivated in their lives, was a goliath without equal. All the Corebearers and Radiant Lords they had come across were taller than him, including most of the Light Paladins and some Vitalists. With his current body size, he fit right in.

As they walked toward the heart of the city, Jake didn't just twiddle his thumbs. He questioned several passersby about what had happened, pretending he had been asleep during the incident. The least that could be said was that their responses were far from pleasing.

Foreigners had indeed infiltrated Lustris to steal something, the assault and the fire on the city being just a diversion. According to the description of several witnesses, and especially the scandalous crimes they had just committed en masse for a mere diversion, Jake almost hated himself for being on the same side as them.

"Those fuckers... Even in an Ordeal where we're seen as the underdogs, they can't give up their base instincts." Jake's jaw clenched as he cursed those bastards, praying from the bottom of his heart to find them before the enemy.

The irony was that apparently those responsible for the 'diversion' had mostly managed to escape, but those charged with stealing the real motive for their visit had miserably failed. Most had been killed during the assault, but the rest had been captured after surrendering.

They were currently awaiting their execution in front of the Conclave Tower.

Chapter 1109: Radiant Conclave Summit

On the top floor of the magnificent tower in question, the spacious crescent-shaped hall, where pivotal decisions for half the continent were made, was more crowded than

usual. The five coveted golden thrones, facing the breathtaking stained glass windows overlooking the even more imposing Heaven Cascade, were now fully occupied.

Master Eldrion, who had occupied the central seat last time, had humbly yielded his throne to a tall, muscular man with sun-tanned skin, slate-grey eyes, and a neatly groomed beard, seated on a majestic golden throne adorned with spikes. His expression was severe and solemn, reflecting his readiness to judge his subjects and make crucial decisions for his people.

Between his gigantic golden throne, fit for a giant, the faint but almost tangible Life Lumyst Aura constantly exuding from his skin to the point of searing their retinas, and the fact that he filled the throne to the brim, the man could only be identified as Valandar, aka the Celestial.

The other three seats were currently filled by two stunning young women with diametrically opposed auras, and a gaunt man who embodied the word cruelty: Lady Faye, Lady Lyria, and Lord Calyx. The white radiances radiating from their immaculate bodies were barely more restrained than that of their enigmatic leader, making the atmosphere in the room suffocating to the point of being unbreathable.

This scene, with the five legendary members of the Radiant Conclave all gathered together, was so rare in the history of the Lustra Plains that each occurrence had preceded events and changes with drastic consequences.

However, one glance at the schadenfreude expressions of the two young women, Master Eldrion's annoyance, Lord Calyx's ugly grimace, and the Celestial's deepening scowl was enough to know that not everyone was here willingly. Without the unifying presence of the intimidating Valandar, these famous invincible individuals would have already come to blows. At least verbally.

Several among them had good reasons not to be thrilled about being here at this late hour. Not only had they been disturbed by an attack on Lustris and urgently summoned by the Celestial in the middle of the night, but they also knew that this time, with everyone present, they couldn't avoid their punishment.

Contrary to what one might think, the Celestial and his four Saints didn't get along as well as their apparent absence of conflict might suggest. At best, they endured each other, not hesitating to stab each other in the back at the slightest opportunity. The inalienable invincibility of their supreme leader was the glue preventing their fragile alliance from collapsing...

As for the reason for their impromptu meeting here, and the Celestial's scowling, unfriendly expression, it was obviously the recent assault on Lustris, but not only... The three Rank 17 Players standing grimly before them were a significant source of the bad mood for both Valandar and the usually patient Master Eldrion.

Shadrex 'The Bipolar', Weiss 'The Mindweaver', and Caelum 'The Titan of Vrax', were indeed the culprits of this unauthorized entry.

At the moment, these three foreigners had burst into the room forcefully, disregarding all protocols. Not security protocols—who could threaten the Conclave on their own turf?—but bureaucratic ones.

Reaching this hall without being mandated was supposed to be a real challenge. It was designed that way so that Master Eldrion, who typically made decisions alone in the absence of other members, would be bothered as little as possible.

Too bad for them, if it were only the old, conciliatory Eldrion, the trio of foreigners might have managed to convey their warning without trouble. Instead, it was a full conclave, Celestial included, who welcomed them, forcing them to tone down their approach.

Right now, the overwhelming Lumyst Auras of the Celestial and the four Saints pinned them to the ground, even life force and a weak light attribute becoming lethal when emitted in sufficient quantities. Just looking the Celestial straight in the eyes without flinching, Weiss and Shadrex had to exert a superhuman effort.

Their cells, despite being powerful Oracle Knights, struggled to withstand such a radiant force without bursting. It was akin to a baptism of Life Lumyst Water, but eternal and without the expected benefits of the torture session. Essentially, the equivalent of an astronomical discharge of radiation just good enough to give them cancer.

The only one who felt rather well in this room, even very well, was Caelum, the only one of the three Rank 17 Players specialized in body tempering. The deadly radiance for his colleagues was like a revitalizing sunbath for him. His cells greedily drank in the vital and light energy from these auras without showing any sign of satiety.

"Suppose I believe you," the Celestial occupying the central throne finally decided to speak. "How can you prove that the 'Player' you're so anxiously warning us about isn't one of those we just repelled? Don't compare the defenses of Dusken to our beautiful capital. In terms of Titans and Revenants, their side has a slight advantage, but Lustris also has us five for its defense. You may not know it, but we killed quite a few of these powerful foreigners just five minutes ago. Those who surrendered are waiting docilely for their execution at the foot of this tower. Maybe your 'Player' is among them..."

Even he didn't believe what he was saying. Valandar had personally experienced what this Player was capable of and he refused to consider that it could be someone else. If more than one enemy foreigner could cause him so much harm, then the outcome of this war would remain unchanged, but the cost of victory would become much steeper...

Valandar himself was unaware of his own dichotomy. On one hand, he still considered himself invincible to the point that the outcome of the war would remain unchanged, but

on the other, he feared more than he dared to admit this mysterious Player capable of offering fierce resistance.

"Val, don't tell me you believe them?" Lady Faye teased the scowling goliath with a sensual laugh. "We already know after interrogating these prisoners who is responsible for the attack and what they came to steal. The perpetrator was a certain Nathan, an alien humanoid more insect than human. He's among those who fled with the fake replica and indeed serves a Rank 17 Player, a certain Cho Min Ho currently posing as the Soulmancer King."

If the prisoners chained at the foot of the tower could hear her, they would break into cold sweats. The vast majority of them were unaware that Cho Min Ho was taking the place of the Soulmancer King, but the Radiant Conclave was already in the know. The big question was rather what they didn't know about their enemies?

The Celestial's angry frown deepened, grasping the disguised sarcasm in the young woman's innocent question. With her flawless coppery skin, deep violet eyes, and wavy auburn hair, she was dazzling.

Her plump lips almost constantly exhibited a teasing smile less honest than it appeared, her very, too light, outfits being the real clue to understanding the twisted prism of her personality. In two words: perverse narcissist. Meaning, a manipulative seductress.

More than just a simple vixen, her kick was to render strong and ambitious men fall madly in love with her through meticulously orchestrated love-bombing, only to do the exact opposite and drive them insane until they were but a shadow of their former glory. The Celestial, as the supreme figure of the Lustra Plains and perhaps even all of Twyluxia, was the perfect target she never tired of. The fact that he was impervious to all her advances and taunts only made him more fascinating.

Of course, Valandar was not fooled by her true personality, nor were the other members who had personally suffered from it. Alas for them, her unique talents were too useful. For that, they were willing to render some concessions.

"Cho Min Ho... Nathan..." The Celestial repeated thoughtfully, eyeing the three Rank 17 Players. "Do these names ring any bells?"

Caelum frowned, but Weiss exchanged a knowing look with Shadrex, who, after a brief hesitation, shook his head in denial.

"They're not the ones," Weiss declared in a tone that brooked no doubt.

With her melodious voice, silvery-blue skin, nine medusa-like tails, curved horns, and claws, her otherworldly beauty was enough of a contrast in the room to easily capture all the male attention.

Lady Faye narrowed her eyes in disgust at the sight of the foreign woman, but the other conclave members merely gave her intrigued glances. Master Eldrion, already familiar with her talents, cleared his throat a bit too loudly and clarified for Valandar,

"It's this woman to whom we owe the intelligence that led to the ambush of the Soulmancer King at Havocspire."

Chapter 1110: Three Intruders

Lord Calyx violently gripped the arms of his throne upon hearing this, grinding his teeth so fiercely that the shrill sound alone would have killed everyone in the room if they were ordinary humans. Conversely, Lady Faye gloated with delight, while Lady Lyria's eyes sparkled with interest.

Learning that she was responsible for the information that made their initial offensive successful, Valandar had a more measured reaction. It allowed him to see her in a new light, but it was hard to appreciate her remembering the disaster that followed. Unfortunately, no one could have predicted that a foreigner would throw a wrench into the well-oiled machine of their perfect plan.

Lord Calyx's livid grimace of anger was understandable. For their plan to work so well, he had to activate all his sleeper spies scattered across Havocspire Citadel, but also give up his own double identity. Decades of meticulously adjusted preparations had turned to dust in a blink.

And in the end, for little gain.

Millions of elite troops with potential potential had died at the cost of the lives of a few minor generals and several times their numbers of conscripts. The death of Great General Winchu, of course, didn't count, since it was he who had killed him to take his place long before the start of this offensive...

"It's certainly commendable, but do I need to remind you how this disaster ended?" Valandar growled at Master Eldrion and Lord Calyx.

Especially the latter received a rare look of pity, which quickly turned to disappointment. The master spy of the Radiant Conclave felt rage flushing his face again, palpable killing intent oozing involuntarily from his body, targeting the young woman who provided the intel.

Before a regrettable incident could occur, Master Eldrion cleared his throat again, more emphatically this time, and tactfully reminded them,

"Let's forget the final fiasco for a second and focus on the positive. Thanks to this charming young lady... Weiss, right? Didn't we manage to mortally wound the Soulmaner King? Sure, we didn't know he used such advanced avatars to deceive everyone, but the ambush was a success nonetheless. The information was correct. If we try to see the bright side, didn't we learn something crucial about the Soulmaner King that we didn't know before?

Valandar and Lord Calyx, who had struck the blow in person, changed their expressions upon being reminded of this detail. The Soulmaner King they had killed had indeed shaken them more than they wanted to admit.

Because what they thought was an Underworld Barbarian like any other wasn't one. In fact, it wasn't even a spirit, but an artifact capable of shapeshifting into human form. And not just any artifact...

A Calice of Nethersshade.

And not just any. The real deal.

This discovery had numerous implications for them and their approach to the tricky case of the Soulmaner King. How the Soulmaner King had managed to convince the spirit of such an ancient artifact to impersonate him was already a mystery in itself, but there were worse possibilities.

Like that the Soulmaner King was the spirit of the Chalice of Nethersshade itself. After all... Knowing what their Radiant Conclave planned for this artifact, the total war that the Dusken Throne had declared on them out of the blue two years earlier suddenly made a whole lot of sense.

It was out of self-preservation! And while for the other members of the Radiant Conclave it was just a suspicious element questioning their understanding of the Soulmaner King, for the Celestial who knew more, it was just the sign he needed to know he was right.

Valandar was indeed after the Chalice of Nethersshade. Or rather its spirit.

This was also the reason for his irritation. Because their ambush against the Soulmaner King had succeeded! The strongest Chalice of Nethersshade of the Duskwight Lands, reputed to be the original and supposed to be preserved as a holy relic in the heavily guarded Netherwell Cathedral of Dusken, had been thoroughly destroyed following their attack.

Its spirit had also been destroyed, except for a will fragment that managed to escape. Valandar was far from an expert in soul and spirituality, but compared to the majority of natives in the Lustra Plains, he had long compensated for his weakness by immersing

himself unhindered in the Lumyst River's half crossing the Duskwight Lands. His Spirit Body, as well as his Soul, were actually pretty powerful, rivaling the best Soulmanancers.

Back to the Soulmanancer King, destroying the spirit of the main Chalice of Nethersshade was undoubtedly excellent news for the Lustra Plains, although the loss of such an artifact was regrettable in more ways than one. The artifact itself had survived, but without its spirit, the equivalent of an Abyssal Revenant, it had become an regular chalice. Harder than any metal produced on this continent, sure, but stripped of all its magical properties that made it so invaluable.

'At least, we killed their strongest Abyssal Revenant.' Valandar repeated gravely to himself to put their bitter defeat into perspective. Although his expression immediately soured again, remembering that for an Abyssal Revenant, its soul was quite weak.

So weak, that even before he personally intervened, the Chalice had almost been annihilated by Lord Calyx's relentless assaults. He couldn't help but think they had missed something.

Whether the true Soulmanancer King was originally the spirit of the legendary artifact or just its last holder was ultimately unimportant. The priority of finding him to end the war remained the same. The only difference from before was that their goal was no longer just to kill him but to capture him alive.

And that bastard of a Soulmanancer King understood it very well, considering how he was hiding, even from the eyes of his own allies... But his efforts to hide were futile. Even without Lord Calyx's spies, they still had Lady Faye.

Finding him wouldn't take much longer. They had already found the foreigner serving as his substitute.

"We indeed learned valuable things about our enemy." Valandar finally responded with a tone heavy with implication in response to Eldrion's enigmatic words. He then coldly assessed Weiss with his slate-grey eyes, then gestured, "If neither this Cho Min Ho nor this Nathan are the Player you're so anxiously warning us against... Then who is it?"

"Jake... Wilderth. And... He... is... already... here!" Shadrex articulated, his facial muscles contorting in a grimace of pain to spit out those two words.

Weiss and Caelum froze, giving him an astonished look. In contrast, the Celestial and the other four Saints glared at the impudent with luminous green eyes in discontent,

"Who authorized this foreigner to speak?!" Lord Calyx snapped, drawing his sword, more than eager to vent his accumulated anger and resentment.

The three Oracle Knights tensed up, gearing up for battle, but before Lord Calyx could fully draw his weapon, Valandar's deep, authoritative voice brought him to an abrupt halt,

"Put that away. I didn't give you the green light to attack them either."

The master spy, a handsome man of average stature for a Lumyst cultivator of his level, stiffened at the command, then with dangerously narrowing pupils, he reluctantly sheathed his sword and sat back down.

"Keep talking." Valandar then ordered Weiss to continue, his tone brooking no argument.

Realizing the command concerned her and her alone, Weiss signaled Shadrex to stay silent with a warning look, then with the same composure and coolness, she explained,

"Shadrex is a kind of... seer. Under the right circumstances, and if the subject of his divination isn't leagues beyond his own, he can divine certain things about them. In this case, his name and location... The name, we already knew after interrogating a few members of his faction. Even Cho-Min-Ho's subordinates knew his name. I'm sure you've heard it too... His appearance was communicated to them by their superiors before the start of the Ordeal. They have orders to report to their leader if any of them spot him anywhere on Twyluxia."

"If you already knew his name, why did this Shadrex engage in an unrequested divination right in front of us?" Lady Fyria interrupted out of curiosity, her mouth pursing in realization shortly after. "Oh..."

"That's right." Weiss smiled wryly. "It's his location that matters. Shadrex's divinations never miss. Jake is h-"

"THREE INTRUDERS HAVE JUST ENTERED LUSTRIS!"

A deep voice, more a vibration than a sound, suddenly echoed in the room, emanating from the gigantic luminescent trunk enveloping the Conclave Tower. Valandar and the other four Saints maintained their composure upon receiving Anthace's warning, but their expressions darkened.

"Their power level, Anthace?" The Celestial inquired gravely without moving from his throne.

Instead of responding immediately, the Titan tree fell silent for a moment as if pondering what response to give, then said dramatically in a lower voice,

"The one who killed River's Bane is among them."

Chapter 1111: Don't Disappoint Me

The three Rank 17 Players' eyes lit up as they heard the Titan Tree confirm what they had been trying in vain to convince the others of from the start. Though, they had no clue who this River's Bane was.

On the other hand, the Celestial and the other four Radiant Conclave members knew exactly who he was! The old kraken had given them a run for their money over their long, unrivaled years of rule. His brutal death had left them puzzled on more than one level.

The reactions of the other Saints weren't as expressive, but their shock was no less intense.

"This is... unexpected, to say the least," Lady Lyria, who rarely spoke up in their meetings, couldn't help but comment. "I'll need to update our archives."

This demure beauty was a slender woman of an introverted nature but with insatiable curiosity. She was easily recognizable by her long golden hair braided into a complex plait, a stark contrast to her plain, prudish white dress that fell flat to her ankles. Her emerald green eyes were always attentive, shining almost as brightly as those of Shadrex's supernatural luminescence.

In contrast to the thorny flower that was the seductive but vicious Lady Faye, Lady Lyria had a much purer heart, though she knew how to plot and conspire when the situation dubbed for it. Usually staying out of internal or external conflicts involving the Radiant Conclave of which she was a part, her primary role was that of the Keeper of the Archives.

What interested her was reading, learning, and compiling the history and knowledge accumulated by the Lustra Plains over millennia. Because she loved learning and had the talent and cultivation to match, she had almost effortlessly gained the informal status of the most powerful Radiant Mage of the Lustra Plains. The term Radiant Mage, as opposed to Lifemancer and Light Warrior, was actually coined just for her, and the entire order was currently under her jurisdiction.

Given her more honorable and candid nature compared to Lady Faye, it was only natural that the Celestial found her more trustworthy. Even so, she was not without her thorns. If her curiosity required her to break rules or harm the interests of other Saints, she would stop at nothing, even if it meant descending into the darkest depths of crime and lawlessness, to quench her thirst for knowledge.

As a result... The Celestial and other Conclave members seldom dubbed on her services, having assigned her the glorious position of Keeper of the Archives primarily to keep her out of the way as much as possible.

Events with dramatic geopolitical consequences like the demise of one of the oldest and most infamous indestructible Titans were, unfortunately, exactly the kind of shocking news that could draw her out of seclusion... The Celestial and the other Saints already anticipated the worst.

And, unsurprisingly,

"... Jake Wilderth, right? If he really killed River's Bane, I must meet him!" Lady Lyria exclaimed exuberantly, leaping from her seat. Addressing Anthace directly, she shouted, "Where is he?"

"..."

Anthace wisely remained silent, gauging Valandar's opinion before responding. Meanwhile, the Celestial managed to maintain a stoic facade, but internally was suppressing a deep, weary sigh.

Due to the assault on Lustris, he hadn't been able to clearly sense what was happening outside. His mental sense was impressive compared to other natives of the Lustra Plains, but it remained his weak point. While he was busy monitoring the capital's circumstance and capturing their enemies, how could they have time to see what had provoked the old kraken's fury?

Not to mention that this wasn't the first time such an incident had occurred. River's Bane was a scourge whose infamy was well-known. He would rage several times a year, usually by accidentally encountering another lone Titan, or when one of them went to the Lumyst River to collect water.

How could they have imagined that this time the outcome would be different... It called many things into question. Especially, how to deal with this foreigner.

"Lady Lyria, you can meet him but on one condition," Valandar immediately adjusted his strategy, deciding to go along with the whims of the Archive Keeper known for her stubbornness rather than opposing her.

"Anything you want," the young woman's face stretched into an innocently beaming smile.

"Make sure he doesn't battle here in Lustris. Meet all his requirements if necessary to get him to leave," the Celestial ordered, eliciting stunned gasps from both the three Players and the other Saints.

BAM!

"Have you lost your mind, Val?!" Lord Calyx vociferated, his knuckles white as he clenched his fists tightly on his golden armrests.

Master Eldrion, usually of a measured temperament, was also in complete disagreement with this decision.

"Val, I understand you want to protect Lustris, but you understand why this foreigner is here," he tried to reason in as respectful a tone as he could muster. "He won't leave without getting what he wants. What do you plan to do then? Hand over our Goblet of Ethershine on a silver platter?"

The gaze of the three other Saints zeroed in on the stern face of the Celestial after this legitimate critique, watching attentively for his reaction. Unperturbed, the giant, perpetually cloaked in his mantle of light, slowly flowed from his throne while glowering at them, then declared sternly,

"My Goblet of Ethershine, you mean? Certainly not. A replica like that other fool who scampered off earlier without checking what he had stolen? Perhaps. Replicas are expensive, but only for mere mortals. If I dip into my own vault, I can easily bring out a few dozen."

Gulp. The rest of the audience's gaze widened, their mouths agape.

Only the Celestial could drop a bombshell like that so casually. Goblets of Ethershine were the Lustra Plains' equivalent of the Chalice of Nethersshade. Technically, they were both cups meant for collecting Lumyst Water. According to those who had observed both artifacts, their design was substantially similar, but to completely distinguish themselves from those primitive barbarians, the term Chalice had been replaced with Goblet.

There were a host of rumors about these two relics. For instance, that they were once one and the same, and that reuniting the two original relics would cause something incredible to happen.

Yet, several previous Celestials had already put that theory to the test. According to the Radiant Conclave's archives, such a war had occurred several times in the distant past for that sole purpose, but the results were disappointingly fruitless. It was now common knowledge that these relics had absolutely nothing to do with each other, except for their anonymous nicknames.

But even this official truth was, in fact, counterfeit. As the current custodian of the original relic, the Celestial knew for certain that these rumors weren't baseless... Even the Keeper of the Archives and the other members of the Radiant Conclave were in the dark about this, except for Master Eldrion who was also privy to the truth.

"If that's the case... I suppose it won't be a problem, I guess," the old Saint replied in a mixed tone, unable to express his true thoughts without betraying their secret. "But my gut tells me he won't be so easily fooled. We'll have to give him a damn good replica. Maybe the best one..."

"If that's the price to pay to prevent Lustris from being torn apart tonight, so be it," Valandar cut in impassively, his decision final. "Lyria, if you've been following, you can go meet him..."

The Keeper of the Archives didn't comment on his lack of formality, nodding excitedly.

"I'll accompany her," Lady Faye added out of the blue, raising a few eyebrows. Her sensually suggestive wink was nothing short of suspicious. "I want to meet this Jake Wilderth. Who knows, maybe I'll catch his eye with my killer looks..."

To emphasize her point, she thrust out her chest, making her generous bosom bounce and almost spill over. Valandar apathetically ignored her two imposing 'assets' and seriously considered her request. This vixen's character was as cunning and twisted as they come, but in this particular case, her skills in seduction and manipulation were exactly what they needed to sweet-talk their dangerous guest.

As long as she didn't push it too far. They definitely didn't want this Jake Wilderth seeking revenge after she broke his heart...

"Understood," the Celestial finally snorted. "And Faye..."

"Yes?"

"Don't disappoint me."

Chapter 1112: Are You Tired Of Living?

Lady Faye responded with a disdainful roll of her eyes, then blew him a kiss before strutting out of the room without looking back, her hips swaying tantalizingly. Lady Lyria, who hadn't moved since rising from her throne, flashed a rueful smile at Valandar and the other Saints, then excused herself from the room.

Once the two chosen envoys had departed, a heavy silence fell over the council room, quickly shattered by Kaelum's sarcastic spit.

"Don't tell me you're going to let him just walk away like that?" The Titan of Vrax, silent until now, couldn't contain his contempt. "If that's all the Celestial and the famed Saints of the Radiant Conclave amount to, maybe we should just exterminate you here and now since you apparently lack the courage to face a single enemy!"

In his indignation, he seemed to forget that a single Abyssal Revenant defending Dusken City had given him a memorable thrashing. The two other Rank 17 Players, equally disappointed but more aware of their circumstances, visibly paled seeing him lose it in the safest place in Lustris.

Fortunately for them, it turned out Valandar and Master Eldrion were more magnanimous, or at least less touchy than their eminent status suggested. Only Lord Calyx seethed in shaking rage, his suppressed bitterness resurfacing with tenfold intensity.

"HOW DARE YOU?!" He bellowed, drawing his sword fully this time.

In a blink, he was in front of Kaelum, his blade at the giant's neck.

"Bow your head, foreigner, and accept your death!" Calyx growled menacingly, angling his sword's edge for a textbook decapitation.

But how could Kaelum, a brawny brute, accept such an undignified death? Faced with such provocation, his only possible reaction was to explode in fury. His recently unified Lumyst Aura, after their dips in the Lumyst River across the Duskwight Lands, was nothing compared to a Saint's, but the true power of his titanic form remained to be tested.

His muscles bulged, turning hard and rough like stone, and his size doubled instantly, quickly becoming cramped in the ludicrously spacious room. Seeing the foreigner revolt so fiercely, Lord Calyx's murderous thirst didn't wane an iota, but instead, a scornful sneer escaped his lips.

A burst of lifeforce suddenly erupted from his body, feeding his muscles and bones, while the gentle whitish radiance emanating from him intensified like a star going supernova. His plain blade became white-hot like a lightsaber, and with a haughty grunt, he brought it down unhesitatingly on the giant's neck, aiming for the kill this time.

Kaelum had no intention of dying without a fight and activated the power of his bloodline at full force, growing exponentially. His two companions had long since taken refuge behind the two unoccupied golden thrones, refusing to be associated with this diplomatic suicide.

In the span of a heartbeat, the Titan of Vrax had become a true titan again, over thirty meters tall, though currently curled up like a sardine in a can despite the impressively high ceiling of the five-throne room.

Lord Calyx, as a Saint, was no small fry either, standing a good six or seven meters tall, which was still small for a Life Lumyst Cultivator of his level. Nevertheless, he now seemed too small to reach the giant's neck without jumping. And that was precisely his intention.

"No matter how big you become, I can still slay you," the Radiant Conclave's master spy declared arrogantly, menacingly brandishing his light blade at his future victim.

Undeterred, Kaelum faced the threat to his life with a carnivorous smile most inhuman, embracing the prospect of a fantastic fight to the death with exultation. Even in this confined space, his berserk orange eyes burned with an unquenchable inner fire.

His rough skin, now with a metallic sheen, thickened, forming a full-body armor of plates and spikes, making his defense even more impregnable. Slicing his neck, even with a light sword, was now a much more daunting task.

The tension in the air rapidly escalated between the two adversaries, in a stifling silence where no one dared to intervene, but when the clash seemed inevitable, an irritated throat clearing from the Celestial, coupled with a chilling killing intent, abruptly brought the two buffoons back to reality.

Kaelum and Calyx froze, their gaze focusing on the colossal man who had appeared between them at a speed surpassing their sharpened senses. His right hand calmly crushed the master spy's dazzling light blade, while his left effortlessly restrained the Titan of Vrax's enormous fist without even looking at them.

With an impassive, yet no less intimidating expression, Valandar distinctively cleared his throat and articulated with deliberate slowness boding nothing good,

"Are you... tired of living?"

Lord Calyx, having regained his senses, was already sweating profusely and frantically shook his head in denial. However, Kaelum, a natural brawler, was deaf to the danger and, faced with this unexpected resistance, struck without hesitation with his other fist.

BOOOOOM!

Jake's expression darkened as he emerged from the building where the artifact he sought was supposed to be. The white stone cathedral in front of him was indeed a magnificent monument, but inside he found nothing but corpses and ruins. Even the basin storing the pure Life Lumyst Water of the capital had been emptied.

"These sons of... If I find the Player who swiped the relic I came here for, I swear to..."

"What?" Crunch asked with innocent curiosity, poorly hiding his scheming air.

Lord Phenix, his partner in crime, cackled excitedly with no subtlety whatsoever, "Let's raid them and steal back the relic!"

To the orange turkey, it didn't matter if the looters were from their own camp. As long as there was a good fight in prospect, he was down for it.

Unfortunately for the two clowns, Jake quickly regained his usual calm and muttered under his breath, "Never mind, I guess I'll call it a night."

After all, he could return here at any time, but he didn't want to clash with the Celestial and all the Saints and Titans defending Lustris just on the off chance of finding a suitable relic to collect Life Lumyst Water. Especially since, for all he knew, the thieves might have managed to steal the original relic.

'Well, without getting my hands too dirty, I'm willing to bet it's the work of Cho Min Ho or one of his underlings,' he consoled himself internally, preparing to turn back. 'With a bit of luck, it might even be another Myrtharian Nerd. If they don't die by then, I should be able to track them down easily.'

"Nooooo!" Crunch and Lord Phenix moaned in unison as they saw him so resolutely give up, until...

BOOOOOOM!

The capital was suddenly rocked by violent tremors, and from their position, they saw, stunned, the top floor of the towering Conclave Tower blasted into the clouds like a pressurized gas bottle cap being unscrewed. The trunk of Anthace, which wrapped protectively around the imposing skyscraper, was also shaken from within, its branches responding with an enraged hum.

The next moment, the figure of a giant the size of a building fell lifelessly from the cloud layer it had just penetrated, the latter being the thing that had carried the tower's roof in its wake. Before completing its terminal velocity fall, which would have caused even more catastrophic damage, the shrill cry of an eagle suddenly sounded, and appearing out of nowhere, Featherfall emerged from the clouds and grasped the unconscious giant with its talons before it hit the ground.

Soaring with the supreme arrogance of an apex predator above Lustris, which its immense wings fully covered, the bird of prey locked its disturbed slit pupils onto those of the man standing atop the devastated tower, and with a disgruntled chirp, carried off the 'prisoner.'

The mysterious individual radiating an overwhelming life force then directed his cold slate-gray eyes toward the cathedral where Jake and his two companions stood. For an infinitesimal moment, their gazes met, but quickly the man's gaze moved on, sweeping the rest of the alarmed city.

"Return to your duties. The situation is under control," Valandar declared in a serene and amplified voice spreading throughout Lustris and beyond.

The next second, the trunk of Anthace came to life, and bark began to proliferate along the Conclave Tower, replacing the destroyed floor. The figure of the man in a simple white tunic emitting a formidable aura was masked by the newly erected wooden walls, and visual contact between Jake and him was broken.

Chapter 1113: The Fat Squid? I Suppose That Was Me

"Who was that guy?" Lord Phenix stuttered, a tremor in his voice. "His aura was even more absurd than the octopus that gobbled us up..."

"If it's a native, it can only be the Celestial," Crunch shrugged, maintaining his usual unflappable demeanor.

Jake nodded silently, affirming this assumption. Absentmindedly petting his cat without seeking its consent, he sardonically praised, "Against all odds, you sometimes say something smart."

"Fuck you, master, I've always been smart!" Crunch retorted, flipping him off in complete disregard of any sense of danger. If he had one, he would never have ended up in the stomach of a millennia-old kraken.

But the cat's blatant insult went over Jake's head, his mind already pondering something else.

'He knows I'm here,' he realized, frowning.

He first considered he had underestimated the Celestial's perceptive talents, but after a brief mental sweep of his surroundings, he quickly came up with a much more plausible hypothesis.

'It's Anthace's doing.'

The roots and branches of the Tree of Life were everywhere in Lustris. In the underground, in the wood of buildings, the parchment used for everyday writing, even the toilet paper the city's citizens used to wipe their ass.

In that case... Jake immediately grasped a dangerous implication. From the moment they arrived, they were already in the enemy's crosshairs. The only reason they hadn't been attacked was that somehow the Radiant Conclave and Anthace had decided to tolerate their presence.

In hindsight, the explanation was obvious: Civilians. The Radiant Conclave didn't want to risk a cataclysmic battle in the capital that would endanger their innocent citizens.

The paradox was that Jake was applying roughly the same logic. Aside from preferring to regain his full powers before tangling with the undefeated top dogs of this world, he was also keen on limiting collateral damage. Even if he couldn't care less, killing too many innocents unrelated to their objective was sure to affect his final rating.

"If that's how they want to play it, I'm fine with playing nice as long as I don't leave empty-handed," Jake immediately adjusted his attitude.

He could have left the city right away, but once outside, what ensured that they wouldn't then be ambushed by the enemy? Nothing at all. So, pressing as many favors as he could from the Radiant Conclave was naturally the next move.

Someone must have heard his prayers because as he wondered if heading directly to the Conclave Tower was a good idea, two stunning young women with dazzling Lumyst Auras materialized in front of him in a flash of white light. The two light trails had sprung from a window of the Conclave Tower...

While Lord Phenix jumped in fright, almost falling off Crunch's head where he was perched, Jake and his cat remained as expressive as a sink, not blinking an eye. Unabashed, they took the opportunity to openly ogle the two temptresses.

Although both were of supernatural beauty, even by the standards of the Mirror Universe Evolvers, their dispositions were diametrically opposed.

The one on the left had tanned skin, long auburn hair hanging freely down her back, voluptuous forms, and far too little fabric covering them. Her makeup was also sophisticated in the best sense, giving the illusion of natural beauty, but unmatched by any unmade-up beauty. Her lip-biting and flirtatious gaze as soon as she saw him immediately raised his guard.

The woman on the right embodied a completely different register, more demure, and dressed more conservatively. She wore hardly any makeup, but didn't neglect her appearance, as evidenced by the complex braids of her golden hair. The simple fact that she hadn't immediately assaulted him with suggestive pouts made him feel instantly more disposed towards her, although he didn't lower his guard.

As for Crunch, he took advantage of his identity as a chubby, cute cat to blatantly check them out from all angles... His squashed face with a stupid look and his hanging tongue aroused no suspicion.

"Jake Wilderth, I presume?" Lady Lyria broke the ice immediately with a radiant smile, immediately following up with the million-dollar question, "Is it true you killed River's Bane?"

It took Jake half a second to figure out who she was referring to.

"The fat squid? I suppose that was me," he replied as if asked about the weather.

The beautiful eyes of the Keeper of the Archives sparkled with excitement upon receiving confirmation that it was indeed him, and she hastened to bombard him with questions about the fight. Jake was so caught off guard by her exuberant familiarity with him that he momentarily forgot to be on guard. Not realizing quite how to handle her attitude, he responded to her inquiries as evasively as possible.

Fortunately for him, Crunch and Lord Phenix loved being in the spotlight, and this kind of VIP interview was just their jam. After Jake uttered a few half-hearted words, the two balls of feathers and fur eagerly took over.

Their verbosity was rich, flowery, and never at a loss for words. Jake learned that night that it was possible to write a 100,000-page book just to recount his duel against the kraken, which had actually lasted only a handful of seconds.

As expected, the high-spirited Lady Lyria quickly reached her limits and soon she was just listening with a vacant expression, nodding mechanically. A chatty cat and turkey had for the first time succeeded in overcoming her insatiable curiosity.

The two clowns were her kryptonite.

Meanwhile, Lady Faye, who had been silent until now, didn't like what she was seeing either. This Jake was indeed a handsome hunk, but in addition to being too tall and muscular for her delicate stature, he seemed not at all receptive to her not-so-subtle hints.

He immediately reminded her of the cold shower the Celestial gave her every time she tried to hit on him. Such guys were the hardest to make fall in love. Not because they were incapable of loving or too dense to notice signs of attraction from the opposite sex, but because they were obsessed with larger goals monopolizing all their attention. Or they were so principled that it was almost impossible to get them out of their default persona.

At no time did she consider the possibility that he might simply love someone else or have already met someone better. A narcissist of her standing did not easily doubt her superiority complex.

It's gonna be a tough one. The vixen acknowledged internally.

Aware that she had encountered another tough nut to crack, she gave up her bewitching gimmicks without regret, adopting the same cheerful but respectable attitude as her prudish comrade.

"May I assume you know why we are visiting you so late at night, sir Wilderth?" Lady Faye asked politely, interrupting the endless soliloquy of the cat and turkey, earning a grateful look from Lady Lyria.

It was the first time in their many years of interaction that the prudish Keeper of the Archives showed her sincere gratitude. It goes to show there's a first time for everything.

Jake was slightly disconcerted by the contrast between her provocative behavior a moment ago and her professional and elegant attitude now, but it didn't go any further. They were two strangers to him, and even within his own faction, he knew more lunatic and histrionic than that.

Starting with his own cat.

"Since my presence is apparently no secret to anyone and you're aware of the fat squid, I deduce you were sent to make me leave your capital peacefully," Jake responded while sizing them up with a realizing look. "Given the diplomats they've sent, can I assume the Radiant Conclave is ready to make some concessions?"

Neither Lady Faye nor Lady Lyria took offense at the implication that they might have been chosen for their attractive looks. It was indeed the truth.

Especially since it suited them well.

Moreover, beauty privilege was not a myth. A physique deemed pleasant to look at, especially by the opposite gender, was certainly a significant advantage in negotiation. At no point did it question their competence.

But they were far from understanding what was going on in his head. While there was some truth in their reasoning, Jake was primarily referring to their cultivation.

Their Lumyst Auras and lifeforce were overflowing, identifying them as two very important powerhouses of the Lustra Plains. Likely, two prominent Radiant Conclave members.

It took at least that to show they were seizing him seriously. If they had sent an ordinary underling, even one as beautiful as one in a billion, Jake would have immediately doubted their intentions.

"You are indeed correct," Lady Lyria confirmed, inviting him with a gesture to follow her to an annex of the Conclave Tower. "We are indeed ready to meet your demands to leave our territory, provided of course they are reasonable."

"Of course," Jake agreed, pursuing her without fearing for a second that he was being led into a trap. Even if it was, he was confident he could escape it.

Chapter 1114: I Swear I Didn't Do It On Purpose

Arriving in front of the designated annex a moment later, however, Jake reconsidered, deciding to revise his definition of recklessness.

The building seemed welcoming at first glance, even luxurious, as one might expect from a place used to receive diplomatic envoys from various kingdoms and vassal nations of the Radiant Conclave. The problem was, it was entirely made of wood.

And not just any wood: Anthace's wood. If Jake hadn't scanned the city with his mental sense upon arriving, he would have suspected the Titan tree had sprouted this spacious residence in a hurry just to trap him.

The problem remained the same, though. As arrogant and confident as he was in his own power, his power had not yet gone to his head to the point of intentionally entering a domain controlled by the enemy. Maybe he was overestimating the enemy and just being paranoid, but he didn't want to give them any chance.

As the two female envoys dashing stepped into the building, the door opening like a plant valve to accommodate their large size, Jake came to a halt.

"Is there a problem?" Lady Lyria inquired tactfully, noticing he wasn't entering.

"I'm not going into a Titan's body. The negotiations will have to take place elsewhere."

The two women exchanged a confused look before coming to a realization. The Archive Keeper, supposed to be in charge of negotiations, was somewhat disconcerted, not used to this kind of protocol.

"Ah! Of course! Where were our heads?" Lady Faye took over from her socially awkward colleague and immediately corrected course by leading them to another construction in the neighboring street.

A minute later, a traditional three-story white stone building appeared in their view. It was undoubtedly the villa of an significant dignitary, but it was currently unoccupied for some reason.

What Jake didn't know was that it was the property of one of the many immensely wealthy Lifemancers whose sudden death he had caused a few days earlier. In such a short time, all the estates left without an owner had not yet been sold.

"A bit austere and monochrome for decor, but it'll do," Jake conceded with appreciation before noticing the front door.

It was of normal shape and dimension, but was made of tempered steel as if it led to a vault. It might seem absurd, but Jake figured it wasn't so strange for a noble to use metal for a sense of privacy if the only alternative was the wood of a Titan tree capable of establishing a close psychic connection with the countless artifacts and furnishings made from its own growths.

However, it quickly became apparent that the issue was not the composition of the door, but its size. Its dimensions, suited for a human of two to three meters at most, were not even sufficient to accommodate the two young women. As physically perfect as they were, with such Life Lumyst cultivation, they both measured a little over five meters.

Wondering how they intended to enter the building, Jake was nevertheless transfixed in place when he suddenly saw their appearances shrink noiselessly to comfortably pass through the door without risking a bump. They now measured just the standard size of a top model on Earth.

Such an ability wasn't so rare, with Jake himself also able to compress his body to a certain extent. The reason he was so shaken was something else: The method used was different.

In fact, it was far superior to his!

With his Cosmic Sight constantly activated, he hadn't missed what had happened, and he had clearly seen how their cells had deflated as their biomass converted into a strange variation of Life Lumyst. This Lumyst then went to lodge in a certain area of their heart, or in other words, their Lumyst Core.

Interestingly, Jake also noticed that the two women didn't have just one Lumyst Core, but several. Each seemed to have a different attribute, occupying different organs so that their incompatible natures didn't conflict.

The heart contained two of these Lumyst Cores, the densest. The first, by far the brightest, contained the same hybrid Life Lumyst contained in the atmosphere and Lumyst River while the second contained only a massive amount of lifeforce. It was this one they had used to store their biomass after converting it into Life Lumyst.

On the surface, this ability to miniaturize by converting excess organic matter into another energy source resembled the True Miniaturization Spell sold in the Oracle Store, but while the latter reduced size in a limited manner, the version used by the two women apparently had no limit. Moreover, its effect was instantaneous and could be reversed just as quickly.

The other Substantial argument for their method was that Jake didn't feel that their physical capabilities had diminished much. The biomass converted into Life Lumyst now circulated in their bodies in another form, able to be mobilized differently, such as for

passively boosting their athletic prowess or regeneration, but also cultivating Life Lumyst faster, their Lumyst Core being denser in this state.

If there was a drawback to mention, it was that more biomass and stronger cells could tolerate and benefit from more Lumyst. In other words, except in cases of extreme emergency, it was better to keep one's regular size.

In summary, this ability was exactly what he needed to avoid having to access his Inner Space every time he needed to renew his biomass or store the excess.

If I had any doubts about the relevance of cultivating Lumyst, now I have none, Jake concluded inwardly, promising himself to devote all his attention to it as soon as he returned to his camp.

[You could also chow down on that Player who just got captured by Featherfall.] Xi suggested in a mischievous tone, reminding him that the giant appeared indeed capable of modulating his appearance in Substantial proportions or he would never have been able to fit in a Conclave Tower room.

This private joke between them was a frequent occurrence, and he knew her well enough to know she was only half-joking. If somehow he ended up going through with it, it surely wouldn't be her judging his dietary tendencies.

"Good idea." Jake approved with a small evil laugh, sending shivers down not only the two women but also Crunch and Lord Phenix perched on his shoulder.

At the same time, without knowing why, Kaelum, who was non-stop roaring in pain in Featherfall's 'nest' from constantly being pecked by its hungry chicks mistaking him for a worm, suddenly shivered with a sense of foreboding. At the moment, he was so surprised that he even let one of the chicks tear off an arm, eliciting another groan of pain.

In his surprise, he temporarily forgot the menacing presence of daddy eagle, and with his other arm swelling like a truck, he accidentally smashed the chick that had just gobbled his arm. A splash of blood instantly painted the entire nest.

"I... I swear I didn't do it on purpose... No, no- Aaaaaaaarrrrrghhhh!"

The hitherto reluctant Featherfall, content with keeping an eye on him at the Celestial's request, was now personally invested in the chick-pecking... Kaelum wasn't about to come down from the tree anytime soon.

The tree in question was, of course, Anthace.

After compressing his body with some difficulty to the point of feeling discomfort bordering on pain, Jake managed to get through the door. Crunch and Lord Phenix, already in their miniature form, had no issue entering the construction either.

Faye and Lyria, however, cast a strange glance at the trio as they passed through the door, especially at the two pets following him everywhere. Titanic Beasts were generally adept at altering their dimensions, but only a minority could do so. The two women could easily discern that these last two didn't yet have a Lumyst Core but something else serving a similar function.

Having access to Crunch's status, Jake knew that his cat had for a time relied on the Miniaturization Spell like him, but that had changed during the last evolution of his bloodline.

Creatures originating from Earth had received, like young children and the disabled, disadvantaged, or just lucky, an innate ability guaranteeing them the bare minimum they needed to hope to survive in the Mirror Universe despite their limited intellect. Without it, even Rank 3 Digestors would have exterminated the fiercest species to total extinction within a few weeks, with a few exceptions.

This talent specific to Earth's beasts was rather straightforward, allowing them to grow in size and strength indefinitely by feeding on their prey. Past a certain evolution threshold, many creatures would acquire enough intelligence to either obtain a proper bloodline or further evolve this initial innate ability.

One of the possible, cheap evolutions was to condense a Beast Core, a sort of internal organ the size of a small gem capable of containing all sorts of abilities. Core structures in various forms appeared to be a constant evolutionary element in numerous strength systems.

In the Beast Core's case, this marvel of evolution was quite handy, serving as a core for various energies, bloodline abilities and even a Soul Core. Although extremely hard, and offering all sorts of benefits for the beasts that condensed it, its destruction or extraction usually meant their death or irreversible weakening.

In some bloodlines of mythical creatures like those of Lord Phenix, whose Beast Core could survive and even find a second wind after its own cremation, they could even regenerate as long as the soul contained inside was relatively intact.

As for his cat Crunch, as incredible as it might seem, his bloodline had also reached the level of a mythical creature.

Chapter 1115: As Long As I'm Satisfied

[Grade 10+ Halcyon Legion Cat: In ancient tales, the Halcyon Legion Cat is a creature of legend, shrouded in a veil of enigma and majesty. It is said that its fur, dark as a moonless night, sparkles with stellar flecks when it moves in the darkness, reflecting the calm and serenity of the starry night. Its deep and penetrating eyes are like glimmering gems, bearing witness to ancient wisdom and sharp intelligence.

The Halcyon Legion Cat is renowned for its unique ability to fragment its spirit and body into various iterations of itself, each entity sharing the same consciousness and agility as the original. Its elastic and adaptable nature grants it extraordinary agility and grace, allowing it to slip through the narrowest spaces or to rise into the air as if carried by the wind.

According to legend, the Halcyon Legion Cat is a guardian of ancient mysteries and a protector of forgotten lands. Its presence is often associated with mysterious events and inexplicable phenomena. The Halcyon Legion Cat embodies the spirit of liberty and independence, roaming freely across dimensions and eras, always elusive, always enigmatic.]

When Jake first read the description of Crunch's bloodline, the Halcyon Legion Cat, he was left speechless. The dumb black cat with the smushed face was much from fitting this glorious description.

Moreover, unlike his own Cosmic D Starfeyrves Bloodline, this one had very few listed abilities. One of its skills was simply named Freedom, supposed to allow all sorts of things, but without specifying what exactly. Too bad for Crunch, he was either too stupid or not inspired and diligent enough to push this ability to its full potential.

Despite that, combined with his Grade 8 Soul Class: Elastic Enigma, which overlapped with some traits of his own bloodline, Crunch was still a very tricky feline to deal with, a calamity to behold.

The real disappointment regarding his cat was that, given its incredible bloodline, it was a bit too weak. His Oracle Major Rank might seem excellent from where he started, but after all, it was his own pet, not just any alley cat.

The countless Evolvers and Digestors who had suffered against his cat would probably argue that it was strong enough as it is, but they would have to meet the master of this calamitous companion to understand where this demonic spawn came from. As they say, like owner, like cat...

Back to the topic, the two envoys led them to a luxuriously furnished and decorated lounge, where drinks and snacks were served. Jake noted that there was no wood-

based material here either, reinforcing his initial impression of austerity. The owner of the place must really value his privacy to fear being spied on by Anthace to this extent.

Whether he had something to be guilty or secretive about, the owner had returned to the state of fertilizer anyway, although Jake was unaware of this fact. Whether he really had mysteries to hide from the Radiant Conclave was now irrelevant to everyone.

Lady Lyria let Lady Faye handle the serving, as she herself was barely capable of making tea for herself, let alone taking care of other guests. It was usually her own disciples and servants who took care of her food, the Keeper of the Archives spending most of her time buried in dusty old grimoires and scrolls.

Faye performed a flawless service, demonstrating etiquette and sobriety that strongly contrasted with her earlier seductive demeanor. Jake still noticed that when serving him a hot cup of an unknown beverage, she paused innocently, bending more than necessary to let him admire her plunging neckline.

Jake didn't look away embarrassed like a virgin, but inwardly clicked his tongue at this. This vixen knew what she was doing.

"Laplaplaplap!"

Soon after, the awkward silence was broken by Crunch's enthusiastic lapping in his bowl, his big pink and rough tongue making an impressive noise by splashing liquid everywhere without the slightest ounce of shame. Lord Phenix behaved more dignified, but not much more.

"Cough, you have two interesting companions..." Lady Lyria praised with a somewhat stiff smile, trying to ignore the beverage splatters rapidly accumulating on her dress.

Lady Faye, who had dealt with all sorts of people and thought she had an ironclad composure, found out today that she wasn't as good-tempered as she thought. The impassive reaction of the human and the unbearable behavior of his two pets were already starting to get on her nerves. Maniacally smoothing the folds of her short dress to contain her growing irritation was quickly reaching its limits.

The quicker they finished this negotiation, the quicker she could go to sleep... and take a bath incidentally. Growing impatient, she shot a pointed side glance at her useless colleague, who then remembering why they were there in the first place, coughed awkwardly to speak up.

"Sir Jake, I'm not going to waste your time by beating around the bush," Lady Lyria, not being a diplomat by trade, decided to speak frankly. "Tell us what you want to leave Lustris without violence tonight, but especially the guarantee that you will not attack our capital or another of our cities outside the legitimate framework of the war that opposes us."

The Keeper of the Archives exhaled in relief after stating their demands, glad that the ball was no longer in her court. Lady Faye's eyebrows twitched, almost facepalming at her lack of formalism, but it was too late, the cat was out of the bag. They just had to pray that the monster sitting across didn't take offense.

It wasn't an absurd reasoning; most of the powerful Lifemancers and Light Warriors of their world were typically that kind of individual. The powerful of the Lustra Plains loved to remind others of it, demanding proper treatment befitting their noble rank.

Hating to beat around the bush and waste time, Jake was actually pleased not to have to pretend to socialize. Which was why, the eyes of the narcissistic vixen widened in astonishment when Jake demanded just as informally, but in a more assertive tone,

"I want the original Goblet of Ethershine."

"Why don't you just ask for the position of Celestial while you're at it!" Lady Faye ridiculed him with a venomous laugh of sarcasm.

Far from getting angry, Jake sized up the beauty seriously for the first time and let out a rogue smile, "You know, I thought about it, but becoming the Soulmancer King is a sufficient goal for now. If my side wins this war, it won't be too late to put that offer back on the table."

"Are you serious?" Lady Faye's eyes narrowed sinisterly, sensing from his calm that he was totally serious. This wasn't bragging, he really believed what he was saying!

She began to doubt that charming this man was a good idea. This foreigner was way too dangerous.

No, it's precisely because he's so dangerous that he absolutely must be eating out of my hand. The femme fatale immediately regained her determination to seduce him. After all, she wasn't afraid to flirt with the real Celestial either.

Nonetheless, there was a difference between them. There were things she was willing to try to achieve her ends with this foreigner that she would never have dared to try with Valandar. The latter was just too familiar with her abilities.

Resolved, Faye began to use her Life Lumyst to manipulate and amplify her pheromones. It was supposed to drive men completely crazy about her, even in heat to the point of being unable to think properly before having discharged the gun...

The target of these pheromones was none other than Jake and in no time, the air around him was saturated with these odorless molecules. The effect on the psyche of healthy men easily rivaled that of a race specialized in the Charm attribute.

Meanwhile, Lady Lyria, suspecting nothing, had 'politely' objected to his first demand.

"I'm afraid that's not possible." She apologized with a sorry smile. "Firstly, I don't have the authority, it belongs to the Celestial, but it's also the most precious artifact of the Lustra Plains. To give it up would mean that we have lost the war and are desperate enough to make this kind of compromise. We haven't fallen that low yet."

Jake nodded coolly, expecting this refusal from the start. He would have been the first to be floored if his demand had been accepted without question.

"In that case, I want your best replica." He asked instead. Before either woman could try to fool him, he warned them, "I have no way of knowing if the relic you offer me is really the second best replica or not, but I have high standards. If you don't want me snooping around, it's better for you that this goblet satisfies me enough not to make me doubt your sincerity."

"That goes without saying." Lady Lyria accepted the deal without hesitation. "But even I don't know what our second best replica really is. I only know our public relics. Most are in the hands of the Celestial only, and he doesn't share his mysteries with us. Does the deal still stand?"

"As long as I'm satisfied." Jake grinned innocently.

Chapter 1116: I Would Be Immensely Pleased

As the Keeper of the Archives for the Radiant Conclave, she knew every replica of every chapel, church, and cathedral in the Lustra Plains like the back of her hand. The one in Lustris had just been stolen by Nathan, but he and his faction would soon realize it wasn't the original.

If she tried to palm off their second-best replica based on the one just stolen, Jake would undoubtedly feel duped upon realizing it. The last thing the Radiant Conclave wanted was to hand over a precious replica only to be attacked again by this foreigner under the pretext of being swindled.

On the other hand, Lady Lyria hadn't forgotten the Celestial's instruction to satisfy all his requests to make him leave. She mulled pensively over which replica to offer but, in the end, decided to contact Valandar through Anthace. One of her wooden earrings had been extracted from the Titan Tree and could be used to transmit what was being said here.

Before she even had to report their conversation, her earring vibrated on its own, the ancient and raspy voice of the plant monster reverberating in the room to convey the Celestial's offer.

"A Goblet... of Ethershine... replica... enchanted more... than 20 times... Take it... or leave it."

Jake scowled discontentedly, evaluating the proposal. An enchantment of +20 was indeed incredible for mere mortals, but for him, who wanted to collect water from the cascade itself, it was probably inadequate.

He had already experienced for himself while ascending the Lumyst River that one had to traverse numerous kilometers of tributaries before the purity of the water began to increase significantly. He had to cross half of the Lustra Plains to face only his fifth baptism. But the closer he got to the Heaven Cascade, the more the water exponentially grew in concentration and purity, leading to his Life Enchantment at +14, which had nearly cost him his life.

Before River's Bane's death, Jake had managed to scan the kraken with his Oracle Scan. Not the one from his bracelet, but the one generated by his own mental sense through Artefact Incarnation.

The result was astounding.

The cephalopod, besides its Lumyst cultivation, had enchanted its physique to +31. He couldn't perform a soulsearch on it, but even without that, he could imagine that initially, this titanic kraken was nothing more than an ordinary octopus or squid before surviving all those baptisms.

After this series of miracles defying the ridiculously low probabilities of all lotteries, the creature's destiny had completely changed, making it extremely talented in cultivating Lumyst, perfecting its genome, and endowing it with great potential for growth and evolution.

According to information Jake had gleaned here and there by questioning the inhabitants of Lustris, this kraken had been a thorn in the side of the Radiant Conclave for an eternity, the main reason being its tendency to consider the waters at the foot of the Heaven Cascade as its turf.

In another register, the only Abyssal Revenant whose spiritual enchantment level he knew for certain was Ledger, thanks to his Snitch Ring. And that one was even more terrifying, having successfully endured 35 Spirit Lumyst baptisms.

If Jake based his estimates on these data alone to gauge the purity of the water at the foot of the cascade, then he would need to be able to survive at least thirty baptisms to hope to bathe there. He believed in his resilience and his incredible talent for forcing the hand of fate, but pushing his limits from 14 to over 30 baptisms was a bit too insane, even for him.

Thus, a Goblet of Ethershine enchanted at +20 was far from sufficient for his ambitions.

"A Goblet of Ethershine enchanted at +20 is worthless to me," Jake finally responded with a sneering look on his face. "If that's all your sincerity amounts to, then I'm afraid negotiations end here."

"Laplaplap..." Crunch lifted his head from his bowl with the crooked, sly smile of a corrupt mafioso upon hearing his master's adamant answer, immediately chiming in cheekily, "Boss, I think what they meant to say was that this Goblet is what Lord Phenix should receive as compensation for not attacking them again. You and I are still due to receive ours."

Jake and the two women froze, but the former, familiar with his cat and just as corrupt inside, didn't call out his lie and wisely played along.

"Ah, if it's compensation for my comrade, I indeed misjudged you," Jake apologized with a modest bow, where only his head moved a little bit. "Lord Phenix, thank the Lady Lyria and the Celestial."

The bird, becoming the center of attention, stiffened, shooting a hateful glare at the black cat for stealing his opportunity. If he was receiving this replica, Crunch was sure to negotiate an even better one for himself.

'That damn cat... !!!'

Of course, Lord Phenix was savvy enough to know when the game was up, so after promising to get revenge later, he swallowed his frustration and burst into theatrical tears, exclaiming,

"Thank you, Lady Lyriaaaa! Your generosity touches my heart! I accept your invaluable gift with the utmost gratitude! Now... Ahem... Where is it?"

As he began to look around in every corner and check under the table without any decorum, even Jake was tempted to roast the turkey for his next breakfast. He was just that detestable.

If Jake, somewhat accustomed to his vices, was itching to skewer him, it goes without saying that the two women wanted nothing more at that moment than to wring the neck of this obnoxious creature. They had to mobilize treasures of self-control to not reveal their ugly side to their problematic guests.

As for Valandar, when he heard the turkey's words reported by Anthace, a vein as big as a small snake swelled on his forehead, a silent fury starting to boil within him. Despite this, he had suspected that it would not be enough to convince them to leave and had given himself some leeway with his first offer.

He indeed had better replicas in his vault. After a brief contemplation, he relayed his second offer to Anthace, who promptly reported it back to Jake and the odious pets accompanying him.

"A Goblet of Ethershine enchanted at +22 for the... cat... And another duplicate enchanted at +25 for Jake Wilderth. This is my... final offer."

Upon hearing this second offer, even Lady Faye and Lady Lyria were left gobsmacked, swallowing hard. Publicly, the best replica of the Lustra Plains, the solitary from their capital just pilfered by Nathan, manifested only enchanted to +19.

Alas for them, Jake had no idea. Having no reference point to base his judgment on, he resorted to the very pertinent 'third time's the charm.'

"A generous offer... Still falling short of my expectations," he contested calmly. "If your goblet cannot contain the purest Lumyst Water, it's of no use to me."

He was, of course, lying. A duplicate would be more than enough for what he intended to do with it: analyze it thoroughly, then devour it... Nevertheless, if the relic suited his intended use from the start, it would save him a lot of trouble.

Unfortunately, this time his bluff didn't work. Before Anthace even informed him of the Celestial's final decision, Lady Faye acted first, estimating that her pheromones must have started to work.

It must be said that she had reasons to think so. Compared to her previous targets, she had multiplied the concentration of pheromones by at least a thousand, and she knew precisely what to expect from their physiological effects on males inhaling them.

The cat and bird had stopped lapping their drink for a while, their bloodshot, lustful eyes and the way they were rubbing their crotches indicating they were having the hardest time controlling themselves. Knowing they were just indirect victims of her magic and that they were of a different species in the first place, solitary could imagine the mental hell Jake manifested going through.

When the two troublemakers pretexted a reason to wait for their boss outside, Lady Faye understood the moment had come to reel in her net. Without a word, she waited for the despicable cat and bird to leave the room, then puffed up her well-endowed chest and licked her lips in anticipation.

When her target's gaze fleetingly met hers, she suggestively ran her hand through her long auburn curls, her right ear and a portion of her graceful neck tantalizingly revealed, inviting exploration.

"Jake Wilderth, why not make a more reasonable request." She whispered sexily, blushing just enough to appear shy and vulnerable. Almost all men fell for this trap. "I would be immensely pleased..."

"..."

Lady Lyria finally realized what her vixen colleague manifested trying to do and held her breath, hanging on Jake's lips, dreading the words that were inevitably going to come out. If he realized that the man-eater was trying to enslave him, the negotiation was likely to go south!

However, to her great chagrin, exactly what she feared happened. Jake lewdly ogled the scantily clad beauty for a brief moment, making her momentarily shout victory in her head, then reality caught up with her as his face twisted in contempt and he coldly threw out,

"Pheromones... Did you really think such a primitive method would work on me?"

Chapter 1117: Love At First Sight

"P-pardon?" Lady Faye froze, her brain taking a moment to catch up. She couldn't believe what she had just heard.

"Aaah, it's actually for the best. It makes things a lot easier for me." Jake suddenly caught her off guard, thanking her with sincere gratitude, albeit tinged with contempt. "Thanks to your pettiness, it will be easier for me to achieve my goals."

Lady Lyria had already sensed trouble brewing as soon as he showed his immunity to her colleague's unstoppable charm, but Faye was too deep in denial to accept the turn of events.

"I don't understand what you're insinuating." She tried to play innocent, but her look of ridiculous disbelief in 'keep talking, I'm amused' mode finally eroded her cool facade. "Aren't negotiations almost over? I just politely asked you to make a more reasonable request. I don't see what this has to do with pheromones? What is that, some kind of perfume?"

Jake stared at her intently, with a peculiar smirk lingering on his face as she awkwardly tried to absolve herself. When she thought he would leave it at that after catching her red-handed, his smile curled up into a sneer, and he declared to the Keeper of the Archives,

"Lyria, right? Inform the Celestial that I accept his offer. Faye here has decided to compensate for the rest."

Both women froze, not remembering giving him permission to be so casual with them. As far as they remembered, they hadn't revealed their true identities either, but that he guessed wasn't so surprising coming from someone as abnormal as him.

Then, Faye stiffened a second time, as her mind grasped the full extent of what Jake had just announced.

"I'm going... to compensate you?" She repeated, half bewildered, half incredulous. The slight enchanting smile lighting up her pretty face quickly twisted into an ugly grimace. "And exactly how do you plan to induce me to show such... generosity?"

Faye still harbored a thin hope that he was under the influence of her pheromones and would end up demanding sexual favors from her. At least that would prove he wasn't totally immune to her charms, although in a twisted way.

Unfortunately, his response hammered the final nail in, extinguishing her last flicker of hope.

"Very simple." Jake shrugged enigmatically. "The same way you tried to manipulate me. By charming you."

This time, even Lyria's mouth, who was holding her breath in the chair next to her, dreaming of disappearing, dropped to the floor in disbelief, let alone the subject of his remarks.

"You... You're serious?" Faye articulated slowly, looking at him with mock-pity as if she had just realized he was completely insane. This level of delusion shouldn't be allowed to exist.

Crunch and Lord Phenix, who had sharp hearing, had overheard their exchange and exchanged a furious look. The black cat and his turkey pal had nearly fired their guns with the first thing they found in the nearby street, and to say they felt defiled was an understatement.

"Damn it! I knew something was off with me. Master, show her who's boss!" Crunch meowed sadistically, one of his cold and anti-hedonic personalities saving him just before cheating on 'Duchess,' the one and only sweetheart of his little heart...

Lord Phenix had purified his fogged mind with his flames just before committing the irreparable, but he had already half-dipped his biscuit into a female pigeon in heat when he realized it. The poor thing stared at him expectantly, making him want to vomit.

"I swear, if our boss doesn't strip her of every last artifact, I swear to do the same to her one way or another." The bird croaked hatefully, knocking out the love-struck pigeon that refused to leave him alone.

He meant, of course, an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. Feed her a powerful aphrodisiac and throw her to the crowd. The orange turkey had always been a sociopath with a particularly vengeful temperament.

His redeeming quality was that once vengeance was served, he genuinely forgave, holding no more grudges. But could the victims of his vendettas say the same?

Nothing was less certain... Since his first Ordeal, the phoenix in the making had accumulated a considerable number of sworn enemies, to the point where his proclaimed immortality and rapid growth curve were the only reasons he was still alive.

Back to Faye, at first, she perceived Jake's proud declaration as mere bluster, but soon the thrill of discovering how he planned to accomplish his ends began to pique her interest.

"So? When are you going to charm me?" She teased him, crossing her arms and legs with a condescending look that said 'whenever you're ready.'

Lyria was also intrigued but didn't believe for a second that such a feat was possible. Otherwise, no woman would be safe from this man.

Instead of responding, Jake decided to ignore her sarcasm and spoke to the Keeper of the Archives, who had so far made a good impression on him.

"You don't know much about us foreigners, and that's why you can't conceive of being charmed without realizing it." Jake expounded her, pointing at Faye as if she were a bad student. "In reality, every concept can be quantified and embodied through Aether. Charm, charisma, these are abilities that go far beyond our physical appearance or scent. Taken to their extreme and with enough belief and power, just like luck or karma, they can become real, tangible weapons. Some races have made it their spearhead, the main talent on which they rely to thrive, dominate, hunt, or coexist with their prey, rivals, and peers. Succubi, Incubi, Vampires, the examples are endless.

"What you couldn't know is that the race of which I am now the sole specimen is also one of those species relying on their charm to assert themselves."

"What race?" Lyria asked, curious despite herself.

"A Fey." Jake grinned succinctly.

He wasn't lying. Most fairies did indeed have a supernatural charm, although it was usually not for harm. It was the kind of charm meant to soften and endear those around them, with most fairies detesting conflict and more prone to flight.

Except Jake wasn't just any fairy. His Cosmic D Starfeyrves Bloodline had come into existence in a very particular way: the voluntary sacrifice of Jeanie and the act of devouring Digestor Ruby.

Ruby also possessed the Charm attribute thanks to one of the components of her current bloodline. Whether this trait came from her innate abilities as a Digestor Trojan, her Myrgenian Light Alf bloodline, or the most recent addition, Angel of Aurae, was irrelevant. All abilities and properties of the prey and objects he digested automatically became within his reach.

Digestor Ruby had also devoured other Evolvers with various attributes and abilities, including at least one with the precious Charisma on which Will heavily relied with his Dragon Soulspeaker Soul Class.

In summary, Jake possessed both the Charm and Charisma attributes. And at a very high value, aligned with his other stats. The only reason his Oracle Status didn't display them was that he detested manipulating others in such a way.

He doubted the feelings of others enough not to artificially amplify them with supernatural charm and charisma, of which he had no idea of the limits and long-term side effects on those around him. Consequently, these two attributes were by default... muted.

But today, exceptionally... He was going to make an exception.

"Faye, be ready to resist my charm." He issued provocatively at the vixen. "You can't say I didn't warn you... I'll start in three, two, one... Now!"

Impassive as someone already knowing the outcome, Jake bestowed Faye one last falsely sympathetic look, then emitted an invisible pressure that went far beyond pheromones. This energy resonated with every part of his being, every photon, wave, particle, and movement related to him and what he represented, snowballing in unfathomable proportions in less than a blink of an eye.

Each of his expressions and movements, even a repulsive nose picking, was now imbued with charm capable of dazzling crowds and melting the hearts of the most frigid noble ladies.

Lyria, not being his target, felt no difference unlike Crunch and Lord Phenix, who had become collateral victims of Faye earlier. This already indicated the difference in skill between the two.

Confused, she commented a bit embarrassed, "I don't feel anything particular !!"

She didn't complete her sentence, her eyes almost bulging out of her head at seeing the soulless witch sitting next to her turn beet red to the ears, her heart racing and her gaze shy as an innocent maiden meeting her charming prince.

Love at first sight! The irresistible Faye had shown incapable of resisting his charm!

Chapter 1118: Too Late

"What the hell did you just do?" Lady Lyria stammered in horror, witnessing the bashful state of the legendary vixen, whose icy heart was known far and wide.

The icy heart in question had just melted...

"Exactly what I promised. I simply charmed her," Jake explained calmly, scrutinizing the reactions of his new admirer with genuine curiosity.

It wasn't every day he got to see his Charm attribute at work. It was a chance to take notes.

Usually the first to not give a damn about what happened to that bitch, the Keeper of the Archives paled solemnly, foreseeing the far-reaching consequences of such a capability. Though the foreigner was focused on Faye under the guise of retaliation, it was unmistakably a veiled threat towards her too.

If she provoked him, he would do the identical to her...

"There's a difference between seducing, charming, and enslaving," Lyria finally retorted, having regained enough confidence to converse without her voice trembling.

Unexpectedly, Jake didn't contradict her, even agreeing with her.

"You're absolutely right. But where you're mistaken is that I'm not doing anything. If a naïve girl falls for a stunning man, idolizing him for his looks and overlooking his flaws, is the man guilty of manipulating her into falling for him?"

Lyria frowned, reluctantly pondering the question. After a brief introspection, she cautiously replied,

"He... shouldn't be guilty. It's the girl, in her superficiality, refusing to see beyond, blinded by the tree that hides the forest."

"And it's the same with Faye and me," Jake concluded, winking at Faye, who blushed so much you could almost imagine steam escaping from her ears. A bit more, and she would have fainted from the emotion.

Finally understanding what he meant, but still skeptical, the Keeper of the Archives repeated several times in her head what she wanted to say, then ventured,

"Are you trying to say you're not manipulating her at all, but your innate charm is so extraordinary that no woman can resist it?"

"Bullseye."

His confident, quick response still didn't dispel her doubts.

"Then why am I not affected? If it were a permanent trait, like your physical appearance, shouldn't I be in the identical state as Faye?"

Jake calmly locked his galactic eyes with hers and clarified with a gesture,

"If your arm can lift a mountain, does that mean everything I do with it must exert such force? If that were the case, just brushing my teeth would trigger cataclysmic tornadoes capable of leveling all of Lustris in a heartbeat." Before she could object further, he added, "When self-awareness exceeds a certain threshold, just as one feels the existence of their arm, one can sense other traits about themselves, even if they're conceptual and hard to quantify objectively. I could elaborate more, but even I don't pretend to know everything about such a subject."

"In conclusion, I'm not manipulating her. I just chose to display her my 'true appearance'. And since I'm good enough to choose whom I reveal myself to, you continue to see a watered-down version of me. Am I clear?"

Lady Lyria still had all sorts of doubts and unanswered questions, but she chose not to dig further, fearing he'd snap and decide to subject her to the identical fate. However, she had to verify something.

Turning to Faye, she waved her hand in front of her eyes, then snapped her fingers to catch her attention. When the vixen turned to her and glared with the identical haughty and slutty air as usual, she felt slightly reassured.

"What?" Faye barked sharply.

"Do you feel manipulated? You realize the feelings you have for him are totally irrational, right?" Lyria reminded her with a worried look, carefully probing her expressions.

She still held a faint hope that her colleague would affirm she wasn't that naïve, that a seductress like her wouldn't be easily caught in her own game, but her response gave her a surge of hope, which was utterly crushed immediately after.

"I'm fully aware he did something. But..."

"But?"

"But even knowing that, I'm regrettably unable to disregard what I feel. If... If he asks me anything, I won't refuse. As long as I can keep looking at him..."

Lyria paled, receiving confirmation of her fears, but Jake had no intention to entertain them any longer. The night had been long and full of twists, and it was time for him to bow out.

Now ignoring the shaken Keeper of the Archives, he flashed an innocuous smile at the lewd narcissist gazing at him like a lost puppy and 'kindly' ordered,

"Make me a list of all your artifacts and treasures, from the most precious to the least."

Jake didn't go as far as asking her to reveal all the state secrets she knew in front of Lyria. Not only was Anthace reporting their conversation to the Celestial, but if they didn't preemptively kill her that night, he'd have other opportunities to interrogate her without raising unwelcome suspicions.

"My most precious artifact is..." Faye rushed to reveal all her possessions passionately, as if eager to prove she was worthy of his interest.

Jake and Lyria listened in silence, the former stoic, the latter becoming more pallid as she heard her revered colleague reveal the obscene fortune she had amassed through evil machinations and plots defying imagination. When she learned at one point that her family heirloom, a mage staff enchanted over 20 times stolen during a burglary targeting one of her ancestors, was in the bitch's possession, her face turned green.

"I... I can't believe it..." Lyria growled in a voice abnormally hoarse and ominous. "I constantly thought it was a tribe of raiders from the Duskwight Lands who had stolen it. The traces left at the crime scene supported that theory."

If the expression of the renowned Keeper of the Archives was ashen with rage, then at that moment, the Celestial listening to Anthace's report transmitting their conversation was downright furious.

And not just him...

The other two Radiant Conclave members were beyond outraged. On the verge of rushing to where Jake was to strangle Faye right before his eyes.

"That bitch!" Lord Calyx cursed, violently smashing the stained glass behind his golden throne with his fist. "That bitch swore to me, looking me straight in the eyes, that my Ode to the Titans was destroyed during the last raid!"

Ode to the Titans was his favorite painting, a masterpiece that one of his painter ancestors created after pushing his art to its apex. By using the blood, sap, and pigments of plants and beasts that had acquired a certain number of Life Enchantments, then dipping these ingredients in the western half of the Lumyst River, it was possible to create a 'living' painting.

To paint Ode to the Titans, his ancestor had undertaken a lengthy task before painting the piece itself, collecting the blood of the Titans he intended to paint to use as paint. The value of this painting, both militarily and sentimentally, was immeasurable. Its disappearance had been a severe loss for the Lustra Plains and his clan, but today he discovered that his cherished painting had never gone very far...

"I'm going to kill her..." Calyx declared through clenched teeth before being stopped by a resigned shake of Master Eldrion's head.

"I also long to torture her extensively, but we have a more urgent problem," the old warrior sighed bitterly.

Noticing the gravity on the faces of Eldrion and Valandar, the blood rushing to his head receded as it had come, his face turning pale with horror.

"No!"

"TOO... LATE..." Anthace's somewhat mocking sigh resonated in the room, prompting them to slump back into their thrones, defeated.

Chapter 1119: Guilty

A moment later, Jake left Faye's secret vault with a satisfied and... sated smile. Crunch and Lord Phenix looked just as pleased and smug, the two clowns decked out in all kinds of flashy signs of wealth.

The cat was adorned with a heavy tiara encrusted with gemstones emitting a gentle energy boosting its wearer's Lumyst Aura. Its fluffy paws were also decked out in bracelets with various magical functionalities, its jewelry weight probably nearing its actual weight.

The turkey was no better, having managed to find and don a exquisite red-gold plated armor covering up to its beak. The only part of its body left exposed was the one it should have forever hidden: its wattle. The kind of saggy red skin reminiscent of withered testicles...

This armor could change dimensions to fit its wearer, suggesting it was originally intended for a more chivalrous mount, like a Titan of Featherfall's stature, for example.

Instead, it was Lord Phenix who had gotten his hands on it, for better or worse. Mostly worse...

As for Jake, while he at least had the decency not to flaunt all his new acquisitions in front of the woman he'd just robbed and the numb Archive Keeper accompanying them, he was undeniably the most shameless thief of the three.

Not wanting to risk a backlash in enemy territory, he refrained from using his bracelet's Space Storage or his own Inner Space, but it turned out that this annoying concern was actually extremely easy to solve.

Among the artifacts stored in Lady Faye's treasure room, there were several rings, bracelets, pendants, chests, and even clothing pockets with their own internal dimensions to stash whatever you wanted. The vixen, being a wealthy Saint and one of the five Radiant Conclave members, naturally had the cream of the crop in spatial artifacts.

Jake had selected a ring in silver metal with a simple design and no ornaments, but with a good storage capacity, and used it to store everything else. He first thought a ring wouldn't be enough to loot everything, but a cheap trick permitted him to do it: fill the storage dimensions of the other spatial artifacts before storing them in his own ring.

It was a common cliché from his past readings, but he wasn't sure it would work. It was because altering the space of an already altered space could in theory only weaken it further. And then, it seemed way too convenient.

After checking, Jake indeed confirmed that the storage capacities of the other spatial artifacts stored in the main ring were substantially reduced, but not completely. The enchantments and additional energy specific to these artifacts were still useful.

But even after filling his ring and all the other storage artifacts to full capacity, Jake realized that there were still less valuable things left to steal, like all kinds of more or less precious materials. Seeing himself as an indefatigable perfectionist, and having obtained an education advocating to never leave anything on his plate, he made a point of 'devouring' the rest.

All in front of the astonished and aghast eyes of Lady Lyria. The love at first sight hitting Faye was alas quite serious. Even having thus been stripped of all her painstakingly accumulated fortune, she was only joy and smiles.

Lyria should have been inwardly jubilant to see the bitch get cleaned out like this, but seeing her ancestors' mage staff just to have it thrown into Jake's spatial ring like a worthless trinket had notably dampened her spirits.

Lord Calyx's favorite painting hadn't escaped Jake's greed either. The three remaining Radiant Conclave members in the tower were also in a foul mood and only desired one thing: for the three foreigners to get out of there.

When the Archive Keeper convinced herself that the three bailiffs would leave without mentioning the fate of the prisoners - confirming to her that these foreigners didn't automatically know each other - Jake's professional rigor pushed him to interrogate the vixen one last time.

"Besides your treasures, is there anything else I should know about that might interest me?"

With this request, there was a risk that Faye would admit state secrets meant to remain forever secret, but although smitten with love for Jake, she hadn't lost the sharp wit that earned her reputation. In the presence of Lyria and Anthace reporting everything to the other members, she understood exactly what she could uncover without compromising her own position.

Considering that everything she had stolen from them was now publicly exposed, one or two more indiscretions obviously wouldn't worsen her case... That's why, after a guilty smile of apology towards the Archive Keeper; she blurted out without hesitation,

"The foreigners who infiltrated Lustris earlier managed to steal one of our Goblets of Ethershine, but many of them serving as a diversion didn't manage to escape in time. Most are dead but we've captured several hundred of them. They're chained in the Conclave Tower dungeons right now."

Hearing her colleague spill the beans with zeal, Lady Lyria couldn't help but sigh wearily. It was supposed to be her the dark spot in the negotiations, but it was the unyielding seductress who had ruined everything...

"Oh?" Jake raised an eyebrow in surprise.

It wasn't so much that he was concerned about their fate, but rather that he was surprised not to have felt their presence. However, when he remembered that the Conclave Tower was mostly enclaved in the trunk of Anthace, he put his failure into perspective.

Thus, Jake learned all about the operation with the mixed results organized by his side, or rather the King's Idol Alliance. The insectoid alien, Nathan, hadn't made such a strong impression on him during their last meeting, as he seemed to fade behind Cho Min Ho. According to his memories and the information he had read about him, the latter was in fact the Korean's Oracle Slave, which explained the absolute trust he placed in him.

The only detail that had bothered him was that, like all the insectoid aliens he had met, starting with the Krishs, their eyes were inhumanly cold, their expressions impossible to read. He had put it down to their anatomical differences, but generally his instinct didn't deceive him. This Nathan was surely more than the loyal and docile image he showed of himself.

The fact that he had managed to escape the Radiant Conclave despite the Celestial's intervention only strengthened this first intuition. King's Idol Alliance might be more impressive than the little credit he had given them so far.

Feeling the need to justify herself without really knowing why, Lyria hastened to explain why they hadn't revealed this information sooner.

"We always aimed to return them to you. It's just that it was supposed to be one of our assets for these negotiations. It must be said that many of these foreigners didn't just steal. The crimes inflicted on our citizens would have normally earned them the death penalty." With these words, her face twitched into a bitter grimace. These negotiations were a total fiasco. "At this point, you can just take them with you when you leave..."

Her exhausted and defeated tone said a lot about what she thought of her interaction with him. This Jake Wilderth had certainly satisfied her curiosity about the foreigners, but this was closer to an overdose.

The worst part was thinking that with everything he had just taken from them, the next time they met him on the battlefield he would be even stronger. It was not a reassuring prospect.

Jake was as tired of these shenanigans as the young woman and decided to wrap up the matter as quickly as possible.

"Take me to these prisoners." He gestured for them to lead the way.

On the way, he asked what the foreigners were guilty of that merited an execution without trial in her opinion, and by the end of his speech, Jake was as dark as the blond Keeper.

Rapes, massacres, unnecessary rampages targeting civilians and innocents having nothing to do with their goals. It seemed that no matter the stakes or the odds, there would always be scum committing the most abject horrors. Yerodes and Lamines, there were everywhere in every Mirror Universe.

It was like a weed impossible to get rid of. Barely weeded out, thousands of others replaced them.

Unforgivable!

Seeing his expression darken to the point of overflowing with pervasive killing intent, Lyria covered herself with a film of cold sweat, initially thinking he desired to kill her for openly expressing her regret at sparing his compatriots.

It wasn't until they arrived at the Conclave Tower, and once the prisoners were freed, that she realized with relief and astonishment that she was not the target of his murderous aura. For as soon as the first prisoner was in the open air, Jake scanned him with a bird of prey's gaze and snorted in revulsion.

The next second, an overwhelming spiritual and gravitational pressure fell on the Player, causing him to implode on the spot.

Chapter 1120: The Onion "Cho Min Ho"

A few minutes later, only a little more than half of the freed prisoners actually left Lustris alive. The rest had been mercilessly obliterated by Jake after being deemed guilty. With his current abilities, it was almost too easy to identify the deviants among the Players.

Anyway, he didn't have to play detective for long. As soon as the other prisoners in the process of being freed heard what was happening outside, those guilty of similar crimes only had three choices to hope for survival: Pretend to be innocent, flee, or stay in their cells.

Interestingly, most erred on the side of overconfidence. The Dunning-Kruger effect in all its glory. If they were that good at faking another identity, they wouldn't have been captured so easily in the first place.

It went without saying that those who tried to bolt right away were killed on the spot before they could even get a few steps away. These were the irredeemable idiots, but at least they had the sense to know that escape was indeed their best chance of survival, however slim.

Besides this minority of fools, another minority chose to stay in their cells, thinking Jake wouldn't have the audacity to visit them inside the Conclave Tower. They were right.

Jake didn't visit them. Instead, he simply informed the two women and Anthace that the fate of these prisoners was no longer his concern. If among them were some innocent Players with paranoid tendencies refusing to believe that a stranger was offering a helping hand, they only had themselves to blame.

Staying holed up in the enemy's dungeons could only be a doomed solution that would severely compromise their final rating, as well as their chances of completing their main mission. In that case, they might as well drop dead for all he cared.

Then there was the third category: the scum who thought they were clever enough to fool his vigilance. In the end, maybe some of them did manage to slip through the net without his knowledge. If that was the case, he could only admit his incompetence and let it go.

But the facts spoke for themselves. With more than half of the freed Players summarily executed, Jake thought to himself that he had been admirably efficient. Maybe a bit too much.

The most ironic part in all this mess was that some prisoners, who had nothing to reproach themselves for, didn't hesitate to rat out their comrades guilty of war crimes, which made his job immensely easier.

Among these people, there was a familiar face. Two, including the quiet woman accompanying her.

"Amy..." Jake muttered with a complicated expression as he met the dazed gaze of one of his very first Earthling companions he had met on B842. "I didn't expect to see you under these circumstances."

"Me neither..." The young female flinched with an even more conflicted air than his, while nervously twirling one of her blue-tinted locks. Compared to before, the color of her tresses was no longer the result of a dye, but of a bloodline.

She had never been tall, standing at just one meter sixty at the time. Since then, like all Evolvers, she had enjoyed a second growth spurt, allowing her to surpass one meter ninety, which was modest compared to most. It was a detail in the Mirror Universe, but her small stature immediately identified her as a foreigner in the eyes of both the Underworld Barbarians and Light Warriors.

Her silhouette hadn't changed much either, remaining a generous figure with a slender waist. Her pretty face was still as cute as in his memories, with a small, slightly trumpet-shaped nose and bewitching lips with the right amount of volume. Despite her very feminine form, she still gave off an aura of being small and fragile, especially when compared to more imposing figures like the natives from Twyluxia.

What had changed, however, was that her hair, originally brown with blue strands, had now fully transformed into a deep, vivid azure, a physical manifestation of her current Azure Berserker bloodline. It fell just below her shoulders, flowing and dynamic, reflecting her tumultuous inner power.

Her ocean cyan eyes complemented her hair. They now flickered with an inner fire when her Berserker abilities were activated, giving a glimpse into her enhanced ferocity. The impression of naive purity from before had somewhat dried up, replaced by an edge of hardened determination.

She had long since traded her torn jeans for practical, combat-ready attire that allows for agility and movement, reflecting her growth from a somewhat timid individual to a warrior.

For Jake, their last meeting didn't seem so long ago, but much more time had passed for Amy. Whatever immature image he had of her, water had flowed under the bridge and she was no longer the same person.

As for the familiar woman accompanying her, it was the Korean Lee Yoon, the icy bodyguard of Cho Min Ho. She was currently eyeing him with mistrust and contempt as if he were one of the depraved scum he had just slaughtered. Her on-edge attitude revealed much more about the predicament of the two women within this group than Amy's ambiguous reaction.

"Are these Players... all from King's Idol Alliance?" Jake probed in a neutral tone, ignoring the barely contained hostility of the unlikable bodyguard.

Amy nodded, keeping her lips tight.

"The criminals included?" Jake continued, still expressionless.

"All the prisoners who participated in the assault, whether they escaped or were captured, were or are part of King's Idol Alliance," Amy admitted with a bitterness hard to feign.

Jake stared at her strangely, then said, "Does Cho Min Ho know?"

Before Amy had time to think of a suitable answer, Lee Yoon snapped,

"Of course he knows! After all, he sets the procedures for accepting new members. As long as they follow his orders and respect his rules, everyone is welcome in King's Idol Alliance."

Jake's lips pinched with disapproval, internally congratulating himself on being a much better judge of character than the young female even back then. He might have been egocentric and asocial before, but at least it had allowed him to retain a certain degree of common sense that the fanatical groupies were assuredly deprived of.

Still, he might have matured since then, but deep down he was still the same petty man. A caustic reaction on his part was therefore in order,

"Wow, I understand better why you were ready to drop us to follow him on a whim despite having braved death together."

It was gratuitous malice, sounding like rancor when in reality it had been far too long for him to still feel anything about it. Even at the time, he hadn't seen Amy's decision as a

betrayal, their interaction being too brief and his character being too much that of a loner to form a real bond of friendship.

If Jake had chosen his words like this, it was because he was actually curious to understand what her response to his jab would be. Amy's reaction turned out to be more disappointing than expected.

Amy had indeed changed, for the better. She didn't get angry, nor did she lose her temper. She didn't apologize either, nor did she express any regret. What was done was done.

Instead, after making sure that none of the freed Players were eavesdropping on their conversation, she offered him a single warning in the form of an analogy.

"Cho Min Ho... is like an onion." She revealed with a gloomy look. "The more layers you peel off, the more his true nature is revealed. Beneath the layer of charismatic and benevolent leader he displays in public, there is the temperament of a cold and impartial leader he reserves for his trusted men. And even beneath that, there is the personality he shows only to those who have known him too long to be fooled. And if you dig even deeper, there is... the monster. And the truth."

Jake wasn't expecting such a convoluted statement from Amy, and couldn't help but follow up, "What truth?"

"Even if I want to, I can't say it." Amy's visage twisted horribly as she spoke these last words, as if she were struggling with a painful backlash. "I'm already saying too much."

Jake fell silent thoughtfully, deciding not to press her further. He could feel she wasn't joking. Nevertheless, seeing Amy clench her jaw to resist her torment as if she were preparing for an even more violent backlash, the silent Lee Yoon, who had stayed apart until now, interposed between them.

"Don't force her to say more. There are worse fates than death in this world." The Korean declared in a final tone, scowling at him with such enmity that he had no doubt she was serious.

Jake looked back and forth between the two women for a long moment, then retreated with a cold smile,

"At least on this, we're on the same wavelength."

Chapter 1121: Rest In Peace

When the tense silence between them seemed destined to linger, his fat black cat decided it was the perfect time to prance pretentiously in front of them, chin held high like an emperor parading before his subjects. As soon as Amy recognized the furry feline, all the tension on her pretty face evaporated instantly, giving way to an excited shriek.

"Eeeeeek! Crunch?! You're still alive!" Amy scooped him off the floor before he could protest, forcibly cuddling him against her soft chest.

Well, that should have been the case, but the breastplate she was wearing made the experience far less pleasant for the cat, who already sported a look of dissent, his fur bristling with discontent.

"Tch! Of course, I'm alive!" The cat hissed, forcefully pushing away the Earthling's cheek with his short paws. "You thought a being as unique as me would croak so easily? Now, it's Sir Crunch to you."

Amy might have been saddened by this rejection if his soft and smooth pink pads hadn't made the cat's flailing even more endearing. Exceptionally, the feline shot a plea for help with his eyes toward his master and turkey friend, but both averted their gaze with a gloating smirk.

Crunch immediately stopped struggling, yielding himself to his fate. However, his wounded glare promised vengeance, giving them a bad feeling, especially Lord Phenix, who was much more aware of his vices than Jake.

Even after leaving Lustris, Amy never once set the cat down on the ground, much to his great despair. He had long since stopped resisting, his body hanging limply like a ragdoll on the young woman's slender forearm.

Once at a safe distance from the capital where the Radiant Conclave resided, the two envoys, Lady Lyria and Faye, eventually bid them farewell. Since freeing the hostages, they hadn't uttered a word, too shaken by his prompt and merciless way of sentencing his compatriots to death by disintegration.

The vixen was already completely charmed by him, but for the Archive Keeper, who still had her wits about her, it was undoubtedly eye-opening. If they hadn't been on opposing sides, she surely would have wanted to learn more about him. That was the case here too, but her quest for information about the foreigner would solely be to defeat him or, at least, neutralize him until the end of their 'Ordeal'.

"What will happen to Faye once we leave?" She asked nonetheless, not out of concern for the seductress, but out of professional principle in case the Lustra Plains faced foreigners with similar abilities.

Jake could have kept this information to himself to advantage his side, but this data could easily be obtained from the foreigners fighting for the Radiant Conclave. A bit of honesty in this case would cost him nothing and leave a good impression.

"Assuming I don't unleash my natural charm every time she crosses paths with me and she takes time to wean off all that oxytocin rush and who knows what other neurotransmitters have short-circuited her brain... With her vitality, I'd say the effects of the crush will be flushed out of her system in a few minutes. The memory and the impact it had on her psyche and soul, though, won't fade anytime soon. You, natives of the Lustra Plains, have vigorous physiques, but comparatively weak minds. It depends on her."

The answer was not as optimistic as Lyria had hoped, but not entirely negative either. If what Faye experienced was comparable to an exponentially multiplied orgasm, then indeed, even physically weaned off the side effects, the mental traces of such a memory would likely affect her for a long time.

If she had been the one to experience it, such a significant event would surely have become an indelible memory, one that shapes a human being's mind like a favorite meal or first love. At least, Faye wasn't a victim of trauma...

Or was she? A cruel smile twisted the blonde woman's face once Jake and the freed prisoners were out of her sight.

She was anxious to see how the detestable vixen would react when the euphoria of limerence gave way to the horror of having willingly donated her entire fortune to an enemy. Just thinking about it, she subconsciously began to giggle.

"Hey, what's making you laugh, Lyr?" Faye's question, in a naughty, mock concerned voice, instantly turned the Archive Keeper's timid giggle into uproarious laughter.

"Hahahahahaha!"

Even after returning to Lustris, she refrained from explaining to the young woman. One thing was certain: she wasn't the only one laughing heartily that night.

The three men seated on their gleaming golden thrones were chuckling in the same manner, but their stiffened features and pupils burning with a sinister glow signaled their forced laughter masked other intentions. While they were more than happy to see the bitch ruined, it didn't change the fact that many of her treasures gifted to the enemy had once belonged to them or their ancestors.

As soon as circumstances allowed, they would make Faye pay dearly. For now, though, they still needed her until the end of this war.

If there were two people laughing even more bitterly than the three Radiant Conclave members present, it was the two Rank 17 Players still stoically waiting in the throne room. Kaelum was still being pecked at by Featherfall's brood, but Weiss and Shadrex had waited all along, wishing for a miracle.

That miracle hadn't happened... Though maintaining a serene appearance, their telepathic conversation was far more animated.

'He charmed one of the 5 Radiant Conclave members, swiped all her fortune, freed the prisoners, and left Lustris as if he were strolling in his own garden,' Weiss summarized gloomily. 'Compared to him, Cho Min Ho is almost a harmless pup.'

'Cho Min Ho has strength in numbers,' Shadrex clarified, speaking normally rather than in riddles – a sign he was taking the situation very seriously. 'But I agree with you. Our Oracle Paths don't work as they should on him or his companions. Only my divination powers have shown some effectiveness, but the backlash was disproportionate to previous times.'

He was not exaggerating about the failure of their Oracle Paths concerning Jake's companions. The case of Hephais was one thing, but their operations targeting numerous members of the Myrtharian Nerds had also gone horribly awry.

Every second, they received a barrage of notifications from Doomhorn informing them of the failure of one or more of these assassination missions. It was bearable when the dispatched Players managed to return home unscathed or with minor injuries, but several of their elites had perished at the hands of the prey they were supposed to hunt.

That night had truly turned into a nightmare...

"Our fate... brightens," Nyx declared anew, a field of corpses stretching as far as the eye could see, the forest's topography they had been treading completely transformed.

With hundreds of Myrtharian Nerds by their side, only a few had regrettably lost their lives during the surprise assault by the enemy. The thousands of corpses belonged to Players from the other Mirror Universe. Ironically, they were the attackers.

Anyway. Providence had smiled upon them as always. As long as the two twins were with them, everything appeared to go their way.

"Alright. Let's get back on the road to find our hubby~," Eris sang out, clapping her hands cheerfully.

The survivors nearly fainted upon hearing this, but knowing that convincing the two sisters to change their minds was almost as futile as trying to extinguish the sun with a

glass of water, they sighed resignedly, gritted their teeth, and set off again laboriously towards an unknown destination...

Millions of kilometers away, at the extreme south of Twyluxia, a gigantic crater filled with lava had replaced the tranquil Lumyst Water tributary that once meandered through these lands. The area for tens of kilometers around had been completely ravaged, with hot clouds of ash constantly blowing over the entire zone, rendering it uninhabitable for human life.

At the center of this hell of embers and evaporated black ash, a muscular giant covered in wounds struggling to regenerate still brandished his heavy, glowing greatsword overhead in a victory pose. The watery corpse of the Player supposed to be his nemesis, who had been guided here by his Oracle Path, was nowhere to be seen.

"You were a worthy opponent. Rest in peace," Gerulf declared in his deep voice, eventually sheathing his sword.

The gladiator champion had once again defended his title!

Chapter 1122: A Grand Sacrifice

"It's a fake," Cho Min Ho declared apathetically, handing back the golden goblet to Nathan, who had presented it to him with deference. "Even with our Oracle System acting up, I had mentally braced myself for such a setback."

Currently, only the Korean idol and the insectoid man were in the room where they had just met. In this isolated environment, where no one could surveil them, the two Evolvers also acted according to their master-slave relationship. Nathan was submissive, never criticizing or doubting the Korean's observations.

Though there was nothing abnormal in this, it was noticeable that, although each was loyally confined to their role, Cho Min Ho didn't disrespect his slave either. At the very least, he seemed to hold him in high regard. He could have punished him for his failure, but instead, he took the news with a regal calm.

"As expected, it's the Celestial who holds the true relic." Nathan confirmed with a mechanical nod, his lidless obsidian eyes making his emotions unreadable, assuming he felt any.

His spiritual and Aetheric fluctuations were just as immovable, making his emotions about as discernible as those of a rock. If it were Jake in Cho Min Ho's place, he would never have trusted such an alien. He needed tangible anchors to trust someone.

But for the Korean, that didn't seem to be an issue. The cold, inhuman mask of the insectoid creature left him unfazed.

Beyond that, the latter's grating voice, somewhere between a consumptive's rattle and a cricket's chirp, could repel even the most tolerant of antispeciesists. His vocal cords, if he had any, weren't meant to be used in such a way.

"Indeed, it can only be him," Cho Min Ho agreed with the insect man. "This complicates things for us. The good news is that the Oracle Knights from the other Mirror Universe also failed to steal the Chalice of Nethersshade. Pathetically."

"Which Abyssal Revenant?" Nathan rasped laconically.

"Bones."

The insect man asked no further questions, but the Korean continued to elaborate on his own initiative.

"In addition to the Players accompanying you on the Lustris raid, we lost another million Players last night," Cho Min Ho informed him somberly, a shadow of mute hatred crossing his face. "This time, it was mainly our King's Idol Alliance and its vassal factions that were targeted. This brings our camp's total losses to nearly 75%. I limited our senior officers' losses by lending them my power and forbidding them from leaving their encampments, but I've only delayed our agony a little. Our enemies have undoubtedly taken advantage to perform as many Lumyst baptisms as they dared. Starting tomorrow, the difference will be immediately felt on the battlefield when the war resumes."

The insect man remained motionless for a long time, his unblinking eyes casting doubt on whether he had truly listened. When the conversation stalled, Nathan analyzed,

"As expected, our defeat is inevitable if we continue to be drawn into the enemy's rhythm. We need a big move. A sacrifice... One capable of diverting the enemy's attention with a glitter screen while you execute your real plan. Thus, even if we lose the Ordeal, you and I will emerge victorious."

Cho Min Ho's eyes narrowed sinisterly, grasping what his slave and confidant was suggesting, but he didn't outright reject the idea.

"This sacrifice... I've already planned something about it. Sacrificing most of the King's Idol Alliance to bolster the enemy's illusory confidence is obviously part of it, if that's what you're insinuating, but that won't be enough. Even if I did everything in my power to save all our members, I wouldn't succeed, unless I focus on a very small elite minority. These elites are already the ones I've been focusing my efforts on saving. As you can see, I'm already thinking as rationally as possible."

For the first time since the conversation began, Nathan showed a hint of confusion. It couldn't be read on his face, devoid of most of the numerous facial muscles that allow for the expression of emotions, but the scorpion tail arching over his head twitched for a fleeting instant.

"If you already planned to sacrifice the King's Idol Alliance, what sacrifice are you talking about?" He finally asked, his raspy voice trembling with a hint of interest.

Before answering, Cho Min Ho prolonged the suspense by pouring himself a glass of wine from a well-made Chalice of Nethershade replica he had somehow acquired, likely thanks to his current status as a substitute Soulmaner King. Between the Chalice in his hands and the Goblet he had returned to the insect man, the resemblance was uncanny.

After sipping the tannin-laden beverage as slowly as possible, the Korean idol declared with a cruel smile,

"While you were escaping from Lustris with that fake Goblet, the Players you abandoned were freed by Jake Wilderth."

"Hmm... The Oracle Knight from the same planet as you, Kang Jun, Lee Yoon, and Amanda?" Nathan nodded calmly, remembering mostly his blinding Aetheric signature. To his eyes, these humans all looked alike. "Speaking of the latter two, I encountered them before the raid and forcibly enlisted them for the operation. Was that inappropriate?"

Cho Min Ho would have been delighted had he received this news a few hours earlier, but he had already heard about the prisoners freed by Jake. Even excluding those executed by Jake, the rest, like Amy and Lee Yoon, were part of his faction.

They tried to keep a low profile, but now that I know where they are, they won't escape me. Even better, now that they're with him, executing my scheme will be even easier.

The nature of his powers made him almost omnipotent and omniscient regarding his 'subjects', but his Spirit and Soul Strength unfortunately limited the distance and number of subjects he could monitor at the same time. When his subjects were far from him, he could still vaguely sense the direction they were in, but it was terribly imprecise.

At least on this point, he willingly conceded that his power was substandard to a simple Oracle Slave Contract. However, it had its perks too...

"No, you did well to force them to participate," Cho Min Ho finally congratulated him. "They are part of the grand sacrifice I have planned. Amy and Lee Yoon were among the prisoners who failed to escape after the Celestial's entrance. They are currently with Jake. Knowing Amy, she will do everything to stay away from me as much as she can and stay with him instead. As if I cared about her insignificant betrayal..."

"The glitter screen, the grand sacrifice you scheme to divert our enemies' attention from you, is Jake Wilderth himself?" Nathan finally realized.

The insect man wasn't omniscient regarding the other members of their faction like the Korean, but his cognitive faculties and instincts were incomparably superior. Jake was the only other identified Rank 17 Player fighting for their camp.

Even without all the information, throwing him to the enemy was indeed a good way to keep them occupied. With that power... He wouldn't die so easily.

"Indeed," Cho Min Ho chuckled ominously, excitedly swirling his glass. "The King's Idol Alliance took a beating last night, but an unexpected miracle occurred. Jake and several of his Myrtharian elites took action. I expected them to be ambushed and trapped as miserably as our own members, but that's not what happened. Most of the ambushes planned by the antagonist on his faction participants bore fruit, but the most important ones suffered catastrophically. Jake and Hephais alone eliminated over a million of their Players last night. That was when they were moving together. After Jake entered the Lustra Plains to act solo, the death count only increased further. Yesterday, our losses were at 60 and 15% respectively. This morning, the defeat report stands at 75% for us and over 40% for the enemy camp. If I allow myself a burst of optimism, I'd say our situation has improved.

"My scheme will be to inform our enemies of his actions, offering them a bait they can't refuse. In exchange, to continue receiving this intel, they'll have to leave me alone to focus on him. No doubt, between him and me, since no Oracle Paths can predict his actions while mine are predictable, they'll have no problem accepting this deal.

"All this because of Jake? I see the logic now. It's a good plan," Nathan finally understood the logical foundation behind the Korean's decision.

No matter how much power Jake concealed within him, he was only a Rank 17 Player like his master. That shouldn't allow him to outwit predicted by the enemy's bracelets. In that case, the only remaining option was...

A Digestor Trojan?

If that was the case, and considering the losses the antagonist just suffered... It could work!

Chapter 1123: Time Is On His Side Now

An hour before dawn, Jake, Hephais, and the rest of their makeshift squad made their way as planned to the Ironsoul Berserker Army Quarters, Ground 3, positioned on the

outskirts of the camp town. The night had been eventful, but only the two Players in the group who had actively contributed to the chaos were aware of it.

On the way back, Amy had asked which camp he was stationed at so she could join the same regiment. Jake hesitated to tell the truth, but after some thought, he decided that hiding his identity would become a major headache from now on.

Not only had Cho Min Ho circulated a sketch of his current appearance to other generals (he had learned this from Meribelle the night before), but the presence of Nerds like Hephais, Crunch, or Lord Phenix clustering around him would soon give him away.

Jake could have altered his appearance again, asked Hephais and his other companions to pretend they didn't know him, but considering their Oracle System was acting up, it was better for them to stay together. Besides, after his feats last night, he knew that friends and foes alike, both natives and Players, would now be keeping a close eye on him.

Even if he managed to fool everyone and convince his close circle, there were factors beyond his control, like the faction of loyalist Soulmanagers led by Meribelle. He had no doubt that the young woman would choose him over Cho Min Ho after witnessing last night's events while tailing him, but it wasn't certain that one or more of her allies wouldn't decide otherwise.

Fortunately, the fortified camp where Amy and Lee Yon were currently assigned was only a few hundred kilometers from his, separated by a single tributary. In other words, just a neighbor's threshold for Players like them. They would have no trouble sneaking away to discreetly join his future regiment.

After all, although they officially had orders and rules to follow, there were so many anonymous conscripts that no one would bother to enforce them or check their identity unless they were suspected of treason. In a modern world, strict identification would have been the norm, but here, it was the Abyssal Revenant Ledger that arbitrarily determined if someone was problematic or not.

The Snitch Rings they had received monitored and recorded all their actions, and after their nocturnal escapade, going against all these military regulations, all adventurous Players now had the assurance that the old Revenant could be flexible when necessary. Unless a camp city faced mass desertion/migration, one or two absentees would not alarm the ancient ledger.

Anticipating such a scenario, Jake had not stopped at the Life Lumyst Baptisms after separating from Amy and Lee Yoon. Accompanied by Crunch and Lord Phenix, who had insisted on following him, the trio then hurried to ascend the Lumyst River in reverse in order to undergo as many Spirit Lumyst baptisms as possible before the next sunrise.

Although his Soul and Spirit Body were comparatively his fortes, especially compared to other natives of the Duskwight Lands, Jake had only managed to enchant his soul 14 times in a row, despite managing to swim much closer to the Underword Cascade. He was just a few hundred meters from the immensely gigantic cascade when he was finally forced to lower his aspirations.

The first reason was that his soul and Spirit Body had already reached an abnormally high evolutionary threshold even compared to average eighth-ordeal Players. The fact that his Soul and Spirit Body could recover in no time from supposedly irreversible damage that should take years to heal was a glaring sign.

On this point, the willing sacrifice of Jeanie, a Cyan Minmin boosting intelligence, had sparked unpredictable effects going far beyond a simple attribute boost.

The second reason was that Spirit Lumyst baptisms were riskier. While his body could recover from a total failure, as long as he had biomass and an intact mind, his soul had no safety net if it was severely damaged.

It was okay if the damage was light to moderate, but if his soul damage became more severe, Jake would suffer all sorts of troubles and liabilities that could compromise his mental health and safety. Amnesia, cognitive regression, and sensory deprivation were among the lesser evils that could afflict him.

It goes without saying that if his soul was completely annihilated due to a failed baptism, he could not come return to life as could be the case with his body. If his physical body remained whole, it might survive but would enter a vegetative coma until the eventual emergence of a new consciousness that would have nothing to do with the current him.

The new changes concerning his status were as follows, mirroring those following the Life Enchantments:

[Cosmic D Starveyrves Soul lvl1>lvl2 (+1>+14): Able to feed on any energy to continuously strengthen and regenerate.

[Attributes: Cosmic, Energy, Life, Space, Time.

[Soul Class: Aetherdream Inceptor

[Graces: Child of Lumyst(+1), Lumyst Breath (+3), Breath of Awakening(+9)

[Glyphs: Blacksmith (Platinum), ...

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

The second Grace obtained was exactly the same as that of his third Life Lumyst baptism, and like his Lumyst Aura, the two Graces had merged into an ability named

Unified Lumyst Breath. He still had to explore what this Unified Lumyst Breath could do, and whether his Spirit Body could also form a Spirit Lumyst Core from now on.

For the moment being, Jake had merely confirmed that his Spirit Body now absorbed the Spirit Lumyst present in the atmosphere of the Duskwight Lands without altering it, an embryonic core seeming to slowly condense where his brain should be.

Where it became interesting was when Physical Body and Spirit Body were one, as was usually the case. Spirit and Life Lumyst would then circulate through a network of superimposed meridians, forming together the Unified Lumyst.

A larger channel than the others connected his heart, the seat of his Life Lumyst Core, to his brain, the location of his future Spirit Lumyst Core. If he had a Soul Lumyst Core, Jake supposed it must be in the same place.

The two types of Lumyst derived from them met and transmuted into each other halfway down this channel, forming a synergistic relationship beneficial to both parties, mutually reinforcing each other in an endless virtuous circle benefiting his entire body and mind.

The resemblance between this channel connecting his pair Cores and the Lumyst River connecting two waterfalls was too big to be a coincidence. Based on these new clues, Jake had a first theory about the origin of the two waterfalls and the river uniting them.

Perhaps, possibly, this world-plane where the entire ecosystem revolved around Lumyst was actually built not on something, but someone. The kind of someone on the level of Aurae.

Jake didn't feel like he was standing on a living being, so it could only be its corpse. That didn't mean that this world-plane wasn't sentient. In a world where Lumyst enchants everything it touches, anything was possible...

This led him to his third Grace, Breath of Awakening, which sounded slightly different from Breath of Living Elements. The latter allowed him to infuse his Lumyst with all sorts of attributes, although he felt like he had missed something.

Breath of Awakening was more straightforward. If he was right, its function was to spiritually awaken inert objects. With this new ability, his Lumyst was approaching the properties of the water flowing from the Underword Cascade.

By extrapolation, Jake could therefore deduce that Breath of Living Elements could breath life into inherently inorganic elements, approaching the function of Life Lumyst Water from the Heaven Cascade.

Thus, the circle was complete, a whole cultivation system revolving around enchantment had turn into his. He had only merely begun to scratch the surface of the benefits he could get from it.

Returning to his status, the alignment of his mind with his body had finally given the last push his bloodline needed to rise to level 2. The performance of all his bloodline abilities had at least doubled, not to mention his stats had risen substantially.

That was why Jake was willing to take the risk of exposing his identity. Even if they knew where he was, he was confident he could at least escape alive no matter what happened.

The other reason, finally, was that his first Grace, Child of Lumyst, was also complete. The laws of Twyluxia still rejected him strongly, but he could feel that the world's hostility towards him was no longer as skin-deep, as if he was part of it. As his Lumyst cultivation developed rapidly, he could truly feel the difference.

Time was on his side now.

Chapter 1124: Ironsoul Berserker Army

Jake could always focus on his Lumyst Aura by racking up kills to gain the favor of Twyluxia, but if he just diligently cultivated his Lumyst, the result would eventually be the same.

This detail mattered, because with all the Players who had fled last night, many survivors must have come to the same realization.

If we wanted, we could slaughter each other like last night and end the Ordeal in a few days, but that'd be terribly counterproductive even for the future winners. Only by prolonging this war as long as possible can we reap the maximum benefits. Jake summed up to himself with a strong sense of conviction.

His instincts were telling him that his enemies wouldn't make an attempt on his life anytime soon. If they did act, it would only be when they had a foolproof plan guaranteeing their success with the least possible losses.

Then... Back to the original plan. We climb the ranks by accumulating feats of arms, Jake concluded, blending in with his squad among the tens of thousands of recruits currently filling Ground 3.

This would also give him time to explore his new powers. He had gained so much in a single night that he hadn't yet had time to digest it all. In addition, there were the materials he had consumed the night before by spending his Contribution Points and the 17 volumes on Spirit Enchantment he hadn't yet put into practice.

Fortunately, among the treasures Faye had 'kindly' bequeathed to him, there was a stack of grimoires about Life Enchantments, written by none other than Valandar

himself, the Celestial on duty. The big boss of the Lustra Plains apparently had more merit than he had given him credit for until now.

While Jake meticulously planned his future schedule to optimize his progression curve, his companions were at a loss, slightly intimidated by the smell of blood and sweat permeating the sand of Ground 3 where they stood waiting for their next orders.

A sea of conscripts just as bewildered and nervous as they were also wondered why they were here. They searched in vain, none of the barbarians with them seemed to be an important officer of the Ironsoul Berserker Army. Before their rabble had arrived here, Ground 3 was a vacant lot left completely abandoned.

There was indeed a large rectangular wall looming over them nearby, but it was too high to see the fortress and quarters supposed to be on the other side. Being just a wooden palisade 7 or 8 meters high, it looked misleadingly like a hastily set up camp. So, if they were not mistaken, the buildings inside must be... tents.

"Not really the image I had of the quarters of a great army like the Ironsoul Berserkers," Ekho grumbled, more perplexed than shocked.

The alcoholic was still on edge since his last drop of alcohol, but it was starting to get better.

"It's because the fortified encampment carved into stone where we slept has made you too complacent. Once assigned to a new regiment and dispatched to the battlefield, it won't be as easy to go back there to stay without enough Contribution Points," explained Sank-Uk, the former 3000-man Commander, stoically with crossed arms. "When we're not sent to the meat grinder on the battlefield, this is where we'll train and sleep the rest of our time when we have a moment of respite. If it hasn't changed, you'll see that they'll soon ask us to set up our camp here or a little further away..."

The other conscripts spread out over the other Grounds were coming to the same conclusion without the veteran warrior's clarification. Considering there were 5 Grounds, and tens of thousands of recruits gathered waiting on each of them, the former 3000-man commander estimated that there was sufficient to form two or three new legions, or 2 to 8 divisions depending on the number of regiments they would include.

"Do you think they're going to send us into battle today?" Jashuzen asked Sank-Uk, clutching his enchanted ax anxiously.

"For sure," Thonzo shattered his illusions mercilessly before the veteran could. Unlike the other recruits, the bandaged barbarian had previously participated in a first battle before being repatriated to Havocspire for injuries and could therefore be taken seriously.

"By the way..." Scalacabe, Thonzo's female counterpart, "what's with the obese cat and the parrot here?"

Crunch and Lord Phoenix, standing proudly to Jake's right and left, immediately gave her a baleful glare.

"Who's this bitch? I'm not fat, just a bit chubby!" Crunch meowed, striking a furious yakuza pose.

"A-a parrot?!" The turkey pressed his heart with his two wings in a traumatized manner as if it had just been pierced by a bullet. "At what point do I look like a parrot?!"

Jake, Hephais, and Crunch gave him a sideways glance, then turned away without a word. The other recruits in their squad, not yet aware of who they were dealing with, weren't as 'perceptive', and Ekho muttered under his breath,

"He does look a bit like a parrot with his colorful plumage..."

"I think he looks more like a big turkey, or a dodo..." Jashuzen added, unaware that he had just signed his death warrant.

Thonzo, Claire, and Sank-Uk were a bit better at judging character and immediately sensed the mood shift from the suspicious behavior of the two foreigners.

"It's definitely a phoenix," Thonzo nodded emphatically.

"Yup, definitely," Claire agreed with a slight smirk.

The orange turkey, whose ego had just been bruised, regained some of his dignity after being flattered and decided to exhibit mercy by forgiving their insolence. A noble creature like him should never stoop to the level of these inferior beings.

Back to the story, Jake had introduced them to the group upon their return, but it was hard for them to take the two pets seriously without having seen them in their true form. If they had had that chance, the recruits would surely never have dared to say those truths right under their noses. They wanted to live a little longer!

When the sun was about to rise and whereas the other conscripts were still wondering how much longer they would have to hang out in this godforsaken hole, they finally heard a hubbub of armor clinking and footsteps approaching them with a metronomic rhythm.

The officer of the Ironsoul Berserker Army had finally arrived.

Jake and Hephais had obviously heard them coming long before with their hearing. In fact, they even knew that they weren't coming from the nearby camp, but from the fortified city behind them.

Each Ground had its own senior officer serving as the officer in charge, but Hephais and he couldn't help but note in their minds that only their officer was coming from the city. Even her escort was different.

While the other officers had well-equipped soldiers who appeared battle-hardened, those accompanying their Ground's officer too possessed dominating and oppressive Spirit Lumyst Auras, as considerably as very bright souls. There were only about fifty of them, but each was significantly stronger than Sank-Uk.

As for the woman leading them, she was even more formidable, with spiritual strength rivaling about 10% of his own. It might seem little, but his spirit was much more powerful than his body. 10% was enough, by his estimation, to dominate a Rank 17 Oracle Knight whose spirit was not the primary focus.

The only two other comparable individuals Jake had encountered in the Duskwight Lands outside of the Abyssal Revenants were the mysterious Great General of the Vorzhul Legion who led the reconquest of Havocspire, and the Soulmaner King himself hiding at his side. The latter did a good job suppressing his fluctuations, but it was insufficient to deceive his senses.

Especially now that his soul had too endured 14 enchantments and his bloodline advanced a level...

"What's a Great General doing here?" Sank Uk voiced what Jake, Hephais, and the two clowns were thinking quietly.

As in case it was her cue to introduce herself, the domineering woman confidently separated from her squad and calmly climbed the platform intended for addressing her new troops. Once facing the confused crowd, she didn't immediately open her mouth, unfurling a scroll in front of her that she inspected attentively. Her cold, predatory eyes detached a moment later from the sketch drawn on it to procedurally scan the face of each conscript.

When she stopped on Jake's face, she ignored the others, the corner of her lip imperceptibly curving. Jake understood at once that she had received orders about him. He didn't need to rack his brains too much to guess from whom...

The warrior then once again enveloped the gathering with an apathetic gaze, then declared in a thunderous voice reverberating for miles around,

"I am Ceythie, Great General of the Ironsoul Berserker Army. From currently on, you are under my command."

Chapter 1125: The Five Military Forces

Jake was done playing games. As soon as Ceythie had recognized him, her loyalty became irrelevant. He quickly decided to eliminate this erratic factor. Faye's transformation had already shown him the wonders his charm could work. Buoyed by this initial success, he didn't hesitate to use it again.

Without a second thought, he unleashed his buried charm, focusing it entirely on Ceythie and, to a lesser extent, her close guards. Her Soul, much stronger than Faye's, didn't experience a drastic change, but soon a faint blush tinged her cheeks, and her breath became noticeably uneven.

The conscripts, still reeling from the revelation that they faced a Great General – and a stunning woman at that – noticed nothing amiss. But there were exceptions. Among these recruits were also former officers and commanders, now without a regiment after their units were slaughtered during the Havocspire reconquest or other battles.

Consistent in his actions, Jake once again projected his Charm, and this time, his Charisma as well, to pacify them. Charisma worked differently from Charm. While Charm made everything about him more attractive, likable, and irresistible to the opposite sex, and to a lesser extent those of the same sexual orientation and even other species, Charisma was a double-edged sword.

Charisma granted him a attractive presence, captivating, enhancing his believability in the eyes of those who listened. At higher levels, it could lead to admiration, adulation, and eventually fanaticism.

The main difference from Charm was that while the latter only benefited its user, Charisma was more of a natural charisma amplifier. In other words, a detestable person would likely become even more so with a high Charisma stat.

Jake didn't have this problem. He was handsome, strong, had long mastered every aspect of his body language, and more importantly... didn't rely solely on that. It was when Charisma combined with Charm and Spirit Power that it truly unleashed its full potential, eventually altering beliefs and reality itself.

Will was their faction's expert in this domain with his Dragon Soulspeak Skill, but Jake could issue similar commands through sheer power. If his location was about to be discovered, he might as well go all out.

'From today onwards, you're all secretly my loyal soldiers. If any of you even thinks of betraying me, your memories of the past few months will be erased,' Jake commanded telepathically, releasing an invisible spiritual blast that spread across all the grounds of the Ironsoul Berserker Army.

The rest of his squad, though spared from his declaration, immediately sensed the difference. On the surface, nothing had changed in these fresh troops, but Hephais and Meribelle, more sensitive to spiritual fluctuations, knew that the two future legions of recruits were now under his control. He didn't control them directly, but it was as good as.

"Was that really necessary?" Hephais whispered with a highly perturbed frown. "It might alert both our enemies and allies. It's hard for them to trust you after such an overbearing demonstration."

"That's precisely what I want," Jake shrugged matter-of-factly. "If maintaining my anonymity is too complicated, then I'd rather make their job as hard as possible. Cho Min Ho will soon know I'm in this army if he isn't already aware, but he'll think twice before sending spies to watch me. Similarly, if I can allure a Great General under his command, he'll avoid letting his trusted men approach me for any reason, lest the status of who's spying on whom gets reversed."

"And the loyalists of the true Soulmaner King?" The assassin inquired with a mixed tone. "Didn't you confirm that Meribelle had promised their support? Wouldn't they now suspect that you've forcefully charmed her just like this illustrious Great General?"

"Maybe, but I'm willing to take that risk," Jake declared adamantly. "Because in my pessimistic view of things, there are always traitors and the indecisive. I prefer to force their hand from the start."

Hephais pondered the double meaning of his words, then nodded, "As long as you know what you're doing. I suppose this also won't make it easy for our enemies hoping to ambush you. Just showing that you can allure an army so easily should make them hesitant to assassinate you forcefully for a while."

"That's the goal," Jake grinned.

"But be careful, boss," the pale Egean warned him seriously, looking him straight in the eyes with an intensity rare for him. "Killing people is my specialty. The more I know about my target, the less I fear them. Don't show them everything. Otherwise, the day they actually come to claim your life, their ambush will be fatal for you."

Jake's eyes narrowed solemnly, but otherwise, he remained unflappable. After a few seconds of heavy silence, he said, "Don't worry. Even if I showed them everything today, even I have no idea what I'll be capable of tomorrow."

Hephais blinked in bewildered realization upon hearing this strange response, but after brief reflection, he realized it made sense somehow.

"And don't worry too much," Jake added calmly. "I'm not acting on a whim. I've thought carefully about my actions before deciding to proceed this way. This signal will also be a

beacon for other Myrtharian Nerds who will quickly know where we are. Now that my bloodline has advanced a level, I've already figured out how to reestablish communication between us. By tomorrow night, we should be able to talk telepathically again from anywhere in Twyluxia, just like in the Faction Chat, if all goes as planned."

He wasn't joking. The previous night after their return, he hadn't had time to test his new abilities, but he had read his new status thoroughly. He could easily estimate what his new abilities made him capable of.

Following Jake's mass charm, the welcome ceremony led by Ceythie continued, the young woman carrying on her speech as if nothing had happened, though her face remained slightly flushed.

"... These two new legions will consist of three divisions, each with three regiments. Each legion will have 75,000 soldiers, that's 25,000 men per division. Two of the three regiments will have 10,000 soldiers each, the third only 5,000. Depending on how the war progresses, these legions may be reorganized later. You, the conscripts of Ground 3, will be part of the second legion, third division, directly under my command. Now, I will ask you to..."

Ceythie was tough as nails. Clearly influenced by his Charm, she was still able to maintain clear and articulate speech, losing none of her vigor and bearings.

With her short, tousled black hair, thick enchanted steel armor, pale gray skin, and piercing violet eyes typical of Underworld Barbarians, she was indeed very different from the dainty Faye. Hideous scars marred her exposed forearms, another large, poorly healed scar ran along her neck – physical reminders of how many times she had cheated death.

Adding to that her remarkable spiritual power, Jake doubted his allure alone could buy her devotion for long.

"Meribelle, who does she work for?" Jake telepathically asked the Soulmaner hovering miles above them, while Ceythie finally asked them to freely form squads of ten people, appointing a leader.

The Soulmaner was still shaken by his show of force, but after that night, nothing really surprised her anymore about him. After a brief moment to refocus, the beautiful brunette cleared her throat, before remembering she didn't need to with telepathy,

"There are 5 major military forces serving the Dusken Throne," she recited, forgetting he already knew all this. "First, the Protectors, led by the late Great General Winchu, killed and replaced by Lord Calyx. They are charged with defending the Ironsoul Rampart and the many citadels like Havocspire that form our main defensive line. Each citadel like Havocspire is overseen by an eminent general who has proven themselves, but only Havocspire was commanded by a Great General in anticipation of the Soulmaner

King's secret arrival. The loss of Winchu has hurt the Duskwight Lands more than one might imagine."

"Cut to the chase," Jake interrupted her exposition.

"..." Meribelle paused obediently without realizing it, then continued, ignoring him, "You already know Radahn, the Great General at the head of the Volzhul Legion. He's in charge of defending the sky but is also our fiercest spearhead. He's never shown his ambitions, but I believe... he's loyal to the Duskwight Lands, not the Dusken Throne or the Soulmaner King, though. I don't think we have to worry about him as long as you don't directly threaten what he's fighting for.

"Great General Sheanu controls the Wargod Raiders, and he's the one to watch out for. He's a bandit at heart, and like any greedy criminal, he's loyal to whoever lets him indulge his base instincts. Cho Min Ho will have no trouble buying him, his policies being far more permissive than the true Soulmaner King's.

"Then there's the order of Soulmaners led by Grandmaster Lorentz, who play more of an auxiliary role and aren't considered a military force per se, and the last two forces. The first has no affiliation, each legion having its own banner and serving the major general of the citadel where they've been assigned, and then there are the Ironsoul Berserkers. They actually contribute the bulk of the war effort, taking the most risks and going to the most dangerous fronts. Usually, you need to have proven yourself before being invited to join them. Recruiting recruits who have never held a sword to form two new legions is already unusual, but Ceythie's personal presence makes her actions even more suspicious."

"And so, what does she really want?" Jake interrupted her again. "I suspect she's not just a brute, and wouldn't take all these risks on the battlefield just to switch loyalty to the first foreigner who comes along."

Meribelle turned her tongue seven times in her mouth to think carefully about her answer, then hesitantly said, "I think she really wants to recruit you."

Chapter 1126: Seems Like Our Platoon Is Overpowered

"Explain." Jake frowned. "The order to report to the Ironsoul Berserker army quarters only came yesterday. Could Cho Min Ho have interfered to assign us here? I thought Ceythie was surprised to see me here this morning. And before bumping into his subordinates yesterday, he shouldn't have had any idea where I was, which would explain why he distributed sketches of me to all his officers."

"Unlikely," the Soulmaner refuted firmly. "He might be the official stand-in for the Soulmaner King for now, but even the real Soulmaner King has limited authority over how each Great General runs their army. If your assignment here this morning isn't a coincidence and your identity hadn't yet been exposed, then it must be Ledger who's tugged strings for you, recommending you according to the criteria she set herself."

Jake felt a headache coming on. He'd almost forgotten that his Snitch Ring recorded everything about him and that Ledger was compiling it all impartially in its database. The awakened artifact served the Dusken Throne above all and could indeed have recommended this army if it was the best way to protect the nation's interests.

If the Ironsoul Berserker Army was involved in the bloodiest battles, then without even mentioning Contribution Points, it was a safe bet that the vast majority of foreigners would end up in Ceythie's army without any other factors changing the game.

If it's just Ledger's algorithmic initiative, then I'm fine with that, Jake finally estimated, deciding not to worry about it anymore.

[Still, keep an eye on that Ceythie.] Xi interjected in their conversation to deliver this single warning before falling silent again.

Clearly, she was still a bit upset about his words from the day before, but she was still closely following everything he did. In truth, she couldn't stay cold towards him for long.

'Relax, I think it's a good thing to have a Great General fighting directly with us,' Jake reassured her, not denying her efforts to reach out to him.

On that note, he was partly telling the truth. Great Generals were inferior to the Saints of the Radiant Conclave, but their strength was the closest thing to it outside of the Soulmaner King and the Abyssal Revenants.

What Jake was still wary of wasn't the three Rank 17 Oracle Knights wanting his skin, their power being nerfed as much as his, but the natives in full possession of their means. If the Celestial and his Titans decided to land on his battlefield this morning, he wouldn't rate his regiment's chances highly.

In fact, if that really happened, he'd probably have no choice but to flee, moving the battlefield elsewhere to avoid endangering his companions.

I hope they'll at least leave me alone for a few days. Jake's face darkened sinisterly at the thought of this grim scenario. If they really attacked him with force, it would mess up his perfect plans, but they would be the ones to regret it.

While Jake was mulling over various scenarios and adjusting his plans accordingly, the recruits had begun to gather in groups to form their own squad of 10 infantrymen. His own group, unwilling to part with him, automatically made him squad leader.

Sank-Uk, Hephais, Crunch, and Lord Phenix were strong enough to have their own squads, but they rejected to split up, claiming that once the next battle was over, they'd all have enough Contribution Points for multiple promotions. If Jake rose in rank, they would naturally rise with him.

"Fine, stay with me," Jake chuckled wryly, deciding to wash his hands of it. They were free to do as they pleased.

With Hephais, Crunch, Lord Phenix, Sank-Uk, Ekho, Jashuzen, Thonzo, Claire, Scelacabe, and himself, they were exactly ten people, as required.

"The count's good, boss," Ekho exclaimed, standing to attention, too anxious to see himself replaced by a more competent recruit.

He had observed all those officer-less commanders eyeing the new squads like vultures, making him particularly uneasy. The other greenhorns in their group didn't feel much better. Apart from Sank-Uk, who was himself a former commander, the others indeed owed their lives only to their ride on his giant shoulders.

Thankfully for them, Jake made no distinction between them and those squadless commanders. However, there were indeed many candidates who applied to join his squad, and he identified himself embarrassed to refuse some of them: Amy, Lee Yoon, and a few other Players whom Hephais and he had saved the night before.

He wasn't sure the two women would make it, but they had apparently been in the crowd from the start like them. Not daring to deploy their mental sense as blatantly as him, they had found his group only now, and that was only because they had identified Lord Phenix's bright orange plumage.

In addition to Amy and Lee Yoon, there was the petite Nuwa and her two otters named Chromy and Chewy, who had moped in endless gratitude for saving her the night before. For resurrecting her two otters, she had practically elevated Jake to the status of an all-powerful deity. Joining his squad was a sure bet.

Senet, the half-demon with ice-blue and blood-red heterochromatic eyes who had gotten by without their intervention, had applied more by chance. With his special vision, he had observed what he had done with his Charm on the Great General and was completely humbled.

Venuwen, a Lunarian endowed with hereditary lunar magic as her race supposed, was capable of spiritism, blessings, buffs, spirit summons, and incidentally manipulating water. Hephais had indeed saved her in extremis the night before.

The two remaining Players who had requested were Ari Windwhisper, a Sylphid archer and swordswoman who could control the wind, and Zerei, an Aereian who could also call the wind, but specialized in sound attacks and illusions.

All these people, the infernal duo of Hephais and Jake, had saved, resurrected, or at least spotted them over the previous night, but had only learned their names today when they came to apply. Surprisingly, except for Ari and Senet, who were members of King's Idol Alliance like Amy and Lee Yoon, the others were factionless, a status quite rare after five Ordeals.

Regrettably, Jake had no choice but to refuse them all. He did, however, offer them an alternative,

"As soon as I've been promoted, I'll incorporate your squad into mine."

It was a sufficient promise for now that satisfied everyone. As a result, these rejects determined to form another squad together and, against all odds, appointed a stranger they'd met by chance as their leader. Jake later learned that her name was Lysandra Moonaris, and apparently, Hephais and he had also met her.

Like Senet, the heterochromatic-eyed Player, she had bathed in the Lumyst River early in the evening before hostilities began and had managed to withdraw without being harassed. Jake identified this suspicious, and scanning her in Oracle Device mode with his mental sense, he discovered that she was much stronger than she appeared.

No wonder the enemy Players had left her alone with Hephais and him rampaging in the same area. She might have just been lucky, but her strength certainly played a role.

Nearly a quarter of an hour later, 2,500 newly formed squads were waiting at Ground 3 for Ceythie's next orders. The Great General was generally pleased with their attitude, and without them having to report anything, she began to scroll through the information of the new squads, referring to the data recorded by their Snitch Rings.

Her soul was powerful, but compared to Jake, her reading speed hadn't yet transcended the limits of her species. It still took a few minutes for her to get through all that information. Once finished, she immediately announced the commanders of each regiment, companies, and platoons, finally ending with the squads forming the latter.

As luck would have it (unless it had nothing to do with it?), Amy's and Jake's squads not only ended up in the same regiment but also the same platoon. The density of powerful Players in such a small number of troops would make them virtually invincible in small-scale battles.

"Well, well, well... Seems like our platoon is overpowered," Crunch smirked smugly.

It had to be acknowledged that with their two squads of high-rank Players, the Light Warriors soon to face them might just regret having gotten out of bed this morning... or curse their rotten luck.

Chapter 1127: Ten Minutes To Pray

The two new legions of recruits were expecting a lengthy briefing on signaling methods for effective communication on the battlefield, like the use of colored flags, smoke, or sound instruments, but there was none. There was no joint drill to improve their coordination as an army either.

Instead, Ceythie immediately ordered them to march east. To the east, there was only one thing: the front line where the armies of the Dusken Throne faced those of the Radiant Conclave.

"Aye... I had anticipated it would go down like this, but I held a slim hope she'd at least give us this day off to familiarize ourselves with our new regiment," Thonzo sighed as he decided to remove his bandages, meant to hide his wounds long healed by Jake.

At this point, it made no difference. Jake didn't stop him either, almost convinced he'd be exposed any moment now if he wasn't already.

Being the only recruit among them who had participated in a standard battle, he had a traumatizing memory of his first battle. The feeling of being an insignificant insect among millions thrown into the fray was alienating.

His first battle had been a meat grinder of unprecedented violence, from which he had not yet recovered. Maybe he never would fully.

"Unless the Celestial wants to get rid of our boss today, this battle should be a walk in the park for us," Claire consoled him with her usual nonchalance. "As long as we're here, you won't die."

"By the way, boss..." Ekho coughed awkwardly, taking the opportunity to involve Jake in the conversation.

"What's up?"

The recovering alcoholic fidgeted nervously, then, gathering his courage, said,

"Yesterday, you stopped us from accepting the equipment provided by this Spirit Enchanter apprentice, claiming you could get us something much better..."

Jake gave him a funny look, impressed by his boldness. He had indeed said something along those lines.

"So. What's your point?" "Apart from Jashuzen who has his enchanted axe as a heirloom, we still don't have any equipment other than our old rusty conscript swords... Are we supposed to fight like this?"

"..."

The other recruits' gazes all zeroed in on him after this question, anxiously awaiting his response. Jake felt slightly embarrassed at that moment. He hadn't forgotten, but he hadn't taken care of it either.

Truth be told, for him creating such equipment was child's play now that he had regained a portion of his powers, but the poor recruits were not aware of this detail.

"Don't worry," Jake finally defused the situation with absolutely credible detachment. "You'll have your equipment before the battle starts."

It was just a few words for him, but although the other natives in their squad merely nodded, he felt their chests deflate with relief. It must have troubled them quite a bit that night.

Soon, the two legions began their march following Ceythie's command, the Great General fearlessly leading the procession with her close guard and the Division Commanders. Ceythie personally taking control of the second legion, the General of the first legion struggled to hide his uneasiness.

Normally in an army, the first legion was supposed to be the most competent, led by the chief general himself. Even racking his brain, he couldn't figure out what was special about this second legion, having previously forgotten the mental injunction Jake had deeply embedded in their subconscious.

As for the commanders designated for each regiment, company, and platoon, they had their own escorts and trusted officers and soon joined the armies assigned to them to command more closely. Each of them was familiar with the signaling methods, tactics, and strategies employed by Ceythie, which would allow them to react promptly to any changes on the battlefield.

Amy's and Jake's squads were in the third regiment of their division, which only had 5000 men. Their platoon captain was a soldier not much older than them, with apparently no intention of trying to control them. From his brief experience, he knew that by tonight, maybe half of them wouldn't remain. It was only after the merciless mortal sieve of the battlefield and the subsequent army reorganizations that proper regiments worth nurturing would eventually emerge.

The 1000-man Commander at the head of their company looked more reliable, his hypertrophied muscles, lion eyes, and vigilant frown making him more credible in his

role. He was currently riding with other officers of the same rank alongside the head of their regiment, a 5000-man Commander.

In many ways, the latter had the presence of Sank-Uk before his downfall with his heavy guandao, but stronger, more imposing, more intimidating, more everything... The catch was that he seemed primarily more belligerent.

In a glance, Jake pegged him while a genuine Ironsoul Berserker, an Underworld Barbarian who truly enjoyed the brutality of the battlefield. Without having spoken to him, Jake didn't get the impression that this commander was the type to preserve his troops' health with sophisticated strategies.

Well, while long as we're here, there's no chance things will go south. Jake sneered inwardly as he continued to march.

As they neared the front line, the memory of the Battle of Havoscpire began to resurface, and the conscripts who had participated and survived quickly became more and more anxious, talking less and less. Ekho, Thonzo, and the another recruits in their squad were no exception, despite existing better off with four Players and a Soulmaner with them.

Meribelle had officially offered to defend their regiment, but everyone in their group knew she was there only for Jake. In fact, she was there for the Soulmaner King, but this information couldn't be revealed for obvious reasons.

Less than an hour later, a hastily erected tent camp appeared before them. A final rise in terrain loomed just behind, with war raging just beyond. Angry cries mingled with screams of agony and the clatter of clashing steel.

To spare them a bit, or conversely to show them a glimpse of what awaited them, Ceythie first made a stop at the aforementioned camp, which was actually a supply point and makeshift hospital for the severely wounded.

Some soldiers were devouring their hastily reheated meals with lifeless expressions, but most were covered in bloody bandages when they weren't lying on stretchers or outright covered with a mortuary shroud alongside other corpses. Several pits were existing dug at that very moment by healthier soldiers, to bury the dead before their flesh decomposed and exposed the survivors to disease.

A pandemic in the midst of war was the last thing they wanted.

Seeing this, many conscripts previously had blue faces, trembling like dead leaves. Thonzo's complexion was also ashen, himself having been one of those wounded lying on a stretcher before existing repatriated to Havoscpire for his convalescence.

Ceythie led them to another vacant plot next door, where the order to set up a similar camp was given, then yelled loudly,

"You have ten minutes to pray to whoever the fuck you believe in, jerk off, get laid, take a shit, do anything that will allow you to approach the upcoming combat without stupidly dying out of panic."

The conscripts turned pale at receiving this respite, which sounded more like the final toll in their fearful minds.

"Boss, our weapons..." Ekho reminded him anxiously, even forgetting his manners.

Aware of their nervous state, Jake didn't take it too hard and headed without hesitation into an unoccupied tent to do what he had to do. His companions hesitated to follow him for a second, but eventually ran after him to see what he planned to do. Hephais and the two clowns, having nothing better to do, exchanged a look and decided with a shrug to enter while well.

Chapter 1128: The Three Rules

Inside the tent, Jake was already hard at work. His Cosmic Chitin Scale ability, being considered a bloodline power, was also restricted by the Aetheric laws of Twyluxia. Given time, he would be able to produce as much metal as he wanted with some effort, but he refused to take such a risk in case his enemies were waiting for him to reveal a weakness.

Fortunately, his beginnings in Lumyst cultivation had opened up a wide range of new options. A few hours was little time for experimentation, but with his intellect, it was enough for preliminary inferences. Relatively speaking, a hasty deduction on his part was like completing a decade-long thesis for an Earth scientist, so he could absolutely trust it.

The first rule he had deduced about Lumyst: It was better to have a core specific to each type of Lumyst than to have a single type of Lumyst incorporating all his attributes. The latter resulted in a potent cocktail that provided maximum power but was too hard to control.

Jake had created them nonetheless. The hybrid Cosmic Life Lumyst Core, including his Space, Life, Energy, and Time Elements, had been instinctively created the previous night during his fight against River's Bane. It was also in his heart next to the main Life Lumyst Core.

The Cosmic Spirit Lumyst Core had been created more recently, in case he had to confront an Abyssal Revenant or a particularly tricky ghost. He had tried to unify these

two energies to form the ultimate Lumyst Core, but that had ended in resounding failure, though he hadn't tried for long. Only the channel spontaneously formed by his Lumyst Breath seemed capable of cohabiting these two energies, although this ended in mutual transmutation.

In the hours that followed, Jake had neglected these two dangerous Lumyst Cores, focusing instead on two others that would be much more useful to him: the Metal and Water Cores. Four, if their Spirit Lumyst equivalents were included.

The meridian network naturally formed by Lumyst Breath was composed of millions of nodes, but some locations were more interesting than others for establishing Lumyst Cores, with a greater flow of Lumyst.

For this purpose, Jake had chosen his lungs to host Metal Lumyst, and his kidneys for Water Lumyst, drawing inspiration from the Theory of the Five Elements in Chinese medicine, for what it was worth. He placed no value on such archaic, unscientific theories, but at the moment he had found it as good an idea as any.

He had chosen to leave the left side to Life Lumyst and the right to Spirit Lumyst for the sake of symmetry, though nothing obligated him to. He had done well, as a channel like the one connecting his main Life and Lumyst Cores had quickly linked the four new mirror nuclei, restoring a similar synergy.

After a few hours of attentive nurturing, these four Lumyst Cores already shone like two small stars that only he could see in the organ serving as their vessel. Jake estimated their cultivation at the mid-Corebearer realm of the Light Warriors, the fifth stage of cultivation for the ordinary natives of this world, but the first recognized for genuine Life and Soulmanancers.

Just based on their skyrocketing power accumulation, Jake knew he would need only a few more days to reach the Radiant Lord stage. After that, there would only be the Saint realm where the members of the Radiant Conclave resided, and the Celestial realm that only Valandar and the Soulmanancer King claimed to have reached.

Of course, the stages of cultivation recognized in the Duskwight Lands had different names, but in essence, it was almost the same thing except that it was the Spirit Body that experienced this transcendence.

Returning to the task at hand, the second rule about Lumyst he had isolated was that without intentional control, elemental Lumyst was highly unstable and tended to easily revert to a material state. The opposite was possible too, but much less common.

Water Lumyst would become water, while Metal Lumyst would produce metal. The main difference, however, was that neither this water nor this metal was ordinary.

They were Lumyst Metal and... Lumyst Water. Right! You read that correctly. This Lumyst Water could theoretically be used for enchantments, albeit with some precautions.

Confident in what he was doing, Jake first sweated a good dose of Metal Lumyst. Enough, in fact, to terrify the rest of his squad.

Ceythie and the other veteran commanders outside even momentarily believed it was an attack, to the point of raising the alarm before realizing it came from 'the one they were supposed to be loyal soldiers to'. A false alarm was announced, and a wide security perimeter encircled their tent to keep the curious at bay.

Inside the tent, Jake had already given the necessary mental impulse for this transmutation, and his Black Metal Lumyst had already begun to precipitate into a majestic nugget of darkness swallowing all light. It was also the first time for Jake that he was putting this rule into practice, and he wasn't too sure what kind of metal he was going to produce.

Instinctively, referring to the first rule, it was possible that Metal Lumyst wasn't specific enough and that the resulting metal would prove unusable. Conversely, it was also possible that the metal produced would have all the best properties of the metals he had consumed so far, as long as they weren't too contradictory.

When Jake estimated he had enough metal to equip everyone, he stopped releasing his Black Lumyst and inspected his work.

[Black Lumyst Steel (+14): An extremely strong hybrid black alloy. A supraconductor of Lumyst, it is endowed with the Attributes of self-repair, self-sharpening, and self-cultivation, thanks to its incorporated Graces Child of Lumyst, Life Lumyst Breath, and Breath of Living Elements.]

'Holy fuck!' Jake almost dropped the black ore upon reading the scan report. He felt the insidious, unsettling sensation of holding an enriched uranium ingot on the verge of exploding.

He had just elucidated a third rule: Lumyst enchantment was contagious. Everything directly engendered from a certain quality of Lumyst also possessed this property.

But after brief introspection, Jake shook his head, invalidating this hypothesis. If that were the case, the +35 Snitch Rings they all wore would have likely annihilated their souls on first contact. The spiritual energy of these rings was indeed insufficient to subject them to such an advanced baptism, but they would have felt something.

In that case, the most plausible was that it was unique to him, or that Ledger had forged them in some other way. Both hypotheses held up, especially given that he was still a neophyte in Lumyst matters.

'Breath of Living Element' must be what breathes life into this metal, but the properties of my bloodline must also influence the process. If this metal is inspired by my Chitin Scales, then it can be considered part of me, which would explain the +14 enchantment that goes with it.

Jake hadn't even started properly studying the new alloy when the ore in his hands began to glow before starting to siphon the ambient Metal Lumyst that hadn't completely precipitated. With his Cosmic Sight, he clearly saw the same meridian network that was in him forming inside the nugget, a nascent embryonic core condensing at its center.

"It's really alive... And cultivating," Jake exhaled with emotion, ignoring the astonished blinks of his audience.

"I got a similar result with Shadow Lumyst," Hephais commented, summoning a cloud of black smoke with a wave of his hand.

Not having had time to visit the Lustra Plains, it was Shadow Spirit Lumyst, but it didn't prevent it from condensing into a sort of shapeless dark mass endowed with its own spiritual meridian network. This thing didn't have its own appearance or consciousness yet, but it was clearly a Spirit Body.

"That explains all those wandering souls," Jake realized after scanning the entity born from Hephais' Shadow Lumyst.

And indeed, Jake soon confirmed that this sentience-lacking ghost did not possess the Breath of Awakening Grace, although it was enchanted at +12. He first thought that Hephais had awakened another Grace than him, but the Egean immediately assured him otherwise.

The strange nature of his Black Lumyst thus came from him.

As long as it doesn't try to automatically enchant everyone and everything that touches it, it should be fine, Jake figured, though with serious doubts.

What reassured him somewhat was that after acquiring the Breath of Awakening and Breath of Living Elements Graces, he hadn't started enchanting everything he touched either. There must still be some limitations, like a strong intent to enchant by the user.

Chapter 1129: Forging Enchanted Weapons

In doubt, he checked anyway, pressing the ingot briefly against the non-enchanted fabric of the tent. After a few seconds, nothing happened, and he let out a sigh of relief.

"I guess it's safe to use," Jake concluded with a faint frown.

The next step was to check if the Lumyst nurtured by the ingot itself was also harmless. For now, the metal remained just an ingot, albeit a living one. He could work with that.

"What weapons do you want? Swords, axes, spears? Tell me quick," Jake called out to the recruits, without taking his eyes off the black steel nugget.

Excited to choose, the recruits hurriedly specified their desires, and he immediately got to work. Even with his bloodline powers nerfed, shaping this metal took but a split second.

He just had to infuse it with some of his Metal Lumyst to gain control of each atom and rearrange them at will. A heartbeat later, a pile of weapons and armor pieces requested by his companions appeared before them.

"Wow! That was fast!" Scelacabe exclaimed, eyes wide with astonishment.

"That was... enlightening," Claire added more dignifiedly shortly after.

The other natives of the group were just as flabbergasted, but the Myrtharian Nerds present reacted much more moderately. Their boss was acting like their boss. Nothing new on the horizon.

Jake then picked up the axe at the top of the pile he had just forged for Jashuzen and scanned it to check the results.

[Black Lumyst Steel Battleaxe (+14): A war axe forged from a large ingot of Black Lumyst Steel. It is endowed with attributes of self-repair, self-sharpening...]

The rest was as the description of the metal ingot before forging. The weapon was alive, its atoms functioning more like living cells than inert particles. However, it had no sentience either.

The weapon also had no unique abilities or powers. They were the same as those of the metal composing it entirely.

"I suppose that without proper Aether Symbols and technology to add additional properties, the only way to further evolve it is to awaken its spirituality."

So, it was time to enchant everything. Jake realized then that he was in a conundrum.

His initial plan was to use Spirit Lumyst Water from his own Water Lumyst to enchant these freshly forged artifacts, but if his Lumyst Metal couldn't enchant what it touched, there was no guarantee that the created water would do any better.

And indeed, after projecting some Water Lumyst out of his body with his hands, the resulting puddle of Lumyst Water proved incapable of enchanting anything even when he took direct control, though he was almost certain it should be possible.

"Thankfully I thought to collect as much Lumyst Water as possible last night before going to sleep," Jake congratulated himself, pulling a Chalice of Nethershade from his spatial ring.

It was Meribelle who had found it for him upon his return. Clearly, following him around had made a strong impression on her. Enough to convince her to grant him such a precious gift.

This replica was only enchanted to +15, but that was more than enough for what he wanted to do right now. He would always have time later to forge something better as his enchanting expertise progressed further.

Once the chalice was in his hands, Jake's relaxed atmosphere vanished instantly. Now was when it got tricky. If he just poured Lumyst Water on the artifact without thinking, it would only have a 50% chance of enduring the first Spirit Enchantment.

If by chance the enchantment succeeded, the baptisms would continue until the energy of the poured Lumyst Water was exhausted. He had collected the purest and most concentrated Lumyst Water his chalice could contain, and he had no doubt there was enough energy to support 10 to 15 baptisms without a problem for an ordinary axe.

If he relied only on statistics to guarantee the result, he would need tens of thousands of axes like this one to ensure perfect success. Not really the kind of odds he liked.

Fortunately, he wasn't counting on chance to guarantee his result. After reading the entire 17 volumes written by Grandmaster Lorentz the night before, and then those written by Valandar later in the night, he knew how to optimize his chances.

Indeed, there were a bunch of factors that could work in his favor or against him. His luck and control of his spirit energy, which Jake had already identified, were far from the only factors to consider.

A well-developed Lumyst Aura could also improve these odds, as could his Lumyst cultivation, and his Child of Lumyst Grace. Combining all that, he was confident he could guarantee at least 9 consecutive Spirit Enchantments.

Beyond that, failure was possible, but unlike him, he didn't know if this Black Lumyst Steel could withstand the backlash of it. Today was not the day to find out, with only a few minutes left to finish equipping his teammates.

He was about to perform the Spirit Enchantment with the Lumyst River water as planned when his arm suddenly stopped, his face frozen in an epiphany.

"... Why didn't I think of that earlier. In hindsight, it's the most logical thing to do," Jake almost cursed himself as he decisively began to emanate some Black Metal Lumyst, but not his spiritual pendant.

"You planning to do what I think?" Hephais muttered, thinking he had understood what he intended to do.

"I don't see why it wouldn't work," Jake nodded.

If Life Metal Lumyst could precipitate into Lumyst Metal, then Spirit Metal Lumyst should precipitate into something too. Applying binary reasoning, it could only be a Metal-attributed Spirit Body, like the one Hephais had conjured a while before in front of them.

But what would happen if a metallic body and its astral equivalent were forced to merge? They would then become one, forming an artifact enchanted both physically and spiritually.

The question was whether such a fusion was possible, but even if it didn't work this time, Jake had another method at his disposal to make his idea work: to precipitate Life Metal Lumyst and Spirit Metal Lumyst at the same place, at the same time.

That way, there would be no risk of rejection, their birth being simultaneous and superimposed, and therefore as one. Once struck by inspiration, Jake was unstoppable and within ten minutes he had finished reforging everyone's doubly enchanted equipment.

"I-Incredible..." Ekho stammered voicelessly, weighing his new sword with reverence. Just holding it, he could feel how terrifying his weapon was.

The artifact's spirit was still dormant, but it already emitted a pervasive spiritual presence, sharp and biting like a cold metal blade. When the former alcoholic sliced the air in front of him with large movements, the fabric of the tent several meters away tore silently, eliciting a frightened squeak from him.

Thonzo also brandished his new black claymore in front of his face, eyes bulging and jaw hanging open, as if thunderstruck.

"This weapon... I'm almost afraid to wield it," he couldn't help admitting, audibly swallowing to remoisten his dry throat.

"..." Jashuzen, the only one who had held an enchanted axe among them until now, was more conflicted.

His familial heirloom was dear to his heart, but compared to his new axe, it was clearly garbage. He didn't know what to do with his previous axe. Although he knew he would probably never use it again, he was reluctant to throw it away.

Claire and Scelacabe had chosen a Tang sword for tight combat and a flexible spear for longer range in more open spaces. They too were as if mesmerized by their new acquisitions.

Hephais temporarily equipped two scimitars as well as a pair of daggers, needles, shurikens, chains, metal wires, and other accessories customized on request by Jake, but while finishing putting on his makeshift armor, he telepathically murmured,

"I'll come back to you next night to reforge my equipment once I can condense Life Shadow Lumyst."

"Sure," Jake heartily agreed. The better equipped his teammates were, the better their chances of survival. And if there was one teammate who had never let him down, it was the taciturn assassin.

As for Crunch and Lord Phenix, they also whined to have their own equipment and the two oddballs now looked like two cosplaying clowns in their ridiculous armors.

The fat cat had insisted that he forge a helmet with a huge rhinoceros horn so he could happily charge his enemies head-

on. His armor was also covered with long ultra-sharp spikes so he could, in his own words, perform his 'spinning top technique'.

The turkey was even worse, having outright asked for a huge joust that he apparently intended to hold against his armpit with his wing during charges, consequently losing the ability to fly...

Chapter 1130: A Normal Battle

Jake had also reforged a decent set of equipment for himself. He didn't have time for the usual Aether Symbols enchantments, but the metal's durability and its ability to self-repair and cultivate Lumyst made the effort of crafting his own set worthwhile.

He had just finished donning his new armor when—

"REFORM THE RANKS! YOU HAVE 30 SECONDS!"

Ceythie's thunderous voice echoed across the camp, reaching every division. The conscripts, startled and sweating with fear, hurried to rejoin their squads and platoons in formation. There were a few mix-ups in the process due to their panic and unfamiliarity, but about a minute later than planned, all soldiers were in place.

Ceythie surveyed her new army with a disapproving squint, then with a loud snort exclaimed, "Let the hunt begin!"

The recruits hoped she would deliver a fiery, passionate speech to uplift their low morale, but they had misjudged the character of their Great General. When it came to risking one's life in war, she was always in a rush.

And she expected no less from her troops...

A minute later, the frontline troops finished scaling the last barrier of terrain separating them from the battlefield, with Jake and his squad among these fortunate few.

"Pheew." Crunch whistled at the sight of the carnage and desolation stretching as far as the eye could see. "This isn't going to help our army's morale. Feels like all these greenhorns are about to wet themselves."

Jake was more impressed that the cat could whistle, but for once, he agreed with him.

It wasn't night, nor stormy like during the Havocspire siege. There was no rain or fog; the sky was clear, and the sun shone unobstructed. The horrors of war were laid bare before them, no whims of the weather censoring their sensory experience.

There were still plumes of dust partially covering the battlefield, likely from the passage of some cavalry or other massive beasts. Explosions of flames and acid bursts occasionally sounded, but compared to their experience at Havocspire, it was relatively mild.

Despite the more newbie-friendly spectacle, soldiers from both camps were still dropping like flies. Every second, dozens of Underworld Barbarians, Light Warriors, and creatures died in agonizing pain.

In the relentless grind of the battlefield, the life of a single inexperienced foot soldier wasn't worth much... Ceythie must have known that as time passed, their courage would deflate, so shortly after, she barked fiercely,

"DIVISION THREE, REGIMENT 3! ATTACK!"

Jake and the others didn't move until Amy's derailed voice cried out just behind them, "Fuck?! But that's us!"

Their platoon's recruits went pale hearing this, but it was already too late to back out, as their division commander had already taken over.

"COMPANIES 1, 2, AND 3. Engage the enemy!"

"Fuck! That's us too!" Ekho cursed in dismay.

"What did you expect?" Scelacabe chided him with a punch on his helmet. "We're literally on the front line. They weren't going to ask us to step aside..."

"Well, fair point..." The alcoholic grumbled joylessly, adjusting his helmet.

Meanwhile, the few seasoned barbarians of their regiment had already launched into a frenzied charge, taking the lead and dragging the rest of their companies along.

"AAARRRRRRGGHHHH! DEATH TO THE RADIANT CONCLAVE!" A platoon captain bellowed on his own initiative, his bloodshot eyes indicating he'd already lost his mind.

Jake and the other Players had to exert great effort not to cringe witnessing this corny war cry, but there were two who took it as a challenge.

"MEOW! CLAWS AND BRAVERY! TO VICTORY!"

"GOBBLE! MY BRAVE TURKEYS, CHARGE FORTH! LORD PHENIX IS IN THE HOUSE!"

Before Jake could stop them, the two clowns had already far outpaced him, even outstripping the platoon captain who had just yelled. Seeing the two overarmed small pets zoom past him like missiles, the captain's next war cry choked pitifully in his throat.

"Well... Now we're down to eight." Hephais coughed awkwardly.

"That might be for the best, I guess." Jake responded, struggling in vain to suppress the annoyed twitch of his jaw.

He didn't want to hear from the two creatures for the rest of the day or he might strangle them with his bare hands.

"At least they've opened a gap with their breakthrough..." Thonza praised with renewed enthusiasm, seeing that the enemy's shield wall awaiting them had been cleanly speared through by the two indomitable monsters.

The other conscripts realized this too, as did their commanders. Without being ordered, they had already begun rushing towards the gap. Knowing the window opened by the two beasts wouldn't last, all the barbarians accelerated at once, shifting from a lackluster trot to a full sprint.

In the blink of an eye, their three fear-ridden companies transformed into an unstoppable, frenzied horde. Their momentum drastically shook the Light Warriors struggling to hold their own lines. These weren't the well-trained troops of Havocspire, but scared greenhorns like them.

The poor shieldbearers were already traumatized by being rammed by a turkey wielding a joust twenty times its size, but to make matters worse, the rotund cat galloping with the bird had bulldozed the Pulsar serving as their platoon captain, hitting him in the belly like a bullet. His ridiculous horn, as long as a butcher's cleaver, had impaled the valiant warrior clean through, even the Life Link connecting him to his Lifemancer failing to save him in time.

These soldiers were sadly unaware that since Jake's vicious achievement, the Celestial had significantly redesigned his Life Web, making him its epicenter. Now that everything passed through him, it had naturally lost some of its reactivity. That explained, among other things, why Jake had received so many Contribution Points.

A few minutes later, Jake and his squad, along with the rest of the frontline, reached the range of the enemy's arrows. Those who weren't being cut to pieces by Crunch and Lord Phenix scrambled back into formation, hundreds of bows aiming at them.

"FIRE!" Their commander, a Vitalist, screamed tremulously from hundreds of meters behind them. Despite the gravity of the situation, he seemed in no hurry to join the front.

"SHIELDS!" Their own 1000-man commander also bellowed his order from the rear lines, leaving his terrified new troops to assume all the risks.

Again, one could see the difference from Havocspire. Their enemies were clearly less motivated and disciplined, officers from both armies not readily risking their lives.

Jake quickly figured out that this was how a battle was normally supposed to go. The death of a Lifemancer or a Light Paladin was worth thousands of Light Warriors or Pulsars. If even one of them died, the entire army segment they were in charge of would quickly collapse.

It was easy to replace killed Light Warriors and Pulsars, but Vitalists and stronger Lumyst cultivators took much longer to grow. Adding their expertise as generals, it made their lives even more invaluable.

If this was the case for the Lustra Plains, it was the same for their own camp. So it wasn't that their commanders were cowardly, but that they had to stay alive at all costs, even if all their troops perished defending them.

"In that case..." Jake turned to check the location of the various commanders of both legions, including Ceythie and her elite guards, and confirmed his theory.

The commanders were indeed all heavily protected and separated from the enemy lines by dozens, hundreds of rows of troops and obstacles. The same was true for their enemies.

At a glance, he estimated that to take down a regiment commander, one would need a cultivation stage at least two levels above that of the commander. But if the enemy struck too fiercely, say by mobilizing a Saint, then Ceythie and her guards would immediately target that Saint, escalating the conflict to apocalyptic proportions. In defense, with all their defensive measures, taking down an isolated Saint wasn't impossible.

The whole challenge was to force the enemy generals to expose themselves for easier elimination or to make them retreat. This could be done by eliminating their lower officers one by one until their army became dysfunctional, or by resorting to a more audacious strategy to take down a more important officer directly without using an overly unbalanced force that would alert them and inevitably trigger violent retaliation.

With these new elements in mind, Jake finally saw how he should proceed to accomplish deeds worthy of him without immediately becoming the man to take down.

With an inconspicuous smile on his lips promising blood and massacre, Jake indifferently ignored the arrows raining down on him and silently threw himself into the fray...