

The Oracle Paths

- Chapter 1131.1: First Real Day of Battle (part 1) |

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Whoosh!

The two nearest Light Warriors immediately blocked his path. The first tried to smash his head with a massive rectangular shield, while the second vigorously thrust his halberd forward, intent on impaling him.

"Too slow," Jake tutted, dodging the first's shield with a backward neck sway, and with a precise front kick, sent the second warrior and his lance flying before the blow could land.

The one who had tried to crush his head with his shield hadn't yet realized the gap in their strength and directly followed up with a second shield bash, but in reverse this time. Jake dodged indifferently as before, but this time, he slipped under the shield by pivoting on himself with elusive footwork, before driving his elbow into the soldier's plexus. The steel breastplate now funneling into the thorax of his unlucky victim, Jake didn't even bother to check the result.

Unsurprisingly, a few seconds later, he felt their souls, but also their lifeforce and Lumyst nourishing his Lumyst Aura. It should have reached level 2 and acquired its first form after defeating River's Bane, but due to his new Unified Lumyst Aura, its completion had been delayed.

Of the two components forming this unified whole, his Spirit Lumyst Aura was just shy of level 2, while his Life Lumyst Aura was still far from advancing to the next level. The lifeforce Jake had managed to snatch from the monster with Essence Snatch before its total obliteration hadn't been enough to bridge the gap between his two Auras.

As for what he had managed to tear away truly precious from the kraken just before its death with Essence Snatch, it was a piece of its Spirit Body in which its weakened soul had taken refuge and the main Life Lumyst Core lodged in its heart just before it imploded. Jake hadn't yet decided what to do with the core, but finding the Titan's soul in the stolen piece of Spirit Body had been a pleasant surprise.

Normally, all this spiritual energy should have nourished his Spirit Lumyst Aura, but at that fateful moment, his instincts as a Cosmic D Starfeyrves had kicked in, and his Soul

Tribute ability had superseded the absorption function of his Lumyst Aura and sucked in the unconscious soul of the kraken.

Jake had wondered for a moment why this had happened, his Lumyst Aura having had no trouble devouring the souls of his previous victims, but by delving within himself, he had quickly found the reason.

In his Spirit Dimension, or rather Cosmic Hatchery, a new fairy spirit very different from his other cute familiars was taking shape... Instead of the expected two arms and two legs, the forming appendages were... much more numerous.

This spirit was also... much bigger!

At the moment, he had been disoriented, not knowing how to react. Even though this new Cosmic Fairy was on track to be a reincarnation of River's Bane, like it had been the case for Jeanie and Trash Rubt, this was the first time an enemy had received such treatment.

With its soul preserved, Jake could already predict that this Fairy Spirit would indeed be much stronger. But without its own titanic body, this Familiar would likely become useless like the others.

This was where the Life Lumyst Core secured with Essence Snatch came into play. With this core and the fairy spirit version of River's Bane, it would theoretically be possible to properly resurrect this calamitous aquatic monster.

River's Bane would consequently become his true first Familiar. A fairy spirit not dependent on his excess biomass to exist in the physical world.

This discovery was a breath of fresh air not just for Jake, but also for all the other fairy spirits dreaming of having their own bodies. It was also a beacon of hope for Xi. Although she hadn't broached the subject after their argument the previous day, he knew it would come up again sooner or later.

[Since you already know...] Xi huffed in an openly sullen tone.

'Too bad incubating this River's Bane requires way too much energy,' Jake justified wryly, decapitating a third opponent too slow to react to his movements.

The damned squid was continuously sapping 10% of his passive Spirit Energy regeneration. Nothing surprising given the colossal Spirit Body of the cephalopod in life. He estimated its imminent birth within a few days to a few weeks.

This twist had, however, sparked a new interest in Jake: to collect the souls of his most powerful slain adversaries.

While Jake was slicing through one Light Warrior after another with the distracted expression of someone lost in thought, the rest of his squad had followed in his footsteps to infiltrate the breach he had just widened.

Hephais unsheathed his two scimitars without a word after also dodging the rain of arrows with supernatural grace, then placed himself in two ethereal steps devoid of presence in the blind spot of the Light Warrior facing him. Before the latter realized that the hooded man sprinting towards him had vanished, his vision blacked out forever, his head severed from his torso.

The expert assassin then drew two shurikens from one of the dedicated pockets of his armor, and threw them both simultaneously in a frisbee-like manner. Aligned with the enemy shieldbearers still barely holding their line, each shuriken shot in opposite directions, slicing straight through the necks of a dozen Light Warriors each before losing momentum.

If he hadn't been intent on keeping a low profile, the entire front line of the enemy would have collapsed.

This extraordinary masterstroke was, nonetheless, more than enough to cripple a whole section of the enemy defense. Three or four enemy platoons instantly became easy pickings for the galvanized recruits of their own regiment, who finally found the courage to overcome their fear by pouncing on the archers caught off guard just behind.

"Careful, Hephais," Jake raised an eyebrow in annoyance as he pierced the heart and breastplate of an enemy army squad leader with a single finger. "We wouldn't want all the enemy Players and commanders to come down on us at the same time. It's annoying, but let's play the game by their rules as much as possible."

Since the beginning of the Ordeal, he hadn't forgotten the objective of his second Side Mission. Unifying Twyluxia under his yoke could obviously be accomplished by massacring everyone, but the rating he would receive consequently would probably be atrocious.

Without presuming to know the Oracle's evaluation criteria, the perfect rating could only be becoming the supreme ruler of the continent with the least possible casualties. To go even further, he would need to gain their respect and recognition, not through tyranny, but by earning it.

Easier said than done. Nevertheless, it remained obvious that indiscriminately exterminating everyone would be a very bad idea.

"Focus on the big fish?" Hephais immediately understood, slowing the pace to let the other members of their squad take over.

Killing more enemies would certainly allow them to develop their Lumyst Aura faster, but these Light Warriors were actually far too weak for them. Their life force was adequate for cultivating their Life Lumyst Aura, but they would still need to kill tens of thousands of them for top Players like them to feel the difference. Killing a Lifemancer or a Light Paladin could bring them much more for far less effort.

As for their Spirit Lumyst Aura, unless they eliminated the Underworld Barbarians from their own camp, only Players were suitable prey. The objective of their Global Main Mission being to triumph over the Players of the opposing Mirror Universe, it was evident which targets were preferable.

Because in the case of these Players, there was unfortunately no possible agreement... Only a camp of winners and one of losers. More precisely, a camp of the living, the other filled with the dead.

Back to the ongoing battle, the Light Warrior into whom Jake had just stabbed his index finger into was not yet a Pulsar, but he was massive, and his Lumyst Aura was about to condense a defensive light film over his skin. The muscular soldier had noticed Jake effortlessly eliminating the subordinates of his own squad and had decided to put an end to it by acting personally.

He had no idea that this would instead amount to futilely offering his life to the enemy. When his body collapsed paralyzed after Jake removed his finger, the vibrant life force that should have allowed him to survive for a while was siphoned by Jake's invisible Lumyst Aura, and his consciousness sank into darkness forever.

Chapter 1132.2: First Real Day Of Battle (part 2)

Jake paused for a brief second, his gaze drawn intently to the corpse at his feet that had just entered eternal rest. At that moment, perhaps instinctively or just out of caution, he checked the last data recorded by his Snitch Ring. As expected, his Contribution Points had increased, but no Titan had been injured this time.

If every soldier fighting for the Dusken Throne has a Snitch Ring, they must have something equivalent on them.] Xi reminded him needlessly, their minds always in sync.

"Anthace," Jake murmured in agreement, catching a halberd swooping down at his back without looking.

As he wrenched it from the stunned assailant's grip with a jerk and eviscerated him with an oblique slash, he thought to himself,

'This tree is the main hurdle preventing me from concealing my identity from the enemy for long. I assume that even without any dirty tricks from Cho Min Ho or another ally,

they'll know I'm fighting here soon enough. Wearing full armor and sporting a different face won't fool them for long.'

[In that case, if you think it's still too early to go all out and show your hand, why not just desert and act from the shadows?] Xi pointed out rightly. [If you struck them from the shadows, they'd have no way of seeing you coming.]

'I've been considering that,' Jake chuckled, crouching to search the previous corpse for an item that might serve as a tracker for Anthace. 'But in a word, prestige. My enemies, as well as my allies, need to see me in action as a role model to appreciate and respect me. Plus, if I know the enemy is laying a trap, can we still say I'm caught in it? Once I'm aware of their plans, it's more like I'm ambushing them.'

His Oracle AI was not so easily persuaded, and after a meaningful silence, she countered,

[That would make sense if the Players opposite were ordinary. Oracle Knights are not sheep. They'll know you're aware of the trap they're setting and will act accordingly. When they strike, they will have prepared for all contingencies. Don't let the prospect of a good Ordeal Rating narrow your field of vision. Even if it's not you they're targeting, it'll be your comrades or the other Players. Knowing where you are at any given moment is also a great asset for them. While you're here, they can strike elsewhere without worry. If I were them, as long as you stay put, I'd choose to sacrifice this battlefield and focus instead on those far from this position so you can't easily intervene even if you catch on.]

Jake's galactic eyes narrowed darkly at this latest warning, but he continued to search the corpse at his feet, ignoring the chaos of the battle raging around him. Finally, he rose empty-handed and mentally reported,

'They carry no rings, no accessories, no items that might suggest an equivalent to the Snitch Ring. Only their weapon and some armor pieces made from Anthace wood remain. Unless my senses deceive me, I can only deduce by elimination that it's their equipment itself that serves as eyes and ears.'

Don't change the subject!] Xi exploded, uncaring of how the Titan Tree monitored its army.

Jake sighed resignedly and started running at a normal pace towards the next enemy, then said with a sly smile, "You really think I'd forget such a detail? I can also turn the fact they know I'm here to my advantage, right? It's not like there's a shortage of Fairy Spirits to take my place."

[A clone?] Xi caught on immediately before retorting, "I thought you wanted to avoid straying too far from them to not endanger the fairy and the biomass allocated to the clone."

"That's still the case, but circumstances have changed. Sometimes, you have to be willing to take some risks to win big."

This statement went directly against his initial plan from the first few days, but the accelerated events of the previous night had forced him to rethink all his schemes. If a Rank 17 Player wasn't capable of self-reflection, he would have had a hard time surviving until now. Jake was usually cautious and inflexible, but when necessary, he could step out of his comfort zone.

'But at least for today, I can help these recruits become real soldiers.' Jake thought to himself as he slid ghost-like under his opponent before bisecting him with an upward saber strike.

Stunned by the death of their comrade, two other Light Warriors accompanied by a quasi-Pulsar hurled themselves at him, screaming, but he dispatched them with the same otherworldly agility.

Jake expected to be attacked again right away, but after raising his blade cautiously, he was surprised when nothing happened. He then took the opportunity to look around and discovered that their platoon had completely overwhelmed the opposing forces. After bulldozing through three or four platoons, the 1000-man Commander leading the regiment had ordered the defensive line to be pulled back.

As for the rest of the three companies fighting alongside them, their advantage was less pronounced. The stalwart shieldbearers of the Lustra Plains were still holding strong, but the breakthrough initiated by Crunch and Lord Phenix, then expanded by Jake and his squad, was starting to have a snowball effect impacting the other battlefields.

The 1000-man Commander of the retreating company had not reacted poorly if his goal was to preserve his troops, but on the scale of the entire battle, it was an unforgivable tactical error, undermining the defense of their army as a whole.

The clearly nervous man, who had been standing out of harm's way, safe behind his lines, had already started to move his command center back, instead of reinforcing the ailing lines. The Light Warriors, relying on him to bring up the rear, found themselves all the more desperate as they realized they would have to scramble to retreat in good order while trying to fend off their relentless pursuers.

The outcome could only be a pathetic debacle. A debacle that all the officers of both armies, from the lowest to the highest ranks, did not fail to witness.

"What an idiot..." The enemy legion commander scowled disdainfully as he surveyed the chaos below from the top of his high hill, where his headquarters were established. "What's that commander's name again?"

A colossus at least 7 meters tall, covered in scars and clad in heavy gold and white plate armor, clasped his hands respectfully with a clanking sound, then reported in a gruff voice,

"Commander Lancel. A Light Paladin recently promoted after his clan pulled some strings. A good warrior, according to the rumors, but this is his first battle of such magnitude."

The graying man who had asked the question cast another apathetic glance at the retreating company, then ordered decisively,

"If he survives, I want him demoted to the rank of foot soldier. He will fight on the front lines until I deem that he has redeemed his mistake. Hopefully, by then he'll have learned some responsibility and grown a pair of balls."

"... As you command, General."

The merciless General that the giant had just saluted before retreating to execute the order was named Isdar. Although he wasn't as renowned as the 4 Saints of the Radiant Conclave or a Great General like Ceythie, the man was still a formidable Radiant Lord, just one stage below. With few exceptions, every Light Warrior who had reached this stage of cultivation was also a formidable Lifemancer.

The hill where the man and his HQ stood was so fortified that if a native attacked it head-on, they would need power at least comparable to that of a Saint to hope to reach the top of the hill in one piece. Only the Celestial or the Soulmancer King might have a chance to defeat him and leave as they came without much damage.

His HQ was far from being threatened, but he didn't think he'd need to activate one of his many trap cards so soon. Even though the hill where he was located was more a minefield than an ivory tower for his foes, he had no intention of resorting to that.

It was his last line of defense, and reaching that point would mean a total failure of both his mission and personally. Throughout his long career as a soldier, he had never lost a battle strategically. Even if it was Ceythie, the bloodthirsty Berserker opposite, he had no intention of ending his long streak of undefeated battles.

Addressing his other adjutant standing silently to his left after the first armored giant's departure, he commanded ominously,

"Send in the Mumaks."

Chapter 1133.3: First Real Day Of Battle (part 3)

Jake was somewhat dismayed that the enemy had faltered so easily, but he took the opportunity to check on how the rookies in his squad were handling their new equipment. He had forged it hastily, but had still put his heart into it and was curious to see how they were using it.

The first he spotted was the former alcoholic, Ekho, who hadn't lost his old habits. Despite being decked out in a brand-new enchanted set, he hadn't abandoned his practice of shadowing Jake closely. Whether it was a sordid nose for opportunities, sheer fanaticism, or survival instinct bordering on paranoia, Jake couldn't help but admire his consistency.

But this time, it had backfired on him. While their other squadmates racked up their first kills chasing down the fleeing enemies, the barbarian found himself momentarily without an opponent.

"B-boss, aren't you going after them?" Ekho asked awkwardly, fidgeting with his sword as if restraining himself from joining the frenzied chase.

"No need," Jake grimaced. "Crunch and the other dumb turkey are on it."

It was only then that the alcoholic remembered that it was indeed the two unruly beasts who had initiated the charge. Right now, the two small pets were out of sight, but a jet of flame or screams of agony gave a rough indication of their whereabouts.

And when Ekho turned his gaze towards the direction of those distant cries and pyrotechnic displays... His eyes widened in shock!

"Holy shit, isn't that where the enemy commander was barking out orders?" He blurted out in astonishment.

Jake smiled. "And it's also the direction he was fleeing in. Crunch might be a slap-worthy idiot, but he's my cat. They'll make short work of a Light Paladin. Especially if he's foolish enough to turn his back on them..."

With his sharp vision, Jake had no trouble seeing their situation through the numerous rows of allied and enemy troops. Indeed, a few seconds later, he noticed the all-but-subtle orange turkey burst out from between two guards too slow to react, and with a flap of its free wing, propelled itself like a missile straight towards...

"AAARRRRRRRGH!"

The piercing scream of agony from the privileged Commander Lancel echoed across the battlefield, a 20-foot lance having impaled his rear end up to the hilt... The tragedy was that, like any Light Warrior with a decent degree of cultivation, his body was massive and resilient, and his Lifeforce abundant.

Believe it or not, but the Light Paladin so dramatically deflowered was still alive... Not for long, though...

Frustrated that his partner had snatched his target, Crunch appeared inconspicuously behind the already deeply lodged lance and with a 'gentle' paw stroke, drove it entirely in... The tip of the lance emerged through the top of the Light Paladin's skull, killing him instantly.

"That was... ugh... I'd rather erase that from my memory," Jake's jaw twitched in disgust, but he knew that, unfortunately, due to his eidetic memory, this repugnant vision would be imprinted in his mind forever.

Ekho, who didn't have a good enough view to comprehend what luck he had, showed a confused expression at seeing his boss's face distorted by disgust, but he attributed it to the pervasive smell of blood and guts enveloping the battlefield.

Meanwhile, the other rookies continued to pursue the Light Warriors in full rout, the death of their company commander only adding to the chaos. The other members of his squad also took the opportunity to nourish their Lumyst Aura as much as possible.

It was a veritable feast!

Jashuzen had finally decided to keep his previous axe and therefore wielded a battleaxe in each hand. The catch was that he only used one, his cherished heirloom serving only to parry a few rare blows.

The difference between the two axes was an unbridgeable chasm. The well-born barbarian didn't even need to touch his opponents to slice them in half. Simply slicing the air in their direction was sufficient, as long as they weren't too far away.

Watching a half-dozen tall and sturdy Light Warriors get minced from more than ten meters away by Jashuzen with a single invisible blade of unknown origin, Jake began to realize he might have made a mistake.

No need to lay low with such recruits... The corner of Jake's lip twitched imperceptibly, but the damage was already done.

[Recruits, who are from the same squad as you and whom you are the captain of~] Xi sang mockingly, enjoying rubbing salt in his wound.

"Fuck..."

"W-what?" Ekho stammered, thinking he had messed up, but received no response.

That said, they might also take an interest in where these weapons came from. Jake decided to see the glass half full for a change. If I supply such weapons and armor to natives of other armies, they might have a hard time tracing the origin back to me.

[Don't get your hopes up too high.] Xi scoffed sarcastically.

'Tsk... You're such a killjoy.'

[Take that as a compliment.]

Of course, assuming he had the time, energy, and inclination to arm everyone, which wasn't necessarily the case, Cho Min Ho would inevitably be informed. After what he had learned from Amy about the King's Idol Alliance, he didn't want to indirectly arm its members.

Because there was no fooling himself. Even if he only offered these weapons to the natives, it would be child's play for Players to take them back, whether by theft, blackmail, or legal requisition. After all, Cho Min Ho was currently the reigning Soulmaner King and theoretically had all the rights as long as the true king didn't invalidate his authority.

Speaking of the true Soulmaner King...

Thonzo was gleefully slaughtering one Light Warrior after another with his new claymore without touching them, his Lumyst Aura condensing visibly. Claire and Scelacabe were also racking up kills with their long spears with disturbing ease, their equipment boosting their combat strength indecently.

It was like giving level 100 mythical equipment to a level 1 newbie, who should only have access to common rarity items of the same level. Just one of the artifacts he had forged was more than enough to make them invincible among their peers.

At some point, a Vitalist, enraged at seeing his loyal troops decimated like minnows, decided to personally put an end to the killing spree by the two young women. He was the vice-

commander of the company that had just lost its commander and was already on the edge of losing his cool.

The warrior, towering over 5 meters tall, appeared out of nowhere, defying all sense, and covered fifty meters in a single leap. Neither Claire nor Scelacabe could react in time.

BOOOOM!

Although they miraculously moved out of his trajectory just in time, the ground collapsed under the Vitalist's weight at the impact, burying the two undefeated women under a mountain of rubble.

"Claire! Scelacabe!"

Thonzo and Jashuzen, who were fighting at their side, let out anguished cries at seeing them taken down so easily, and their sense of invincibility took a hit. Their enraged killer, however, couldn't be satisfied with killing two women two stages of cultivation below him and immediately turned his murderous gaze towards the remaining two recruits.

Gulp.

Even over-equipped with their enchanted artifacts, the two natives were petrified with fear, on the verge of fleeing like those they had just been chasing. But as the powerful Light Warrior set his sights on Thonzo with a carnivorous throat rumble, the ground beneath his feet trembled and he leaped into the air just in time to see it explode.

Rocks and dirt shot into the air like omnidirectional artillery fire, taking out friend and foe alike. Thonzo and Jashuzen were not spared either, getting hit by two rock projectiles the size of footballs with the velocity of a cannonball.

"Ffuu-"

BANG!

The Vitalist, having calmly dodged in time, landed a little further away and after the dust settled, inspected the devastated area to try and understand what had just happened.

The first thing that struck him was the hundred or so Underworld Barbarians and Light Warriors lying dead or grievously injured on the ground. Neither their inferior equipment, nor their immature Lumyst Auras, nor their frail physiques could have saved them from such a destructive force.

But as the vice-captain of the company was about to leave the area, his bloodlust satisfied, his eye caught movement in his peripheral vision. When he identified the things responsible for these movements, his tranquil face paled substantially.

The four recruits he had come to personally kill were not only all alive, but also unharmed.

Chapter 1134.4: First Real Day of Battle (part 4)

Even more baffling, not a speck of dust had sullied their hair or dirtied their armor. It was as if the earth and rock upheaved by the explosion had magically avoided them.

This was especially striking with the two young women who had been buried alive. Even unharmed, their skin and clothes should have borne the mark of rotting six feet underground just seconds earlier.

"What sorcery is this?" The Vitalist grumbled in a wrathful voice, tinged with an involuntary fear.

The warrior was not the vice-commander of his company for nothing, and his gaze quickly shifted to the identical armor and weapon materials each of the four surviving recruits wore. It was all the more eye-catching because Jake had made no effort to embellish his creations, focusing solely on functionality. Thus, for the wary Vitalist, these plain weapons and armors forged from the same black steel seemed all the more suspicious.

'If I get my hands on these artifacts, a promotion is surely mine.' A flame of ambition blazed in his eyes. Forgetting that his commander—a Light Paladin much stronger than him—had just perished, he lunged at the nearest recruit.

Seeing the giant, wrapped in a thick film of light, charging back with the clearance of an elephant, Claire's legs involuntarily trembled. Despite her fear, she did not succumb to despair and tried to thrust her lance forward as taught, but she was hopelessly slow compared to her opponent. She had barely raised her weapon when the light giant was already upon her.

Perhaps because his first assassination attempt had failed, the Vitalist attacked seriously this time. Within arm's reach of the tiny woman barely up to his waist, he swung his massive mace backward and struck with the velocity of a thunderclap.

BANG!

A shockwave more deafening and devastating than before tore the ground from beneath Claire, creating a crater a meter deep and several meters wide, making her appear even smaller.

But her body... was still there. Not pulverized into a bloody pulp as everyone anticipated.

"Cough!!!"

Instead, jets of blood spurted from the various orifices of the Vitalist who had struck her with all his might, as he stared in horrified disbelief at his broken hands holding a mace reduced to its handle.

'...what the hell just happened?'

The first to be surprised was Claire herself. As the massive mace descended on her at breakneck speed, she thought she was done for, but instead, it was her assailant who was on the brink of death. What had happened?!

She could swear that just before the mace hit her, her armor emitted a dark metallic aura that completely absorbed, amplified, and then infused the kinetic energy of the attack back into the enemy's weapon, leading to its annihilation. This aura reminded her unmistakably...

"Black Metal Lumyst," Jake commented in a flat tone. "The spirit of her armor is not yet conscious, but with 14 Spirit Enchantments, its instincts are already there. If I go by the personality of Ledger, an inert artifact that is spiritually awakened will tend to hold its primary function dear as its *raison d'être*. Armor exists to protect its wearer, and even I, its creator, forged it with that purpose."

It was just the beginning. Rather than awakening, it was more accurate to say that Breath Of Awakening bestowed a soul upon these initially inert objects. For now, even for Jake, a promising Aetherist, it remained a high magic trick he was far from unraveling.

Understanding how a soul emerged in an item with no neural network or electrical activity capable of supporting a proto-soul was a mystery that eluded him. No doubt, a more learned Aetherist might provide an answer, but for the current him, it was beyond his grasp.

As Jake let his mind wander, thinking of all the mysterious magics waiting to be discovered, Claire recovered from her surprise. Taking advantage of the Vitalist's stupor, she dared a counterattack.

"Die."

At that moment, her face and tone were as hideous as they were indifferent and cold. The spear in her hands came to life on its own, like a serpent awakening. Claire only had to wield her spear, and its tip pierced the radiant-haloed giant in the blink of an eye, extinguishing his inner light.

Her immature Lumyst Aura intensified dramatically, going from invisible to almost palpable. A commanding murderous aura then radiated from her being before being quickly subdued.

"C-congratulations, Claire," Scelacabe congratulated her with an uncertain pat on the shoulder. "Your Lumyst Aura has taken form."

In terms of Aura alone, the influence and spiritual pressure she now exerted over several meters' radius and infused into each of her movements were enough to rival a Pulsar from the Lustra Plains. An ordinary Light Warrior would not be completely incapacitated, but their movements and reaction time would be drastically affected.

'So this is what a fully formed Lumyst Aura looks like,' Jake realized with a feeling of impatient anticipation.

The difference was indeed spectacular. Until now, he had been under the impression that natives of the Duskwight Lands were at a disadvantage in the initial stages compared to the physical advantage and powerful defensive, offensive, and regenerative capabilities provided by Life Lumyst Aura and Life Lumyst, but this world was fair.

Claire's physical constitution hadn't changed much, except for the expected stat boost from her Lumyst Aura's advancement. However, the danger she posed to her opponents was incomparable to before. If before, she was a non-venomous grass snake, she was now a cobra capable of killing with a single bite.

After the death of the Vitalist—also the vice-commander—the little discipline left in his fleeing company completely dissolved, and the relatively orderly rout turned into chaos, each running for their life.

The other recruits in Jake's squad, eager to imitate Claire's power-up by condensing their own Lumyst Aura, became like mad dogs, chasing the fleeing soldiers with the desperation of starving lions. The other conscripts in their platoon didn't have as good weapons but couldn't miss the opportunity to score some kills and accelerated their pace not to be left behind.

In less time than it takes to say, the two or three platoons leading the counter-offensive had moved far away from their own lines. Jake, Hephais, Amy, and the other Players fighting among them immediately noticed the problem but did nothing to stop them.

'The enemies are retreating too quickly and leading us in a specific direction,' Jake noted with a concentrated frown, scanning his surroundings for a sign corroborating his suspicions.

Far behind enemy lines, he soon spotted a series of white and yellow flags aligned and raised in a certain sequence. Now that he had spotted these flags, he couldn't help but notice the numerous similar-patterned banners relayed by other visible officers of the enemy army.

Thump... Thump...Thump...

Listening closely, Jake felt more than heard the rhythmically precise clash of war drums. Combined with the flags, it must surely mean something. Of course, he could have soulsearched a major officer, but that would force him to reveal his role too soon.

'I can't go to that high hill without orders...'

But that was fine, Ceythie and all her superior officers were under his control.

"F-freaking hell! What are these abominations doing here?!"

"I-I can't believe it! M-MUKAKS!"

"Hmm?" Jake noticed the wave of panic sweeping through his camp almost immediately, but it was already too late.

While he analyzed the enemy army's means of communication, the few surviving enemies had managed their retreat, leaving their pursuers exposed and vulnerable far from their own line.

'So, counterattacking with these things is what those drums and flags meant,' Jake realized without any stress, seeing abominable war beasts emerge from previously dug tunnels, pulling enormous armored chariots behind them.

Each of these chariots was piloted by a Radiant Mage.

Chapter 1135.5: First Real Day Of Battle (part 5)

RRROOOOOARRRR!

As the enemy's concealed tunnels revealed themselves to daylight, along with the nightmarish horrors pulling chariots inside, the overexcited barbarians who had outrun their comrades skidded to a halt, gripped by terror. Thus exposed, these monsters would make short work of them!

Alas, it was too late to flee. These war beasts galloped far faster than them!

The other platoons, maintaining a semblance of formation at a safe distance from the front, didn't fare much better. It didn't take a master strategist to realize that three companies of green infantry like theirs would be minced by such a chariot charge.

In many ancient cultures, such as Ancient Egypt, the Roman Empire, Greece, China, Assyria, Babylonia, India, and even the Celts, relying on this Bronze Age-born technology was quite standard. Mounted cavalry, more versatile, had gradually replaced them much later during the Iron Age.

These two-wheeled chariots, drawn by two to four horses, with a driver accompanied by one or more archers and lancers, often had a long scythe-blade extending from their axle, capable of mowing down any soldiers failing to clear their path in time. Those who survived were finished off by lancers with long spears suited to their role, while archers targeted infantry at medium range.

Such a chariot charge, like a well-timed cavalry charge, could, with its speed and inertia, decimate an unprepared infantry unit in an instant. No warrior, no matter how strong and trained, could stop a galloping chariot and its horses by merely blocking its path with a sturdy shield. Even if somehow they managed, it would be outright suicide.

Yesterday, as today, barring a few rare kamikazes, no soldier, even well-trained, was ready to futilely sacrifice their life for a good cause. They needed at least a reasonable chance of survival.

This individualism was the main reason why chariot charges were so effective. Caught off guard, the infantrymen instinctively forgot the few risky tactics that could have given them a fighting chance.

Despite its certain military interest, there was a good reason why these chariots had gradually been abandoned during the Iron Age in favor of mounted cavalry. Their wheels were not as mobile as those of modern cars and thus had a lot of trouble taking turns.

Another major disadvantage linked to the first was that they could only be used on flat, solid, and clear terrain. As war tactics evolved, moving to more varied and rugged battlefields, these chariots naturally became obsolete, and mounted cavalry gradually replaced them.

These Mumaks, along with the steel monsters they pulled, did not have these weaknesses.

Even from Jake's rear position, the scene was striking, with dozens of huge beasts and chariots emerging from nowhere, dwarfing their own army. Those in his squad, like Jashuzen and Thonzo, who had participated in the pursuit of fleeing enemies, accompanied by other recruits, were already exhausted from their previous run and were now on the brink of collapse.

What they saw before them exceeded all their imaginations.

In the distance, emerging one by one from the tunnels, the Mumaks continued to unveil themselves in all their terror. These massive creatures, the size of a three-story building, were more terrifying and alien than anything the conscripts had faced before, advancing with an aura of relentless destruction. By their sheer presence, they eclipsed everything around them, casting their menacing shadow over the battlefield.

Though massive, these beasts did not appear clumsy and slow. Their trunks and limbs were sleek and muscular like slender felines, hiding explosive strength. Their sinewy, striated muscles rippled under their pale white-gray skin, resembling armor.

The entire surface of their bodies was indeed covered in oversized horns, sharp claws, and an abundance of spikes, giving the impression that every part of their body was a deadly weapon. These natural outgrowths lent the Mumaks a nearly demonic appearance, as if they were the product of some aberrant biological experimentation.

Their bloodshot eyes shone with an evil yellow glow, reflecting the savagery and brutality of their nature, and each time their gaze fell on a recruit, they almost invariably lost control of their bladders. To make matters worse, every deliberately slow step of these monsters resonated like a thunderclap, shaking the ground and spreading panic among those in the front lines, as well as those further back.

Contrasting with the apocalyptic aspect of their hideous mounts, the war chariots they pulled were of almost unreal beauty, but equally deadly and imposing with their high golden steel wheels, the diameter of a small car, and covered with long sharp blades. On the rather spacious platform they supported stood resplendent warriors, draped in white and gold armor, shining with an almost divine glow under the sun's rays: Pulsars and Vitalists.

On each of these chariots, a Radiant Mage stood out, emitting a luminous halo, enhancing the aura of nobility and celestial power surrounding the group and further boosting the Mumaks propelling them.

As if this nightmarish spectacle wasn't enough, in addition to these chariots and their awful mounts, there were also smaller Mumaks moving independently, bringing mobility and flexibility to an otherwise more rigid unit.

At a glance, Jake estimated the average power level of these beasts to that of a Vitalist. That was only for the youngest. The most massive Mumaks pulling the chariots were even more formidable, matching the strength of a Light Paladin and perhaps even that of a Corebearer for the oldest.

"What an impressive force to eliminate a handful of terrified greenhorns..." Jake muttered with a grim face. "If it's not because of me, I suppose Crunch and Lord Phoenix must be feeling quite proud of themselves right now..."

Speaking of the two clowns, they were indeed ecstatic. But... True to their personalities, when it came time to own up to their blunders, they were nowhere to be seen...

"Sigh... I hate them."

"Who's that?" Ekho asked out of curiosity, perhaps the only recruit completely relaxed due to the reassuring presence of his invincible boss.

"... Who do you think?"

Leaving the former alcoholic with that response, he decided to take action rather than wait, joining the front platoon. He had the feeling that if the Players dispersed among them did nothing, the three companies with whom they were fighting would be annihilated.

And his prediction was indeed not far from the truth. As soon as the tunnels finished spewing the last Mumaks, the Radiant Mage commanding the most mastodon among them signaled the charge by firing a luminous flare with his staff. Both the mage and his mount had the lifeforce fluctuations of a Corebearer.

"CHARGE!"

SWWWWOOOOOOOSH!

Jake and the other Players had imagined this charge in all sorts of ways, but nothing as absurd and lightning-fast. The huge beasts and their chariots went from zero to half the speed of sound in the blink of an eye, gutting their three companies before they had time to react.

The archers on the chariots unleashed dozens, hundreds of golden arrows wrapped in light with the cadence of a machine gun during their lightning-fast charge lasting one or two short seconds. At least 800 barbarians were shot down by these arrows alone, while twice as many were trampled by the Mumaks or mowed down by the long blades extending from the chariots' axles.

In a flash, three companies still nearly intact totaling nearly 3,000 men had been reduced to less than a quarter of their strength. It was nothing less than a massacre!

Chapter 1136.6: First Real Day Of Battle (part 6)

Amy and Jake's squads, composed of Players, emerged unscathed, yet they couldn't shake off their overwhelming shock. They had mostly gauged the lifeforce and Lumyst cultivation of the war beasts correctly, but the explosive charging speed under such gravity was beyond their wildest expectations.

In fact, one of Amy's lower-ranked Players, a Rank 11 Aereian named Zerei, was blindsided, crushed, and rolled over by a pair of rampaging Mumak-chariots before he could even react. He was barely hanging onto life.

"I... didn't expect to get hammered like that," the frail Aereian grimaced, coughing up blood between short, ragged breaths.

His survival was a miracle, owed to his bloodline which, despite his slight frame, bestowed upon him a resilient skeleton capable of withstanding sudden accelerations when he manipulated air for propulsion. Unfortunately, his specialization in auxiliary wind magics like mirages and sound magic had left him ill-prepared for such brutal frontal assaults.

"Don't whine," Venuwen chided him, tapping his forehead as she set about healing him with her lunar magic, racing against time before the Mumaks returned for another charge.

Her healing magic was painfully slow compared to Jake's almost instant resurrection spells. But this wasn't entirely her fault. Zerei's shattered body was saturated with the Life Lumyst from the beasts, negating his natural regenerative abilities. Had he been a mere Rank 8 Player without any special talent rather than a somewhat skilled Rank 11, he would have been long gone.

"Let me heal him," a voice, soft yet unyielding, prompted Venuwen to step aside.

Turning her head, she recognized the ethereal elven face with flowing silver hair as Lysandra Moonaris, their unanimously chosen squad leader. The aura Venuwen sensed from the Rank 15 elf-like beauty was familiar, and rightly so.

While Venuwen was a Lunarian with an affinity for lunar magic, Lysandra was born a Moon Elf. Her bloodline had evolved significantly, yet the root of their magic remained similar.

However, the vast difference in their Oracle Ranks was no laughing matter. As soon as Lysandra directed her palm towards Zerei and her hand shimmered with a pale radiance, the Aerelian's broken bones started to knit together rapidly. Seconds later, he was able to stand once again.

"Thank you..."

"If you really want to thank me, try not to get hurt again," the elf nodded stoically.

She then silently moved on to heal Chromy, Chewy, and their owner Nuwa, who also had suffered minor injuries. Amy and Lee Yoon had come out unharmed, as expected of their Rank.

Yet, the tremor in Amy's arms as she withdrew her sword from the skull of one of the independent Mumaks betrayed the ordeal's severity. Around her, three more Mumaks lay in pieces, with Lee Yoon standing amidst the carnage, her body drenched in blood, exuding a chilling efficiency.

"They are surprisingly resilient," the former bodyguard of Cho Min Ho eventually declared. "Their life force isn't much different from that of a Light Paladin, but their sheer brute strength is deceptive."

"Their hide was ridiculously tough," Amy admitted, catching her breath after briefly activating her Berserk Skill. She was still in disbelief that she had failed to take down one of these beasts in a single blow without resorting to it.

If a Rank 13 Player like her, specialized in close-quarters combat, was struggling against these monsters, the situation for others must have been even grimmer. Lee Yoon was of the same rank, but her ease in handling the situation wasn't surprising. Had she not been so reserved, she could easily have reached Rank 14 or 15.

Amidst the agonized screams and hundreds of barbarian corpses strewn around her, Amy couldn't help but wonder how Jake and his squad were faring, suspecting they were just as rattled as they were.

Re-energized, she anxiously scanned the battlefield, her eyes widening in astonishment upon spotting Jake and his companions. Apparently, the Mumak charge hadn't come out intact either...

Where the vanguard of their army stood, there were also Thonzo, Jashuzen, Claire, and Scelacabe. Jake obviously couldn't let them perish like that. Not after going through the trouble of forging them such fine armor.

Ironically, for once, Crunch and Lord Phenix, the culprits of this absurd escalation, had decided to take responsibility. Just before the Mumaks and their chariots steamrolled the natives of their squad like a herd of giant bulldozers, they had swiftly intervened, each facing off against a chariot.

Without enlarging himself, Crunch had curled into a ball and puffed up like a moonfish, or rather an urchin, in the path of one of the Mumaks. When the beast stomped on him, not only did it pierce its foot, but it was also explosively launched skyward as if stepping on a trampoline.

The chariot tied to the creature and the Light Warriors on it were just as bewildered, being catapulted along with their mount as if by a slingshot. The Vitalists ended up crashing somewhere, their fate unknown, while the Radiant Mage managed to stop his fall just in time, hovering high in the air with a slightly disoriented look.

Lord Phenix, meanwhile, had bravely accepted the challenge like a knight in a jousting match, directly thrusting his enormous lance into the maw of the massive Mumak charging at him. Unlike the one halted by the black cat, neither the chariot nor the mount budged an inch. The Light Warriors and the Radiant Mage piloting it remained in good shape, though equally bewildered despite not having left the ground.

Hephais, too, had leaped into action, his intervention more surgical but no less lethal. He had simply placed a shadow in the path of the Mumak, its front legs literally 'sinking' into it mid-stride. The beast's horned head then tipped face-first into the ground, and the Egean, positioned just right, simply placed his scimitars in the trajectory of its throat, silently beheading it.

Contrary to Amy, his blades, coated in Shadow Lumyst, had effortlessly sliced through the creature's armored hide.

The chariot attached to the Mumak caught in Hephais' shadow trap then fell victim to its own momentum, crashing against the rear of its massive mount. Its crew was launched into the air with the vehicle, and Hephais plucked the brains of each one, including the Radiant Mage, with one of his dark shurikens. Clean and efficient!

Jake, for his part, had ignored Sank-Uk, who wasn't in serious danger, and with a mere snap of his fingers, hypnotized the three enormous Mumaks charging at him to divert their charge towards the neighboring chariots. The result was a catastrophic pile-up, causing a dozen chariots to overturn. Triple the number of smaller independent Mumaks got crushed or trampled by their larger counterparts or the vehicles caught in their frenzied upheaval.

Thonzo, Jashuzen, Claire, and Scelacabe, fighting with the vanguard, had front-row seats to this show of force, their hearts rapidly shifting from despair to ecstasy before settling on adulation.

They had indeed chosen the right boss! His swift action had saved several hundred lives.

As for Meribelle, battling in the sky against the enemy Lifemancer, she had a vantage point from her height. Without Jake and his comrades, the three companies would have been completely wiped out.

But she wasn't happy. She knew that if it hadn't been for not escalating the battle any further, they could have saved everyone.

Chapter 1137.7: First Real Day Of Battle (Part 7)

"Great General Ceythie, shouldn't we intervene?" A stern-looking trusted officer inquired, the furrow between his brows deeply knit.

Perched like the enemy legion's general atop a hill, the woman leading the Ironsoul Berserkers and her senior officers had not missed the massacre the Mumaks had just wreaked in their ranks. The appropriate response would be to mobilize a counterforce of similar quality.

Usually, that's how they proceeded, but the fierce Great General shook her head, her arms crossed in a stoic demeanor.

"No need. Look. The foreigner I was tasked to report on has already taken action." She finally pointed out with an ambiguous smile. "He's strong enough to sway my heart, thus shaking my unwavering loyalty to the Dusken Throne. I doubt I could harm him, even if he betrayed every value dear to my heart. Nonetheless, my resolve isn't so easily swayed. Knowing that a mere charge of Mumaks can't kill him, by letting him handle it alone, I do him no harm. As long as I trick my mind, I can act as I please."

The officers and guards at her side displayed enlightened expressions after hearing her reasoning. Unfortunately, they couldn't replicate her methods. Compared to a Great General, their minds were too weak. To resist such overpowering spiritual influence, the gap between the victim and the spell caster shouldn't be too wide.

"So we do nothing?" The officer prodded, his tone hesitant.

Ceythie grinned cruelly, "That's not what I said. Since dear old Corvac was forced to deploy the Mumaks, we have the initiative. Order divisions 1 and 2 to attack the flanks of the enemy army. Also, prepare our own Mutated Fiends. Since he chose to bring out the heavy artillery first, who am I to not return the favor?"

The officers and guards around her let out a sinister, knowing laughter in agreement, and the next moment, the rest of the second legion she personally controlled began to move, marked by a deep rumble of footsteps.

The battle, which had started gently, was about to escalate to an entirely different level.

"Only 700 or so survivors, tsk." Jake grumbled, throwing a glance over his shoulder.

The saddest part was that by causing the pile-up involving a dozen chariots and their mounts, he had saved more than half. The other half had been saved by the joint efforts of his squad's Players and Amy's.

A shadowy pool suddenly expanded before him, and Hephais reemerged with a sorry look. Suppressing a falsely contrite smile, he said as impassively as possible,

"It seems fate is determined to force us to fight in the spotlight, whatever we try. If we wanted to keep a low profile, we should have pretended to be dead. Unfortunately..."

"It's just not in our nature." Jake sighed. "I know."

Jake could easily let strangers die, rationalizing that this war really didn't concern them. Keeping in mind that it would have happened with or without them, he could easily absolve himself of the deaths around him.

The problem arose when the enemy attack threatened to wipe out his entire regiment, destroying the environment in which he was supposed to climb the ranks quietly. Another ego-related flaw: He hated losing, even if it meant pretending.

Crunch and Lord Phoenix arrived immediately after, voicing his inner sentiment,

"Boss, laying low is lame!" The black cat criticized, punching the skull of a dying yet somehow still conscious Mumak. "Anyway, after what we just did, all enemy eyes will be on us. In that case, let's not hide and bring out the big guns!"

"It pains me to admit it," The turkey chimed in with a forced grimace, "But the furball is right. LORD PHOENIX MUST SPREAD HIS GLORY THROUGHOUT TWYLUXIA!"

Pong!

Hephais knocked the top of the bird's beak to silence him, earning glares. Ignoring the daggers shooting from the supposed phoenix's eyes, the assassin acknowledged,

"Boss, I know why you want to keep a low profile, but sometimes life doesn't go as planned. Probably our enemies think like you and want to delay the final confrontation as much as possible to gain as much time as they can. Cultivate their Lumyst, accumulate feats, explore Twyluxia's lore, discover its secrets, obtain new artifacts and skills... All this additional time to optimize our Ordeal ratings and progress while only a day passes in our respective Mirror Universes is indeed a boon.

"But we can see things differently. Precisely because it doesn't suit our adversaries either, it might be worth hastening the end of the Ordeal as soon as possible. Don't forget that our Players are still deprived of most Oracle System functionalities. Except for a free spirit like you, biding time represents a huge risk."

Jake didn't immediately respond, just furrowed his brows as the Mumaks in the distance started a wide turn in anticipation of a second charge aimed at finishing them off. There was truth in Hephais' words, but it didn't change the fact that their Ordeal ratings would inevitably be affected if they ended the Ordeal too abruptly.

They simply hadn't had enough time to accumulate Side Missions and explore. And by rushing like this, they would only expose themselves to greater risks.

'However... I can always bail if it gets too heated.' At this thought, his face hardened, a cold killing intent resonating with his newfound resolve.

[No regrets?] Xi finally manifested, now that his decision was made. [Once you start hostilities, there's no turning back. The Lustra Plains and the Players fighting for them will have no choice but to adjust to your new pace.]

Jake remained silent for a moment longer, then said coldly, "I'm fed up with this Ordeal. Let's finish it."

In the meantime, the other recruits of their squad had also joined them, feeling safer around the four Players. When they heard what he had just said, one of them changed expression, stepping out of the role she had played so well until now.

Realizing what he had just said, Jake swept his gaze over the natives of his squad, focusing on one of them, and nuanced,

"No need to worry. I'll do it right. This war won't end so quickly. Just try to keep up with my pace, and all will be fine."

ROOAAARRRRR!

As if to demonstrate his point, the contingent of Mumaks and chariots had just completed their turn and realignment. If their second charge was as swift and deadly as the first, the rest of their three companies would be decimated in the blink of an eye.

In truth, of the three companies, only one remained: theirs. Without Players to save them, the other two had been exterminated in the first charge with a few miracles spared.

These survivors, as well as those of the surviving company, were not fools and understood the plight they were in. Long before the Mumaks finished their turn, they had hurried to rush behind Jake and Amy's squads like a flock of frightened sheep returning to their shepherds.

Unfortunately, the Mumaks were now attacking from the opposite direction. Jake and his companions, currently at the front of the army, logically could do nothing for them.

If Jake had stuck to his original plan, they would have had to abandon them to their fate. But not anymore.

"No quarter." Jake declared, stepping forward, teleporting directly into the middle of the enemy formation. Compared to his speed of movement, the charge of the Mumaks seemed in slow motion.

Reappearing amid the Mumaks and chariots, he accelerated his cognition to the extreme by infusing his neurons with Time Lumyst, then looked at the monsters and chariot wheels, almost at a standstill. They hadn't even noticed his presence yet.

"Poor things... If things had gone as they should have, you wouldn't have had to perish so unjustly. Now, die please."

Chapter 1138.8: First Real Day Of Battle (part 8)

Jake was poised to annihilate them all before they could react when he abruptly halted his motion.

'Killing them all might be too ruthless,' Jake reassessed, recalling his Side Mission's objective. Wiping out all his enemies indiscriminately wasn't the solution if he was aiming for what he believed to be a perfect rating. 'In that case...'

Jake dispersed the Time Lumyst flowing through his neurons, slowing down his cognition to a threshold adequate for communication. Scanning the enormous chariots and the monsters pulling them with a cold gaze, he released a minute part of his spiritual pressure and declared in an amplified voice, saturated with his charm and charisma,

"If you want to live, drop your weapons here and now. I'll count to three. One... Two—"

"A LIGHT WARRIOR BOWS TO NO ONE! KILL HIM!"

Jake turned his head towards the source of the valiant tirade, a fleeting expression of compassion on his face. The speaker had surprisingly resisted his charm, though he hadn't fully exerted himself.

'So, Lumyst Aura and high Lumyst Cultivation have other uses.'

[It's not as if there was anything surprising about it.] Xi chuckled teasingly. [Look on the bright side: thanks to your Lumyst Aura, no spirits will be able to possess you while you sleep].

'Eh, as if that could happen...'

[You never know.]

'...'

Unlike Lady Faye, the Radiant Mage had previously been a victim of a possession attempt by a malevolent wandering soul and was on high alert. As when Jake had confronted River's Bane, his Lumyst formed a dense, impenetrable barrier around him, indiscriminately blocking anything attempting to pass through.

If Jake wanted to break this Radiant Mage's defense, he could easily do so by matching the energy of this barrier with his own. The trouble was, even though his spirit was comparatively powerful, it wasn't for nothing that most ghosts were only a minor threat to the living. And his spirit was still considerably nerfed by Twyluxia.

Of course, if he chose to, smashing this Life Lumyst barrier with his raw spiritual force was well within his capabilities. It just wasn't worth it when a simple smack could do the trick...

Jake's silhouette blurred, and he reappeared on the chariot's platform where the brave orator had just barked, startling him into almost tumbling overboard. Had his teammates not caught him, he would have certainly fallen.

"I get the impression you're the kind of guy who says 'do as I say, not as I do,'" Jake mocked as he approached the culprit.

As he closed in on his prey, a low chuckle shook him upon realizing that the one bellowing the order was, in fact, a Radiant Mage, and not one of the incorruptible warriors he claimed to be.

Well, this Radiant Mage was no ordinary person either. Based on his youthful age, his dazzling aura of holy light, and the presence of a brilliantly burning Lumyst Core in his heart, this native was a talented Lifemancer, and very likely the commander of this battalion.

"At least, unlike a certain Saint, you're not reckless," Jake praised, feeling the solid luminescent aura separating him from his dumbstruck target.

Faye could have resisted him by cloaking herself in Life Lumyst, but she had risked retracting her Lumyst Aura in his presence. That was a true sin of overconfidence.

The teammates and the Mumak serving as mount also looked formidable, undoubtedly at the Corebearer Realm. The young Radiant Mage had good reason to be arrogant.

Yet, they too didn't dare to move, transfixed with fear as their merged Lumyst Auras distorted and flickered dangerously at each brush of Jake's fingertips. How incredibly hard were his fingers to touch such a dense barrier?

"It's a nice trick," Jake complimented again, beginning to understand the kind of challenge he'd face if he directly assaulted a general's headquarters. "Pity, you're too weak."

"IGNORE MY SITUATION AND ATTACK HIM!" The young Radiant Mage screamed in a high-pitched voice as he watched the handsome barbarian in front of him drain all the Lumyst from their merged barrier with a simple inhalation.

It seemed his subordinates feared him more than Jake, as his previous ultimatum was completely ignored once the order was reiterated. The chariots ready to charge remained in place to preserve their formation, but the independent Mumaks immediately surged towards him.

Watching a hundred horned quadruped beasts several times his size charge their chariot at near-sonic speed, Jake heaved another tired sigh and said to the arrogant Radiant Mage,

"Since you're so eager to set an example... So be it."

Detecting pity in the foreigner's eyes, yet unmistakably hostile, the young Radiant Mage's heart skipped a beat. Would it have been wiser to yield than to be so steadfast? Alas, he would never know.

Jake had given him enough time to decide. As soon as their Lumyst Aura finished dissipating, his spiritual pressure hit them like a wall, and their souls cracked apart. Their brains imploded within their skulls, and the Radiant Mage and his teammates perished instantly, their consciousness extinguished.

Witnessing their commander's death, the complexion of the archers, lancers, and other Radiant Mages on the neighboring chariots turned ashen. Driven by a silent agreement fueled by fear, they halted the shots and spells they were about to launch. However, the independent Mumaks were not as intelligent and continued their offensive.

Now the sole survivor of his chariot, Jake was besieged in an instant by the horde of ferocious beasts, the smaller ones leaping onto the vehicle, while a larger one rammed into it with its horns, tipping it over.

With a simple backflip, Jake left the chariot just before it capsized and calmly landed on the platform of another one. Again, not just any, but the one with the most abundant lifeforces after their fallen leader.

This Radiant Mage wasn't as courageous as his previous chief, and as soon as Jake appeared before him, he threw his Anthace wood spell staff to the ground.

"I surrender!"

Jake was almost disappointed to receive no resistance, but a look around confirmed that the wandering Mumaks hadn't forgotten the previous order. They were already charging the chariot he had just appeared on.

"If you value your life, order these beasts to back off before I decide to kill you all," he ordered sternly.

The eyes of the Radiant Mage and his teammates widened in terror, and he stammered hastily, "Y-yes, of course. LOWER YOUR WEAPONS. MUMAKS, STOP!"

The other soldiers had already lost all will to fight after seeing this foreigner decimate a dozen chariots and even more Mumaks during the first charge, and their leader's death had only driven the final nail. As soon as their second in command ordered them to surrender, they laid down their weapons with relief.

Unfortunately, the same couldn't be said for the Mumaks. While the larger ones stopped docilely, albeit visibly upset, the smaller, faster ones continued their assault unabated.

"STOP! STOP! Damn it!"

As the Radiant Mage fruitlessly tried to command them to obey, Jake snorted, exuding a horrible pressure,

"Sit, mongrels."

He barely raised his voice, but when his spiritual pressure hit them full force, all without exception started yapping, defecating themselves like frightened pups.

With a growl, Jake had brought an entire chariot company under his command. His conquest towards the supremacy of Twyluxia was off to a very good start.

Chapter 1139.9: First Real Day Of Battle (Part 9)

"Hmm? What's happening down there?" The enemy legion's general, known as Corvac, sprang up from his seat.

He had dispatched the Mumaks to clear out the enemy units that caused the debacle of an entire regiment, but the tanks and their monstrous mounts had stopped moving. He had a bad feeling when this troop had survived their initial charge, but now he was certain something was amiss.

"Foreigners!" His pupils dilated in realization, recalling the instructions he had received that morning.

The imposing guard, who had returned to his side immediately after delivering the general's order, had come to the same conclusion. His gleaming armor, adorned in gold and silver, did little to inspire confidence.

"General," he addressed solemnly. "The Celestial has ordered us to fight defensively if a high-ranking Player, as they call themselves, appears. Ranks 17 and 16, and some Ranks 15 and 14 pose a danger even to a Saint, let alone peak Radiant Lords like us."

Far from intimidated, the graying general scoffed with disdain, crossing his arms. He wasn't about to learn how to defend his life from the likes of the Radiant Conclave. Scowling, he spat out determinedly,

"Even if it were the Celestial himself charging my hill head-on, with the measures I've prepared, I'm certain I can escape alive and unscathed. If it's my skin they're after, let them come!"

"Hmm? Has the battle stopped?" Ceythie raised a skeptical eyebrow, noticing the same strangeness on the battlefield as the opposing general.

She suspected from her report that Jake was probably incredibly strong, but the Mumak battalion didn't seem eradicated.

"Send someone to check what's going on down there," she finally ordered, before turning her attention back to the rest of the battlefield.

Things were going well. The diversion provided by Jake's regiment and the early mobilization of the Mumaks had given her Ironsoul Berserkers the upper hand.

She had also discovered there must be other foreigners scattered among each regiment of her army, but the enemy seemed devoid of them. This was the main reason her troops were advancing unimpeded.

It was as if Jake's mere presence here had pushed the enemy to abandon this front to its fate. But for that... They had to be aware of his presence here.

"Arrrgh, I don't like this!" Ceythie stood up swiftly, donning her armor.

Conveniently, the soldier she had sent to check on the situation with the Mumaks was back.

"Well?"

The messenger immediately fell to his knees before her, hands clasped, and with a forehead dripping with sweat, he stammered,

"I... The Mumaks have surrendered."

"What?!" She exclaimed in astonishment before recomposing herself. "That's good news for us. Why are you so stressed, messenger?"

"Ahem... It's not because of you that they surrendered."

Ceythie suddenly had a bad feeling.

"What do you mean by that?"

"Cough... I mean they swore allegiance to the one who just defeated them."

The Great General began to sense where the nervous soldier was heading.

"Jake Wilderth?" She asked with a bitter smirk.

"The same."

"..."

The fierce officers by her side didn't know where to look, but one of them had to ask the uncomfortable question. Her right-hand man, a mountain of muscle almost as wide as tall, cleared his throat and inquired with the taciturn air of someone sent to their doom,

"So... What do we do?"

Ceythie's eyes fluttered aimlessly as she pondered at full speed before finally commanding,

"Bring me my horse. He wants Corvac's head. Let's make it easier for him."

Seeing their Great General don her helmet and gloves with a carnivorous smile, a resigned sigh passed through the officers and elite guards of her inner circle. They had known her long enough to anticipate what she would say next.

"... We're going to be the bait. Let's make a grand exit! Corvac hates me so much he'll have no choice but to take the bait."

A thrill of adrenaline coursed through the horde of veteran barbarians. When was the last time they launched a charge like this, relying on nothing but their own strength? Their warrior blood couldn't help but boil!

An instant later, the war cries of thousands of soldiers among the most formidable Underworld Barbarians of all the Duskwight Lands resounded in unison, shaking the earth. The next moment, a horde of nightmarish steeds galloped out of their HQ, cascading down their hill like an arrow released from its bow.

"What's your name?" Jake asked the Radiant Mage who had just surrendered and seemed to command respect from his regiment.

"... Homer."

"Nice to meet you, Homer." Jake patted his shoulders with a smile that sent shivers down his spine. "Tell me what you know about the defenses awaiting us on that hill."

The Lifemancer was tempted to lie, but a glare from Jake stripped him of his last shreds of courage. Stiff as a board, he spilled everything he knew with fear in his belly.

In truth, he didn't know much. Nothing specific, at least. However, important generals tended to defend their HQ and their own lives in the same manner, ready to face a threat one to two realms above their own.

Since Corvac was a Radiant Lord known for being cautious and strategic, which Jake had anticipated without being able to confirm, his defenses were likely to be just as ambitious. Attacking head-on, even the Soulmancer King would lose a few feathers.

"Nothing we hadn't anticipated," Hephais remarked indifferently.

The rest of his squad and Amy's had joined him by then, and there wasn't just jubilation on their faces.

"Master, you left us nothing!!" Crunch complained with a pouting face.

"Shut up! They surrendered, I wasn't going to slaughter them for no reason." Jake snapped, grabbing his cat by the scruff of the neck before flinging it far away.

The feline never touched the ground, its body puffing up like a balloon before falling back. It drifted through the air with a grumpy expression, clearly in no hurry to come down.

"What do we do with him?" Ekho coughed awkwardly. He hadn't contributed much in this battle, but he hadn't wavered from his plan to stick close to Jake.

"Ignore him. He'll cause trouble elsewhere," Jake replied casually. "He's not as dumb as he pretends. Look where he's floating off to..."

His companions darted their eyes toward the cat, and realizing where the furball was headed, Lord Phenix let out an audible curse,

"That jerk! He didn't even clue me into his scheme!"

The orange turkey flew after his furry friend with a flap of his wings, disappearing toward the high hill where the enemy HQ was located.

"Alright, let's not give them too much of a head start." Jake clapped his hands. "We'll follow them."

"What about the other recruits and these beasts we've just captured? Do we take them with us?" Lee Yoon frowned, looking at the 700 exhausted and demoralized recruits.

Amy, usually the more sociable of the two, was strangely silent, reeling from the realization of the chasm that had formed between her and Jake. To think there was a time when they were both human...

Reacting to the taciturn Korean's words, Jake scanned the conscripts of his company, those full of expectation from his own squad, and said,

"They are free to follow us or stay here if they prefer. No one can be forced to risk their life."

With no longer any intention of keeping a low profile, patiently cultivating his own army of loyal warriors was no longer important. Now, only those who earnestly desired to become strong would be able to follow him.

Chapter 1140.1: Capturing A Hill (part 1)

Without further ado, Jake stepped forward and in the next instant reappeared at the foot of the high hill where the enemy HQ was erected. Hephais emerged almost immediately from Jake's shadow, followed swiftly by Lysandra, Lee Yoon, then much later Amy and the other Players. The disparity in their levels was plain to see.

Lysandra's performance was expected, being a Rank 15 Major, but Lee Yoon was faring better than her rank suggested. Amy, however, was the disappointment.

She was only Rank 13, like Will or his cousins Vincent and Kevin, but unlike the former, her specialty was hand-to-hand combat. Yet, the merchant seemed to physically surpass her by a wide margin, while Kevin was definitely much stronger.

'I really hope she hasn't shown all her cards earlier. If Will saw this, he'd surely be disappointed too,' Jake sighed inwardly before finally lowering his expectations and reminding himself that at least she was still alive.

Unlike many others.

In reality, Amy's progression placed her among the top Earthlings considering her starting point, but Jake couldn't help judging her harshly since, if she hadn't left, with their help she might have done much better.

Or maybe she would have died at the first encounter with a Digestor. In the end, maybe it was for the best. Cho Min Ho's faction seemed objectively better suited for providing protection and security to ordinary humans. At least in the beginning.

Considering what was happening in this Ordeal, its weaker members were clearly left to fend for themselves.

"Shouldn't we go help Crunch and Lord Phoenix?" Hephais hissed speechlessly upon seeing the two fools already near the top of the hill, triggering one after another all the enemy traps and countermeasures.

BOOOOOOM!

A pillar of blinding white light, as wide as a skyscraper, struck down on the orange turkey like a celestial strike, reducing it to ashes in a flash. As soon as the bird was obliterated, the celestial laser 'teleported' onto the temporarily spared black cat, 'tanning' it just as lethally.

The Light Warriors camping their defensive positions on the hill were also caught in the radiation's fire, the closest ones disintegrating before they could react, while entire platoons a bit further away were burned to the third degree.

From the foot of the hill, the Players alongside Jake, though at a safe distance from the gigantic pillar of light, instinctively recoiled, momentarily struck with blindness like all troops for miles around.

The only one who remained motionless, not even trying to cover his eyes, was Jake himself, staring unblinkingly at the luminous column as dazzling as a nuclear explosion at close range with his cosmic vision. Once he ensured that his cat and the other foolish turkey were fine, he breathed a sigh of relief.

"These two idiots..." He swore with exasperation.

Hephais had covered his own eyes with a film of Dark Lumyst just in time, and didn't seem overly affected either. Lysandra, on the other hand, like the others, was forced to close her eyes, a troubled frown creasing her pale forehead.

When the light vanished and their retinas recovered enough to accommodate, the Players in the group opened their eyes one by one, discovering the aftermath of this celestial strike with astonishment and reverent fear.

"Wowowow! What's this madness?! Does that crazy general want to blow up the whole hill and himself with it?" Senet, the half-demon with mismatched eyes, exclaimed, his eyes bulging at the sight of

thousands of Light Warriors annihilated by that massive white laser.

If it had been him standing in the place of those two creatures, he would have surely died!

Hundreds of thousands of troops, both allies and enemies, were still struck with blindness, many permanently unless they received proper treatment. The battles had come to a standstill in a flash of light over an entire section of the battlefield.

"This general is indeed more determined than I thought. He's rising in my esteem," Jake praised in a relaxed manner, contrary to expectations.

"..."

"Jake, do you still plan to climb this hill and take the head of this general?" Amy then asked in as serene a voice as she could muster, but internally her stomach was in knots.

"R-right haha-ha! I think it would be wiser to proceed with this battle as it's supposed to unfold." Ari, the blonde Sylphid also belonging to Cho Min Ho's faction, laughed nervously, eyeing the hill with terror. These natives were all mad!

"Objectively, I can't follow you to the top," Nuwa said in a tiny, dejected voice. "I really wanted to fight with you two to thank you for saving me and my two otters, but I'm just useless..."

Chromy and Chewy comforted her by rubbing their noses against her cheek, but the two saviors in question showed no compassion. As if they expected anything from her in the first place.

"As I said, I don't force anyone to follow me," Jake reminded expressionlessly. "I also can't guarantee your protection against countermeasures of this magnitude. Especially since I'll be the main target. Estimate your own limits."

"It was obvious that we were going to encounter obstacles," Hephais added with a deadpan expression.

With those words, the bodies of the asocial duo blurred again and they reappeared on the ashes of the flaming turkey. A chick was slowly taking shape within the flames.

"B-boss! You're stepping on me!" Lord Phoenix whimpered pitifully, his lack of plumage and bulging eyes resembling a raw chicken ready for the oven. Ironically, he was just returning from it...

"... My bad." Jake moved away without an ounce of remorse, which the bird felt acutely. It was his punishment for trying to play the daredevil.

Objectively, he was more worried about his cat, which in principle could not resurrect from its ashes. His eyes darted around apprehensively in search of its charred carcass, but upon finally finding it, a surprising sight presented itself.

Far from being dead, it wasn't even seriously irradiated or burned. However, its current appearance was very different from what they were used to.

Instead of its fluffy black fur, stiff and bristled like a hedgehog's spines, the mischievous feline now resembled a strange crystal sea urchin pulsing with a radiant holy brilliance very similar to the pillar of light that had struck them.

Arriving a moment later, Amy's squad's Players displayed confusion and astonishment at his strange appearance, but Jake and Hephais nodded inwardly, as if it was reasonable.

Maybe Crunch had his own talents for surviving such an offensive fate, but in this specific case, it was the Cosmic D Starfeyrves Body Passive that had come into play. Its most notable quality was neither the stat bonuses nor the elemental affinities it granted, but its power of adaptation.

Where Lord Phoenix had let himself be incinerated right away, Crunch had no choice but to resist as long as possible, allowing his bloodline time to find a solution. By crystallizing his body in the face of the threat, the cat had become a superconductor of light, with it flowing through him before coming out the other side, barely heating his body. The remaining brilliance was the fraction of light that his imperfect crystallization could not get rid of.

Still... Instead of being fully relieved to see his cat alive, Jake couldn't help but frown at how effectively it had used its power. Although the Faction Passive endowed each member with his talent for adaptation, not everyone could benefit from it to such a level.

This was only possible because of his cat's strange bloodline.

Chapter 1141.2: Capturing A Hill (part 2)

Approaching another flank of the hill, Ceythie, who was supposed to divert Corvac's attention from Jake and his group with her cavalry charge, suddenly yanked the reins of her horse to bring it to a halt. The pillar of light that had struck down Crunch and Lord Phoenix had momentarily blinded them all, sending their mounts into panic.

Despite their vast experience, several seasoned soldiers were thrown off by their spooked horses, some of which reared so violently that they collapsed heavily onto their backs, crushing their riders with their full weight. If these barbarians weren't unnaturally robust, they would have been crushed to death.

"Whoa, easy there." Ceythie whispered softly, reassuringly patting the neck of her startled steed after it tried to buck her off. Even as a war-trained mount accustomed to the chaos of battle, its herbivorous instincts were in overdrive after becoming blind.

Like all the other generals and elite barbarians at her side struggling to calm their horses in vain, she quickly realized that a few seconds wouldn't be enough to regain control. On the battlefield, several seconds of standing still like sitting ducks could mean the difference between life and death.

And indeed, what she feared materialized immediately after, like a prophetic vision. The loose ground beneath their hooves cracked with a violent shudder, throwing several more barbarians off their mounts, then it collapsed entirely, plunging them into an abyss with their horses.

"ABANDON THE HORSES!" Ceythie yelled angrily, decisively removing her boots from the stirrups and leaping explosively to the uncollapsed surface.

Enraged, she glanced below at her massive steed disappearing into the void, not overly concerned about its fate. It was a Great General's mount. Even in panic, there weren't many creatures that could harm it.

Or so she thought.

SHRRRRRRRIIIII!

Piercing shrieks erupted from the bowels of the earth a few seconds later, followed by a chorus of terrified neighing that sent shivers down her spine.

"What in hell was that?"

Her trusted guards, having surfaced alongside her, were just as solemn, but it was only upon hearing the heart-wrenching screams of agony and terror from the troops who hadn't made it up that their complexions turned ashen.

"That didn't sound like a mutant creature bred by the Lustra Plains." Her second-in-command declared grimly, gripping the hilt of his war sword tightly, his knuckles turning white.

Ceythie was also burning with the desire to abandon their objective and dive in to rescue her horse and satisfy her curiosity, but she was too disciplined and responsible to be so pathetically sidetracked.

"We ignore it and continue on foot." She ordered grimly, trembling before adding coldly as if to reassure herself. "This kind of underground ambush is typical of the Dreadnought Nematodes. Wouldn't surprise me if Corvac raised a colony of them. It's just his style."

The Dreadnought Nematode Titan was a colossal calamity, a massive threat to the environment due to its voracious appetite. Fortunately, the leaves and nourishing sap of Anthace usually sufficed to satisfy its stomach.

However, this abomination was infamously known on Twyluxia for two things: its growth/regeneration capability, and its ability to self-fertilize. The number of eggs this monster could lay after a single meal could easily disrupt an ecosystem if left unchecked.

Nature, being well-designed, had the Featherfall Titan and its offspring relishing feeding on these insatiable giant worms, naturally regulating their population. The Celestial had forbidden breeding and mutating these Dreadnought Nematodes outside

of Lustris to prevent eggs from being laid in areas outside their jurisdiction.

Corvac had some serious guts to defy an official decree from Valandar like that!

Yet, Ceythie still felt uneasy even after identifying the underground threat. It was the skeptical murmur from another warrior that made her realize the source of her bad feeling:

"That shrieking... It doesn't sound like the noise those worms make."

The Great General narrowed her eyes gravely, peering into the darkness of the abyss one last time, which had fallen silent again. Without proof, she suddenly felt the intimate sensation that she wouldn't see her favorite steed anytime soon...

"Maybe it's a new mutated breed concocted by those heretic Lifemancers." She brushed it off with a statement she herself didn't believe, then resentfully turned her attention towards the hill's summit, sprinting towards it with superhuman speed.

Corvac's head awaited her there!

"Do you want to scout ahead first again, like earlier?" Jake taunted sarcastically to his cat and the bird after they had fully regenerated with his help.

That pillar of light was no simple matter. If it had been just a laser, Lord Phenix should have quickly returned to his normal form after being reborn from his ashes, but even after several dozen seconds, he still resembled a chick.

If Jake, Hephais, and the others hadn't reinforced him with their own vitality after purging the foreign Lumyst from his body, the bird might have remained in that state for a long time. And that was only because the turkey had some pretty good stats. A weaker phoenix would have remained ashes permanently.

Upon receiving his 'generous' offer, Crunch immediately rubbed against his leg, purring and giving him pitiful kitten eyes.

"Cough, master, I've realized it's not right to steal the glory from one's master." He meowed coyly before shamelessly hiding behind him so Jake wouldn't be tempted to tell him to stay in front.

His turkey buddy wasn't stupid either when it came down to it, and without a word, he waddled hurriedly over to Nuwa and her two otters, who had chosen to stay at the foot of the hill. Jake stood there for a moment, unsure whether to laugh or cry at their limitless shamelessness.

"All that for this..." Hephais chuckled wryly, shaking his head.

Jake smiled in return, but inwardly he was more circumspect. Lord Phenix had suffered more than he let on. If he turned to ashes again, it wasn't certain he would resurrect. No wonder he had so expressly decided to withdraw from the fight.

"We continue." He finally announced with a resolute tone.

Corvac, standing stoically at the top of the hill, waited, sweating profusely, for the report of the attack. That blinding laser beam should have wiped them all out, right?

To activate this trump card, he had to mobilize a whole platoon of powerful Radiant Mages, as well as tap into his reserves of Light Lumyst accumulated over a long period, notably sacrificing an Anthace seed, a natural reservoir with its own Lumyst Core. He only had three of those.

As for the hundreds of thousands of collateral victims, mostly his own troops, it pained him, but his life was his priority. He would do it again without hesitation if that was the price for surviving this battle.

Unfortunately, when he saw the somber expression of the messenger reporting the result, his own expression fell apart. A failure.

"Tell me at least that the target who triggered the trap was annihilated..." the army general hoped gloomily.

"I'm afraid... that's not the case." The messenger replied hoarsely. "Of the two targets, one took the hit without flinching, the other resurrected and then withdrew from the hill..."

Corvac remained silent for a short moment, digesting this new information, then inquired,

"What about the bombardment of Grenadier Bugs I ordered on the Mumaks who betrayed us?"

"Barely stopped by three Soulmanancers. Two perished, the third is at death's door. They'd fall at the next volley."

"Better than I hoped." The old general sneered with satisfaction, before becoming uneasy again.

The foreigners storming the hill had started moving again. They were still far, but he had seen their leader climb half the hill in a single stride. One more step, and he'd be right in front of him. Of course, that was assuming he could avoid all the traps and obstacles in his path...

Yet, his feeling of insecurity only grew. His instincts, having saved him from many situations, made him take his anxiety very seriously. Determined, he commanded resolutely,

"Order all Lifemancers and Radiant Mages spread across the battlefield to converge on this hill to reinforce my personal guard of Radiant Mages and Lifemancers. Abandon the other troops to their fate."

The messenger and even the two imposing Radiant Lords at his side blanched upon hearing his command. After this order, there would be no turning back.

The giant in golden and silver plate armor briefly thought of opposing it, but remembering that he had just lost the signal from the Dreadnought Nematodes sent after Ceythie, he decided to remain silent. Without those monsters to stop the Great General, they would need all the help they could get on this hill.

The question remained: who was more dangerous, Ceythie or these foreigners? Clearly, Corvac had made his choice... by ignoring Ceythie. His general's instincts were not to be underestimated.

Chapter 1142.3: Capturing A Hill (Part 3)

Jake had barely taken a few steps when he suddenly turned back with an annoyed scowl towards the spot where he had left the Mumaks and the rest of the conscripts, and stretched his arm out in front of him.

"Damn, they really don't know when to quit."

A torrential downpour of greenish acid and plasma projectiles was currently crashing down from the sky like divine judgment for the third consecutive time in a short moment, with no one to stop it. The target of this aerial strike was precisely the conscripts and the Mumaks left behind to spare them from danger. Though he had promised not to protect them directly anymore, he apparently had too soft a heart.

His powers were too suppressed to deploy telekinesis of such magnitude over such a distance, but with his Lumyst cultivation growing by the second, he was no longer completely powerless in these situations either.

Suddenly, dark bluish Lumyst burst from one of his Lumyst Cores, lighting up his fingertips. Several hundred pulses of Cosmic Lumyst, casting tree-like lightning, split the air in the blink of an eye, invisible to the naked eye, smashing every enemy projectile raining from the sky. Upon contact, the Cosmic Lumyst exploded, producing hundreds of tiny big bangs that tore through space. A curtain of darkness replaced the fragmented blue sky, swallowing the falling projectiles just after.

Among these precise shots of Cosmic Lumyst, four more pierced the foreheads of four individuals retreating from the scene, flying towards the top of the hill where they were located: Four Lifemancers.

"That should keep us in peace, but these bombardments will continue as long as those Grenadier Bugs are still alive." Jake analyzed with a bored tone.

At that moment, Hephais, who had vanished without a sound, reemerged from Jake's shadow, his scimitars covered in the disgusting creatures' greenish blood.

"We're in the clear now." The assassin nodded calmly as he sheathed his scimitars.

"That's why I like teaming up with you." Jake praised, then turned his attention to the thing that had just crashed violently to his left, to the general indifference.

Amy and the other Players in the group had already taken combat stances, expecting another overpowering spell like the ones that hit Crunch and Lord Phoenix. But upon inspecting the newly created crater, they found the broken body of Meribelle inside.

For a second, they thought her dead, until she began to stir, wincing.

"Still alive?" Jake asked while casting a quick healing spell. Unlike Lord Phoenix, her body instantly knitted back together.

The young woman remained on all fours for a moment to catch her breath, then whimpered painfully as she stood up, "Those Grenadier Bugs... With the two other Soulancers secretly protecting our regiment, I managed to shield the surviving recruits, but the Lifemancers we were facing seized this chance to strike at our heart. If we don't intervene, they will all die!"

Jake and Hephais exchanged a blasé look, then said, "You don't have to worry about them anymore."

Meribelle's eyes widened stupidly upon hearing his confident statement, until she remembered what this human aberration was capable of. In the end, she surprised

herself by realizing how much her perspective had changed in just a few days of associating with him.

'I guess there's some truth to the saying that our personality is the average of the five people we spend the most time with...' She mused internally as she stood up, surprised by the absence of pain.

Even the old, indelible scars from past cultivation accidents had been completely erased.

'What a terrifying healing spell...'

Noticing that the Soulmaner woman was back on her feet, Jake nodded inwardly, then said,

"Let's move on."

Without further ado, his silhouette blurred again with speed, followed by Hephaeis and the Players from Amy's squad who had chosen to continue following them. The hill they were climbing might have been as massive as Mount Everest, but Players like them could scale it in the blink of an eye.

Only an unavoidable countermeasure could guarantee the safety of the HQ erected at its summit. Crunch and Lord Phoenix had triggered one, but as soon as Jake became the spearhead of the offensive, charging dangerously fast towards the summit, even more lethal and unimaginable traps were triggered in response.

"General Corvac, are you sure about this..." The giant in shining armor asked darkly, seeing Jake collide with an invisible force field encircling the summit of the hill.

Rather than seeing it, he had mainly felt the cataclysmic shock that cracked the immense hill at the moment of impact. The barrier protecting their command center was supposed to withstand the full power of a Titan for several minutes, but at that moment, they felt it waver.

The assailant was a true monster!

With slightly trembling hands, the old general suppressed the fear engulfing his mind through sheer willpower, then, as if resigned, he ordered, grimly,

"Have our Radiant Mages sacrifice another Anthace seed to buy us some time. In the meantime, order the nematode tamers to open the aquifer..."

The stoic officers, thinking they had seen everything in their long years of war, paled upon hearing the second instruction.

"G-general! Have you lost your mind! Our troops are also here!" A respected Radiant Lord exclaimed in horror, drawing his own sword out of reflex. His only son was also among them.

Seeing this, a ruthless glint flashed in Corvac's eyes, and with a look that needed no words to his right-hand man, he ordered the execution of the dissenter. Without betraying any sign of murderous intent, the giant turned abruptly and sliced the eminent officer diagonally in two, from shoulder to opposite hip.

"Anyone else object?" The merciless General asked in a chilling voice as he swept his gaze over his trusted officers.

No one responded.

"In that case, do as I've said." Corvac growled sharply, taking out his third and last Anthace seed from a jewel box radiating abundant life force.

After grasping the seed contained inside in his palm, he clenched it until his knuckles whitened with a solemn expression. The officers around him, who had doubted his motivations at that moment, also became resolute, finally understanding the gravity of their situation.

Their General was also going all in.

BANG!

Jake was abruptly stopped by an invisible wall a few hundred meters from his objective and violently thrown backward. The impact was so brutal that the talented Light Warriors still alive on the hill after the previous light strike were blasted away for kilometers, their skeletons shattered, leaving them on the brink of death.

No Light Warrior within a kilometer of the blast below the level of a Light Paladin survived. Those more powerful, mainly experienced regiment and division commanders from the Corebearer realm, were injured to various degrees, rendered incapacitated.

Somewhere, that was a good thing for them, as it gave Corvac and his personal battalion of Radiant Mages the clear field to use his second celestial strike directly on Jake. This time, they would be able to unleash themselves without restraint.

The only catch was the proximity of the barrier enveloping their HQ. A single mistake, and they would become collateral victims of their own spell. Yet, not for a single second did the chief Radiant Mage of this battalion question the order received.

With a fanatical gleam in his eyes, he bellowed at the top of his lungs,

"FIRE!"

Chapter 1143: Capture Fail: No Hill Found

Jake sensed the deadly strike more than he saw it coming. Even with his reaction time becoming inhuman, his nervous system couldn't yet outpace the speed of light. Yet, he remained true to himself: unnervingly calm.

Lifting his head impassively towards the sky before the Radiant Mage leader had even finished barking his command, his pupils, reflecting the sky darkened by the dust fallout from the previous shot, suddenly contracted as the heavens ignited.

BOOOOOM!

A pillar of light, even more blinding and cataclysmic than the one that had struck down Crunch and Lord Phoenix, crashed down directly on him, the sound of the impact dwarfing a thousand rolls of thunder. His allies, struggling not to fall behind, froze in horror at the sight, skidding to a halt in panic.

Only Hephais, Lysandra, and Lee Yoon pressed forward, with Amy shamefully and helplessly dropping out of the race along with Senet and the other Players who had persisted until now. If she got any closer, the superheated air molecules on the periphery of the laser would get to her long before she could come within shooting distance.

However, one thing that slightly lifted her spirits was that neither Hephais, Lysandra, nor even her friend Lee Yoon dared to directly enter the white light pillar with their bodies and armor as the only defense.

Lee Yoon had an almost unmatched natural defense with her Grade 10 Praying Mantis Bloodline, but absorbing a photon discharge energizing the air to exceed 100 million degrees Celsius was not among her abilities.

Amy barely knew Lysandra, but even though the Moon Elf woman leading their squad had an Oracle Rank higher than hers, she didn't seem like the tanking type. Indeed, to protect herself, she conjured a sophisticated spell to deflect and reflect the light and heat in her path. The shimmering shield enveloping her now reflected her silver hair like the full moon shimmering on the water's surface, granting her an ethereal aura.

The science behind this method was a bit murky, but it did the job. Slowly but surely, she too reached the top of the hill, albeit staying a good distance from Jake and the massive light pillar bearing down on him.

As for Hephais, he was the only one of the three confident enough to take the light pillar on with his own body, thanks in part to the Faction Passive. But as they say in his line of work, an assassin doesn't take unnecessary risks.

In response to blinding light, even darker shadows were bound to form inevitably. This would remain true as long as the light came from a single direction and an obstacle stood in its path. With his new Shadow Lumyst, the Egean had already discovered that by intensifying his flow, the light around him tended to avoid him all the more spontaneously.

A blot of darkness in the omnipresent dazzle, he sauntered into the white light beam until he stood beside Jake with his customary indifference. Seeing Jake stoically endure the terrifying laser with his hands in his pockets, he couldn't help but roll his eyes.

"Why stay inside until the end if you can get out of this pillar whenever you want?" Hephais clicked his tongue skeptically as he felt the incandescent magma under their feet destabilize the entire hill and beyond.

The first shot had already significantly affected the terrain's topography. This second shot, comparable to a large nuclear warhead, would finish off the region. At least the hastily forged equipment by Jake was holding up. The Black Metal Lumyst was already proving its worth.

"I'm analyzing the spell, or rather, the state changes of the Light Lumyst that originated this laser," Jake replied a short second later with a fascinated expression.

As experienced firsthand against River's Bane, the elemental Lumyst could also be transmuted into its physical and tangible element as well as allowing its control. However, once the Lumyst was released into nature, anyone was theoretically able to control it.

These Radiant Mages understood that well. This pillar of light contained zero Lumyst. It was truly just light.

If a powerful Lifemancer or Soulmaner at the level of a Titan or an Abyssal Revenant were receiving this attack, even with Light Lumyst as their main element, it was almost impossible to react in time. Too bad for them, before becoming a Lumyst cultivator, Jake was primarily a Player with a ridiculously powerful bloodline.

Even before becoming a Cosmic D Starfeyrves, his Myrtharian bloodline already nearly completely protected him from light and heat. Not to the point of achieving absolute

immunity, which was a talent beyond rare, but strong enough to allow him to endure and absorb the rest with his constitution.

At that precise moment, Jake's body didn't even need to call on its adaptive properties to resist. Between his robustness, the natural ability of his body to conduct, absorb, and store light in his cells to convert it into pure Aether via his Energy Body, he just had to relax and enjoy.

Despite everything, the light charge was insane and soon heated his body beyond humanly tolerable limits. But he had not been human for a long time.

Even if his cells exceeded a temperature of several thousand degrees, they wouldn't burn up. This gave Jake ample time to set up other countermeasures: like producing some Light Lumyst. Conveniently, the Life and Spirit Lumyst Core corresponding were in dire need of refilling...

A few dozen seconds later, a hole surrounded by lava of unknown depth had been drilled by the light pillar, almost entirely flattening the hill and its surroundings. What remained was an expanding sea of magma. The troops from both camps had long since retreated in terror, but the molten earth was quickly catching up with them.

Ceythie and her elite guards, heading on foot towards the hill after abandoning their mounts, were left speechless at the sight of this apocalypse. As a Great General worthy of the name, she also had her own trump cards to take the enemy down with her if she found herself backed into a corner, but even she was ready to admit that she had underestimated Corvac's level of preparation.

"Fortunately, I never gave the order to charge his HQ head-on," she exhaled emotionally, forced to slow down as the ground under her feet turned to lava. "Even leading the charge myself, my trump cards might not have been enough."

It depended on what Corvac still had up his sleeve as a last resort. Knowing him, he might still have a scheme or two...

"Shall we proceed the offensive?" An old general who had fought hundreds of battles with her asked gravely, shielding his eyes with his gauntlet due to the molten earth stretching as far as the eye could see.

The distant white light pillar was still dazzling them, burning their retinas even with their eyelids closed. However, one could notice the skill of these elite veterans in their ease of orientation and movement in all this light. Relying on their other senses honed in combat was almost second nature to them.

Ceythie was also forced to close her eyes, but after lowering the visor of her helmet, the sensation of discomfort subsided. Having faced those damn Radiant Mages before,

they had developed some counters. After confirming that all her colleagues had lowered their own visors, she smiled with satisfaction and declared,

"The magma and burning air won't stop us. Take a deep breath and continue. If you haven't already, put on heat-resistant boots or bring out your anti-heat artifacts."

"Heuss!" The seasoned warriors responded in unison.

The deep breath was because the oxygen in the overheated air had been consumed and projected into the upper atmosphere. The multitude of carbonized carcasses slowly sinking into the lava was the living proof of all those unfortunate souls who had passed out from hypoxia before escaping the danger zone.

The moment after, Ceythie and her elite officers sprinted over the lava towards the distant light pillar serving as their beacon, the hill that had once been the enemy's stronghold now nowhere in sight...

Chapter 1144: Execute The Judgment!

About a minute later, the radiant terraformation of the region ceased, leaving nothing but lava and desolation in its wake. Where a towering hill once stood, now only a cracked rock base under a force field remained, the sole remnant of the original grassy protrusion.

The enemy's encampment, sheltered within, didn't withstand the onslaught despite this protection, but at least Corvac and his men were unscathed. No small feat.

A feat, alas, that could not be repeated.

While the unqualified guards lucky enough to be posted at HQ were patting themselves on the back for still being alive, praising their general's foresight for such a barrier, the elite soldiers and officers who had seen the world wore ugly grimaces as if they'd just swallowed a hornet. However, it was only when the light outside dimmed to a bearable level for their retinas that they truly succumbed to despair.

Beyond the slowly cooling sea of lava, leaving a plain of smoky, dark obsidian, their 'unharm'd' target taunting them with a predatory gaze was the final nail in the coffin for their will. In addition to their target, two of his companions also encircled their barrier, triangulating their HQ. Only the flickering barrier stood between them and death.

"Is this some kind of joke, right? Tell me I'm hallucinating..." A Radiant Lord at the head of a division, hardened by thousands of battles, felt the firmness of his weapon's grip loosen in shock and fear.

This had never happened to him. Not even when Chillmire froze his entire regiment back when he was just a green recruit.

Fortunately, while this officer's case wasn't isolated, the discipline instilled in them by their spartan lifestyle down to their bones wasn't so superficial. When the domineering battle cry of their General Corvac rang in their ears, they snapped out of their stupor and brandished their weapons, preparing for the ultimate battle.

"Have the Nematode tamers done what I asked?" Corvac inquired with a furrowed brow to the giant on his right, remarkably composed considering he was the primary target of this offensive.

But above all, he was the main culprit behind this indiscriminate destruction that had killed more allies than enemies. Even if he ultimately won this battle, he was destined to be sacrificed in the public square for these crimes. Being allowed to retire from combat after that would be the sweetest of outcomes.

"They're in place," the giant whispered solemnly into his ear. The other officers, aware of what was about to happen, were equally grim. What followed condemned them to death as well.

"Then let the festivities begin," Corvac chuckled madly. "I will pray with all my heart for Lumyst's grace to smile upon you, so you may avenge this affront."

No one responded, acutely aware of their survival odds. A slight nod to acknowledge their general's farewell speech was the best they could muster.

Meanwhile, Jake, about to shatter the barrier now as fragile as glass, paused his motion upon sensing approaching troops. A glance allowed him to recognize Ceythie and her elite officers.

When she stopped beside him, panting, her helmet and armor smoking hot enough to cook a steak on, he looked at her differently. Crossing that lava and the overheated atmosphere where oxygen was scarce was no feat for him and other Players with suitable abilities, but to his knowledge, no bloodline predisposed the natives of the Duskwight Lands to such a feat. Her presence here was obviously made possible only by her tenacity and good equipment.

Moreover, Jake could almost tangibly feel her Lumyst Aura emitting a bloodthirsty and indomitable spiritual presence, fitting her reputation as an Ironsoul Berserker. This aura significantly boosted her physical condition, besides very ineffectively protecting her from the scorching air.

Ineffective, because with his sharp perception, he could distinctly see the souls within her aura combust upon contact with the scorching breeze. Initially, raw spiritual energy without attributes was very volatile and vulnerable to energetic elements like fire, light,

or lightning. Not everyone had a spirit attuned with the cosmos and energy in general. He was just beginning to realize how rare that was.

"I didn't think you'd come all this way," Jake commented expressionlessly. "Is it to steal my thunder?"

Keeping her visor down to not show her sweat-blotched beautiful face, the woman Great General chuckled bitterly, then responded reluctantly,

"I haven't sunk low enough to claim the merit of my men. Not to mention, you're stronger than me. However, if you'll allow me, I'd gladly take the honor of breaking down this barrier. I can't let you have all the glory without doing anything."

Hephais and Jake couldn't care less about this futile achievement and readily stepped aside to let her vent her frustration. Excited to finally hit something with all her might after having to abandon her mount helplessly, she laughed loudly and drew her heavy war sword in one swift motion before slashing the force field before her with a downward strike of extreme savagery.

The wavering barrier was cleaved in two with a single stroke, releasing a horrific screeching distortion noise that made them all grit their teeth. On the other side, a small garrison of a few thousand enemies, mainly elites with high Lumyst cultivation, awaited them in battle stance, their radiant Lumyst Auras brimming with life force betraying their veteran status among a few lucky recruits.

And in front of this tightly arranged troop, an old bearded man in white and gold plate armor glared at them with loathing, as if they were already dead: The General of the entire enemy army: Corvac.

"Corvac! We finally meet!" Ceythie gloated with a jubilant laugh upon seeing her long-time rival lose his legendary composure.

While the Great General was too busy savoring the impending defeat of her old enemy, Jake, Hephais, and Lysanna instead focused their gaze on the seed containing an astronomical amount of Life Lumyst in his hand, as well as the armored giant standing slightly behind the old man.

'Huh? It seems Corvac isn't the strongest here. Is he aware of this?' Jake and the two other Players coldly thought at the same time.

The giant was a Saint! A Light Warrior comparable to members of the Radiant Conclave. He hid it well, but he couldn't fool their senses.

This put into perspective what Jake knew about the military forces of the Lustra Plains. There was what it showed on the surface, through its generals and high dignitaries, but there were always talented individuals choosing to keep a low profile in the shadows. It

remained to be determined how much darkness this shadow lurking behind the dazzling light on the surface held.

Suddenly, Jake wondered if the Celestial was really the one he should be wary of, or if there was someone even more formidable pulling the strings behind him. Nonetheless, after a brief tension, he relaxed, figuring that only the present moment mattered.

'If there really is someone stronger than the Celestial, I'll deal with it when the time comes.'

As Jake came to this internal decision, Corvac's lips had slowly curved up into a sadistic grin. Ignoring Ceythie's gloating, he released with an unresolvable enmity,

"You think you've won, but it's too late. Neither you nor my men will make it out alive. What remains of this hill will become our tomb. If you even survive that... I'll accept my defeat from the bottom of my soul."

As Ceythie's mocking laughter choked in her throat, the old general's face hardened with resignation, then he took a deep breath and commanded,

"EXECUTE THE JUDGMENT!"

Chapter 1145: Corvac's Deadly Gambit

A monstrous quake brutally shook the ground beneath their feet right after his last word, throwing off their balance. Soldiers from both sides, gathered at the site of the former hill, toppled to the ground one after another with shocked cries, only their superiors and other renowned warriors managing to stay upright.

"An earthquake?" Jake frowned doubtfully, considering this development underwhelming after all the suspense.

Hephais, Lysandra, and Ceythie seemed to share his sentiment as they all projected their mental senses into the ground below, searching for the cause. A serious light passed through their eyes as they sensed the ground beneath them was as perforated as Swiss cheese. Even deeper, they could feel a vast expanse of water...

"An aquifer? No, Lumyst Water!" Ceythie realized, finally understanding what Corvac was planning. All right! The man had guts! As expected from an old, faithless trickster!

Yet, it wasn't the enemy general's risky, double-edged plan that unsettled her, but rather how he managed to hide the existence of all this water. An aquifer covering the entire region of the battlefield and filled with Life Lumyst Water should not have escaped their vigilance.

It was well known that battle zones were thoroughly examined and regularly inspected to avoid any such surprises. To hide his plan, Corvac had to pull out all the stops, sparing no expense.

"If you were as strong as a Saint, you'd have been sitting in the Radiant Conclave long ago," Ceythie acknowledged softly, her face devoid of earlier condescension. The old strategist deserved her respect.

However, after delivering her compliment, she shook her head with pity. As impressive as it was, such a plan couldn't defeat a Great General like her. Even if the Lumyst Water was pure enough to kill her, she'd still need to be touched by it. Her physical abilities might not match those of a Lifemancer or Light Warrior of equivalent cultivation, but they were more than enough to escape before everything collapsed.

Let alone her, none of the guards and officers accompanying her were in real danger either. The Light Warriors facing them were even athletically superior, also able to escape without issue.

It was rather the small fry who needed to worry. Coincidentally, a large number had been wiped out when the region was reduced to ashes by two consecutive forbidden spells cast by the battalion of opposing Radiant Mages.

The other survivors, still numerous, had managed to retreat quite far but not enough to escape the area covered by the aquifer. The enemy trap had also closed on them, and it seemed they would be the only victims.

Ceythie's reasoning wasn't bad in itself, as even Jake and the others started to think in the same direction.

"Counting the survivors from each army affected by the trap, we have 316,836 soldiers, about 1.6 million beasts, and 7 million enslaved souls on our side, and only 200,000 Light Warriors and about 450,000 beasts for them. The fact that their HQ was the epicenter of the two luminous strikes hit them hard." Jake quickly analyzed in his head before squinting with a gloomy gleam. "If all these people come into contact with the Life Lumyst Water below us, they'll be subjected to as many successive baptisms as the purity of this water allows. With a fixed success probability of 50%, after ten consecutive baptisms, there would only be about 630 units left, against 8,700 for us, assuming the wandering souls controlled by our Soulmanagers can receive such a baptism."

[Except it's Life Lumyst Water.] Xi finished his reasoning without being asked. [All Lifemancers have received at least three baptisms, and ordinary Light Warriors at least one. In addition to this, their robust physiques from their Life Lumyst cultivation significantly increase their chances of surviving the initial baptisms, just as your high constitution and vitality allowed you to recover from your wounds in case of failure. Conversely, the Spirit Lumyst cultivation of our men makes them less apt to survive the

consequences of a failed baptism, starting one baptism behind. This means that after one baptism, our troops will be practically halved, while the enemy will suffer no losses.]

"And this gap will widen even more if this water is pure enough." Jake's voice trailed off thinking of something even worse. Then, he sighed, "This is even truer for their Lifemancers. With at least three baptisms ahead of our Soulmanancers, and a similar starting number in both camps, their number will surpass that of our Soulmanancers by a factor of 8 after only ten baptisms. If parity is maintained, they would then need to endure three more baptisms, which would grant them a significant power boost. The impact of each baptism beyond a certain threshold cannot simply be quantified as a mere gain in life force. I can attest to that first-hand.

"If one ignores the absurd number of losses inflicted on his own camp... It's a stroke of genius for a general with his back against the wall." Jake concluded with sovereign calm before scowling again with yet another bad feeling.

Did I miss something? He thought, scanning the water below them again. An Oracle Scan indicated that the purity of the water at the surface was only +14. Higher than expected, but not enough to worry him. After all, he had himself endured 14 Lumyst baptisms. And for both types of water!

Bringing Lumyst water of this quality here in such quantity shouldn't have been easy, which at least revealed to him that this aquifer was not natural but artificial. The lake's edges were indeed strangely smooth, with a metallic reflection suggesting a material specially treated to hold such water...

As for the Nematodes squirming below them and responsible for collapsing the ground, they had long since fled or ended up in the underground lake into which they were trying to drag them.

When, a quarter of a second after the first quake, a barrier similar to the one protecting the hill previously closed over the region, enveloping it like a translucent capsule, Jake's bad feeling only grew.

"This barrier... I can't destroy it in one hit." Jake discerned immediately after investigating it with his Cosmic Eye.

Undoubtedly the work of another artifact or spell. It was hard to see, but the water level was dropping imperceptibly as if it served as fuel to power the gigantic force field.

This meant that Corvac's trap involved everyone, not just the cannon fodder. Once the ground completely collapsed, even the strongest warriors would end up in the water.

Even so, there was still an unknown factor in the equation that troubled him. It was the smug grumble of Lord Phoenix, far from the epicenter, who thought no one was paying attention to him, that gave him the answer:

"Hehe, even if the ground goes, I don't care, I can fly..."

So that's what was bothering me. Jake understood, exchanging a look reflecting the same wariness with Hephais and Lysandra.

If they could fly, then they wouldn't have to fall into the water. So, if their sense of alarm continued to intensify, there was only one possibility: Not only could they not escape this trap, but something even more terrible than the Lumyst Water below awaited them.

[The spiritual impulse of the Oracle Scan struggles to penetrate Life Lumyst Water.] Xi added, without a hint of teasing this time. [If the enemy has planned something to get rid of us, it's in the water.]

VRRRRRRRM!

As Jake and the others wondered what kind of horror awaited them, the water level, which had been dropping faster and faster to support the barrier, suddenly began to swell in the opposite direction, as if something massive was expanding inside, pushing it towards the sky.

Soldiers from both camps, clinging as best they could to the exponentially fracturing ground, felt the rumble of the earth intensify again, followed by a deafening roar comparable to that of a waterfall pouring directly into their ears.

The next moment, the barely cooled magma exploded like a champagne cork. A geyser of high-purity Life Lumyst Water expanded quickly, filling every corner of the bubble-barrier that had become their tomb in the blink of an eye.

Ceythie, Jake, the other Players, and all the soldiers from both camps were helplessly submerged, swept away without being able to resist the power of the torrents. And as soon as the mystically charged water made contact with their skin or clothes...

The Russian roulette began!

Chapter 1146: We Have A More Urgent Problem

"Aaaaaaaarrrrbblblblboob!"

Hearing the screams of agony being muffled in their bubbles as quickly as they had formed around him, Jake's expression changed. Upon contact with such pure Lumyst Water, the first baptism had been explosively triggered.

Jake was safe for the moment, but feeling the concentrated flow of vital energy seeping into him through every pore, pressing on his tissues, he could only imagine what the

others were enduring. A glance at Hephais and Lysandra told him that they were okay for now, but he couldn't say the same for the rest.

Without further ado, although he had promised to let the others fend for themselves, he emitted a burst of Space Lumyst, slicing through the currents on his path to rejoin the rest of his squad. The mass of water was split for a fraction of a second, a moment he used to cross the distance in one motion.

Just before taking off, however, he caught a glimpse of the enemy general, Corvac, swallowing the life-force-pulsing seed in his hand without hesitation, gulping it down whole with an audible gulp. The eyes of the old Radiant Lord then bulged with terror and anger, as if he had been duped, then the curtain of sliced water closed behind him, blocking his view of what followed.

'Whatever, I couldn't care less about what happens to that asshole.' Jake cursed as he shot towards the group of Players, where his cat and Lord Phenix were also present.

Seeing him reappear before them and push back the enveloping waters, Amy and the other alarmed Players gave him a look that was as grateful as it was dumbfounded. Except for Crunch and Lord Phenix: The two had bathed in the river the day before and could hold on for a while.

Alas, before Amy could thank him, Jake had already sliced through the water again after placing them under a dome to go save the other natives and Mumaks who were further back from the trap.

Unlike the Players, Ceythie and the other veteran soldiers, these recruits had far more modest physical abilities. Without him, they wouldn't survive a minute, unless they had luck that could rival Ulfar's.

Indeed, when Jake arrived near them, he discovered without surprise but with a heavy heart that half of the survivors of his company—already severely depleted by previous battles—had already lost exactly half of their numbers. From the roughly 700 barbarians still alive from their original regiment, there were now only 350.

Conversely, as he had anticipated, the Mumaks and their crews had all survived. As expected, the first baptism posed no problem for them.

At least the good news was that Ekho, Thonzo, Claire, and the others in his squad were also in good health when he found them. They owed their salvation to their new equipment, freshly forged by Jake before the battle. The main material of their doubly enchanted armors being Black Lumyst Steel (+14), the water obviously posed no danger to them.

In fact, the real danger was that of asphyxiation or being crushed by the water pressure. Until proven otherwise, Underworld Barbarians couldn't breathe underwater.

While mitting a continuous torrent of clear Water Lumyst from his entire body to take control of the surrounding water and forcefully push it back to form a breathable air dome, Jake calmly inspected their condition before asking somberly,

"Holding up okay?"

"W-what's happening?" Jashuzen stammered, anxiously clutching his battle axe, his brain struggling to grasp the apocalyptic scene he had found himself in.

"A trap made of Life Lumyst Water." Jake responded succinctly before stiffening and then clenching his teeth.

The weight of the water was already taxing on his reserves of Water Lumyst, but there was worse news waiting for them.

[The water's energy level is constantly increasing.] The dark words of Xi echoed with his own thoughts, adding to his pessimism.

"Aaaarrrrrgghblbloob!!"

While Jake saved his friends and other survivors of his company by placing them under a single large dome, the other troops left to their fate continued to succumb one after another. This Lumyst Water was so pure that the Underworld Barbarians had endured 6 consecutive baptisms in less than 10 seconds, reducing their numbers by a factor of 64!

Compared to that, their enemies were faring much better, although he had no way to verify this.

Whooosh!

"What a slaughter..." Hephais tsked as he entered the dome briefly with a few of Ceythie's guards in bad shape before carefully dipping the tip of his hand back into the water.

Jake didn't stop him, aware that this was the assassin's chance to undergo the Life Lumyst baptisms he had originally planned for the next night. Seeing him do this, Amy was tempted to follow suit due to her inferiority complex and thirst to become stronger, but Lee Yoon and Lysandra stopped her just in time.

"Don't do it. The Lumyst is too concentrated." Lysandra warned her with a sorrowful look. She still had the same ethereal elegance, but it was evident she had lost some of her luster compared to earlier.

The elf, though an arrogant Rank 15 Player, had nearly died in those waters just now. Because she had more energy than most natives, her body had only been subjected to

three baptisms during this short period, but that was enough to give her an idea of what awaited if she lingered in the water any longer.

Rather than risk her life in these waters for a few early baptisms, she would rather bathe in less pure water where the risk was more manageable.

"If we survive this ambush, I promise to protect you during your next river baths." Jake promised readily to discourage the more stubborn.

This promise didn't soothe Amy's sense of inferiority, but at least it quelled her suicidal urge to throw herself into the water.

"Isn't it dangerous for him?" Lee Yoon raised an eyebrow skeptically towards Hephais, who was chattering his teeth as if the arm in contact with the water had been plunged into a meat grinder.

Jake, clenching his teeth just as much but due to the concentration required to control the tremendous volume of water infused with his Water Lumyst, glanced at the Egean, then grunted,

"He's using my armor and his Shadow Lumyst as a buffer, so if it becomes too tough, he should be able to stop in time. Worst case, I'll heal him."

Jake wasn't sure if the assassin had other tricks up his sleeve to cheat death, but knowing him, it was more than likely.

Amidst these banalities laden with anxiety, silence soon fell in the dome conjured by Jake, punctuated by increasingly rare howls of agony outside. Now, the baptisms took more time, requiring much more energy, but the number of soldiers on both sides had significantly dwindled.

To make matters worse, the Lumyst Water was so rich in Life Lumyst that their senses struggled to see through it beyond a few meters. They had no idea what was happening outside. Whether Ceythie or the enemy general was still alive was a big mystery.

RRROOOOOARRRR!

An indescribable roar outside, followed by a surge of water that tested the dome created by Jake, startled all the survivors.

"What was that?" Crunch meowed, ostentatiously licking his balls before remembering he was still wearing his ridiculous armor.

Ignoring the annoyance, Jake thought back to the shocked and furious expression of the old enemy general before going to save his friends, and he had a small idea of what had just happened.

'...But we have a more urgent plight...'

"You're almost out of Water Lumyst." Lysandra dropped casually, mirroring his thoughts as she realized the flow of aqueous energy radiating from his body was beginning to dwindle. After all, he'd only been cultivating his Water Lumyst Core for a few hours, up to the mid-Corebearer realm. "Will it be enough to maintain the dome?"

Jake wasn't surprised. He could hide the situation inside his body, but not the Water Lumyst emitted in plain sight. Not only the elf, even Amy and the natives had realized the situation.

Aware that he couldn't hide the situation for long, he hesitated for a moment, then admitted with a wry smile,

"If the mass and purity of the water had remained the same, I could have held on a bit longer..."

"You mean..." The realization on his friends' faces forced a bitter grimace from him.

"That's right... This dome is going to collapse in a few seconds."

Chapter 1147: Will My Artefact Hold?

The mood, already somber given their predicament, nosedived into the negative upon receiving confirmation from Jake's lips. They had believed that as long as he was with them, they would pull through. What a letdown...

"Hey, I'm not some all-powerful god, in case you weren't aware," Jake retorted with a look that was half-irritated, half-aghast. "If I gave off the impression that I was that badass, then I'm genuinely sorry."

Hearing his 'sincere' apology, even the usually brazen Crunch and Lord Phoenix were overtaken by a sense of outrage, a vein throbbing on their temples. Hephaïstos, who was typically the most unflappable among them, also had his mouth slightly agape.

What was even more astonishing, though, was that the others, including Amy, who knew him less well, weren't particularly surprised by what he had said, feeling even ashamed for relying too much on him.

"Don't scare us like that. How much time exactly?" Lysandra, at least managing to stay calm, redirected the conversation.

Jake turned serious, then after briefly closing his eyes to focus on the behavior of his Water Lumyst outside, he reopened them and announced with utmost solemnity,

"The water pressure around us is rapidly increasing. That can only mean two things: either we're sinking, or the water level above us is rising. We're not sinking; I've made sure of that. So, it's the volume of water that's increasing.

"This brings us to the second, and real, issue: the rising purity of the Lumyst Wate. Initially, its maximum enchantment potential was 14, the same as my Water Lumyst. Even if the water pressure continued to increase, I was confident we could survive even if the dome were to collapse.

"It will become impossible once the water's purity reaches +15. At that point, the Water Lumyst I've infused into the water will undergo a baptism, just like the Spirit Power I'm continuously using to probe the water outside the dome. When that happens, whether the enchantment succeeds or fails, I'll inevitably lose control of it. The dome will then collapse."

What Jake didn't explain was that his control over Lumyst came from his Lumyst Core. Even depleted of his Water Lumyst, he could control the Water Lumyst outside his body as long as his physical and mental endurance allowed, as long as no other Water Lumyst Cultivator competed with him for this energy. Of course, the farther the Lumyst was from him, the less grip his Lumyst Core had over it, allowing any cultivator to snatch it away if he wasn't careful. That's what had happened to the Lumyst of River's Bane after his death, when Jake had absorbed its scattered remnants.

In other words, him running out of Water Lumyst didn't really have any impact on his ability to control the water around the dome. The catch was precisely the fact that both the pressure and purity of the water were increasing, not that his Water Lumyst Cores were empty. Meribelle, the Radiant Mages present, Hephais and Lysandra understood this very well, but it wasn't necessarily as clear to the others who had never undergone more than one baptism.

"So, 36 seconds." Hephais ended the suspense as he finally removed his hand from the water.

While the others listened to Jake's explanations, he had nearly perished after his twelfth baptism. That was his limit.

Despite his disappointment at not being able to endure more, he had a satisfied smile on his face as he read the notifications about acquiring new Graces and the splendid elevation of his stats. Like Jake, his physique was now at least twice as strong.

As soon as his Lumyst Breath became complete, the assassin wasted no time and immediately mimicked Jake by starting to condense his own Shadow Life Lumyst Core to accompany his Shadow Spirit Lumyst Core cultivated the previous night.

While Hephais was focusing on his accelerated Lumyst Cultivation, panic had already set in the dome upon hearing it would collapse in 36 seconds.

"Is that true?"

"Fuck! Only 32 seconds left!"

Ekho and the others in his squad were a bit calmer, but that was because they were too weak and ignorant to grasp their plight. Their confidence in Jake hadn't been shaken in the slightest despite everything he had just said.

"Do you have a solution?" Meribelle noticed after exchanging an anxious look with one of the recruits. Having hung around him, she could tell he was not nervous.

Addressed by the young woman, Jake did not mention her not-so-discreet glances towards a member of his squad, and retorted with a slight smirk,

"I do."

With that confident tone, Jake materialized the Goblet of Ethershine (+25) he had obtained the previous night in Lustris after 'tough' negotiations. Seeing the golden cup appear in his hands, Meribelle's eyes and those of a few elite guards saved earlier by Hephais, who were loyal to Ceythie, widened in disbelief.

"Is that what I think it is?"

"It is." Jake confirmed without beating around the bush.

"9 seconds." Hephais reminded apathetically, making the dome's survivors, including Meribelle, turn pale.

Jake's lips twitched, then he commanded without further explanation by tapping the chalice as if he was about to give a housewarming speech,

"Enough jokes. Trust me and get inside."

Before any objector could voice their dissent, the space on the surface of the golden goblet distorted, and then, with a suction noise that siphoned the space, all living beings in the dome were sucked inside. Jake followed them in with a worried frown right after, leaving the cup-shaped artifact floating in the middle of the dome.

Without his active control, the Water Lumyst maintaining the dome became anarchic, and the breathable air space collapsed onto itself, the unleashed waters filling the void inside. The Goblet of Ethershine was then swept away, drifting at the mercy of the currents.

Meanwhile, the natives and Players occupying the now-defunct dome reappeared in an environment pitch black and without any apparent limits. If not for the solid surface under their feet, they might have thought they were dead.

Lysandra, and the Radiant Mages saved by Jake conjured some light, revealing a decor as bleak and lifeless as they had imagined. No surprise there, since they were inside a water container, precious artifact or not.

The only point of note was the golden floor under their feet seemed unusually flat, as if it had been added in a hurry. That was indeed the case. When Jake appeared in turn, he explained sternly,

"The space of this artifact can contain Lumyst Water of purity 25, so don't move from here. It turns out I filled it last night, so if not for the thin partition under your feet, you'd already be dead."

Essentially, they had fled the threat of the Lumyst Water trap outside for an even worse prison. Those with a Chalice of Nethersshade or a Goblet of Ethershine Replica knew that the artifact could create various compartments to separate waters of different purities. It was this function that Jake had used to produce the partition under their feet.

"And what do we do now?" One of the guards loyal to Ceythie frowned as he inspected his surroundings. The fate of the Great General and his comrades worried him.

"It's better to wait here until things settle down outside." Homer, the leader of the Mumak battalion, spoke in a grim tone. "I know Corvac, see, and he's the type to prefer a collective suicide with the enemy over defeat."

Seeing that the one who had just responded had the look and nauseating aura overflowing with vitality of a Radiant Mage, Ceythie's guard was far from convinced, but a surge of spiritual pressure from Jake and the other Players present made him swallow his saliva.

Turning to Homer, Jake asked gravely, "Will my artifact hold?"

The Radiant Mage froze upon receiving the full attention of the foreigner who was his enemy not so long ago, but unfortunately, lying wasn't in his nature. It turned out he knew more about Corvac than Corvac imagined about him.

Taking a deep breath for courage, he declared apologetically as his shoulders slumped in exhalation,

"Probably not... All the Radiant Mages who have worked closely with him know he holds a Goblet of Ethershine enchanted to +28. Your artifact only has a one in eight chance of surviving this calamity if Corvac's plan is what I imagine."

Chapter 1148: Master, The Waterproofing's Spot-On

The glimmer of hope that had started to rekindle after being whisked away to safety was abruptly extinguished following Homer's grim revelation. Despite their distrust, the Radiant Mage had no reason to lie. His life was on the line too!

Unperturbed, at least on the surface, Jake had already begun fervently discussing strategies with Xi in his mind, searching for a way out of their misfortune. Even for him, things were looking pretty dire.

After a brief internal monologue, whose only audience was his Oracle AI, Jake once again questioned Homer,

"Does Corvac's artifact really contain that much water?"

His skepticism was warranted. The amount of water required to purify a groundwater source of such magnitude seemed astronomical. From his limited testing, even when filled to the brim, his own Goblet of Ethershine could only hold a fraction of this groundwater source, which was already significant in his view.

However, an important distinction was that Lumyst Water from the same river half, or more precisely the same waterfall, wasn't subject to the same rules as other materials and entities that came into contact with it. Inferior quality water physically interacting with purer water wouldn't be subjected to a coin-flip chance of self-destruction as they would.

Jake's hypothesis, after traversing both halves of the Lumyst River extensively and observing his own Lumyst Cores, was that, regardless of its current purity, Lumyst Water was born at maximum purity before being released into the Lumyst River by its originating waterfall. It was only as it traveled away and lost energy through contact with various objects that the enchanting water's potency would eventually diminish, becoming neutral where the waters of the two falls met.

This meant that Corvac didn't need as much high-purity Life Lumyst Water as they had imagined to enhance the quality of this groundwater source. Still, the required quantity of water was staggering, an equivalent amount of +28 Lumyst Water to the groundwater source to match its purity.

That seemed impossible. Nonetheless, with half the water, or even just a quarter, Corvac could easily push all the water within the barrier to +25 or 26 purity. If it was +25, they could still manage with his own Goblet, but if it was +26... It would be too late for tears.

"No idea," Homer finally replied, his expression one of embarrassment. Such information was beyond his pay grade.

'In that case, let's assume it is,' Jake concluded internally with a gloomy expression.

The other Players seemed to have reached the same conclusion, because as soon as they saw his resolute expression, Amy asked guiltily,

"Do you plan to head back out despite the dangers? Is there anything we can do to help?"

Jake understood it was just shame and guilt speaking, reflecting her feelings of uselessness and powerlessness, but he didn't hold it against her. In this case, at least, her offer was sincere.

"We'll manage. Just need to dismantle this trap, find an escape, or a safe haven where the water can't harm us," he assured, his tone designed to comfort both her and the anxious survivors.

Seeing his assurance failed to ease their fears, he announced with a grim determination, "I'm going out."

A second later, he was back inside, soaked, with the furrowed and thoughtful brow of someone deep in calculation.

'The water's already reaching +15 in concentration. If the influx of the purest Lumyst Water follows our predictions, the barrier will be completely filled in 56 minutes, likely reaching a purity of 26 or 27, as we feared. With proper preparation, devising a strategy to breach the barrier or take down Corvac is well within my reach.'

[It's doable.] Xi acknowledged encouragingly.

Endorsed by Xi, Jake shared his plan with the group before getting down to work. Hephais, Crunch, and Lord Phenix, each capable of cultivating elemental Life Lumyst, set about their tasks.

The objective now was to fabricate, in the next few minutes, a submarine or at least a fortified mobile shell robust enough to withstand immediate disintegration upon exterior contact with the Life Lumyst Water. The key was delaying the initiation of the baptism.

Given the significant restrictions on their bloodline skills, the task of generating the necessary materials for the armored vessel fell to their Lumyst cultivation. Jake would oversee the vessel's construction, but his companions' contributions were equally critical.

Within a short span of ten minutes, Jake had synthesized enough Black Lumyst Steel, infused with his Lumyst, to construct a uniquely hollow metal hull with approximately 3 meters of armor thickness. The interior space was tight, barely accommodating a few individuals, yet perfectly suited for their needs.

He then dedicated the subsequent five minutes to transforming the scant Cosmic Fairy Force at his disposal into Force Lumyst, a psionic Lumyst with telekinetic-like properties, essential for maneuvering the water outside or propelling them at crucial moments.

Jake had aspirations to craft additional Lumyst variants, such as Space Lumyst and Time Lumyst, among others. However, these forms demanded an exorbitant amount of energy, capable of depleting him instantly even with full access to his powers. Delaying further would render the external water unmanageable, regardless of his preparedness level.

In the meantime, Hephais had conjured sufficient Shadow Lumyst to apply an extra protective layer over the hull. Crunch introduced a peculiar substance akin to Jake's Black Lumyst Steel but with a disturbingly elastic quality. Compared to these, the Fire Lumyst produced by Lord Phenix was less applicable in their current dilemma, though Jake appreciated the effort nonetheless.

Roughly fifteen minutes post-preparation, they were battle-

ready. Jake surveyed their peculiar boule-shaped submarine before declaring with fervor,

"Ready?"

"Ready!" came the varied responses from Hephais, Crunch, and Lord Phenix, ranging from subdued to spirited.

To the other survivors, particularly fellow Players like Lysandra, Lee Yoon, and Amy, the sight of them bracing to risk it all, their casual demeanor in the face of danger, was utterly bewildering.

"Then, let's embark!" Jake's sinister chuckle marked the commencement of their 'voyage.'

The trio's matching malevolent smirks sent shivers down the spines of onlookers, making it abundantly clear this was no ordinary underwater excursion. Knowing Jake, Amy and Meribelle had no illusions; this was a hunt.

In an instant, the quartet and their strikingly unconventional vehicle vanished, leaving the rest in the stark vastness of the artifact. When they reappeared outside next to his replica, Jake had preemptively released some of his Force Lumyst to prevent their protective vessel's cockpit from flooding. The water around the artifact was repelled without issue, but the Lumyst emitted for this purpose slipped out of his control before he could do anything to retain it.

"I had hoped to recover some of it, but oh well," Jake lamented before returning to their current mission.

"Master, the waterproofing's spot-on, but a window or two for outside visibility wouldn't have hurt," Crunch purred dryly, realizing his enhanced vision was useless in the pitch-dark submarine.

"Ugh, someone's welcome to swim in the open if they miss the sunlight that much," Jake shot back with equal sarcasm.

"Actually, scratch the windows. At least Lord Phenix's flames will be of some use," Crunch quipped slyly, casting a mocking glance at the irate figure beside him. This taunt had been his intention all along.

"That damn—"

"We're moving!" Jake interjected as the first layer of their vehicle's armor vanished from his perception.

This meant the Black Lumyst Steel forming it had either been obliterated or upgraded. Either way, the Lumyst within was no longer his. Fortunately, the moment he sensed the loss of the first armor layer, Jake shifted his focus to the underlying layer of Force Lumyst.

This innovative design approach made their egg-shaped submarine truly unique. Constructed like an onion, it featured numerous layers, each separated by a vacuum, with the limited Force Lumyst under his control ensuring structural integrity and acting as an additional sensor.

This idea might seem far-fetched, but it was actually the best solution in their situation. The multi-layer system with distinct thicknesses prevented the triggering of a baptism affecting the entire vehicle. If that happened, no matter the thickness of its armor, the Lumyst Water would have breached it in less than a minute unless their luck defied all odds.

In truth, if luck truly decided to favor them, Jake would probably be the first to shed tears. After all, his submarine genuinely had neither doors nor windows. If the alloy composing it actually withstood 28 baptisms, the real challenge would then be figuring out how to get out.

Chapter 1149: Change Of Plan

From the outside, a massive black bowling ball floating in the water suddenly shot forward like a cannonball, not towards Corvac's presumed position and his troops, but

towards the 'exit'. If they could destroy, or at least breach the barrier confining them in this basin, their predicament would be instantly solved.

Hephais, Crunch, and Lord Phenix found themselves brutally slammed against the back wall by the sudden acceleration, with only Jake—charged with piloting—remaining firmly rooted in his stance. The plump cat served as a cushion for the other two, the assassin using its belly as a trampoline to land upright, hands in pockets.

'Since when has my role been reduced to that of an airbag?' Crunch almost sobbed internally as he spat out a feather from Lord Phenix that had ended up in his throat. The gloating bird even went as far as to wipe his feet on his fur instead of thanking him for his sacrifice.

"Do you see anything?" Hephais asked with a grim expression that cut through his usual indifference.

He wasn't referring to sight in the traditional sense, but to Jake's overall perception. If he was asking, it was because he himself couldn't see anything beyond their submarine, even his Oracle Scan struggling to penetrate the water more than a few inches. So, he was right to wonder how their leader was navigating. If it was thanks to his sensory abilities, then he had underestimated him once again.

"Nothing at all," Jake cut off his speculations. "I just remember the topography of the area and where I left my artifact. While it was tossed by the current, Xi kept reporting its movements so I could position us. Knowing where we were, figuring out where to go isn't hard."

The assassin frowned slightly as he considered the feasibility of the idea, then nodded, deeming the explanation reasonable. It was also within his capabilities.

BAM!

Midway to the barrier, the steel sphere serving as their transport vehicle hit something, violently deviating from their course. As they quickly righted themselves, Crunch meowed impatiently,

"An enemy? Are we there already?"

Slap!

"Shut up, idiot, it's too early," Lord Phenix scolded him sharply, pulling his ear mercilessly. "Besides, we're surrounded by Lumyst Water. How do you expect us to fight?"

It was the first sensible thing Jake had heard all day from the orange turkey. Well, he had already taken a beating with the enemy's forbidden light spell. If he was showing

restraint, it was mostly because he wasn't confident he could resurrect from his ashes in such a vast expanse of water...

Ignoring his companions, Jake's body tensed and remained still in an intense effort to concentrate on what they had just hit. He decided to spend another portion of his Force Lumyst to 'feel' the unidentified floating object. A few seconds later, he relaxed upon discovering it was just a piece of volcanic rock about 60cm long.

"False alarm," he informed the others. "Just a piece of cooled magma from when the ground collapsed."

The eyes of his three companions, including Hephais, lit up upon receiving the info. Fortune favors the brave, and after the storm comes the rainbow never sounded so true. If they survived this battle, all those treasures waiting to be picked up awaited them!

To make a long story short, the sabotage work of the Nematodes had collapsed the ground of the region into millions, possibly billions of fragments of varying sizes from rocks like this to mere dust particles. Like everything else, upon contact with enchanted water, they had undergone a baptism. The 50% rule applied, and due to the large number of fragments, a certain number of enchanted treasures at +26 or +27 were bound to appear by the end of this farce.

'I guess this is what Corvac was counting on to recover if he survived all this,' Jake thought with a certain admiration for the old general before resuming control of the submarine.

Their vehicle resumed movement, producing a sonic boom greatly muffled by the mass of water. They collided with several other debris on the way to the barrier, until—

BANG!

"We've arrived," Jake smiled, immediately feeling that this impact was different from the previous ones. They had just hit something immovably heavy.

Now, it was just a matter of destroying it. Blindly, Jake maneuvered their submarine close to the barrier until the outer shell and the barrier touched.

'Oracle Scan.'

He used his bloodline ability Artifact Incarnation for this. Although restrained by the laws of Twyluxia, it was more powerful than Hephais's bracelet scan. Just enough to allow him a cursory analysis of the barrier.

Unfortunately, to Jake's great dismay, it took him five or six tries to succeed, wasting a lot of Spirit Power. This was because the purity of the water outside had already

reached +21, and by a stroke of luck, the outermost layer of their submarine's shell had endured six consecutive baptisms, defying the odds. This had multiplied the insulating properties of its material.

It was only when it disintegrated after failing the seventh baptism that Jake managed to project his Spirit Power beyond their vehicle.

'Phew... For a second, I really thought we'd never get out.' He exhaled, wiping the sweat from his forehead with relief. It was the first time he was thankful for his bad luck.

Alas, even worse news awaited them.

[Light Sanctuary Array (+28): A large-scale array belonging to a Goblet of Ethershine (+28). The light barrier created can resist Life Lumyst Water of equivalent purity and use the latter as fuel to sustain itself. The purer and more energy-rich the water, the more powerful the light barrier.]

"Fuck!" Jake cursed out loud. Even his Goblet was custom-made.

He had completely overlooked this possibility. Corvac was even more thorough and cautious than they thought him capable of. Yet, Jake had already set the bar very high.

Noticing the contortion of their boss's face, Hephais and the two beasts felt something was off.

"A problem?"

Jake's facial muscles twitched, then dejectedly he said,

"Change of plan. We're going to have to take on Corvac. The barrier is indestructible."

It might not have been, but Jake was objectively more confident in his abilities to take down Corvac than this barrier. The real issue was that time was of the essence, and they had a limited amount of Lumyst.

If the Light Sanctuary came directly from the enemy general's Goblet of Ethershine as described by the Oracle Scan, then the barrier wasn't going to run out of energy anytime soon, the artifact's purest Lumyst Water being its immediate fuel.

In other words, the barrier didn't have to wait for the ambient water purity to increase. The spell was already at full power. This was the real trump card behind the enemy's confidence.

In the meantime, two more layers of the vehicle had disintegrated after failing their baptisms, intensifying his sense of urgency. Alarmed, Jake decisively turned around and propelled the submarine towards the center of the barrier where he thought he had heard the previous roar. If he was right, they shouldn't miss it...

And bingo! When the hollow metal shell arrived at the destination a few dozen seconds later after shedding a few more layers, Jake suddenly felt pulled towards the center of the region with the current without having to do anything. Something massive seemed to be siphoning the ambient water with insatiable gluttony.

In their cockpit devoid of portholes, none of the four Players had any idea what was happening outside, but that didn't prevent them from sensing that the final confrontation was imminent. Hephais drew his scimitars, while Lord Phenix, who had been useless since the beginning, began compressing his Fire Lumyst in anticipation of a powerful counterattack when the time came.

As for Crunch, for the first time, he began to control the rubbery and padded substance made from Lumyst that he had painfully condensed to cushion the interior of the submarine in anticipation of future shocks.

It did him good, for a second later a thunderous impact, rivaling that of their collision against the barrier, shook their submarine. However, there was a significant difference: Instead of the unyielding resistance of the light barrier, distinct sounds of wood cracking resounded at the point of collision, and their vehicle didn't stop abruptly either, advancing several more meters.

As with the barrier previously, Jake then took the opportunity to scan the object into which their vehicle had embedded itself, and a smug 'as expected' smile lit up his face.

[Corvac (Treant Puppet): A former general who ingested a seed of Anthace after trusting the wrong person...]

Chapter 1150: Enter His Body If You Want To Survive...

Earlier...

Corvac had just swallowed the Anthace seed in his hand after springing his grand trap. Victory was set to be bitter, but he would survive! That was his resolve as a general, a Lifemancer, and a Light Warrior loyal to the Radiant Conclave.

And he had every reason to be confident. These seeds had been handed to him by Anthace himself as a reward for his faithful service. Everyone knew that the Titan Tree was the most significant guardian of the lands they fought for, and the main reason for their superiority in every aspect over the primitive tribes of the Duskwight Lands. If the

Abyssal Revenant Ledger hadn't appeared to offer a semblance of competition, those backward barbarians would have lost the war long ago.

Moreover, the uses of these rare and precious seeds were no state secret, although few were rewarded with one directly by Anthace. Given their staggering lifeforce, they could serve both as a source of energy for all sorts of powerful Lumyst Spells or Arrays, and as a medicinal ingredient for cultivation with the right methods.

However, these seeds were seldom consumed directly, as the astonishing amount of lifeforce and Light Lumyst compressed inside could cause any cultivator of insufficient stage to implode. Radiant Lord was recognized as the minimum realm. Corvac met this requirement with his peak-Radiant Lord cultivation and was thus confident in his ability to withstand the shock.

Even so, the danger was real; the seed could use their body as fertilizer to sprout if they were careless. That's why normally, Anthace would block this function to avoid any regrettable incidents. To his knowledge, such a tragedy had never occurred, proving the reliability of the old tree.

The other reason the veteran general was proceeding in this way was because Anthace was a primordial Titan deemed to have endured more than 30 baptisms. The exact number was unknown, as the plant entity, almost as ancient as the Lumyst River, could produce all sorts of goods from its body like wood, fruits, flowers, roots, etc., of a lower enchantment level than its main body.

This spoke volumes about the old tree's mastery of Lumyst. Jake, by contrast, could for the time being only produce materials of the same enchantment quality as his own body.

The only exception concerned its seeds. They had the same potential as their progenitor. If they were to be planted, a second Anthace could theoretically emerge.

That's why the Titan Tree strictly forbade them from planting the seeds without its permission. The Titan would then proceed to kill their consciousness in the bud by linking them to the rest of its vegetal network covering the entirety of the Lustra Plains. This mechanism had greatly contributed to the monstrous plant's expansion.

For all these reasons, Corvac didn't doubt his decision for a moment when he swallowed the seed in his hand. Never would Anthace seek to harm a citizen of the Lustra Plains.

That's why, when the seed cruelly sprouted in his stomach, its roots expanding voraciously through all his organs to suck out all his lifeforce, he felt betrayed. A rage, a hatred like he had never experienced in his long warrior existence erupted from the depths of his heart, overwhelming his consciousness.

The general wanted to backpedal, make himself vomit, seek revenge. But by the time all these thoughts crossed his mind, it was already too late. A second later, the expanding roots pierced his skull, sucking out his brain matter and annihilating his mind for good. Then, having nothing left to feed on, the starving roots burrowed their way to the surface of his skin to project themselves into the vast expanse of water that had engulfed them.

The omnipresent Lumyst Water was in turn absorbed, becoming nutrients for the seed, and the hollow carcass of Corvac began to grow at an exponential rate, his withered skin covering with bark. From his arms, branches budded, then rapidly branched out, while from his feet sprouted all sorts of roots infiltrating the depths of the groundwater at a frenzied pace.

In less than five seconds, a colossal Treant Puppet had replaced the deceased general. His trusted officers, guards, and Radiant Mages standing back behind their general under a fragile barrier witnessed the entire scene frozen in horror. Ceythie and her officers were no less unsettled, unable to make sense of what was happening.

All but one. The giant in silver and gold plate armor serving as Corvac's right-hand man flashed an evil smile as he beheld the gigantic humanoid tree that had replaced his former superior.

The goliath was named Isdar, and under the guise of serving the Radiant Conclave, was part of a hidden order of Light Warriors answering directly to the Celestial. The weakest member of this underground organization was a Saint.

Surprisingly, the Lumyst Water that had engulfed them out of nowhere left him indifferent. Where other fighters, allies or foes, were forced to rely on the battalion of Radiant Mages or their artifacts to endure, the giant only had his armor and flesh to withstand the bite of the enchanting water.

Unmoved by Corvac's tragic fate, Isdar then slowly turned to the other soldiers paralyzed with fear, and pointing at what remained of Corvac he announced without a hint of sadness,

"Corvac's sacrifice has served its purpose. Enter his body if you want to survive this calamity."

As if to validate his point, the colossal bark giant knelt in their direction, his sudden movement stirring up a whirlwind of water. With its two enormous wooden hands, the huge creature then planted its fingers into its chest, then spread them apart to open a thin breach in its chest. Wide enough to admit the tallest Light Warrior.

The soldiers were full of suspicion before his strange inviting posture, but facing the proven threat of the surrounding water, they stifled their mistrust and took refuge in the breach without hesitation, jostling each other to enter first.

Once the last one entered, the breach created by Treant Corvac immediately healed, sealing his chest hermetically. It was no different from another prison. The plate-armored man remaining outside finally discarded his mask at that moment, his friendly smile turning into unadulterated contempt.

"These fools... As if Anthace could take the risk of letting any of you survive after witnessing such heresy. You would have been better off taking your chances with the baptisms. At least there, you would have had a tiny chance of survival."

Echoing his words, screams of agony broke the silence. To the Saint's eyes, these tearing screams were like a delicious symphony to his ears.

Ceythie and a few other officers had also witnessed the entire scene and had thought of taking refuge in Corvac's body with the enemy troops. Hearing these screams, they had no choice but to retreat.

This scene of horror surpassed anything their intelligence services had managed to glean from the enemy. Since when did the enemy possess such a weapon?

Of course, they had not yet realized that Corvac was nothing more than an empty shell. To their eyes, except for Ceythie and a few generals with strong mental senses, the Treant was just a secret weapon of the enemy.

The Great General, known for never backing down from a fight, would have taken up the challenge under normal circumstances, but with all this Life Lumyst Water around, it was suicide. Especially since she could feel the purity of this water increasing rapidly... Without hesitation, she telepathically ordered, projecting Spirit Lumyst filaments directly into the foreheads of her subordinates.

"Scatter! Regroup at these coordinates once you've shaken the enemy. Use the enslaved wandering souls in your artifacts to buy some time. The rest of you, burn through your Spirit Lumyst Aura! If fate allows, we'll meet at the exit! I hope to see as many of you alive as possible then..."

"Hooah!"

Trained never to question orders, her war comrades fled in all directions without a word, while the artifacts holding wandering souls began to expel them to serve as decoys.

"As if I'd let them escape after what they've just witnessed," Isdar sneered, drawing a massive wooden flamberge. His silver and gold armor also reverted to a dark bark state, as a black aura began radiating from his body. "Corvac, kill them."

Unable to speak, an ominous, evil green glow flared in the eyes of the immense treant as a sign of agreement, then thousands of roots burst from his body, chasing after the fleeing soldiers.

The moment Ceythie wanted to stop them, her instincts made her hairs stand on end, and she raised her saber just in time to parry a phenomenally powerful blow from the flamberge. The force of the stroke was such that her weapon broke, the enemy blade penetrating deep into her armor.

"How is this possible?!" She stammered, eyes wide with incredulity at her broken sword. Her weapon wasn't supposed to be this brittle.

She was indeed channeling the bulk of her Spirit Lumyst Aura to resist the water, but her saber was an artifact with its own spirit. It wasn't something that a mere wooden flamberge strike could sever, whether it came from Anthace or not.

But if it was just that, a distinguished general like her wouldn't have been so shaken. The spirit of her weapon no longer responded at all. Its consciousness had been completely obliterated.

Then she noticed the dark and sinister light enveloping her opponent's blade and understood,

"You... You're not a soldier of the Radiant Conclave! Who are you?!"

Chapter 1151: You Really Take Me For A Turkey

Back in the present...

"Looks like we're stuck," Hephais muttered, watching his boss struggling to push their vehicle forward with his mind.

Jake only groaned in response, refusing to admit defeat so easily. The only silver lining was that the Treant Puppet seemed surprisingly indifferent to the presence of a steel sphere embedded in its chest.

Shortly after their makeshift submarine had violently crashed into Treant Corvac's bark skin, they became aware that the rear half of the vehicle was still submerged in water. Consequently, it continued to shed its layers of armor one after the other at an alarming rate, escalating their sense of urgency.

"Fuck, if only I could get out and take it down myself," Jake cursed, realizing he was almost out of Lumyst Force. The purity of the water outside had already reached a critical threshold, making exiting, even for a brief moment, out of the question.

To conserve his Force Lumyst, he applied his telekinetic properties to the internal walls of their submarine to prevent it from being consumed upon contact with the Lumyst

Water outside. Indeed, as long as the Lumyst was under his control from his Lumyst Core, he didn't have to worry about losing it and could even recall it.

To a lesser extent, Jake could also control the vehicle by tapping into the Metal Lumyst infused in the still intact steel walls, but it was significantly less effective. Mainly because most of the Metal Lumyst produced had reverted into Black Lumyst Steel, just another metal.

Ironically, Lumyst was needed to control a material derived from that same Lumyst...

If Jake had been able to infuse a monstrous amount of Metal Lumyst into the freshly condensed Black Lumyst Steel, his control over it could have rivaled, or even surpassed, that with his telekinesis, at least at short range. Regretfully, the rapid evolution of the situation had not afforded him the time.

[You could use the rest of your Lumyst Force to forcefully penetrate the enemy's bark armor, but that would mean running out of Lumyst to seal the breach behind.] Xi suggested with moderate enthusiasm.

Clearly, that was the problem. Their goal was to shelter from the water, not to turn Corvac's body, in which they sought refuge, into a municipal pool...

"Or we could use my flames..." Lord Phenix suggested, raising his hand, er, wing.

"At the risk of setting our salvation ablaze?" Hephais shook his head. "Forget it."

"I meant as a means of propulsion, damn it!" The bird squawked out. "For God's sake, you really take me for a turkey!"

"..."

The ambiguous and heavy stares from his companions immediately made him regret his last words. Crunch's trembling lip, holding back a laugh, was unbearable...

Shrrrrrrrrlllinnng!

A deafening scraping noise suddenly came from the uncrashed side of their steel ball, followed by a jolt that propelled their vehicle forward without resistance. They were unstuck!

"Huh? What the heck was that?" The black cat's back arched in surprise, its senses on alert. The others were also on the lookout.

Jake frowned, then said coldly, "Sounded like a sword scraping against metal."

The state of the outermost armor when he probed it with his mental sense confirmed it. A long scratch scarred their rear hull, but not deep enough to damage a living metal capable of self-repair. Something had clearly hit them.

Yet, more concerning was that the force of the attack wasn't sufficient to penetrate the bark armor, or they would have resolved the problem long ago. Following the impact, their vehicle had clearly resumed moving without resistance.

Jake was certain it wasn't the bark that had given way, which could only mean one thing. For some reason beyond his understanding, Corvac had decided to let them enter his body.

'Did we make a mistake in wanting to use his body as refuge?' Jake doubted his judgment fleetingly before curling his lip in ridicule. 'In any case, if we don't accept the invitation, we'll perish once our vehicle is consumed.'

His senses were telling him that only four layers remained on their submarine. Hephais also had a clear reading of their plight thanks to his Shadow Lumyst.

"We're inside Corvac," Jake announced solemnly, not liking what his Oracle Scan feedback was now reporting, now that they were out of reach of the enchanting water.

"Jake, I need you to destroy the last layer of armor so I can see what's happening outside," the assassin requested, believing he was the best suited for the job.

The last layer of armor was indeed no longer under Jake's control after enduring a baptism. If it was just a baptism, he was confident he could overcome it without too much effort.

"Sure," Jake nodded before grimacing. "Seems my intervention won't be necessary..."

He didn't need to explain further, as his three companions also heard the sounds of friction and constriction rapidly enveloping their significantly thinned steel shell. At this rate, let alone the last layer, the entire vehicle was about to implode under the pressure.

"If we were in the wild, this situation would remind me of a giant snake's hunting method," Hephais ventured, unable to confirm. "But considering what we've fallen into, I'd bet we're dealing with roots. Big roots..."

The four companions put on a wry smile listening to his assumption. They had to face it: They had jumped from one trap into another.

Corvac had let them enter his body to digest them. Not just to kill them, or he would have let the water outside take care of it. Otherwise, why take such risks?

'But puppet implies someone pulling the strings, though,' Jake rationalized calmly.

Neither his companions nor he were nervous. Rather than being at the mercy of the waves outside, they much preferred facing this new, more tangible threat.

Creeeak!

About a minute later, the outermost layer of armor snapped like a porcelain vase, and Hephais finally got a glimpse of the new threat wanting their skin.

This was the kind of situation he had produced Shadows with his Lumyst for. The Egean could move and project his senses into his shadows, but they normally had to be connected to each other, at least by a thin filament of darkness.

The Shadow Lumyst allowed him to overcome this weakness by enabling him to project his senses into his Lumyst and move through the shadows infused or emanating from it.

As soon as the armor gave way, the layer of Shadow Lumyst underneath serving as a coating became a screen revealing the external situation to him.

As expected, huge roots were constricting their vehicle with the firm intention of crushing it, but that wasn't all. Further away and all around them, he could see humanoid forms suspended from a damp green wooden vault. Roots were wrapped around them as around their vehicle, but these corpses had long since succumbed.

How was Hephais so sure? Blood everywhere, non-existent lifeforce, but above all, a root as wide as a beam was deeply lodged in their brains. To say their corpses were drained like mummies would be an understatement.

They couldn't be dead.

"Good. At least we know what awaits us if we're not careful," Crunch yawned, sharpening his claws against each other after hearing the detailed description of the situation from the assassin.

Crack!

Another layer of armor broke, and Jake could finally probe his surroundings by projecting the Force Lumyst trapped between the two layers. The telekinetic blast repelled the hungry heavy roots around, sending splinters of wood in all directions.

Immediately after, Jake took advantage of this to manipulate the remaining layers of black steel of the vehicle with his Lumyst to open a door for them. The quartet then cheerfully emerged through the opening created, walking into the new prison of roots with a childlike curiosity evident on their faces.

However, as soon as their group finally got a clear view of where they had landed, their relaxed demeanor vanished instantly. A giant in dark wood armor, with an impressive flamberge standing peacefully on his shoulder, awaited them with a cruel smile.

At the same time, they noticed one of the suspended humans was familiar to them. Her spiritual aura was like the flame of a dying candle buffeted by winds, but its owner was still clinging to life. Though not for much longer.

A glance at her damaged helmet allowed them to determine to whom it belonged: Ceythie.

Chapter 1152: So It's Not Just All Talk

"I didn't think you'd manage to survive this long," Isdar congratulated them with dripping sarcasm, his malicious smile unwavering. "Thinking you're safe here? Big mistake. But I guess I can't blame you for thinking that way. Cornered, a human can only see what's right in front of him. Makes it easy to make them dance to my tune—"

"You talk too much," Lord Phenix retorted disdainfully. "Whether you're a nobody hungry for glory or the Celestial himself, if anyone's trapped here, it's you!"

"Exactly!" Crunch sneered, lifting his snout with a pride that matched his rival's snooty air. "The nerve to think my master can be manipulated by anyone! For that, I'll take care of you myself."

Jake and Hephais watched the two clowns with deadpan expressions, but internally, their thoughts were far from indifferent. Why can't these two stop stirring up trouble? Keep sniffing around for it, and they'll end up with a face full of it...

And they weren't far from the truth. As soon as the armored giant was interrupted in the middle of his villainous monologue by the two beasts, his smiling face twisted into a forced, unpleasant grimace. He had already decided who he would kill first.

"No point arguing with future dead enemies. Fine! I'll start with you two."

Releasing a murderous intent held back for who knows how long in a sigh resembling a death rattle, Isdar slowly lifted the greatsword resting on his shoulder and wielded it deftly. As he took his stance, the atmosphere around him shifted drastically, becoming icy and hostile.

A Lumyst Aura as bright as a mini sun ignited his body, forming a dense, impenetrable halo of light enveloping both his body and weapon. The lifeforce radiating from his cells seemed to have changed nature, becoming more compressed and subdued, multiplying his physical prowess.

At the touch of this white radiance overflowing with vitality, the bark-covered ground began to bud, quickly covering itself in a bed of flowers, and then young roots similar to those having ensnared Jake and his group. At this precise moment, the Saint truly looked the part of a... saint.

Seeing the four foreigners frozen in place, transfixed by him, Isdar felt a slight satisfaction. It's always like this when these loudmouth weaklings see me in action. Disappointing.

He had expected more from these foreigners. Especially after they had forced him to reveal his existence early by pushing Corvac to the brink.

Of course, his confidence wasn't just out of ignorance. Like all high-ranking officers and commanders, they had been briefed that morning about the appearance and threat posed by the most dangerous foreigner fighting for the Dusken Throne: Jake Wilderth.

Even a Saint had to proceed with extreme caution if he/she met him in a one-on-one without any backup. His charm, in particular, could reportedly enslave the mind of the opposite sex with just a glance.

'I don't buy that bullshit,' Isdar scoffed arrogantly while taunting, "Who wants to die first?"

"First?" The four Players mocked him. "I think there's a slight misunderstanding. We're not here for a duel."

Right after the last word, Crunch and Lord Phenix reverted to their original state, swelling dramatically to fill all available space. From the outside, the flat belly of Corvac swelled like that of an obese beer drinker, while his bark cracked at multiple points.

In their combat form, the two creatures were free to toy with the armored giant as if he were a mere child's doll.

At least, that was the initial plan. Reality proved otherwise.

Lord Phenix immediately found himself cramped, realizing he didn't even have enough room to fully extend his wings, let alone maneuver. The Fire Lumyst he had accumulated exploded in a burst, plunging the hollow insides of Corvac into a sea of flames, forcing his allies to defend themselves.

Thankfully, due to their Faction Passive, they were all highly resistant to heat, while their enemy was forced to protect himself with his Lumyst Aura with all his might. Overall, one could consider his intervention more helpful than hindering to his allies.

In contrast, Crunch turned out to be by far the worst teammate imaginable. While the orange turkey simply lacked space and aimed roughly, the black cat made no distinction between friend and foe at all.

Where Lord Phenix merely enlarged, Crunch's expanding body was integral to his attack strategy. The Lumyst with strange rubbery and metallic properties that he had condensed circulated through his body, increasing his own elasticity as he swelled up like a balloon at the speed of sound.

In the blink of an eye, Crunch's fur, spiked and hard as diamond, pinned everyone against the walls of Corvac's interior, flattening them like pancakes. Lord Phenix, the bulkiest of them all, was the most miserable, ending up skewered and pierced as if struck by a giant sea urchin.

"This idiot..." Jake facepalmed, seeing the razor-sharp fur inches from his eyes.

Not wanting to hurt his cat, he had no choice but to let himself be pinned against the vegetal wall behind him, contorting into an improbable position to dodge as many spikes as possible. Alas, even so, Crunch's drum-tight skin eventually reached him, crushing him against Corvac.

Right now, Jake found himself the guinea pig of a painful experiment to determine which between Crunch and the Treant Puppet's belly was more stretchable. Finding himself between a rock and a hard place, the preliminary results of this experiment allowed him to ascertain that, at least, his bones fared better than the bark.

To resist the unstoppable expansion of the cat-balloon, a myriad of roots as thick as cables burst from the walls, indifferent to whether Jake was in their path. He couldn't help but groan in pain each time a sharpened root broke against his shoulder blades or the back of his skull.

ROOOOARRR!

If Jake himself was in such bad shape, then he could only imagine the condition of the others. Though he had lost his sense of self after becoming a Treant puppet, Corvac was currently in agony from his stomach. It was as if he had explosive diarrhea held in by clenching his buttocks for months but no toilet to launch the missile.

On the surface of his body, one could see the bark armor cracking rapidly, then regenerating slightly larger thanks to the continuous absorption of the Lumyst Water around. As long as this source of energy lasted, the match between Corvac and Crunch wouldn't find a winner anytime soon.

While Jake wondered how to join the fight without hurting his cat, Hephais was inwardly thanking the feline for providing an ideal hunting ground. Earlier, their opponent's

blinding light aura prevented his shadows from approaching, but now he had his pick of the litter.

Projecting filaments of Shadow Lumyst in all directions, the assassin melded into the first shadow he found and slipped between the stretched skin of Crunch, its fur, and the bark walls below. Even a millimeter of space was enough for him to move in this tight environment as long as shadows could form. And by blocking the light from the enemy's aura, the cat had done precisely that.

A few tenths of a second later, the Egean found the armored giant crushed against the bark wall, unable to move, but unharmed. His greatsword shone like a white sun, embedded deeply in Crunch, and burning his flesh, but the cat, to his great surprise, had emitted no whimper.

'Eh? So it's not just all talk.' Hephais praised mentally, seeing the cat in a new light.

Isdar was going through a similar thought process but was frustrated and hateful. He had never felt so humiliated.

'Damn it, what's this despicable tactic!' The Saint fumed, mobilizing all his strength to move the arm holding his sword downward to deeply gut the balloon cat whose skin had taken on a crystalline appearance.

He had channeled an insane amount of Light Lumyst into his blade, enough to level a small village, but the cat's skin resisted like dragon leather. In addition to being tough, the beast regenerated ridiculously fast, while he could feel his light dispersing in its flesh until it became almost harmless.

Isdar had a huge ego, but he wasn't stupidly arrogant. He was well aware that at this rate, Corvac would run out of water. If he wanted to win, he would have to strike much harder.

"Corvac, let's fuse—"

Slash!

At that moment, Hephais' scimitar struck, emerging from a tiny shadow cast by a fur of Crunch. Isdar, the unnamed Saint, was decapitated in an instant.

Despite the successful execution, the expert assassin's face displayed no joy, instead frowning.

"Something feels off."