

Oracle 711

Chapter 711: Undead Leprechaun

His complexion was corpse-like, his one semi-functional leg slowly limping with an inverted ankle and knee joint. The rest of his body was as shapeless and unsightly as a snail after its skeleton had been crushed by the aftermath of their fight. To complete the picture, his face was completely caved in and beyond recognition, like some disfigured victims of ballistic trauma.

But it was indeed Trash. Jake would have recognized him anywhere. First, because his keen sense of detail could still make out most of his original facial features despite the colossal damage he had sustained, but more importantly he still had his armor on, albeit in shambles.

The Death Mark shimmered proudly across his forehead, branding him as one of the new Undeads of the fallen Lich. Seeing him wander around this place aimlessly, Jake briefly mused that it was the android necromancer's death that had deprived these Undeads of direction, but he immediately dismissed the notion.

Those Undeads had retreated long before the Lich's demise, but Trash had still been left behind.

"Oh Trash... Could it be that even dead, this Lich found you too trashy to be willing to recruit you?" Jake sighed as he approached the misshapen teen.

Elduin coughed in indignation and nearly choked to death upon hearing him sigh. Even dead, Jake was still humiliating the kid?

"Poor child..." Carmin sympathized, her eyes moistening again as she thought about her sister being kept in her Space Storage. At least, unlike the teenager, her body hadn't been too badly bruised.

[He's dead, but there's something wrong with his condition.] Xi warned. [If it wasn't the Lich who did it, then something unusual may have happened in the last few minutes. You should check, if the Undeads nearby are in the same state of bewilderment.]

"I was just thinking along the same lines." Jake agreed.

A long-range Oracle Scan brought him no results. These Undeads knew how to retreat and must not have slowed down for a moment. To be sure, he had to capture another one.

Explaining his intentions to Wyatt and the others, they approved the plan and even Bhammod, who had just regained consciousness, joined in. In the end, Wyatt brought back another Undead left behind, but the reasons for its abandonment differed greatly from those of the boy.

Apparently, the Wengol Undead had had its arms and legs severed during the battle and had simply fled more slowly than the others. Like the other mutilated undead, it must have been carried on the back by another Undead, but for some reason it had fallen and its carrier had not seen fit to pick it up.

Clustering around the Wengol Undead, which looked like a big log coated with a squid skin, the group watched with interest the behavior of the Undead before finally feeling some hope.

"Trash is indeed not acting like the other Undeads." Wyatt acknowledged, scratching his head. "But why? Could it be his Half-Leprechaun bloodline?"

"I can only see that." Jake shrugged looking as baffled as the Vampire.

'Xi, what do you know about the Leprechauns in the Mirror Universe? I only know what Irish folklore says about them, but I've always thought of them as some kind of leprechaun or hobbit with a top hat and a penchant for gold. If it weren't for St. Patrick's Day, I wouldn't even know they existed.' Jake confessed frankly. Of all the fantastic creatures in literature and mythology, Leprechauns were probably at the bottom of his list of interests.

[Let me check the Oracle System database...] Her Oracle AI replied perfunctorily. A few seconds later, she exclaimed, [I think I know what's going on. As you already know, for all the fantastic, folklore-like creatures in the Mirror Universe, anything that can be imagined most likely exists. Leprechauns come in different versions, but all civilizations describe them as small, bearded, prankster-like, greedy beings. Some of them would be able to produce illusions and certain physical phenomena to hide their treasure. Most often under a rainbow. This information doesn't help us much, since Trash is only Half-Leprechaun and was obviously unable to do so.

[But I did find a clue that might fit his situation. Some legends say that if you capture a Leprechaun, the Leprechaun must then grant three wishes to his captive. I believe the reason Trash didn't follow the Lich's orders is because he already has a master.]

"And who is that?" Jake darkened as he realized what she was getting at.

[In all likelihood, you.] Xi revealed, holding back a laugh. [When his mercenary group was wiped out and you saved his life, his life became linked to yours. And in truth, I think the leader of his former group knew that. Why would this alcoholic Uncle Oaf who was up to his neck in debt choose to take care of a needy orphan like him? Because that extra mouth to feed was most likely the only reason he hadn't been completely drowning in debt for the past few years.]

Jake's eyes lit up as he understood the implications. All Uncle Oaf had to do was tell Trash about his money woes, and the orphaned boy who felt indebted would then subconsciously wish to help his mercenary gang.

Then, and even now, Trash was no stronger than an ordinary native. His Soul Class was nothing special either. Still, status didn't tell the whole story. The Oracle Scan, by revealing his species to him, had already revealed more than enough.

As weak as Trash was, it could be that, like his Words of Power skill, his wish system was based on the intensity of his desires. Except that unlike his Words of Power, he wouldn't die on the spot trying to grant an unrealistic wish.

Despite his tiny powers, the child had surely done his best, helping Uncle Oaf three times during his hardships. According to Trash, their finances had deteriorated dramatically over the past three years, and that would match up with the expiration of the three wishes. Contractually, the Leprechaun side of him had fulfilled its part.

Jake repeated to his comrades the information he had just gleaned from his AI and Carmin put on an expectant face.

"Does this mean he can bring Lily back to life?" She fantasized optimistically.

Jake was gobsmacked by her naive enthusiasm, and although his first spontaneous response would have been to say no, he reconsidered. After all, Lily wasn't dead! She was just dead in that Ordeal.

If a Leprechaun used his magic to revive her, could he recall her soul from the Red Cube?

"Forget it." Wyatt mercilessly snuffed out her fragile glimmer of hope. "Even if it were possible, Trash is definitely not able to."

Well of course he wasn't. It was a given, Jake agreed inwardly. Now it was more a question of what they were going to do with this Undead Leprechaun.

'Technically, I haven't used any of the wishes, but even if I used all three I doubt I could bring him back to life.' Jake concluded, figuring it was a waste of time.

A scan through his mental sense told him that both his body and mind were irreversibly damaged. He could find a way to restore the body, but his mind was just like a vegetable. Even if his soul was somehow repaired, one had to seriously wonder what would be left of the original Trash.

"He's dead. Dead for good." Jake stated flatly as he moved the teen into his Space Storage. He didn't want to entertain any false hopes.

Carmin knew deep down that she was expecting too much and she didn't contradict him.

"By the way, aren't we missing some people?" Bhammod remarked as he uncorked a flask of homemade liquor.

"Now that you mention it..."

Then it clicked! Jeanie and Ruby! They hadn't heard from them in a while.

Luckily, Jake remembered leaving the fairy in a safe place nearby. The Oracle Shield protecting her must have deactivated a while ago, but that didn't stop him from turning livid as he saw the dwindling of his Aether fortune. After all those fights, he had only 190B and a few points left.

Unsurprisingly, when he dug up the Minmin from the bottom of her pit, an angry red fairy leapt out of her liquid alloy prison and pounced on his face, then began pummeling him furiously with her tiny fists. For Jake, these blows hurt even less than the drops of water from a gentle rain shower and he let her vent her feelings without resisting.

That left Ruby's condition to be checked. According to his Oracle Device, she was still alive and her Oracle Status indicated that she had been seriously injured but her HPs were recovering fast. Whatever the outcome of her fight, it was also over.

Gently stuffing the little huffing and puffing fairy poised for battle into his pet pocket, Jake told the others where he was going and they decided to sit back and wait for him. He soared into the air and in a flash flew over the mountain behind which Ruby and the other two Were-birds had been battling.

When he saw the devastated landscape, his face showed no surprise. He had expected this level of destruction from the start. At a glance he spotted the bodies of the two Undeads, but not Ruby. He furrowed his brow, but according to his Oracle Device she was close.

Landing near the two Were-beings, Jake stared blankly at the carnage. The two middle-aged warriors had returned to human form, but Trash's wounds were nothing more than a scratch next to them... How much did one have to hate someone to mutilate their corpse so badly?

Besides... He didn't want to speculate, but they were clearly missing some parts. Did her digestive instincts make Ruby a cannibal?

If so, he would have no choice but to kill her.

Chapter 712: Can You Control Yourself?

Following his Shadow Guide, Jake flew back up the trail and found Ruby a few minutes later huddled against a tree in a small flower-filled clearing, her legs tucked up against her chest and her face buried in her lap. A lone ray of moonlight had pierced the thick layer of clouds, shedding its brightness wonderfully on the young woman.

This ethereal beauty shimmering in the moonlight would have moved the most mediocre of painters, but Jake saw only the lethal charm of a viper. As he set foot on the ground, a twig snapped and Ruby jerked alertly to her feet and shouted,

"Who's there?!"

When she recognized Jake, she tried to hide her face in a rush, but it was too late. A single glance was enough to imprint this unforgettable scene in his memory forever.

A swollen and reddened face, red and wet eyes, partially dry tears that ran down her cheeks and a haggard and lost countenance that he knew only too well. But above all, for once the silver glow pulsing in her pupils was nowhere in sight.

His gaze drifted subconsciously to her blood smeared vermilion lips. Jake didn't need a drawing to understand what had happened. His guess was right. Ruby had indulged in cannibalism.

"I'm sorry, Ruby, but I need to be sure you can control yourself." Jake stated with a deadpan face, but the tone of his voice couldn't have been more chilling. Depending on her answer, he would kill her on the spot.

Sensing his resolve, the silver glow in her pupils dimly flared as her face became the very embodiment of anger and resentment. However, immediately afterwards the young woman quelled her emotions. Her Digestor part went back to sleep and the terrible feeling of shame and guilt that threatened to overwhelm her came rushing back.

Weary and exhausted, she slumped back against the tree she had chosen to brood and grieve, gazing up at the dark clouds for a moment, utterly disregarding Jake's presence. The latter did not try to rush her, stoically waiting for her to speak.

"Do you remember our first encounter?" She asked out of the blue, completely changing the subject. Her long white eyelashes fluttered cutely, a faint smile blooming on her flawless face. This perfect balance of cuteness, beauty and vulnerability was fatal to all men and could easily make them forget that the young woman in front of them was far from being an innocent.

Jake remained silent, content to admire her lovely curves, while cursing the one who had bestowed such a gorgeous and sexy body to such a devilish girl. Even her restraint, the way she coyly rubbed her nose, shyly avoided his gaze, tucked a stray lock of hair behind her ear to soothe her restlessness...

Each gesture, even the most anodyne ones, were frighteningly effective to tantalize a man's heart. Combined with her angelic beauty, even Jake was suddenly overwhelmed with a strong feeling of compassion, an irrational will to protect and cherish her, but also to conquer her, to savagely make love whilst letting out all his fantasies on her.

"Are you trying to charm me?" Jake snarled scornfully as he suppressed the contradictory twisted thoughts that were spontaneously surfacing from deep within him.

"What if I am? What if I'm not?" Ruby laughed wryly as she threw an accusatory dig at him. "My charm is part of me. I used to be ugly and disabled. No matter what I did I couldn't seduce anyone, at best evoking a feeling of friendship or sympathy, but far more often one of disgust. I never complained, I was never envious of those stunning women who had nothing to do but be alive to seduce men. Their beauty was enough. If that's not enough, men and women use all the means at their disposal to seduce the one they love. It is in our nature. My Bloodlines, my charm stat, my skills, are part of me and if you fall for me, it's because you like me or because you are too weak-minded. In either case, you can't blame me."

Jake was genuinely taken aback by her reasoning, but that didn't stop him from retorting in a caustic voice,

"Is this how you normalize your crimes as a Trojan Digestor? By telling yourself that whatever you do to others, they probably deserve it?"

It was a low blow, but he hadn't come here to give her flowers. Ruby's face broke down, but she quickly regained her composure, even grinning again.

"No. I have nightmares about it every night, but I can't change who I am." She confessed sadly, looking back at the moon to hide the distress in her eyes. "I've spent the whole past year trying to get back to the way I was, but it's only getting worse. I had already become a despicable person a year ago, now I'm just a monster. In another year or two, if I'm still alive, the Oracle Overseer will surely give the order to put me to death."

Jake was shocked by this revelation. From what she had just said, the Oracle Overseer of B842 was well aware of her condition and was keeping a close eye on her. In that case, the Oracle must be having a reason for not eliminating her right away.

Expressing his doubts, Ruby snapped back at him with great annoyance,

"You think I don't know that? Become a Digestor like me and you'll know right away that this is all bullshit! Information about the treatment of Trojan Digestors and Corrupted in the Mirror Universe is a closely guarded secret, but the Earth Union government has been able to glean some intelligence from its connections. General Rob even personally joined the front line on B7 to find out more. So let me make it clear!

"One, we all end up betraying the Mirror Universe. Two, we get killed before that happens. If by some miracle we survive, we join the Digestors and are never heard from again, except in a negative way. My symptoms are already considered advanced. At the rate I'm changing, I won't be able to tolerate the existence of any living being other than my own kind within a year or two. At that point, I will die."

Jake fell into silence as he learned of her difficulties. The situation was more convoluted than he had imagined. Not only did the Oracle System know full well who these corrupted Evolvers were, it was also ruthlessly efficient and responsive in weeding them out at the slightest slip.

"You asked me if I remembered our first encounter." Jake said suddenly, his face serious. "I've always wondered if our encounter was a coincidence or an event planned by the Oracle. Did you receive a mission about me when we met?"

"So what if I did?" She evaded with a hint of pink on her cheeks, the corner of her lip twitching unintentionally.

Jake could not help but smile, before immediately scowling.

"Our first encounter, I don't have a bad memory of it." Jake admitted honestly while staring her straight in the eyes. "But, the second one, it's since that very day that I don't trust the Oracle System anymore. When you betrayed me after I saved you, I wanted nothing more than to get even, to make you pay. I still do, one year later. But did you know that I didn't save you on a whim? The Oracle requested me through an Ordeal Side Mission."

Ruby's pupils suddenly contracted as she heard this shocking truth. Without knowing why, her heart lurched in her chest, an inexplicable pain assailing her mind. Then, understanding lit up her face, even though she was all the more sad and embarrassed.

"I betrayed you, but I didn't spare you by chance either." She revealed back more calmly. "The Oracle had also instructed me to spare you. As you probably know, my betrayal worked to your advantage back then. I can't help but wonder which of us the Oracle is more biased towards. You, or me?"

"Evidently you!" Jake snorted spitefully. "When you tried to kill me this morning, I was set on getting revenge no matter what it took. If I came back, you owe it to the Oracle System's interference. I made you my slave, but whether or not you are a poisoned gift has yet to be determined."

This time Ruby showed no surprise. She couldn't understand why he had come back to save her when he clearly hated her, and rightly so! Now she knew. For profit.

"So, you don't like me at all?" She joked teasingly, though deep down her diva ego had just taken a hit.

"Is this supposed to be a joke?" Jake rolled his eyes.

"Not even a little bit?" The young woman grinned with an offended pout.

"Not at all."

"What a boring man..." She muttered irritably.

The explosive tension between them had gone down a notch and for a moment they felt as if they had returned to the day of their first meeting. But Jake's next icy question brought them back to square one.

"So, can you control yourself? I don't want an out-of-control cannibal on my team."

The hostile silver glint once again blazed in her eyes, but the despondency and sadness was still there. Jake couldn't help but break into a sneering laugh,

"Did you notice that throughout our conversation your eyes remained normal? As soon as I asked you if you were able to control yourself, they started glowing again. Why?"

Chapter 713: Back To Lodunvals

Contrary to Jake's expectations, Ruby showed no hint of surprise. Against all odds, she knew very clearly why her Digestor part had gone silent. Why else would she suddenly be consumed with guilt and grief?

Her facial muscles repeatedly tensed and relaxed, reflecting the painful inner conflict playing out within her. Eventually, a disillusioned countenance between shame and self-hatred froze on her face and she answered glumly,

"Because I have eaten."

Jake mulled over her words for a long time before he finally grasped what had been bothering him earlier. Ruby was behaving, reacting in a more human way, appearing more empathetic and very aware of the abominations she had committed. This was in total contradiction with the icy and cruel, almost psychopathic, behavior she had displayed all day long.

At first glance, and more out of mistrust, Jake had thought she was trying to lull him into complacency, to make herself sound more human and pitiful than she was, to soften him up. Perhaps that was so, but at least her emotional anguish was not feigned or her acting had reached such a level that she could even meticulously control her every spiritual fluctuation.

An almost impossible feat.

What had changed from before? She had taken a bite out of the two Were-Eagles, giving in to her Digestor instincts.

Digestors were aptly named and had an insatiable appetite. Yet that didn't mean they gorged themselves on anything and everything. This may have been true for those low-level Digestors devoid of any intellect, but as soon as they began to develop a hint of intelligence they would also awaken their own sense of ambition along with it.

This ambition was only the logic continuation of an instinct as irrepressible as their hunger. Namely, the desire to evolve. Jake had always wondered how they sorted out the genes and Aether bloodlines of their prey to achieve this elevation.

The Digestors' innate ability was something most Aetherists dreamed of being able to accomplish, and except for the most eminent of them standing at the very top of the Mirror Universe, it was a feat they would never be able to emulate.

Still, every extraordinary ability had to have its downside. Digesting and reworking these bloodlines to extract the desired quintessence must have taken a lot of effort and energy from them. If this was true for the other Digestors, then it was also true for Ruby.

The unvarnished truth, then, was that after tasting the two Were-Birds, Ruby's Digestor part had entered its digestion phase, devoting most of its attention and energy to it. The reality was much bleaker than he had expected.

Ruby didn't feel guilty because her humanity was returning, but because the Digestor in her was simply too busy to care. It was only when it had felt its personal interests threatened that it had deigned to come forward again, momentarily suspending its digestion.

"In other words, as long as you're full you can stay yourself?" Jake summarized matter-of-factly.

Ruby shook her head and put on a contrite face.

"I can't. Normal food is no challenge for the Digestor." She explained with an exasperated look. "It only needs to put in serious effort when the food consumed contains new or useful elements for its next mutation. It's not a matter of quantity but of quality. Moreover, every time it finishes its digestion, it grows stronger. I'm talking about it in the third person, but our souls have been merged for too long. When you are hungry or thirsty, angry or sad, it would never occur to you that these emotions do not come from you, but from someone else. As far as I'm concerned, the Digestor and I are one and the same.

"When the bloodline analysis of these two Were-birds is completed my bloodline will get a little closer to perfection and my personality will deteriorate another notch. My digestion abilities will also improve, making my human phase increasingly shorter and more subdued. The day the silver glow in my eyes becomes permanent will be the day the former Ruby no longer exists."

A few minutes later, Jake and Ruby rejoined the rest of their companions near the convoy. Neither of them spoke a word on the way back, but the dimmed silver gleam in her eyes gradually regained its luster, until the vulnerable and self-conscious Ruby became only an ancient memory.

Jake felt ambivalent about the young woman. He pitied her, but he had no way to help her. He had several ideas, even a pretty convincing one, but he refused to believe that Ruby or any other Evolver around her hadn't thought of it first.

He'd had a taste of what Corruption could do. It was a relentless poison that even True Will could only slow down. A powerful mind would be corrupted more slowly, and by advancing faster than the Corruption it was theoretically possible to keep the upper hand.

But Ruby was not under the influence of the Corruption. Her soul had been corrupted from the start and the human half of her mind was easily swayed. Her True Will was unreliable.

In the Mirror Universe, there were plenty of bad guys. And even sociopaths, whose mentality was so hideous and their crimes so unforgivable that the Digestor Corruption would have made no difference. After thinking, acting, and living like a Digestor for so long, it was a wonder her humanity hadn't completely withered away.

"Is everything okay?"

Seeing them walking up side by side all silent, Elduin immediately struck up a conversation, but Bhammod firmly gripped his shoulder to stop him from continuing. The elf then noticed Jeanie's alarmed face sticking out of Jake's pocket and gesturing with her mouth and hands all over the place to tell them not to insist.

"What do we do now? There's no one left to save." Bhammod uttered as he desperately shook his empty flask of alcohol over his tongue to no avail.

"And Norton hasn't come back... He's probably dead." Carmin mentioned solemnly as she stared intently into Jake's eyes. She seemed to have recovered from her sister's elimination, but it had erased the last traces of flippancy in her. The way she spoke and acted was no longer flirtatious.

Jake hesitated for a brief moment, and then spoke up, giving the Players on the team a meaningful look,

"Let's go to Lodunvals. Our mission isn't over. If we give up now, our rating will be appalling."

Jake, Ruby and Carmin shared the same anger and frustration over this. They had taken huge risks, but they had become someone else's stepping stones. The irony of this farce was that this Undead army strengthened Laudarkvik and thus theoretically worked in their favor.

The problem was that their Ordeal Mission did not require them to bring victory to the empire, nor did it require them to choose a side. Their performance would be evaluated, but that's all they knew. Without more detail, it was to be interpreted as "doing their best".

Had they done their best? They were still fit to fight, so no.

"I'm coming with you this time." Wyatt proclaimed in a commanding, resolute manner disallowing the slightest refusal.

He was the only one who didn't have to come. He still had the night to prepare, but he couldn't risk losing another comrade.

"Where's Seren?" Jake inquired, remembering that she was hanging out with them earlier in Laudarkvik.

"I left her at the inn." The blond Vampire shrugged coolly.

Jake sighed inwardly. He would have appreciated some extra help.

"Let's go then."

"W-wait! And we're not asked our opinion?" The elf complained agitatedly. "Wasn't that mess enough for you?!"

Jake, whose feet had already left the ground, turned to Elduin and shot back in a voice full of contempt,

"I didn't save anyone. How can I be satisfied."

Then he soared into the air, blasting off into the distance with several sonic booms. It was Ruby this time who carried the others with her telekinesis, but she didn't drop anyone halfway. The digestion wasn't over and that was the only reason Jake was willing to take such a risk.

Besides, Wyatt was there to have their back. If the enemy couldn't use ultraviolet, the Vampire Progenitor was basically an invincible boss. Only the Rank-S natives and a few outstanding Players posed a threat to him.

Without any stops, it only took about ten minutes to reach Lodunvals. As they got closer to Lodunvals, the cumulonimbus clouds obscuring the sun began to thin out and the dawn rays began to shine through the tumultuous clouds with increasing frequency.

After flying past yet another mountain, Jake recognized the Wilderness forest where he had met Trash, and then seconds later he caught sight of the burning city, or rather what was left of it.

Imagine a city as large as London being besieged on all sides by a Wengol army numbering over 600,000. It was a sight as chilling as it was enthralling.

It was what he had mentally prepared himself to see.

It was not what he saw.

Instead, a far more dire spectacle revealed itself to him. Smoldering ruins as far as the eye could see, huge craters measuring from 100 to 1500 meters in diameter littered the battlefield and had atomized all of its infrastructure, as well as those fighting inside.

Bloodcurdling screams echoed incessantly from both the ruins of the city and the huge Wengol and Wurching army outside. Jake almost hoped for a moment that the Lich's plan had failed and that he would only have to kill the Wengols, but one look at them dampened his spirits.

Those Wengols and Wurchings fighting were not alive. There was only a tide of Undeads stretching to the horizon.

Chapter 714: Successful Rescue

"Holy shit... This is crazy." Jake gawked at the apocalyptic sight.

A galactic vortex began to glow behind his pupils as he activated his Myrtharian Eyes and every movement, energy, aetheric and spiritual fluctuation on the battlefield was captured by his eyes.

His brain stoically received and analyzed the mass of incoming data, with Xi processing and crystallizing any details he might have missed. A few seconds later, Jake exhaled deeply, his face a model of pessimism.

'Lodunvals is lost, but there are still some survivors.'

Three kilometers to the east, atop a hill, several hundred Wengol Protectoral Guards were guarding their great head general like rabid tigers. Their level was still a notch above that of Urzul and his elite brigade, and their ferocity was matched only by the rabid hatred they had for their former brothers who had turned Undead and were currently attacking them in droves of thousands.

Whatever the plan may have been to defeat the Wengol army, it had gone haywire. Despite how far away he was, Jake could feel the overwhelming presence of the titanic Wengol astride his equally huge Wurching steed, each of its sweeping swings mowing down hundreds of Undeads in one fell swoop, including its former elites.

As tall as a six-story building, this alien with dark purple squid skin stood out from its followers. Its long white tentacle beard and three bleary eyes were so cold that they could freeze a river of lava with a single glance.

Its assegai and armor were forged entirely of a myhril-orichalcum alloy, and no enemy arrow or spell could leave a scratch. Runic inscriptions ran through every piece of its equipment, enveloping its gigantic body with multiple defensive halos of different properties. Some accelerated its regeneration, others its defense and reflexes.

Lastly, in addition to having a set of gear that bordered on the technological and material limits of Quanoth, the alien had a mass, strength and physical constitution several times greater than that of Norton in his demonic gorilla form.

This head general was the ultimate tank.

Plus his mount, a Wurching behemoth resembling the lizard centaur of legends, but on the obese side. Its lizard-like front end also wielded a huge halberd covered in black flames and each swing sent out deafening deflagrations that consumed everything in their path.

'So this is what Laudarkvik sent us to battle against?' Jake mullered in his mind as he struggled to contain his indignation. Even if Aisling and her 26 elite Mutants had somehow managed to defeat that 600,000-strong army, they would have been routed by that alien. In the most optimistic scenario, they would have escaped unscathed, but left with nothing. No one would have been saved and the mission to retake Lodunvals would have been a total failure.'

And indeed, Jake recognized several Mutants from Aisling's bodyguard among the Undeads. They too were currently trying to take down this invincible Wengol, but when one of them got too close, a spectacular assegai blow shattered half his bones and organs, blasting him to kingdom come. If they hadn't become Undeads, they would have been incapacitated long ago.

In addition to these Undeads, there were also humans, specters, and other humanoid species trying to take it down, bombarding it with devastating spells and other debuffs designed to weaken it. The Wengol and its guards were forced to retreat, step by step.

Yet, Jake didn't feel at all like this ultimate general was about to fall. With baleful indifference it continued to wield its assegai, brutally cutting down anyone who got in its way. Despite the best efforts of these Undeads to bring it down, it was slowly but surely retreating into the Wilderness towards Khinchod.

Feeling spied upon, General Wengol glared at him, piercing him with its three discolored eyes, and Jake felt as if he had been struck by a nuke. His hair stood on end and he prowled into a fighting stance, but by the time he was poised for a deadly counterattack, the invincible alien had already averted its gaze back to the tide of Wengols blocking its path.

'?a?da ?o??I 'Phew... He's the most powerful native I've met since I arrived on Quanoth.' Jake sighed. When it dawned on him that this was the second time in less than an hour that he had uttered this sentence, he sighed again. 'I really hope I don't have to say that line again...'

[(Boss) High-Wengol lvl 90]

Fine, this Wengol could just go about its life and return home in peace. Jake wouldn't stop it. As if he could anyway... That 'boss' suffix spoke more than enough about the guy's power. The Oracle Device didn't use that adjective often, but when it did you could be sure that the enemy in front of him was an anomaly among its kind.

Jake had personally experienced what it was like to meet a boss version of himself and he knew what to expect. If he came across this clone again, he'd run like hell.

'As for Aisling and the refugees...' Jake squinted his eyes, zooming in on the ruined bastion in the heart of the ruined city.

The old Archdeacon who had fought so valiantly earlier lay in her own blood, her face frozen in a plea of terror. The young S-Rank Adventurer fighting with a rapier lay in one of the few craters outside the city, but miraculously he had not joined the ranks of the Undeads.

Perhaps he was still alive.

The refugees under the Archdeacon and his paladins' protection had mostly perished, but Jake recognized several Mutants from Aisling's guard among them, staunchly protecting those who remained. Each of them was covered in festering wounds, surrounded by Undeads, Wengol riders and...

Humans and specters. Again, the reinforcements that were supposed to help them had betrayed them.

In that case... Jake began to actively search for Aisling and her other squadmates with the Oracle Scan, and with Xi's analysis and his keen eyesight, he was able to piece together the battle. His eyes darted from one crater to the next, until they drifted off into the depths of the Wilderness forest.

His Myrtharian Eyes gleamed as he spotted several tiny shadowy figures in the distance.

"So that's where you are." He grunted, his heart pounding with apprehension.

"Are we really going to head over there?" Jeanie murmured anxiously as she found him peering into the vast forest where freakish auras were clashing with extreme viciousness.

Jake needed his eyes to spot them, but since Minmins were semi-spiritual beings, she was particularly sensitive to anything supernatural. This was even truer of the Blue Minmins who specialized in Intelligence.

Just as Jake was about to leave, Ruby and his other companions burst out of the clouds behind him. Seeing the sheer scope of the bloodshed, they had the same shocked reaction as he did. Especially when they saw how few of Aisling's trusted Mutant guard were still alive.

"I'm going to assist Aisling. Ruby you come with me. Wyatt, I'll let you save the ones that can still be." Jake instructed sharply. "Don't take any chances. If that's not possible, just save the remaining Mutants and paladins and leave."

Elduin and Bhammod frowned at his orders, but they did not protest. It was up to them to prove him wrong. Wyatt and Carmin, by comparison, complied without complaint.

"Let me handle it." The Vampire Progenitor declared gravely, a vengeful glint blazing in his red eyes. "I will make all those responsible for Lily's death pay in blood. I will not let such a blunder happen again."

"All right. I'm counting on you." Jake nodded as he rocketed into the sky with Ruby in his wake.

"Follow me." Wyatt commanded tersely once Jake and Ruby were gone. Without them, they couldn't fly and plummeted to the ground.

With Wyatt leading the way, they easily infiltrated the city and a new killing spree began under the supervision of the Vampire Progenitor. Meanwhile, Jake and Ruby reached their destination.

As they approached the battle zone, the clashes and impacts of aura that Jeanie was picking up became clearer and clearer, even to Jake and Ruby. And then, finally, they were close enough, and their keen vision allowed them to discern clearly the tragedy that was unfolding.

Dozens of kilometers ahead of them, in the heart of the Wilderness, a blinding constellation of stars suddenly lit up the dawn sky, instantly dispersing the thick layer of dark clouds obscuring the sun. A dazzling beam connected each star, forming a psychedelic pattern in space, and then when they were all connected a pillar of light as large as a mountain smote the earth with the explosive power of a Tsar bomb.

Simultaneously and in response to this strike, a dome of water as large as Lodunvals formed over the forest, intercepting the pillar. An equally large metal structure resembling the shell of a turtle sprang up from beneath the watery dome, pushing the water skyward. Upon contact with the metal structure, the water dome turned into a gigantic crystal bowl as hard as a diamond.

The pillar of light struck the double dome of metal and crystal, generating a devastating shockwave that blew down trees for ten kilometers around. But the dome held and the light diffracted inside the crystal as if the rays had just penetrated a prism, before being refracted in all directions, its destructive potential diverted to other targets.

As soon as the pillar of light and the constellations in the sky began to dim, the defensive dome cracked at its center, and a gigantic blade as long and wide as a spaceship sprang up, the invisible energy surrounding it slicing through the very fabric of space. The lone figure hovering majestically in the sky in the middle of its constellation had no time to react and was violently shredded by this tyrannical sword of energy.

Puchi!

The blade disintegrated Jake's shoulder and half his left torso instead. When he reappeared in the forest at his former location a split second later, the two people he had just saved collapsed to the ground unconscious in front of a dumbstruck Ruby

Chapter 715: You Have 10 Seconds

"What just happened? Where the hell did they come from?" Ruby yelled in shock before falling silent as she noticed the severity of their injuries.

"Cough!" Jake jerked back, vomiting a copious amount of blood that stained his armor, and dropped to one knee from a temporary bout of dizziness.

His face contorted horribly from the pain and Ruby immediately noticed that his disintegrated left shoulder and torso were not regenerating. Worse, they wouldn't stop bleeding, a steady stream of

blood spilling onto the ground. Using her own Myrghenian Eyes, she detected multiple strands of sharp energy swirling chaotically through his wounds and negating the clotting.

The two individuals Jake had just rescued were suffering the same torment, but although their wounds were less worrisome their condition was actually much more dire.

One of these people was obviously Aisling, the leader of the Mutants, but she was in a deep coma, her vital signs so weak that they could go out at any moment. She had not been tainted by the cutting energy that was ravaging Jake's insides, but she had long since bled to death. Because of her unique nature, she had not perished, but her time was running out.

The second individual was an ageless man shining as bright as a star in the firmament. An Astral. While carrying him, his body seemed insubstantial, as vaporous as a wisp of smoke, but every bit of gas was charged with tremendous energy. A being of energy. Yet it didn't flow through their fingers when they squeezed it, allowing Ruby to easily carry it on her back.

It was most likely he who had summoned the pillar of light to save Aisling. Without his intervention, she would have died long ago.

The Oracle Device identified him as Haynt, a level 91 Astral. Such power... He could only be the leader of the Astral Faction. His circumstances were both cause for rejoicing and terrible concern.

The good news was that he was apparently on Aisling's side, willing to risk his life to save her. Apparently, the specters' conduct had nothing to do with him. The bad news was that even an immortal being existing since Quanoth's latest reiteration had ended up in this state.

Each Spirit Body level was significantly more difficult to attain than the last, and the gap between two higher levels widened exponentially. At level 91, Haynt's spirit was probably ten times more powerful than Aisling and her level 82. Even that much power had not been enough.

His wounds were more like Jake's, and though he had no holes in his body, the Astral was continually wracked by dozens of conflicting energies and spirit imprints of different kinds, requiring all his concentration not to simply implode. To offset the danger, he was burning up the energy of his Astral body at a dizzying rate, the stars inside him flickering ever so faintly.

"Ruby, carry us and leave! NOW!" Jake ordered snappishly!

The silvery glow in her beautiful pearly eyes flashed vibrantly for a split second, but when Ruby noticed dozens of crushing auras melting down on her, she stopped dithering and bundled the three wounded onto her back before flying off at full blast without looking back.

As Ruby streaked her way forward like a shooting star, the monstrous energy signatures erupting behind her became more and more terrifying as they got closer. Shooting just one curious glance, the young woman's eyes bulged out as she saw the trees being uprooted by the thousands by the blast of their passage.

"Fuck! Jake, I'm not going to be able to outrun them. We've got to let them go! They're the ones they want."

Jake, who was focusing on his wounds with his eyes closed, snapped his eyes open and coughed up another spray of blood charged with maiming energy and growled,

"You really have no solution?"

"Hmmpf, if a certain gentleman hadn't forced me to waste all my Aether, then maybe!" Ruby harrumphed grudgingly. "You're the money guy right now, so take responsibility."

"What makes you think I have any Aether left?" Jake chuckled scoffingly before being seized by another bloody coughing fit. He had already ingested a gallon of Rank 8 Digestor Blood but it didn't seem to be having much effect.

"Please. Not to me." Ruby sneered before anxiously yelling as she saw thirty or so figures appear less than half a mile away from her, "I AM NOT JOKING! IF YOU DON'T FIND A SOLUTION RIGHT NOW WE'RE GOING TO DIE IN A FEW SECONDS!"

Jake scowled with a gloomy look and said in bad faith, "Leave it to me."

The Purgatory hidden in his Aether Soul Core emerged from his glabella again, and a rush of light later they were transported into the cockpit of a huge spaceship, a 7th generation Consortium Interstellar Battleship designed for the Inquisition.

Ruby blinked in bewilderment, but after witnessing the unfathomable potential of his Purgatory Dream, she found it hard to be surprised.

[Xi, I'll let you fly the ship.] Jake mentally authorized.

[Okay! Pilot Xi joins in!] She cheered before merging her consciousness with the ship's AI.

Numerous control blips and holographic screens popped up all over the room, and the whirring of engine ignition made the ship roar.

[Hang on!]

The ship accelerated sharply, going from 0 to 10,000G in an instant, but the ship's artificial gravity reduced the danger to the passengers to a tolerable level. Otherwise, only Jake and perhaps Ruby would have survived with grievous injuries.

This insane velocity had a terrible trade-off. No ship was supposed to fly at light speed through a planetary atmosphere. The friction forces were simply too high and no ship, even an armored one, could withstand such stresses.

The spaceship was only a Purgatory illusion and as such could be maintained indefinitely, but its sturdiness was the same as the original version. To maintain the illusion during this brief acceleration, over 20B of Aether points were consumed in an instant.

In a flash, the ship and its smoldering prow resurfaced over Lodunvals, its huge shadow blanketing the last remaining stronghold in the north-central part of the city. Wyatt and his squad, Aisling's trusted Mutants, the paladins and the few remaining refugees all looked up in shock, momentarily forgetting to fight.

Wyatt and Carmin were taken aback when they recognized the ship's design, but they remained on guard. For the refugees already on the verge of despair, it was just a nightmare vision. Only the Undead Wengols continued to fight unconcernedly, causing the death of several absent-minded fighters.

When Jake's amplified voice echoed through the fortress as the boarding deck lowered like a drawbridge, Wyatt and Carmin were finally relieved, but they were quickly disheartened by his first words,

"Get on board now or die! You have 10 seconds!"

Wyatt and his companions processed the information instantly and with unspoken agreement proceeded to ferry the refugees at superhuman speed, leaping like locusts into the ship with dozens of refugees on their backs. Ruby and Jake also came to assist them and they were alarmed when they saw his injuries.

Aisling's bodyguards and the remaining paladins were a little confused, but seeing the quick reaction of their esteemed helpers, they too were alarmed. They too began to pick up refugees and soldiers too frail to jump that high.

To save time, Jake unceremoniously slammed the ship down on the already battered fortress and it instantly collapsed like a house of cards. He had made sure just before that there was no one left inside.

Before landing, he activated the ship's defensive system and multiple plasma cannons and other homing missiles shot down all the Undeads within a radius of half a kilometer.

"Awesome!" Jeanie chirped from inside the ship. "Why didn't you use that weapon earlier?"

The question was innocent, devoid of ill intent, but Jake's face turned ugly as he received this dig. His pride and stinginess had simply prevented him from doing so. If he had summoned it from the start, he could have rammed the ship right through the Alpha Were-Eagle. Who knows how many people he could have saved with that extra time?

But the reality was just as stark. Jake had only summoned this ship for a few seconds, but its intense use had already burned 25B of Aether points. Activating his weapons was easy, but the energy used for ammunition was powered by his Aether. No matter how much he wanted to, it was still a last resort.

Seven seconds after Jake and his ship appeared, Wyatt and the rest finally understood why his tone was so urgent. A rumble of thunder echoed in the distance and they saw a huge tsunami roll in from the edge of the Wilderness. The wave was nearly touching the clouds.

The six Mutants left from Aisling's bodyguard cursed loudly as they recognized the newcomers.

"Those bastards! Treacherous sons of bitches!"

Jake said nothing, but there were also 29 Wengol generals among them. The approaching hooded figures were in the minority, but one of them was out in the open, his gold leggings and red cloak making him particularly eye-catching.

"Abbikesh!" A Mutant woman gritted her teeth, her eyes bloodshot from rage. "I understand now how they defeated Aisling."

"Where's Haynt?" Another elderly Mutant growled with a somber face. "I hope he didn't betray us either or we're really screwed..."

"Get your fucking ass over here or die!" Jake barked gruffly as he started pulling the boarding drawbridge shut from inside the cockpit.

Aislings' guards shut their mouths immediately and rushed into the ship, the deck closing with a thud behind them. The battleship then swiftly took off into the air and with a BANG vanished into the clouds, leaving their pursuers in the dust.

Chapter 716: I Entrust Him To You

A few seconds later, the ship emerged on the outskirts of Laudarkvik, on the edge of a valley sheltered from prying eyes so as not to alert the city. The huge spacecraft landed noiselessly and the passengers inside cheered with joy.

Yet, Jake was more in the mood to cry his eyes out. The speed of this Lodunvals-Laudarkvik trip was matched only by its Aether cost. 80B worth of Aether points was what the Purgatory had burned to power the ship's thrusters and support the illusion, put to the test by the atmospheric friction.

Right now, he had just over 100B Aether points left. That is, less than a quarter of the amount of Aether he had started with. And the Ordeal had only been going on for a day.

Jake drew a cold breath as he checked his savings. From now on, the Aether he had left should be reserved for life and death situations. But more realistically, he absolutely had to find a way to restore the spent Aether and put in place some solutions so he wouldn't be so dependent on it.

The events of that night had been traumatic and unforgettable in more ways than one. He never wanted to experience that feeling of helplessness again, but now that he had time to reflect on it quietly, he also knew that with the context of the Ordeals such situations were bound to happen again.

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All he could do was make the best of his time to prepare for those grim days.

While Jake recalled the Purgatory in his Aether Soul Core in front of the dumbfounded survivors, Ruby, Wyatt and the veteran Mutants kept a vigilant eye on the southern sky for any sign of their pursuers. After five excruciating minutes, the oldest of Aisling's guards breathed a sigh of relief.

"We're safe for now. But until Aisling or Haynt regain consciousness, we can't risk returning to Laudarkvik." The old Mutant cautioned them. He then proceeded to cross-check their versions of events as he listened to their reports.

His wrinkled face had the pointed ears and blue-gray skin of the Night Elves, so he was probably much older than his appearance suggested. His name was Rifalen and he was the only one of the three Vice-Leaders of the Mutant Faction who had survived last night's battles.

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?a?da ?o?? Norton was presumed dead, while Tazee, the second Vice-Leader, a Vampire-Werewolf hybrid with the highest fighting capability after Aisling had perished while protecting her. Or so he

thought. Given Aisling's and Haynt's grievous injuries, he could only hope that she had not sacrificed her life in vain.

Deep down, the old Mutant was much less optimistic. In reality, an enemy capable of putting Haynt and their leader in such a state could surely eliminate Tazee in a heartbeat. Perhaps she had even been ambushed and obliterated before she could even draw her sword.

As Jake suspected, as soon as they reached Lodunvals, Aisling, Haynt and Abbikesh, the respective leaders of the Mutants, Astral and Humans in Laudarkvik, were locked in a deadly struggle against the Head General of the Wengol army. It was the gigantic and unshakable Wengol warrior that Jake had seen retreating with his protectoral guards.

The other Mutants, humans and Astrals in their squads had rushed to the aid of the inhabitants and soldiers of Lodunvals under the command of a Vice-Leader, while the rest had been tasked with disrupting and slowing down the Wengol army.

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As for the battle between the three Faction Leaders versus the Wengol Head General, it had started well. The fight was evenly balanced at first, and even greatly to their advantage thanks to the presence of Haynt by their side, but it quickly turned sour when the shadowy conspiracy of the other Laudarkvik factions came into play.

The dead on both sides suddenly began to resurrect, and many hooded figures and traitors within the Wengol army alike moved in to target generals, officers and other high-ranking warriors.

One such powerhouse was worth 100 ordinary troops. As they succumbed one by one and joined the ranks of the Undeads, the rate at which the Wengol army was being cut down increased exponentially.

At the same time, the common troops, human or Wengol, horse or Wurching, fell into an irrepressible killing frenzy, irreversibly sinking into madness. The elites capable of stopping them were already too busy resisting their evil impulses and facing assassination attempts by these mysterious enemies to do anything to prevent this catastrophe.

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At this point, the Wengol army's Head General obviously had neither the heart nor the desire to continue fighting the three Faction Leaders. With a frustrated roar of rage, it had jumped into the fray and initiated an all-out attack on the hooded, traitorous figures wreaking havoc on its army.

But whoever these enemies were, they were well prepared. Several unassuming individuals in their shabby cloaks immediately rose up against the tyrannical Wengol, easily containing it.

As Aisling, Haynt and Abbikesh and their guards recognized the techniques and auras of some of these hooded figures, a terrible feeling gripped their hearts. They had been played.

Who was it for? As soon as the answer crossed their minds, they found themselves surrounded by dozens of enemies. Rifalen, who was fighting far away alongside the paladins of Lodunvals, was fairly certain he recognized with his keen vision the Thrajah clan's Vampire Ancestor, but also Strudaaqyx, the Undead leader.

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Cornered by these formidable antagonists, the trio had unhesitatingly fled in the direction of the Wilderness, hoping to shift the battlefield there to preserve their troops and the civilians they were trying to protect. As for the rest, Rifalen couldn't say for sure and would have to wait for Aisling and Haynt to wake up to get to the bottom of it.

What he did know, however, was that humans and Astral had betrayed them in battle, but not all of them. Some had also been deeply shocked at the reversal of their companions and many had died with irreconcilable expressions on their faces as they were stabbed by those they believed to be their friends.

It was these unforeseen treacherous attacks that had caused most of the casualties among these Mutants. How else could they have died so miserably?

Each of these 26 Mutants were veterans who had accompanied and supported Aisling throughout her rule. They ranged in level from 60 to 75 and each was an indispensable pillar of their faction. After tonight, there would be only 7 of them left.

For the Laudarkvik Mutants, that fateful night would go down in history as the night that nearly caused their extinction. It was a catastrophe from which they would have difficulty recovering for many years.

After hearing the report from Jake and his group, the old Mutant and his 6 companions were left with a heavy heart, filled with a strong pessimism about their future.

"So how are they doing?" Rifalen asked shortly afterwards to Wyatt, who was tending to the two unresponsive leaders.

The Vampire Progenitor had volunteered to tend to the wounded. With his Blood Thaumaturgy he could do some amazing feats of healing magic. It was particularly effective in the case of Aisling who had been drained of her blood during the battle.

One drop of Wyatt's blood could regenerate the entire blood volume of an ordinary man, and although it was less effective on Aisling, it was still better than nothing. His Blood Magic gave him extreme control over the blood of creatures entering his field of perception and if he wanted to, he could make them explode with a snap of his finger. Of course, he could also use it for good.

"I can't do anything for Haynt, since his body has no blood, but Aisling should be waking up soon." The blond man replied with a reassuring smile. "She'll need a lot of human blood to recover, but I guess you already knew that. With all the Blood Essence she used, it's a wonder she survived."

Rifalen nodded with a blank stare, realizing once again how close they had come to disaster.

"And Haynt? What are his odds?" The old Mutant questioned again, his features tense with worry.

Wyatt grimaced apologetically,

"These wounds are much worse than Aisling's, there's nothing I can do. If he wasn't so powerful, he would have been dead long ago. He needs a kind of energy to recover that I unfortunately can't provide."

Well, that was putting it mildly... The Astral was like a neutral star. His brightness was not lethal to Vampires, but Wyatt obviously didn't have what it took to help him. Perhaps a certain walking sun could...

"Let me take care of him." Jake declared with perfect timing as he walked towards them. His disintegrated shoulder and torso were back to health, though he was a little more gaunt and pale than before.

A strange glint flashed in the Vampire's eyes, but he gladly obliged,

"I entrust him to you."

Suddenly, dozens of loud, supersonic shockwaves echoed in the sky several kilometers away from them as everyone in the valley stiffened. On the lookout, Elduin and other Mutants clambered to the top of a tree to see what was going on. A few seconds later, the elf came back down and whispered darkly,

"Dozens of hooded figures have just flown into Laudarkvik. From what you've described, they are Aisling and Haynt's attackers."

"Peeh! You dog bastards!" One of the Mutants spat on the ground.

Their arrival had just put to rest their last doubts. They had indeed been betrayed by their allies.

Chapter 717: New Friend

"Jenie, stay with Wyatt and Carmin while I tend to Haynt." Jake mouthed softly as he cupped the sleepy little fairy in his hand.

On the one hand he was flattered to see her feel safe enough in his pocket to fall asleep while on the other he couldn't help but feel worried about her future with such poor common sense.

Snuggled asleep around his thumb, which she was using like a large duffel bag, the Minmin mumbled unintelligible words when he asked her to stay with the others. It took a couple of gentle flicks to wake her up from her nap.

After being awakened, she continued to yawn with her eyelids barely open and didn't even notice when Jake dropped her into Carmin's open palm, whose eyes sparkled in wonder like a cat lover in front of a super cute kitten.

'Good luck, Jenie. You can do it...!' Jake gave a contrite smile as the Vampire began pawing at the fairy who had already fallen back to sleep.

The fairy's exhaustion might have seemed worrisome, but once one remembered that her Constitution was only 0.1, ten times less than a human adult, then it all made sense. Since their meeting, Jake had never seen her sleep and he deduced that she had reached her limit.

Now that they were safe, he could just let her sleep to her heart's content.

'Our turn now.' Jake thought unmotivatedly as he flicked a finger to lift the Astral leader off the ground with his telekinesis. Seeing him walk away alone into the forest with the passed out Astral, several of the Elite Mutants as well as Rifalen wanted to stop him, but Wyatt stopped them coldly.

"If you want Haynt to heal quickly, trust him. If you insist on following him, I won't stop you, but I can guarantee you'll regret it." The Vampire Progenitor warned them in a scathing tone.

Sensing his determination and the hint of threat in his voice, the Mutants hesitated for a brief moment but eventually complied.

"Very well. But if they're not back in an hour, I'm going to go check on them." Rifalen promised sternly as he gripped the hilt of the sword at his belt.

Carmin, who was fiddling with the fairy next door, rolled her eyes dismissively at the old Half-Elf's false bravado. It was clearly to pacify the restlessness of the other Mutants.

Jake, on the other hand, began to dash as soon as he blurred into the forest. Sprinting at full speed, his body sank into the ground and he reappeared a few moments later in an underground cave that he had previously located with his Oracle Scan. The cave was as spacious as several soccer fields, exactly what he needed for what he planned to do.

"I hope I'm not wrong." Jake grumbled as he gently placed the Astral on the floor in the center of the cavern.

[This will work.] Xi comforted him encouragingly. [The Astral feeds on star energy, and your Aether Sun Core is like an artificial sun. Besides, you too need to recover your strength.]

"You're right..." Jake grimaced with a sullen face.

He may have regrown his arm and torso, but they were now weaker than before, as if his Bloodline had regressed by half a level. The rest of his body was also a little weaker and that was the result of being smashed to mush by that Were-Eagle asshole.

Even reduced to a pulp, Jake could easily regenerate by relying on this biomass for energy. It was more complicated when a piece of his body had been utterly annihilated.

"After I heal Haynt, I'm going to need several days to cultivate, I'll return to Laudarkvik later." He finally decided after sitting cross-legged in front of the Astral.

? ??? ? ? ???? If the Aether Sun Core didn't work, Jake still had the Purgatory Dream to heal Haynt, but he hoped he wouldn't have to resort to that. His savings had already suffered too much.

With a thought, the Aether Sun Core appeared in the air above them at a safe distance, and Jake carefully monitored the Astral's fluctuations, looking for any change. At first he was pessimistic, but within seconds of the artificial sun's appearance, Haynt's jerky breathing stabilized and his light stopped dimming.

'It works!'

[I told you it would work.] Xi chuckled, just as pleased as he was.

Haynt, who had been consuming his energy, finally regained the upper hand, and as Jake brought the Aether Sun Core closer, the concentration of the solar rays increased, further speeding up the healing process. With a steady stream of energy, there was no need to extract or purify these foreign energy

filaments. He could simply cancel them out with his own life energy, just like when an atom of matter collided with an atom of antimatter.

These collisions of different energies caused a second round of damage to his body, but the Aether Sun Core's rays immediately compensated for the lost energy. Within minutes, Haynt won this internal battle, but his recovery did not end there.

The Astral abruptly opened his eyes, looking up to gaze thoughtfully at the bright mini sun above him, and then his ageless gaze met Jake's.

"Guilty, are you the one who saved me?" He asked calmly, his face relaxed.

"I am, or should I say my Aether Sun Core is." Jake nodded, pointing to the sun. He wasn't really surprised that the Astral leader had guessed his identity.

"In that case, you have my eternal gratitude." Haynt bowed in sincerity. "If you need a favor, just ask and if it's within my capabilities I'll grant it."

Jake was taken aback by the Astral's solemn pledge, but on reflection it was no surprise from a level 91 native who was almost 1000 years old. Preventing the warrior from completing his bow, he hurriedly said,

"Senior, you don't have to bow to me. I treated you as I would have treated anyone else. Another of my companions is also taking care of Aisling."

Haynt was momentarily taken aback by his reaction, but with unruffled equanimity he finally agreed and straightened up as if nothing had happened.

"I have a question." The Astral suddenly spoke. "Where has the Spirit of your sun gone? I don't feel any connection to it."

Jake put on a puzzled face as he heard the question. Probably an Astral thing that only they understood.

'Xi, does this ring a bell?' he asked mentally to his reliable AI.

[Hmmm... I'm not sure.] Xi admitted honestly. [It is said in the Oracle System records that the Astrals form connections with certain distant stars and constellations and derive their energy and abilities from their link with them. This connection transcends time and space and their Constellation Magic is shrouded in secrecy. The Astrals are considered an esoteric species in the Mirror Universe. Very few Aetherists have delved seriously into their mysteries and most have kept their discoveries to themselves.]

[If the stars they link with have a Spirit, then it becomes easier to explain. Although a star is a giant ball of inorganic gas, they exist for billions of years, permanently bathed in the Dream Aether and nurturing many myths. The thoughts of those who believe in these myths and legends accumulate, stagnate and simmer in the Dream Aether, resulting in unpredictable effects. I believe that if enough people believed in the existence of an imaginary being, they might eventually come to exist for real. Never underestimate the word Dream that goes with Dream Aether. We tend to forget it quickly, but it is just as important.]

[Perhaps under certain specific conditions a star can indeed develop a Spirit, but it would take a relatively high Aether Density and a lot of time. Such a miracle could never have occurred in your home universe.]

'I see.' Jake thought he understood, but it was too abstract and remote for them to dwell on.

Xi's theory, nevertheless, opened up an infinite field of possibility. Jake already knew that the Oracle could draw on the history and folklore of the contestants to design its Ordeals Worlds. He didn't know if the Oracle picked a suitable world from a very long list, but according to Xi, like the Fluid fabric in his Third Ordeal, the Dream Aether fabric linked them all together.

In this context, it no longer mattered who came first between the chicken and the egg. Imagining something most likely meant that it already existed somewhere and vice versa.

In this case, could gods and other fantastical beings exist, born of the beliefs and imaginations of different peoples? There was only one step to take to believe it.

Now that he had roughly grasped the principle, he could answer Haynt. Referring to Xi's theory, he explained in simple words the origin of his Aether Sun Core, and the Astral appeared to accept his explanation.

In fact, the Astral was amazed to learn that this mini sun could shine like this until the end of time. If he had owned such an object the day he started training, heaven only knew how much power he would have achieved today.

"Can you make me one? I'll pay any price." Haynt vowed feverishly as he suddenly summoned dozens of shiny weapons and armor out of thin air.

Jake's eyes widened at the sheer amount of weapons. Each one was at least an Advanced Aether Artifact!

'How rich is this guy...'

Sadly, although he was dying to collect all of these weapons, he was unable to accept the offer.

"I can't do it, my master customized this one for me and it's not for sale." Jake apologized awkwardly before elaborating, "But I'm hopeful that I'll be able to make one myself within the next few months. If you're willing to wait, I am open to selling you the next one."

"Deal!" Haynt jumped at the offer without hesitation.

And so ended the first meeting between Jake and Haynt. On a deal.

Chapter 718 10 000 Places

Haynt was not the talkative type. Once his curiosity was satisfied, he devoted himself to his recovery and Jake did the same, deciding to postpone his own questions for later. In the end, it was the Astral who first recovered his optimal condition.

At that very moment, the native emanated an overwhelming radiance, every particle of his being bursting with energy. By comparison, Jake felt insignificant and it had nothing to do with the suppression due to their Spirit Body level discrepancy.

Whereas Jake was confident that he could assassinate an ordinary level 90 human with his immense attribute advantage, Haynt was a much harder nut to crack. Regardless of his powerful Soul, this nearly 1000 year old Astral boasted racial abilities equal to or slightly exceeding those of a rank 10 bloodline.

Given equal Spirit Bodies, Jake would not necessarily have the upper hand. The Astral could switch between a physical and energy state at will, becoming virtually invulnerable to all physical attacks, but also most spells and other curses that depend on a body to express their effects.

As a being of pure energy, Haynt also had a very high tolerance to heat, and radiation like Jake, but also to electricity. Last but not least, his evolutionary potential was almost limitless.

As long as the stars he was connected to existed, he would never run out of energy and his power and attributes would keep growing. He could also derive all sorts of abilities and spells from his constellation magic, a magic Jake didn't understand much about.

Xi tried to reassure him that not all Astral people were like Haynt. Although all Astral people were born equal or nearly so, they were a species that placed a high value on talent and discipline. Perhaps more so than other Laudarkvik factions such as the Vampires and Demons.

The Bloodline Ability allowing the Astral to connect with sentient stars of their choice was as unfathomable as it was complex, requiring outstanding perception and fortitude that was not necessarily inborn.

The reality was that less than one in ten Astral could establish such a link. Most were content to scrape together the crumbs of light that the sun of Quanoth deigned to offer them. In Laudarkvik, where daylight lasts less than two hours a day, it was no surprise that the Astral were considered the weakest faction after the Humans. If Haynt didn't hold the fort, they would have been wiped out long ago.

When Haynt ended his cultivation session, Jake ended his as well. His Bloodline had not yet fully recovered, but he had regained 75% of his fighting power.

The Astral leader stood up gracefully, in no hurry. The corner of his lip curled into a delighted smile and he told his savior,

"It is time for me to return to Laudarkvik. Aisling is finally awake."

Jake had no intention of talking him into staying here, but he couldn't help but voice his doubts,

"Whoever put you and Aisling in this state is also in Laudarkvik." He reminded Haynt circumspectly. "Are you sure you want to go back?"

"I have to." The Astral declared deadpan. "And it's not as risky as you think. Why do you think they set up this whole farce to get rid of Aisling and me? Because in Laudarkvik, it's much more tricky. On the surface, we are all allies and vote together in the Council on important decisions for the future of the city. Each Faction has its allies, or if not powerful friends, otherwise none of them would have survived until now."

" On a personal note, Xaverie Zangruth, the leader of the Zangruth demon clan and also Aisling's mother, is a childhood friend. Her father, Grimbald Dracul, was also a long-time friend. He was sentenced to Eternal Rest for his past crimes that nearly caused the extinction of his clan, but he can be revived from inside his coffin at any time with a few pints of blood. I also get along very well with Kenway, the one people call the Lion King. He left his clan, but he's by far the most powerful Were-Being on this planet."

Jake got his point. Not everyone in Laudarkvik wanted him dead and that was why they had to ambush him far from the city in a war where his death could easily be justified. For the same reason, Aisling was not afraid to show up in front of those same enemies who had just tried to kill her.

If that was the way it was, then there was no reason for him not to return to the city either. As long as the Mutant Faction and Aisling were alive, he and his comrades would never be the priority targets.

A moment later, Jake and Haynt walked side by side to join the others, but Aisling intercepted them midway. Although she didn't show it, inwardly she was surprised by the Astral's good mood. She couldn't remember seeing him so cheerful in years.

"Grandpa Haynt!" She greeted as she caught sight of the fitful native.

"I'm glad you're okay." The Astral smiled as he ruffled her hair as one would do to children. Despite this infantilizing treatment, Aisling did not dare to shy away and let her hair be tousled without flinching.

When he got tired of messing with her, the young woman turned to Jake and bowed exactly as Haynt had earlier.

"Thanks for saving me. There aren't many people who would have taken such a risk." Raising her head, she thanked him while staring intently into his eyes, then said, "I know it's presumptuous of me to ask this after forcibly conscripting you for this mission, but what are your plans from here on out? After what happened last night my faction could use some extra hands... But I'd understand if you were planning to leave..."

? ??? ? ? ??? Sensing her embarrassment, Jake didn't insist. With two of the three Vice-Leaders out of the picture and only seven Mutants left of the original 26 elites, her Mutant Faction was more vulnerable than ever.

"I have no intention of leaving the Mutant Faction." Jake finally answered, which made Aisling heave a loud sigh of relief. "But I want a status that suits my talent and complete freedom. My goals are not confined to Laudarkvik. This city is only a stopover on my way."

"Oh yes, I forgot that you and your comrades are Guilties?" Haynt commented thoughtfully, stroking his chin. "So you're heading to the Celestial City?"

Jake nodded. "That is indeed my goal, but there's no rush."

"If you're going to take your friends with you, you'll need to be a lot stronger than that. Or an army." The Astral pointed out with a wink to Aisling, who caught on immediately.

"Good timing, Laudarkvik also intends to fight to earn his place on the Celestial City." The young woman chuckled as she puffed her chest out. "If you stay in my Mutant Faction, I can promise you that all Mutants in my service will fight loyally by your side until the final battle."

"The final battle?" Jake sneered. Talk about a crappy deal!

Aisling let out an awkward chuckle as she sensed his disdain. Obviously, he understood the situation as well as she did. Maybe even better considering his Guilty status.

"Laudarkvik will remain united on the surface as long as there are still enemies capable of threatening its integrity." Haynt explained coldly. "The Nine Factions are powerful, but there are hundreds of kingdoms and empires on Quanoth. Compared to them, Laudarkvik's forces are insignificant, and even the empire of Ret'Asi is only a dispensable pawn. Therefore, until the last moment we will remain loyal to the empire, while the empire will also maintain as many alliances as possible. In case of victory, the major alliances will break up, followed by the minor alliances, until the companions and friends of the same faction start killing each other.

"That's why Aisling can't promise you the support of her faction until the very end. Because the Mutants will also end up killing each other when they realize that there are only so many places on the Celestial City. Desperation can drive men to commit terrible crimes and in this case, their desperation will be more than justified. To survive, they will have no other choice."

"How many places are there on the Celestial City?" Jake inquired curiously.

Aisling also gave the old Astral a quizzical look. Faced with the overflowing curiosity of his two interlocutors, Haynt chuckled wryly, then with a weary sigh he spilled the beans,

"10,000 places. This is information I personally obtained from a pythia of Aurae. The other leading clans also know about it."

"10,000 places..." Aisling's face broke down as she heard that meager number.

It might sound like a lot, but there were hundreds of trillions of living beings on this planet and probably a billion B-Rank adventurers and above.

"I didn't want to keep it from you Aisling, but I was afraid you'd get discouraged when you found out." Haynt murmured sympathetically when he saw her so crestfallen.

There were far more than 10,000 Mutants in Laudarkvik. 10,000 was perhaps the number of decent fighters, the rest were ordinary citizens of Laudarkvik depending on the shade of Aisling and her faction to subsist.

And Aisling was very attached to her faction. She was willing to risk her life to save every one of them. To learn that she would be forced to knowingly sacrifice most of them could only break her heart. In an instant, her mind sank to the bottom of the abyss.

Seeing her fall into silence, frozen in despair, Haynt shook his head and sighed again.

"Let's go home. Maybe we'll find a solution." He said without conviction.

A few moments later, the survivors appeared at the gates of Laudarkvik, ready to commence their new life.

Chapter 719: I'm Glad You Understand Your Position

As Haynt had predicted, nothing happened to them when they showed up in town. In fact, whether it was the guards posted at the gates or the early morning passers-by, all showed overwhelming exuberance and excitement when they recognized their idols.

In Laudarkvik, the Astral was a legendary being as ancient as Quanoth and his reputation as a righteous and benevolent warrior had been established long ago. To see him walking down the street was a rare event and a man as bright as a star did not go unnoticed.

As for Aisling, the populace had an even higher opinion of her. She often mingled with ordinary citizens and her ice-cold warrior beauty had been feeding the fantasies of single and married men in the city, but also in the neighboring regions, for years. If you lined them up, her admirers could form a long line from Laudarkvik to Kanui, the empire's capital.

Accustomed to this sort of attention, Aisling waved and smiled at the crowd, even shaking a few hands and tossing a few gold coins to pacify the crowd. Haynt was much more stoic, simply walking with dignity and looking straight ahead, but no one held it against him.

The crowd was oblivious to the hellish night they had just experienced, and the two Faction Leaders had no intention of ending their delusion. Their days of peace would come to an end soon enough.

The seven surviving Mutants formed a protective cordon in front of the few refugees they had managed to rescue, assisted by about thirty extremely uptight Aurae paladins. Laudarkvik was not Lodunvals and they could not help but feel like they were stepping into enemy territory.

Jake and his companions closed the march in silence, telepathically discussing their upcoming plans. Jake and Ruby were in their human form, so they did not attract attention, but the guards who had first received them and had the privilege of reading their ID cards were deeply surprised to see them walking so naturally behind these two legends.

Aisling had offered to walk alongside them to prepare the public for their promotion, but Jake and Wyatt insisted on keeping a low profile. Jake, because he didn't want to be painted a target by all of Haynt and Aisling's enemies, and Wyatt because he wasn't supposed to be there. At the first chance he got, he split from the group and went off into the narrow streets of the slums heading for the Vampire district.

After passing all the checks, the group reached the Mutant Office and this coincided with the daybreak in Laudarkvik. Two hours later, the sun would be obscured by clouds again and a long moonless night would start all over again.

p???? ?????? "This is where our paths part." Haynt bid them farewell with a nod before flying off to his own HQ.

He'd only gone the distance with them to send a message to their enemies. If they wanted to kill Aisling, they would have to deal with him first.

'Jake, I still owe you a favor.' The Astral telepathically sent him an entirely different message. 'If you need my assistance, you know where to find me.'

"Big sister!"

As soon as Aisling crossed the threshold of the service, a miniature version of the young woman threw herself into her arms, momentarily taking her breath away. A sincere, yet mournful smile filled the young leader's face as she returned the little girl's embrace. They had come close to never seeing each other again.

Hearing of Aisling's return, the Mutants nearby flocked around them to welcome their return, but they immediately grew morose when they saw their expressions. The manager from last time who knew a little more became livid when he saw that two of the Vice Leaders and most of the elites were missing.

"Vice Leader Norton and Tazee?" The grizzled man with a butler-like appearance whispered in Aisling's ear, giving her a hug.

The young woman shook her head while closing her eyes with an apologetic countenance, confirming the doubts of the Mutant whose complexion became downright cadaverous. Very quickly, he pulled himself together and gestured to his desk.

"Let's talk inside."

Aisling nodded and Rifalen, the other six Mutants and a few other Mutants allowed to attend the meeting followed the manager inside. Others took care of housing the refugees.

Jake and his companions chose to stay outside, leaving familiar faces to deliver the bad news. The Mutant Faction was destined to undergo a major reshuffle after these revelations.

Exhausted both physically and psychologically, Jake and his friends found a vacant table in the bar-cafeteria space of the office and collapsed happily onto the couch chairs.

"Finally some peace and quiet!" Elduin exclaimed as he slumped against the back of his seat.

A Mutant waitress took their orders and moments later enough food and alcohol to satiate a battalion crowded the table. The other Mutants seated nearby were startled by their appetites, but they were even further astounded by their topic of discussion.

"Hey boss, can we still call you by your first name or will we have to call you Vice Leader Jake starting tomorrow?" The elf teased as he chewed his mouth full with a distinct lack of manners that belied his noble origins.

"Who says I'm going to be the next Vice-Leader?" Jake slapped the back of his head, causing the elf's head to dip into his plate full of sauce. "I just saved Haynt and Aisling's lives, nothing special."

"... "

"Show-off." Jeanie muttered.pa??a ??????

"This cockyness disguised as false modesty makes me want to puke." Ruby coughed "quietly," but loud enough for the entire office to hear her clearly.

"You're just jealous." Carmin immediately came to Jake's defense, throwing her arms around his neck and bringing her fangs dangerously close to his neck.

Seeing through her attempt to taste him, he mechanically pushed the Vampire's face away with his hand while remaining focused on his own plate.

"Hmmp. I was badly injured last night." Carmin harrumphed as she crossed her arms with a sulky pout. "With a bowl of your blood, no just a small cup... Even a sip! I'm sure I'll recover from all my wounds in an instant and maybe even make a breakthrough."

"Did we raise the pigs together?" Jake shut her up mercilessly. "We cooperated out of necessity during the last Ordeal, but I don't remember us being this close."

"How cruel..." Bhammod guffawed loudly as he downed his third pint of beer.

But Carmin hadn't given up yet.

"I lost my sister last night." She blurted out as she looked him straight in the eye, her frivolity gone. "If you had been more decisive, it could have been prevented. The one who saved us tonight wasn't you, it was Wyatt."

Jake crumpled as he received this abrupt accusation. The resentment and hurt in the Vampire's voice was so vibrant that he couldn't so easily ignore it. Elduin, Bhammod and Jeanie immediately stopped fooling around and put down their cutlery to listen to his answer.

He could justify his failure in any number of ways. He could claim that he had done his best, that he had not expected them to perish so quickly, or that he had not predicted such a danger, let alone the arrival of these hostile players whose Oracle Rank equaled or surpassed his own.

But all of this would be a lie.

He had panicked, but that was no excuse. They had all seen what his Purgatory was capable of. If he had truly put their lives first, neither Trash nor Lily would have died. Even if he had been truly helpless, he had ultimately risked sacrificing their lives to save a little Aether.

The elf, the dwarf, and the fairy could be fooled, but not Carmin. She knew the Purgatory had been in his possession all along.

His appetite gone, Jake put his cutlery back down and stood up, tossing a few gold coins on the table.

"I'm sorry for everything."

And he walked away. His heart was in his throat.

Jeanie panicked when she saw his attitude, but she ended up flying after him after hurriedly packing enough supplies to feed a human teenager. Watching her crumble under the weight of her bundle was hilarious, but none of her companions had the heart to laugh.

After they left, those who remained at the table exchanged embarrassed glances, then went back to eating in silence, their good mood gone. In the end, it was Ruby who ended the silence by standing up in turn.

"You disgust me." She spat as she glared at each of them in turn before stopping her contemptuous gaze on Carmine, a silver fire burning inside her pupils. "You especially."

The Vampire shuddered as she was pierced by the young woman's harsh gaze. It was like having her soul bared to a predator filled with malice. Tears came involuntarily to her eyes, but she forced herself to hold the eye contact.

"You blame your failures on him, but you were the only one who could protect your sister during that battle." Ruby continued. "This is an Ordeal, not a walk in the park. He owes you nothing. If at the next Ordeal, this situation happens again and no one is there to save you, you will die. As you should. Ungrateful losers like you don't deserve to live."

"With this mentality you will only prevent him from realizing his potential, parasitizing his energy. Weak-minded people like you should continue to act like the good dogs you are and die when told to."

"You mean, stupidly sacrifice us like you sacrificed our former friends?" Elduin bellowed red with anger, slamming his fists hard on the table which shattered into pieces, spilling all the dishes and cutlery on it onto the floor in the process.

The din drew the attention of all the Mutants in the building and the elf immediately regretted his action. Indifferent to the elf's anger, Ruby smirked and patted him on the shoulder,

"I'm glad you understand your position."

And she left as well, leaving the dejected trio to suffer the dumbfounded looks of the crowd.

Chapter 720: New Member

Jake did not stay in town after leaving the Mutant Office. In a very taciturn mood, he strolled with a perpetual frown down the stairs to the lower levels. Sensing his unfriendly disposition, none of the guards had the nerve to control him. After he walked by, all of them sucked in a deep breath, aware that their foreheads were dripping with sweat.

'We better not be the enemy of this Mutant.' This was the thought that flashed through the minds of all of them.

As he entered the slums of the Outer City, Jake saw multiple ghosts and other clusters of negative thoughts swarming around him, frantically trying to inhale his own spirit emanations.

"Fuck off!" Jake unleashed a blast of mental power, and the spirits, invisible to the average local folk, scattered in a wisp of smoke, spilling dozens of puddles of ectoplasm onto the cobblestone path.

After this incident, the other ghosts with a bit of intelligence left him alone. The others were wiped off the surface of Quanoth with the same ruthlessness.

A moment later, Jake crossed the western drawbridge of the city and once out of sight of the guards, he dived into the ground, which seemed to liquefy under his feet. A few seconds after his departure, two individuals appeared at his last location.

"Where did he go? He couldn't have just vanished into thin air." The man on the left, an albino Vampire with an effeminate look and wearing variegated tails, snarled as he stomped on the otherwise perfectly regular ground.

There were no footprints, no traces of mana indicating the use of an Earth Spell.

"It doesn't matter. " The dark elf woman to his right crisply chided as she crouched down to press her pointed ear to the ground. " He is moving underground, but he is already pretty far away. This ability is troublesome. There are very few places in Laudarkvik that he can't access.

"Can we catch him?" The Vampire asked, licking his lips in anticipation.

The elf woman hesitated briefly, but eventually shook her head.

" No way. He' s too far below the surface. Without a very powerful Earth Mage or Digger, it's going to be very difficult and time consuming. Enough time for him to run away ten times."

"In that case, let's go back and report to our clans. They'll decide what to do next." The Vampire decided arbitrarily. "But this Jake must die. According to our sources he is the Guilty one who saved Aisling and Haynt. He also killed Lansho, the Alpha of the Golden Were-Eagle and seriously injured my nephews. Quillan and Riah are completely traumatized since their encounter with him."

The elf woman was deeply shocked to learn that one Guilty had caused so much mayhem in one night. This guy really didn't know how to spell death.

"You are free to do whatever you want with him when you catch him. I'm just a humble tracker." She replied dryly, having only one desire, to extricate herself from this mess.

"And you better remember that. Damn it, I'm hungry." The albino Vampire sniffed as he transformed into a blurred trail of afterimage, which escalated the Laudarkvick compound without drawing the guards' attention.

The dark elf's face scrunched up once the abhorrent queer Vampire left, but inwardly she pitied his soon-to-be victim. These Thrajah Vampires were all bastards. Eventually, she too returned to the city through another door.

Kilometers underground in the large natural cavern where he had healed Haynt, Jake sneered as he watched his two pursuers give up. Even without the Oracle Scan, he had spotted them long ago. These two shady guys had supernatural stealth abilities, but not to the extent of avoiding the sharp, crystal clear vision of his Myrtharian Eyes.

"I finally lost them. Still, I better change my hideout." Jake reminded himself. A little caution never hurt.

Navigating the underground cave system, Jake eventually reached a magma stream and after following it for a while, he found a magma chamber opening into another spacious cavern. Above it was a small, ordinary mountain. No one in Laudarkvik knew that under this rocky mountain about 50 kilometers west of Laudarkvik was a potential dormant volcano.

"This place will be perfect for my training."

Right, Jake had decided to forgo the rewards of his third Side Ordeal Mission. He was definitely withdrawing from the war between Ret'Asi and Khinchod to focus on his training. The results of last night's bloody battles had made him realize that his power was far from adequate.

"It is hot here! Jeanie has a headache." The smeared little fairy grumbled from inside his pocket, her food bundle gone. All that was left was a used towel covered in crumbs and grease.

Jake let her sit in his hand, his expression softening slightly as he looked at her.

p???? ?????? "To be honest, I'm surprised your body can tolerate these temperatures. If you want to get to the surface all you have to do is ask." He offered honestly.

The fairy immediately began to flutter angrily around him, buzzing around like a large fly.

"Jeanie wants to stay here. Minmins are persecuted by everyone, but as fairies we are also Nature Spirits. As long as we are not directly attacked, the environment will never deliberately try to kill us."pa??a ???????

"I see..." Jake commented in a skeptical tone. "When in doubt, keep a safe distance from me during training. As far as I know my powers are not environment friendly..."

"No! Jeanie wants to stay close to you. It's safer here." She refused vehemently.

Jake quickly felt his annoyance and impatience rise at the little fairy's persistence. She wasn't dead weight like Trash. Her buffing and appraisal skills were really useful.

But with her in his way, it was impossible to train as he wanted. On the other hand, by letting her go he could only blame himself if she got eaten by one of Laudarkvick's many scum.

Looking for a way to get rid of her without endangering her or offending her, the image of Sigmar suddenly popped into his mind. It could work. At least it had worked in the past.

"Hey Jeanie, do you want to join my faction?" He asked out of the blues.

"The Mutant Faction?" She repeated cutely with her index finger resting on her lips and nose.

"No mine. The Myrtharian Nerds. A faction of Guilties." Jake explained succinctly.

Contrary to what he imagined, the Minmin did not hesitate for a second and accepted with infectious enthusiasm.

Reluctantly, Jake offered her a half kilo of liquid alloy from his personal supply, and after letting Xi set up the new bracelet, showed her how to get it in and out of her body. The fairy was a little frightened, but when she saw that he was wearing one too, curiosity overcame her reluctance.

"Oh Jeanie, see a weird message in my head!" She exclaimed as she discovered her new mental interface. "And I can even see my status!"

Leaving her to marvel for a few seconds as a child would with a new toy, Jake took the opportunity to ask Xi intriguedly how she had fixed the Oracle AI issue.

[I just replicated my base code in her new bracelet.] She answered evasively as if it were no big deal. [Her bracelet is supposed to automatically connect to the Oracle System and an Oracle AI will be downloaded after her access to the system has been authorized.]

Knowing for a long time that these Oracle AIs were not mere artificial intelligences but also had their own consciousness and a Soul Energy-like presence, Jake carefully monitored with his Myrtharian Eyes the descent of this new consciousness, but to no avail.

One second earlier the new Oracle Device was lifeless, the next second it was alive. There was nothing in between. At least, Jake hadn't noticed.

"Someone is talking to me in my head!" Jeanie gasped as she dove into Jake's pocket to hide.

"Relax, listen to what the voice is telling you." Jake tried to comfort her as he petted her hair.

After a few minutes of diligent persuasion, the fairy finally calmed down and even began to look forward to making a new friend.

"What's your new friend's name?" Jake asked with a jaded look.

"Yi!"

"Yi? Xi... Don't tell me your names are all monosyllabic i names?" Jake teased her gently.

[Kyle's Oracle AI is named Veya.] Xi snorted in his head, immediately refuting his theory. She then conceded in a low voice, [But many Oracle AIs do have simple names to remember...]

With the awakening of her new Oracle AI, everything was easier. Jake extended the invitation and the Oracle AI took it upon himself to accept on Jeanie's behalf. As soon as the Minmin joined the Myrtharian Nerds, her body immediately began to change and her tolerance to heat and light began to increase rapidly.

Now the fairy could train here as well, but still at a distance from him. The Myrtharian Body passive skill was not worth his Myrtharian Bloodline, but it was more than enough to break through her old physiological limitations. With the fairy starting from an extremely low point, initial progress would be rapid if she stayed by his side.

With Jeanie engrossed in her new bracelet and friend, Jake finally got the peace and quiet he so desperately wanted. Drawing on his Aether Core and the energy stored in his cells, he then set about restructuring the cavern and magma chamber in which he would spend a long time.

A few hours later, Jake had built his new base and he officially began a long and arduous training, which he hoped would help him avoid future tragedies.