

Oracle 741

Chapter 741: No Ordinary Opponent

The huge demon Belakor, who had just been speared in the shoulder, was lying on the broken stone table, still traumatized by the dreadful blade. He was huffing and puffing, his face drenched in sweat, his tiny white eyes staring at Jake with palpable trepidation.

He now saw this fearless human in a different light! Even in hell, this monster would fit right in! Getting fooled once, he could chalk it up to surprise, but this time he had clearly felt the difference between them.

It wasn't just a question of power, but also of equipment. His hell greatsword had some style, but it was really just an Advanced Aether Artifact. In contrast, this unknown Player had already used two super-powerful weapons. Who knew how many other weapons of this caliber he was hiding in his Space Storage.

Bracing his boot against Belakor's shoulder blade, the Spartan bent over to grab the tip of his spear and used the support to push hard with his leg to extract his weapon from the demon's shoulder. The demon growled silently in pain, but he complied. Once the spear was removed, he stood up without a thank you and twirled his damaged shoulder to test the condition of his joint.

"You were reckless." The Spartan chided him without compassion. "You bring shame to Lost Divinities."

Humiliated, the demon turned red with anger but in the end swallowed his scathing remark and faced the enemy once more.

"It won't happen a second time. I just underestimated him." Belakor declared with a bone-chilling coldness.

A sigh filled with dissatisfaction and contempt sounded from behind his back.

"You still underestimate him. You're all underestimating him. Look ahead."

Belakor who was the epitome of bad faith had the word doubt etched on his face, but when he searched for Jake again his eyes widened in astonishment.

'What what the heck is that?!'

In the brief seconds he had looked away from Jake, Jake had not stopped attacking and neither had his companions. The mangled and bloody carcasses of dozens of Players littered the room, another wall had collapsed, a gaping hole twenty meters in diameter had atomized a portion of the table, and cries of hatred and helplessness mixed together to form a macabre symphony.

Marks from the passage of his Tempest Sword and Aether Sun Core were everywhere. Many of the Players had not been as fortunate as Belakor and their scattered guts and entrails spoke of their cruel end. However, Jake had underestimated their fervor.

When he was chopping another enemy in half, an elderly Player with long white hair had suddenly trapped his arm in an iceberg dozens of meters wide. Two others had bombarded him with diamond-cutting water, forcing him to defend himself with the Aether Sun Core in his other hand.

The steam generated had plunged the giant room into fog and he took advantage of the confusion to smash the two opportunists with the iceberg his arm was stuck on. The problem was that the ice-wielding Player exploited this water vapor to freeze the fog. To avoid being sealed inside, Jake had no choice but to use a Heat Aether Spell to defend himself.

With the help of his Aether Sun Core he managed to dislodge his hand from the iceberg, but not the sword. Pressed for time, he stowed away the ice block in the Faction Vault, his Space Storage not having enough room for it.

Jake then continued to weather group attacks, ambushes, and other treacherous enemy moves, but never forgot to return the favor. His Aether Sun Core burned a dozen Players to a crisp while several others were torn apart by his blazing claws and fangs.

Still, this white-haired Player was persistent and his fearsome Ice Spells kept coming at him out of nowhere with no warning. He dodged as best he could with his inhuman reflexes, but many times he was left scrambling to protect himself with his Aether Sun Core.

Soon he realized that his precious artificial sun was the real target of his opponent. Each successful ice spell significantly cooled the Aether Sun Core. If this continued, the thermonuclear reaction taking place in the core might stop or worse, become unstable. Frightened, he stowed it away without hesitation in his Space Storage to prevent any accident.

At that very moment, Azeus, the barbarian commander of lightning and thunder, was engaged in an intense hand-to-hand duel with Jake. Jake no longer had his Aether Sun Core and Tempest Sword in his hands and the two brutes were currently throwing punches at each other hard enough to knock out a fucking blue whale. At first glance, their physical strength and toughness seemed to be equal, but after several hundred punches and parries exchanged in a few milliseconds, the barbarian's blood-stained, broken arms forced him to retreat.

Having lost the close combat round, Azeus remained inexpressive as if he felt no pain, but a cloak of purple lightning suddenly enveloped him, arcs of electricity as wide as his biceps winding through the air around him like living snakes. His body seemed to merge with the lightning, becoming one with the element, and the next breath he appeared in front of Jake.

Transmuted into electrical energy, Azeus struck forward with both palms together and an electric shock of millions of volts shook Jake's innards. With blood pouring from his lips, Jake let out a roar as he clenched his fists and his body temperature soared in an instant, becoming a supernova man.

Unfortunately, no matter how fast and tough Jake was after his power-up and Bloodline Ignition activation, he couldn't surpass the speed of a lightning bolt, let alone catch it. Only his Myrtharian Eyes could track his movements. The multiple electrocutions he took in such a short time put his constitution and mental strength to the test, but not a hint of panic dampened his lust for battle.

Taking advantage of Azeus' unstoppable assault, his partner Shamash also went on the attack. Erasing his presence, he crossed the huge room in just three steps, then decisively backstabbed Jake. Jake didn't hear him approach or strike. It was only when the sharp pain radiated up his spine that he realized he had been wounded.

"Tch... How hard..." Shamash winced as he vigorously shook his trembling hand.

To launch this surprise attack, he had braved his comrade's lightning cage and his normally meticulously trimmed black hair and beard were now messed up and scorched from their electrocution. He was slightly injured. But like Belakor, Ashun and the others this level of injury was nothing. Even before he retreated and faded into the background, his wounds were already healed.

If Shamash could recover quickly from his wounds, Jake didn't have to feel embarrassed about it either. To resist Azeus' lightning he had long since activated his Silver Stone Skin. He was also deriving a Lightning Rod Aether Spell. Having never done this before, he could not succeed in a few seconds, especially in the middle of a fight.

But that didn't stop him from retaliating with what he already knew. To hinder the movements of Azeus and the other Players he cast an Invisibility Spell, then a series of other spells to erase his presence, suppress the sound of his movements and launch a salvo of plasma bullets with the cadence of a machine gun and surgical precision.

These projectiles were no match for Azeus in this energy state, but the other attackers nearby were riddled with holes. The white-haired expert controlling ice was so focused on his magic that he reacted too late, a coin-width hole appearing between his two eyes.

"Boreas!" A hooded young woman screamed in fright as she saw him collapse.

The old man's head was hurled backwards badly, but after hitting the ground he immediately raised his hand to tell the others that he was fine. The young woman sobbed with joy when she saw that he was okay. When the white-haired Player straightened up, the hole in his forehead was gone, replaced by a snowflake.

Indifferent to their excitement, Jake continued to wreak havoc on their ranks, absolutely tireless despite Azeus's repeated electrocutions and the rain of spells falling on him every second. These Players had rarely faced such a tank. His regeneration and stamina were insane, his strength and speed top notch, and his fighting skills even more demoralizing.

Momentarily out of enemies, Jake arrived at the rock dome erected by Nucnar and with a smirk he bolted inside, the dome opening briefly to let him through. The rock giant at the center of the structure gasped in disbelief when he saw that his defenses had been so easily subdued.

"What's going on Nucnar?" Ashun asked as she nervously jabbed at his foot, the highest limb of the giant she could reach.

"Shut up."

BANG!

The rock formation cracked immediately after with a resounding impact. The second impact was so violent that it caused a mini earthquake, a huge crack splitting the fortress in two. On the third blow, the stone dome exploded and the gigantic figure of Nucnar was thrown dozens of meters into the air letting out a furious roar.

Had Jake not suddenly found himself unable to move his left leg, he would have pressed on with the attack to extend his advantage. Recognizing the fragrance emanating from his leg, he glared in the direction of the beauty hiding under a heap of rock, arms crossed over her to guard her head.

"Do you understand now?" The Spartan repeated to Belakor, "This is no ordinary opponent."

"I understand." The demon capitulated, his thirst for battle quenched. "An enemy like that, you can't underestimate him. Let's give him a run for his money."

Taking a deep breath, he bellowed,

"LOST DIVINITIES! ASSEMBLE!"

Chapter 742: Embracing Violence

In the blink of an eye, thousands of Players burst into the room from all directions. Some burst in through the stairs, others came in through the elevator, while many more teleported in or came in through other, even more unexpected ways, such as the floor, the sky or the vents.

Before he could fully process what had just transpired, Jake found himself surrounded by more than three thousand Lost Divinities Players, a good tenth of whom exuded a life force comparable to or greater than his own at the beginning of the Ordeal. Within this group, there were several dozen enemies with an aura close to or on par with that of Belakor and Nucnar, whom he had just faced.

One of them, a huge, snow-white, scarred Nosk, even had a presence that rivaled that of the Spartan still sitting on his throne. As soon as he teleported into the destroyed hall, he exchanged an intrusive look of displeasure with the latter, and then, following their silent conversation, his cold, penetrating eyes fell on the culprit of this bloody scene:

Jake.

When Jake met the Nosk's gaze, his eyes narrowed with alertness. This was not his first encounter with Nosks, but while the ones he had faced up to this point were foolish hunters seeking glory and trophies, this one had the restrained poise of a warrior with nothing left to prove.

The only Nosk he'd ever met that came close was the Sixth-Ordeal albino Nosk named Khug' Kagamai, whom his master Cekt had saved on the Dungeon Digester's Sixth Floor. But considering that they were two Ordeals apart, the mere fact that this Player gave him a similar impression was quite a credit to him.

Whether it was this daunting Nosk or the other extraordinary Players who had just stormed in, they rarely hid their identities, while the small fry that made up the other 90% assiduously wore their signature black hooded cloaks and a gold, silver, or bronze mask to conceal their identity. A portion of them wore no mask at all, but kept their faces down and their hoods on in an explicit effort to remain anonymous.

When everyone seemed to be there, a blinding flash of light flickered through the crowd and a huge, multicolored, translucent sphere towered over the ruined hall. This sphere of about twenty meters in diameter with colorful walls was hovering over them like a mini planet and... in some ways this thing looked like a soap bubble.

Jake broke out in a cold sweat as he recognized the species to which this alien belonged. Not so long ago, but it seemed like forever, he had witnessed the scuffle between a Nosk and one of these Bubble aliens shortly before his first Ordeal.

It was the first time he had become aware of the chasm between humanity and some other species. Digestors aside, the insignificance of humans in the Mirror Universe had been a wake-up call and the main driver of his perseverance.

Unlike the first and only alien Bubble he had ever encountered, this one was dozens of times more massive. This deceptively fragile soap bubble appearance, ready to burst at the drop of a hat, was in fact a death trap for those foolish enough to risk it.

The energy contained in this huge bubble was mind-boggling and could be compared to several thousand tons of C4 and perhaps even more. If this alien had the same abilities as the fellow alien Jake had encountered, then he could blow himself up and take the entire crowd of Players to his grave with a single thought.

The bad news is that this suicide blast wouldn't kill him. As if time were reversed, the energy released would essentially be reabsorbed, the only price to pay for such a powerful blast being a negligible reduction in its diameter. Perhaps there were methods to effectively fight and counter these Bubble aliens, but Jake was not privy to them.

"Belakor, you are compromising my mission!" A childish, but deafening voice echoed for miles around. The source of the sound came from the giant bubble envelope vibrating at high frequency. "I hope this emergency rally is justified or I swear I will make you regret the crappy hell that spawned you."

Belakor paled upon receiving this outspoken threat, but gritting his teeth he took it upon himself and retorted chillingly,

"Ozo, by questioning my sense of judgment, you are disrespecting Deimos and all the others here. Am I to understand that you wish to declare war on us?"

The alien Ozo remained silent for a long half minute. With his iconic morphology it was impossible to know what was on its mind without reading its Aether and Spirit Body fluctuations, but the colored reflections on its surface gradually turned red. Then when it found Nucnar deeply embedded in a collapsed wall, the red receded and the bubble became multicolored again.

"This is your lucky day, Belakor. I'm in a hurry. Tell me who to kill so we can get it over with."

The hostile gaze of all the Players that Jake had knocked out focused in unison on him. All the Players who had dropped everything to come here also zeroed in on Jake, their faces tinged with curiosity. Who could this formidable foe be to motivate such a rally?

The truth was that most of them had already identified their target, including Ozo. All of these Players knew each other well, or at least had memorized the faces of all the other members working with them. Jake was the only outsider and his appearance and presence was so impactful and eye-catching that it was impossible not to notice him.

"Deimos, do you really approve of this gathering? I find it hard to believe that you can't handle this problem on your own." The white Nosk who had remained silent openly asked the question that everyone was wondering about.

The Spartan's reputation as an undefeated warrior was well established and those in the upper echelons of Lost Divinities for this Ordeal had an even clearer understanding of his extraordinary abilities. The probability of meeting a stronger player than him in this Fourth Ordeal was practically nil.

The Spartan, who seemed determined to remain seated, turned his head to the white Nosk and Ozo, and smiled enigmatically before calmly confessing,

"I appreciate his courage and talent. It takes a lot of guts to walk into a lion's den like Lost Divinities alone. It doesn't happen often and it would be a shame to rip his fangs out so soon. On the flip side, most of our new members are excessively arrogant. Fighting this man will do them a world of good. Those who perform satisfactorily will be promoted. Ozo and Khag' Dagmai I would like you to accept this selfish whim of mine. Belakor has only acted under my command."

" ... "

Khag' Dagmai and Ozo had a short telepathic conversation, then the white Nosk accepted the terms in both their names.

"We accept."

The Belakor demon's face distorted with glee as he received their approval.

"DID YOU HEAR THAT?! THOSE WHO KILL OR CAPTURE HIM WILL BE RICHLY REWARDED! ATTACK!"

The thunderous, hate-filled bellow of the twice-defeated demon spread like a shock wave through the audience, galvanizing their souls and increasing their bloodlust tenfold.

"KILL HIM!"

That was all it took to spur them into action. With an earth-shaking roar, nearly three thousand Players swarmed over Jake like a tide of insects. Even Jake, who thought he had become immune to fear, felt a shiver of dread run down his spine.

Even before bracing himself for the impact, his retinas were dazzled by a barrage of light flashes, spells and missiles.

BOOOOOOOM!

Like a chain reaction, several hundred cataclysmic explosions detonated instantly at millisecond intervals and the area where Jake was standing was immediately leveled by several dozen meters. Molten rock, lightning, plasma, poisonous miasma, acid rain, blizzards and windstorms collided and intermingled, forming a zone of chaos annihilating everything inside.

Those who witnessed the scene shuddered as they watched the devastation, but they were soon overtaken by a different concern. The Jake they thought they had obliterated suddenly reappeared behind Belakor, and with a sudden twist of both hands he ripped his head off after grabbing his head and digging his claws into his skull.

A geyser of purple blood splashed across Jake's face but only a sinister glint gleamed in his icy eyes. There was no pleasure or disgust on his face, only an oppressive killing intent. To achieve victory, he had to embrace violence and stop hoping for a peaceful resolution.

At that moment, he had completely given up the idea of saving Carmin and the others. There was only an inexhaustible will to fight.

"Bring it on!"

His Spirit Body ignited and at a speed far too fast to be prevented he etched into his flesh the Words of Power, which had won him victory over the Alpha Were-eagle Lansho. For better results, he used Aether Conversion and an improvised Aether Spell to sustain the intense expenditure of spiritual energy. He also invoked his Soul Stone to prolong the state as much as possible.

Strength, Stamina, Agility, Speed, Intelligence, Power, Perception, Sharpness, and even his Luck, all of his basic parameters affecting his combat ability were greatly amplified. When the Words of Power began to work their mysterious magic, the thousands of Players facing him underwent a dramatic change in expression.

The white Nosk's eyes brightened with realization, while Ozo remained as inscrutable as ever. But those who watched it closely could see that it had quietly regained some altitude. It seemed that it was no longer in such a hurry to participate.

As for the Spartan Deimos, a solemn and puzzled expression crept over his stony face for the first time. He had underestimated this human.

Chapter 743: He's Still Alive

But that wouldn't change the outcome of the fight. All that awaited this human in the end was a miserable death. Unless he agreed to surrender and promised to be at his service.

At this point words were of little use. All that was left was to make their fists do the talking. Far from deterring his enemies, the exponential increase in pressure exerted by Jake instead boosted the ferocity of his enemies, giving them the impetus they needed to throw caution to the wind.

The thousands of Players surrounding him once again pounced on him like a school of hungry piranhas, and Jake answered their challenge. At least he pretended to. And his enemies pretended to as well.

At the last moment, the hundreds of leading brutes beat a hasty retreat to make way for a barrage of missiles and spells. As for Jake, after raising his Bone Crushing Snowworm's Fang over his head, he teleported to the back of their lines to cleave in half a burly alien about 2.5 meters tall that bore a striking resemblance to the Pokemon Machop.

His stealthy kill was completely covered by the racket of spell impacts and explosions, and it wasn't until the nearby Players felt a warm liquid dripping through the gaps in their armor that they realized their imminent deaths.

"He's here!"

"Kill him!"

"He got Koga!"

These Players pulled themselves together admirably, showing their experience, and one of them, an alien of the same species as the deceased Koga, charged at him with the momentum of an elephant, but

at a speed dozens of times greater. Carrying no weapon, it slammed into him with its shoulder with unprecedented violence, forcing Jake to take a step back before stabilizing himself.

Snorting scornfully, Jake let himself be pushed by the enemy's momentum but his legs bent imperceptibly, gathering energy. Then, with his supporting leg he thrust firmly into the ground and his other knee smashed into the face of the overconfident alien.

The result was even more gory than the death of its comrade Koga. Its head caved in, then came off its neck before disintegrating into the sky like a football shot into orbit. A stream of blue blood gushed like a fountain from the still standing corpse, then when Jake teleported again it collapsed lifeless on the ground in front of the stunned crowd.

The Players, having witnessed the scene live, drew a cold breath. They were no longer in a hurry to join the fray. As much as they longed for the promotion, they had to be alive to enjoy it. Against this lunatic? Nothing less sure...

While these Players were hesitating to return to battle, the clash between Jake and the remaining thousands of Players continued. Teleportations and deadly ambushes occurred at a blistering pace, and the Players of various species were picked off like flies one after the other, unable to react.

One should not judge their poor performance too harshly. Even if they were Lost Divinities' small fry, their presence on Quanoth was a testament to their talent. Compared to the average Players, they were definitely the elite of the elite.

On many occasions, the post-teleportation ambush failed. These Players either had exceptional reflexes or a way to anticipate his movements. Some of them were even able to exchange a few blows with him, forcing him to reteleport to avoid being surrounded or bombarded with spells again.

After exchanging a few saber strokes with such a foe, a three-headed monster that was a head taller than he was, Jake found himself in serious trouble, and if he hadn't teleported away in a hurry, he could have been critically injured. As he reappeared behind another target, he gave that particular alien a baleful glare, but he didn't ambush it again.

This three-headed monster was somewhat bizarre. Its aura and physical abilities were nothing special at first, but as soon as Jake swung at it, its power swelled by an unimaginable factor, its presence momentarily surpassing that of Deimos, Khag' Dagmai or Ozo. At the same time, the hooded Players in the vicinity saw their aura diminish in a disturbing way, most becoming so frail that they were forced to sit on the ground for fear of fainting.

Nevertheless, the facts were there. In the space of 7 seconds, Jake slaughtered over 300 Players. It was an unthinkable feat and an unacceptable failure for a faction like Lost Divinities. The faction's leaders and key officers were both outraged and infuriated as they watched their subordinates get whacked like sitting ducks.

They were like an army of babies taking their first steps and trying to join forces in order to take down a grown man at the zenith of his strength. It was as laughable as it was futile.

But it couldn't go on. After the first 7 seconds of disillusionment that claimed so many lives, these many officers and warriors with a strong sense of honor thought it was time to let the "adults" do the fighting.

Khag' Dagmai nodded in the direction of a certain hooded, ordinary-looking Player, but when this one nodded back a slight smile stretched his mouth. This kind of exchange happened over and over again on the battlefield, and by the time Jake realized what was going on, it was too late.

"Seal the space."

Just as Jake had decapitated yet another enemy, a gigantic steel club as large as an obelisk swished above him, the blast of wind that preceded it slamming the dozen or so surrounding Players to the ground. Recognizing the weapon of the rock giant Nucnar that he had already thrashed, Jake stood his ground, preparing to sidestep the blow before considering teleporting again.

Just then, a tremendous gravitational force crashed into him and a ten-meter radius area with him at its center. Caught off guard, his legs buckled involuntarily but he stabilized nearly immediately. The other Players could not say the same, and those who were not promptly crushed under their own weight found themselves immobilized on the ground unable to move.

Although for Jake this gravity posed only a small threat, it was enough to compromise his dodge. His sidestep was imperceptibly affected, but he still seemed able to avoid Nucnar's club in time.

But just then, Jake felt the space fluctuate around him and dozens of magical projectiles of various hues shot out of nowhere just inches from him. Thinking, he activated his teleportation, but this time nothing happened. His pupils narrowed in astonishment and incomprehension, but it was already too late to turn on his Oracle Shield.

The spells hit him first. He had expected extremely offensive spells, but it turned out that they were mostly debuffs. The surface of his body was covered with ice, chains of light slowing his movements while a myriad of magical phenomena numbed his muscles and intellect, dulling his very will to fight.

These weakening spells removed his last chance to dodge the mace in time. Nucnar, whose physical superiority Jake had already recognized, brought his heavy steel club down on him with all his strength and weight. The rock giant weighed several hundred tons and his bludgeon was almost as heavy as he was.

SMASH!

Jake had just enough time to cross his arms above him to protect his head, before taking the most powerful physical blow of his life. Although he was prepared for it, it didn't stop his legs, and then his entire body, from sinking into the ground like a nail.

His head went into his neck, then his neck into his rib cage, then his rib cage into his pelvis. Simultaneously, the bones and joints of his arms and legs dislocated while his skull split into hundreds of pieces. If he had not used his telekinesis at the last moment to limit the damage, he would have been reduced to a pulp.

Just when he thought he had weathered the storm, Nucnar, who had a big heart, raised his club above him and swung it down again.

BANG BANG BANG!

A deep crater opened up where the ancient stone table used to be, quickly growing so deep that it threatened the integrity of what little remained of the fortress.

The unfortunate Players nearby who had asked for nothing and were already doing their best to resist gravity were blasted away in all directions, their disjointed bodies speaking volumes about their survival prognosis.

"I GOT HIM! Did you see that Belakor?! Frow now on you can call me daddy!" Nucnar burst out laughing.

Unlike the admiring and envious looks from the crowd and Belakor's frustrated red head he was hoping for, all he got was silence and gloomy faces. Realizing that something was wrong, he tried to shift his club to see what was left of his victim, but his eyes widened when he realized that he could not move it an inch.

Crack!

Underneath the weapon, Jake's blood-covered fingers dug into the steel club he'd just grabbed, fracturing the metal. Pushing the heavy mace aside, his hellish appearance reappeared in plain sight. A familiar sun blazed beneath his feet, its scorching heat infusing his veins.

"He's still alive?!"

Sincere disbelief and stupefaction warped the faces of the leaders and other officers for the first time, until then unduly stoic and composed. No one noticed, but at that very moment the Spartan Deimos' hand subconsciously gripped the armrest of his throne. He was excited. The Nosk Khag' Dagmai's attitude also betrayed his eagerness to join the fight.

Jake stared hatefully at the crowd, identifying at a glance those responsible for the deluge of surprise spells as well as those he thought were Space Mages. He wouldn't forget this lesson anytime soon. Then his Myrtharian Eyes landed on Nucnar.

This time, his desire for revenge made him forget all instinct for self-preservation. Drawing unrestrainedly on the power of his Aether Sun Core, his body became as glowing and blinding as a star. His body temperature instantly exceeded by far the limits his cells could withstand.

A burning smell came from his charred flesh, but he ignored it and focused the energy into his eyes. A blinding white laser beam of astronomical power shot out of his pupils, operating on both the material and psychic planes.

When the dazzled crowd opened their eyes again, all that remained of the giant Nucnar were his smoking feet. The rest of his body and his Spirit Body had been obliterated.

Chapter 744: Shocking Truth

Embracing the pain, Jake gave his audience no chance to collect themselves. Drawing even more heat and radiation from his rapidly cooling Aether Sun Core, his body's calcination level quickly reached new heights. If he hadn't pushed his pain threshold throughout the last three months he might have passed out on the spot.

"AAAAAAAAAHHH!!!"

The roar that escaped his mouth at this peak of pain was no longer human. The shockwave of his cry expelled a large portion of his surplus energy in the form of an omnidirectional and utterly unstoppable deflagration.

"What the...!"

" Run!"

Players too close to the epicenter scrambled back, but those behind them caught on to the impending danger too late. Just as a pyroclastic flow after a volcanic eruption, nothing was spared.

Those who were swift or able to teleport barely managed to outrun it, but the others who were unable to protect themselves suffered the same fate as Jake, except that their bodies were hopelessly ill-equipped to handle so much heat and radiation. In addition to the lethal burns that revealed their flesh and bones when they were not directly disintegrated, the DNA of their cells was also deeply damaged. Without Digitization and a proper Bloodline, they would have perished no matter how much Vitality they had.

As for Jake, his charred skin peeled off, then flaked due to the unrelenting heat and radiation, his flesh and bones translucent as diamond making him look like an Undead God. His plight did not escape the notice of some of the Lost Divinities players.

"Don't give up guys! He' s in deep shit!" An Ent as tall as Nucnar, but whose foliage had been swapped for triangular flames and a trunk as black as obsidian, defiantly let the blast wash through it, its sturdy roots anchoring itself deep into the ground to keep it from being blown away.

By all accounts, this was a very special Ent.

"We can still make it!" A horned swordsman in a kimono with a third eye and some sort of cleaver hacked the superheated shockwave in half, then weaved through the rift fearlessly.

"The promotion is mine!" A flame-wrapped bird resembling the phoenixes of legends excitedly rammed into the plasma blast, the blur of its silhouette splitting the air more explosively than the most modern fighter jet.

Seeing that not all of their subordinates were cowards, a proud smile broke out on the white Nosk's face. Most of these valiant Players were in fact under his command. A dozen hooded Nosks had even adopted a formation where they connected their dendrites to share the radioactive and thermal load between them. After overcoming the blast, they were about to reach Jake.

The Bubble alien Ozo was not so optimistic and had been steadily gaining altitude. It wasn't that he was afraid, but it was just his nature to never give his cornered enemies a chance.

Deimos, however, did not share Khag' Dagmai's optimism. On the surface, Jake seemed on the verge of self-destruction after overestimating his abilities, but his instincts and senses were sending him a very different signal.

"That Jake... He's using us to get stronger."

Only Ashun, the beauty previously hiding behind Belakor, and then Nucnar, heard his murmur, disbelief congealing her open mouth into a big O. Then the Spartan's bold statement was borne out.

While the new wave of attackers had convinced themselves that the horrific laser beam that had atomized Nucnar was a one-time shot that he would not be able to use again for a long time, the stark reality proved them wrong.

For a fleeting fraction of a second, time stood still, or at least that's how the enemies saw it. When the Grim Reaper came to collect his due, it was not uncommon for the deceased to experience their dying breaths in slow motion.

Powerless, they saw Jake, who was now a 5m60 diamond skeleton, crack his neck ominously, then turn his head in their direction. Only his eyes had not changed. The two galaxies immersed in an ocean of golden and silver light were still as mesmerizing and hypnotic as ever.

As deadpan as a corpse, his head tilted, swayed and jerked several hundred times with millimetered precision, his gaze locking on to each target with the unerring efficiency of the best remote guidance system.

Then all the heat and energy that made his skeleton glow and crackle was sucked into his eyeballs already brighter than a supernova and then... And then nothing.

Hundreds of laser pulses coldly pulverized their targets before anyone could give them any warning.

The Nosks defended themselves with their dendrites, but after exceeding their threshold of energy absorption the whole group exploded simultaneously.

The phoenix was flying so fast in a straight line that it collided head-on with the beam as if it had deliberately run into it. Except for a few scorched feathers, nothing remained of its former splendor.

The volcanic Ent tried its best to diffuse the light energy into its flame leaves and roots, but a wistful, self-mocking sigh rustled from its dying branches. The soil in which its roots were buried melted into magma, then the flames in its foliage turned to plasma before exploding like fireworks. Finally, his obsidian trunk began to glow, then turned white-hot before bursting like an old tree struck by lightning.

The swordsman in kimono, facing his imminent death, unleashed the full extent of his skill. With a hiss of rage, filled with reluctance and regret, he unleashed all his Sword Qi in a final burst, hoping to "slice" this light. But nothing could stop this attack. Even before this thought emerged in his mind, the laser beam had already disintegrated his brain and the rest of his body.

All of those brave, talented and experienced players were decimated without exception. This time, no one dared to take the initiative. Those who were still tempted by the reward retreated, moving back at least 300 meters. The area around Jake instantly became a no man's land.

A deathly silence settled over the ruined fortress. With different expressions breeding all sorts of thoughts, the survivors watched with increasing gravity as the wounds of their invincible foe recovered at a dizzying pace. Within seconds, his skeleton had already begun to cover itself with a new layer of muscles and organs.

They could have all attacked him at the same time to stop him. If Deimos, Khag' Dagmai and Ozo were leading the charge they could have easily annihilated him. But as long as none of their leaders volunteered to personally lead the offensive, none of these Players would be foolish enough to sacrifice their lives pointlessly.

Thus, Jake managed to regenerate completely without incident. He might have felt proud of his accomplishment, but he was in no mood to celebrate.

His Bone Crushing's Snowworm Fang was covered in cracks, his Tempest Sword was sealed in an iceberg that was very difficult to melt, his equipment was beyond repair, his Soul Stone had shrunk for the first time, and his Aether Sun Core now glowed with little more than a brown dwarf at the end of its life.

This battle had cost him dearly. Much more than he was initially willing to pay. But if he had to do it again, he would do it the same. This arrogant faction was an obstacle in his journey that he had to overcome.

And besides... This fight at death's door was not without benefits. His Silver Myrtharian Bloodline was on the verge of leveling up.

During this short lull where both sides scrutinized each other with contrasting emotions, only the occasional crackle of flames licking the rubble broke through the stony silence. Lost Divinities' fortress was nothing but ruin and ashes, as if the apocalypse had passed by.

Jake may have administered a savage thrashing, but he could see no fear in their eyes. During the battle, these victims had indeed been subject to fear when they saw him coming near, but as soon as the battle ceased he realized that these were only physiological reactions. Their current unwillingness to fight was not out of fear, but caution.

As the stalemate seemed bound to drag on, Deimos finally rose from his throne. As he left the throne, the stone throne collapsed into dust. The battle had long since destroyed everything that could be destroyed. Without the Spartan's mental force, the throne would have collapsed long ago.

Clap. clap. clap.

"I admire you. I really do. Defeating a whole army of Lost Divinities is a feat that few in the Mirror Universe can boast." Deimos congratulated him warmly, his face wearing an expression of sincerity.

But the congratulations were only the prelude to much harsher words.

"Unfortunately, I'm afraid you haven't defeated us at all. Your strength is not the issue. You just don't understand what makes us who we are and what unites us. Look around you!"

Deimos waved his hand and the watchful and gloomy faces of the survivors lined up behind him revealed a taunting and slightly sneering smirk.

At that moment, Jake became aware of a recurring phenomenon that he had been unable to dwell on during the heat of the battle. Sweeping the battlefield with his Myrtharian Eyes, his heart sank as he realized the shocking truth.

'Their numbers haven't changed.'

If he wasn't fighting an illusion, something he was almost convinced of, then there was only one possibility.

"Did you figure it out yet?" Deimos laughed with a tone caught between pity and condescension. "That's right. I regret to inform you that none of those you faced died. You didn't kill anyone."

Chapter 745: You Asked For It

Jake felt his heart clench as he heard the Spartan's chilling proclamation, but before long he shot back unswervingly,

"You're lying."

Their numbers had indeed not changed. Jake counted exactly as many Aetheric and Spiritual signatures as before. However, it was one thing to detect exactly the same number of auras and quite another to see for himself who they belonged to.

The ones Jake had crushed beyond hope... He couldn't find them anywhere close by. Especially those who had been obliterated by his Eye Laser Beam, which affected both the physical and psychic planes. Even digitized, it was impossible to recover from such injuries so quickly without assistance.

But since he could sense their presence, then these Players were most likely not dead and he had indeed sacrificed his equipment for nothing. Just picturing the time, energy, and resources it would take to restore his Aether Sun Core, saber, and armor, he felt his legs wobble. His grieving face spoke volumes about his remorse.

Tragically, most of the Lost Divinities Players mistook his sad and heartbroken expression for despair. In a way, they weren't wrong. To lose so much of his fortune for nothing was indeed the height of despair for Jake.

One couldn't blame these Players bullied by Jake, for even their leader Deimos was wrong about his attitude, mistaking Jake's response for one of denial. The only one who wasn't convinced by his response was the Bubble alien Ozo, who was still inconspicuously gaining altitude.

"I'm afraid not. I repeat, you did not kill anyone." The Spartan uttered slowly with an imperceptibly mocking and provoking smile.

Alas, his unfamiliarity with Jake's character immediately backfired. Deploring the degradation of his equipment, his mood was at its gloomiest and he expressly needed an outlet. All he needed was an excuse to make one of them his scapegoat.

When Deimos decided to rebut him, he gave Jake the excuse he needed to be humiliated.

Jake's saddened look hardened, his face becoming as devilish as that of a fiend. The galactic glow in his pupils flared up again and a raspy laugh escaped his lips.

Deimos and the other leaders and officers immediately frowned at his sudden change in behavior.

'Something's wrong.'

Despite the relaxed and regal persona the Spartan exhibited, he had never relaxed his vigilance. The space was still sealed and while he chatted with Jake, an anti-magic zone had also been deployed. All that remained was to activate it. The fish had fallen into their trap and all they had to do was reel in the net.

But how could their greenhorn shenanigans escape his Myrtharian Eyes. With his high Perception no Mana or Aether fluctuation could elude him and he could even read the pages of a newspaper from over

5 kilometers away. Without a layer of heavy metal dozens of meters thick or a specific spell to obstruct his vision he could even clearly make out energy currents and other elemental particles from tens or even hundreds of kilometers away.

While they were setting up their formation, they had not been exactly subtle. With his diligent training over the past three months and his new Aetherist abilities their preparations were about as unobtrusive as a black man in the middle of a Ku Klux Klan meeting.

Suddenly, Jake turned into a blur and dashed straight to a certain devastated area covered with cracks and rubble. Jake smirked as he found the huge and still smoking rock feet embedded in the ground.

This place was no coincidence and when he realized his intention an angered expression appeared for the first time on the Spartan's face.

"Don't you dare!

With an agility and power impossible to anticipate, Deimos went from a relaxed standing position to that of a javelin thrower completing his throw. He was so fast that those nearby failed to notice the summoning of the golden spear, or how he adjusted his stance by tilting his torso and bringing his muscular arm back before swinging forward abruptly, releasing the deadly projectile with all its might in one expert motion.

Jake, who had his back to Deimos, perceived with his mental sense the golden spear before he could see or hear it. His hair standing on end, he ducked his head to the ground, narrowly dodging the projectile, but the sharp wind blowing past him and charged with an eerie energy ripped off several layers of his skin before shooting off straight ahead, disappearing into the Wilderness woods and piercing through hundreds of ancient trees.

"Phew..."

Ignoring his fright, Jake conjured his Aether Sun Core under his feet again, using it to permanently incinerate what was left of Nucnar's rocky carcass. Even after his huge granite feet were atomized, Jake did not stop his assault. Stepping into his Aether Sun Core, which was much colder and dimmer than at its peak, he pumped out what little heat and radiation was left and his Myrtharian Eyes shone like torches one more time.

At that moment, to the crowd's utter stupor, his pupils spat out a blinding laser beam again, but unlike the previous times he didn't seem to have any target. Of course, for those who knew what he was trying to do, it was a disaster.

When the anti-magic spell provided by Lost Divinities finally activated, Nucnar's Soul and Spirit Body had already been wiped out to the last particle. Even Jake doubted the Oracle's ability to heal that.

"It would appear that I did indeed kill one of you." Jake chuckled in an exceedingly prideful manner.

"You asked for it!" Deimos snarled in an icy voice as he lunged at him in a few steps, a new golden spear in hand.

Jake, who was still using his Myrtharian Eyes to track any traces of Nucnar's Soul in case he missed anything, felt a corrosive and deeply belligerent aura washing over him and he was forced to forgo his last principled check to defend himself with utmost emergency.

BANG!

Jake blocked the downward spear thrust with his right hand's claws, dazzling sparks accompanied by tearing squeaks testifying to the sheer violence of the attack. His claws took the blow with a few cracks, but the bones, tendons and ligaments of his fingers were torn apart in the process.

With a savage expression, Jake ignored his bloody hand and retaliated with a tremendous punch that struck with a loud, resounding gong against the round bronze shield under which Deimos had taken cover. The shield neither broke nor deformed, but Jake felt a shock wave as terrific as his own punch propagating through his arm and up to his shoulder.

'Damn it, is it some fucking Vibranium?!' Jake cursed inwardly as he felt the bones in his knuckles fracture. Even his Furnace Gauntlets were showing signs of cracking.

After that first exchange of blows, Jake knew he was not equipped to deal with such an opponent. He immediately summoned his Bone Crushing Snowworm's Fang, which was already damaged, and met the Spartan's next strike with it.

Crack!

The impact and resulting shockwave was at least twice as powerful as the previous attack, but what really rattled Jake was the state of his saber. Clashing against the enemy spearhead resembling a 60cm long miniature saber, an indentation an inch and a half deep and ringed with multiple cracks ruined his weapon.

Then, in one swift and expert move, Deimos bashed him in the face with his shield, forcing him to pull his head back, and the edge of his spear slid down his saber toward his wrist. As it slid, shavings from his saber were chipped off his weapon, sending a shower of sparks flying.

Jake parried, and counterattacked as best he could for the next seven or eight swings, but Deimos had an impenetrable defense. Besides his physical stats, which were unexpectedly slightly higher than his own, the real challenge was his technique and the unfathomable aggressive energy permeating his weapons and every move he made.

Without his Myrtharian vision, he would have found nothing special about his opponent, but with his extraordinary senses he had a front row seat to a very different spectacle. Each time the flow of this spooky energy resonated with the Spartan's spear, the latter would be covered with a thin halo of dark red light of uncertain effect, but each time ending in his failure and the obligation to retreat on the defensive to avoid a deadly thrust.

On the ninth exchange, sensing that his blade was about to break, Jake released the two Heat Spells and the Radiation Spell contained in his Furnace Gauntlets. Two balls of plasma almost as hot as his Aether Sun Core and a laser of the same caliber as the one that atomized Nucnar were fired at the enemy.

As if he had anticipated them all along, the Spartan deflected them back at him with his shield. Jake split the two plasma balls in half with a claw, but the laser tore a hole in his forehead, vaporizing half his skull.

Thanks to Digitization, Jake did not die, but his Spirit Body was damaged. Ignoring the paralyzing pain, he activated his Oracle Shield just in time to take the monstrous barrage of blows from his opponent.

As his brain and skull regenerated, Jake was suddenly overcome with a foreboding feeling, a chill of fear creeping up his spine. No longer passively taking the blows with his Oracle Shield, he darted back and subconsciously protected his face with his claws and gauntlets. After a tiny resistance he felt his claws break, and the spear head cut through his gauntlets, then his hands. If he had not reacted in time, his head would have been pulverized.

Appalled, Jake took off without hesitation, releasing a massive telekinetic blast that threw Deimos backward and forced him back into a defensive posture. The Spartan gave him an indifferent look, and just as Jake thought he was safe in the air, a deafening blast shattered his skeleton, his squishy octopus-like frame crashing down powerlessly in front of Deimos and causing another earthquake.

Ozo had detonated himself.

Chapter 746: I'll Be Back

No sooner had the Lost Divinities Players rejoiced in his demise than a blurred figure shot out like a bolt of lightning from his crater, streaking across several hundred meters in a blink to slash out at Deimos' throat.

The Spartan blocked in time with his spear, but the fierce strike knocked him back seven or eight meters, leaving deep furrows in the ground. Feeling the tremor of the golden spear between his fingers, a stern frown grew on his face. This strength... was at least 50% higher than that of their last bout.

Raising his eyes to face his cockroach-like opponent, Deimos' frigid heart throbbed as he met his gaze, which carried an inexhaustible killing intent.

Jake's shattered skeleton had been forcibly restructured by sheer willpower, and he was only standing thanks to his telekinesis. Redistributing his Vitality Aether to the most severely damaged bones and organs, he stabilized his condition within seconds, the gashes and burns covering the surface of his skin healing in a heartbeat.

The Spartan was not fooled by his ferocious counterattack and lunged forward, shortening the distance between them with a single leap to thrust forth like the wind with his spear, intent on impaling him and taking advantage of his diminished state to deliver the final blow.

Although he was absolutely confident of his superiority and their imminent victory, this insignificant player from another faction had already surprised him far too much. His fighting power was increasing by the second and after being blasted by Ozo's explosion, his power had suddenly doubled as if he was on steroids.

This reasoning was only based on his instinct and not on any observation or certainty, but it was close enough to the truth. Ozo's explosion, like any explosion, had released an astronomical amount of heat.

The blast and the temperature generated was of such a magnitude that even Deimos did not think he could get away with such an explosion at close range.

It wasn't about Oracle Shield either. The Bubble Alien knew his strengths and weaknesses and rather than focusing on the Oracle Shield, which was of little value to an energy being like him, he had instead chosen to maximize his forte: His ability to explode without any lasting after-effects.

For this, he had opted for the exact opposite of the Oracle Shield as a special reward from his Second Ordeal: the Oracle Anti-Shield.

The mechanism was as follows. When two Oracle Shields clashed, it was simply a collision between two indestructible objects. One Oracle Shield could only destroy another by forcing the enemy's Oracle Device to overheat or by momentarily overpowering the Aether flow powering it.

The Oracle Anti-Shield worked differently. The clash between an Oracle Shield and an Oracle Anti-Shield was more like a collision between a particle of matter and antimatter. When the two shields met, they cancelled each other out.

By itself, the Oracle Anti-Shield had an extremely limited utility. It cost ten times as much to use as its defensive counterpart and was not very effective at stopping enemy attacks or regenerating. However, coming into contact with it was undeniably more dangerous. If someone had the unfortunate thought of attacking it directly with a weapon or their fist, the weapon and hand that touched the Anti-Shield would be instantly annihilated.

That's why, even with his Oracle Shield activated, Jake couldn't resist this explosion. The two shields of opposite nature had nullified each other and the blast of Ozo's explosion had then been able to hit his body with full force.

"He, he stole my energy!"

Suddenly Ozo's gut-wrenching, rage-filled shriek rang through the sky, sending tremors through the air that ravaged the ruined fortress they were fighting in. It had just recalled the body particles released in the explosion and found to its horror that its diameter had shrunk by almost 20%. Normally, even thirty consecutive explosions would not have weakened it that much.

Returning to his battle with Deimos, Jake smirked as he heard the Bubble Alien's furious wail. The Spartan inwardly cursed Ozo for its incompetence, but this incident gave him a new level of understanding of his opponent's abilities and he thrust even harder.

Jake sensed the sudden change in the Spartan's disposition and dodged the piercing spear thrust aimed at his heart with a twist of the hip, diverting its path with his palm, but expecting it Deimos drew a sword with his free left hand and delivered an upward slash aimed at his armpit to sever his arm. Jake caught the dark red halo radiating from the blade and had no choice but to parry with his crack-covered sword.

Crack!

He blocked successfully, but the sword strike landed squarely where the previous indentation was and his saber blade, though an Intermediate Artifact, snapped cleanly. With only the hilt in hand, he had no

choice but to tilt his head to the left in desperation to avoid the sword swing when the Spartan suddenly flicked his right hand holding his spear and slashed in toward his neck.

With his chest angled far to the right and his neck tilted even further in the opposite direction, Jake had no choice but to tuck his head and duck forward.

The spear swept past his head, cutting off some of his hair, but then Jake had to deal once again with the sword that his own saber had failed to block. This time it was a downward slanting slash coming from the left and to dodge it without falling, he threw the now useless saber handle at his opponent's face with no qualms. Deimos groaned, but he did not change his move. Instead, he lowered his head to block with his helmet and continued to swing his sword at Jake without looking.

This time, he was really in trouble. Ignoring his still brittle skeleton, Jake released the telekinetic control over it and coldly lifted both hands, one aiming at the sword, the other at the Spartan's chest.

As Deimos was about to behead him, his arm suddenly slowed as if he were facing an intangible force weighing several hundred tons. Then, this pressure also appeared against his chest and he felt his ribcage compress as during acceleration in an airplane takeoff.

Experienced, he unleashed his dark red aura without thinking twice to break Jake's influence on the space around him, but he was taken aback when instead the thrusting force only grew stronger. By the time he realized that Jake was not applying his telekinesis directly on him but on the air molecules in front of him, it was too late and his feet had already left the ground.

The Spartan's body was sent flying like a cannonball into his army's lines, knocking out dozens of his subordinates before stabilizing himself by planting his spear into the ground. This prodigious telekinetic thrust unfortunately came at a price, and Jake's poorly reshaped skeleton shattered again and he fell to his knees.

"I am heat!" Jake growled in a hoarse voice, his teeth clenched as he carved another rune into his flesh.

The drain of his spiritual energy instantly increased a hundredfold and his body blazed like a star. If the Lost Divinities Players had not repeatedly witnessed his abilities, they might have mistakenly believed that he had willingly immolated himself alive.

Sensing danger, Deimos became blurry and shot towards him, leaving a series of afterimages behind. The white Nosk, Khag' Dagmai, who had remained passive until now, also lunged at him, wielding a long light saber almost as tall as himself.

Inside the flames, Jake, who was still on his knees, spread his hands as best he could and brought Deimos and Khag' Dagmai's charge to a screeching halt with his telekinesis. The two mighty Players suddenly slowed down as if they had just hit a mountain, or rather become entangled in a giant spider's web, but it only lasted a moment.

The thousands of Players outside the anti-magic zone tacitly unleashed a barrage of spells on the motionless Jake, including the old white-haired ice expert. Missiles, bullets, spears, lightning, poison, acid, and stalactite steel and ice of all kinds bombarded him simultaneously, turning Jake's flaming body into a pincushion. A powerful ice spell hit him right after, promptly smothering the flames shooting out of his body.

To protect himself, he obviously activated his Oracle Shield, but this disruption inevitably affected his control over his telekinesis.

That's all Deimos and Khag' Dagmai needed to complete their offensive. The white light saber split Jake's body in two, leaving a trail of light in its wake, while the spear, covered in a huge dark red halo, skewered Jake from under his chin and emerged through the back of his skull.

Exchanging meaningful glances, the two leaders nodded, and preparing to strike again, boundless energy erupted forth from their beings. The Nosk's dendrites became brighter than a thousand stars as the Spartan disappeared under a monstrous dark red flame, which was quickly absorbed by his golden spear.

Jake could sense his end coming and without hesitation made the only choice he had left. He uncoupled his Spirit Body from his body and placed the latter in his Space Storage, putting all of his liquid alloy in it before fleeing back into his ghostly state.

In this etheric state, the anti-magic zone cast by Lost Divinities was powerless and he shot through the skies like a shooting star before stopping a few dozen kilometers away before looking back and declaring ominously,

"I concede you this victory, but I'll be back. Get ready for round two, because it will be your last."

With those defiant words, Jake summoned his body back and placed his soul back inside before flying off aimlessly into the Wilderness.

Long after he left, Deimos, Khag' Dagmai, Ozo and the other leaders continued to repeat his words as they stared at the spot where his figure had faded into the distance.

"Did we make a mistake by letting him escape?" The white Nosk asked himself gravely.

Deimos remained silent, inexpressive as always, but underneath that blank mask all the players present wondered what sinister thoughts he was really harboring.

For surely, seeing the devastated fortress around them, none of these Players felt that they had won a victory.

Chapter 747: All Alive

"That guy was a real piece of work." Khag' Dhagmai praised after a while, a combative glint gleaming in his eye.

"That Player has balls." Shamash smiled as he played with his dagger. The barbarian Azeus standing nearby seemed to approve.

"And he's handsome." The Ashun beauty chimed in with hearts in her eyes.

"Erk..."

Hearing the young woman's off-topic comment, many of Lost Divinities' male Players shot her a look oscillating between resentment and despair. The demon Belakor for one, who had served as her shield

against Jake, suddenly felt the intense urge to squash her under his huge clawed foot, but after staring at her wickedly for half a second, he looked away with a blush...

"Ahem!" Deimos coughed to regain their attention. Seeing his apathetic face, they knew he was serious. The more flawless his poker face was, the more important what he had to say was. Those who had misinterpreted his facial expressions were no longer there to talk about it or kept traumatic memories of the events.

After restoring order, the Spartan inquired in a commanding manner without looking at anyone,

"How is Nucnar?"

A Player who looked like a huge black minotaur of 4.5 meters with a thick woolly fleece like that of a bison lumbered out of the crowd before kneeling in front of Deimos and reporting loudly,

"This humble subordinate has found leader Nucnar."

Upon this crisp statement, the minotaur held out his cupped hands, which seemed to hold something inside. When he revealed their contents, a flicker of relief lit up the Spartan's face.

"You can rise."

Exposed for all to see, a mini rock human stood haggardly in the Minotaur's palm. His appearance was juvenile and his Aetheric and spiritual fluctuations were so faint that they were even weaker than those of a normal human. From his groggy expression, he didn't look like he knew who he was and he looked about as stupid as the rock he was.

Still, he was very much alive.

Alive after Jake had disintegrated his body and mind to a subatomic level. If Jake had been present, he would have been incredibly shocked. Such a resurrection was nothing short of a miracle to him.

Even more amazing, the mini rock human was recovering quickly. In the few seconds that had passed, he had grown almost an inch and his body shape looked less juvenile and a little better proportioned. His gaze was also a little less goofy.

With such low body, Aetheric and psychic stats, it was obviously not possible to explain this regeneration by conventional logic. This was the Lost Divinities members' secret.

Deimos then called out a series of names like a teacher calling the roll in a classroom, and other Players introduced the revived members he had just mentioned. These were all the intrepid officers and Players that Jake had nuked with his laser beams.

Among them was the kamikaze flame bird with the bloodline of a phoenix, which now looked like a hideous, hairless duckling. A Player had found it in the middle of a heap of ashes.

The alien swordsman in kimono had regenerated his body, but his appearance was slightly translucent as if his existence had lost its tangibility. However, his presence was quickly growing stronger and it wouldn't be long before he was back to his full strength.

All of the Players that Jake had defeated and thought he had killed for good were alive, but usually in worrisome states. Although they had all somehow managed to survive, many of them, like the kimono swordsman, had a translucent appearance and all displayed varying degrees of mental confusion.

In any case, Nucnar was by far the worst off and it would certainly take him weeks, if not months, to fully recover.

Having confirmed the condition of these Players, Deimos suddenly thought back to Jake's brazen intrusion and said with a frown,

"What is the current situation with our prisoners? Has anyone tried to break into our prison in the last few minutes?"

Belakor, who was in charge of the dungeons and everything to do with the torture and interrogation of their prisoners, crumbled as he heard the Spartan's question. How could he not have thought of something so obvious? Wasn't this Player here to free his comrades?

The demon accessed his bracelet to communicate with his underlings in charge of the jails, and his face turned ugly when he received no answer. Aghast, but decisive, he ordered a battalion of unharmed Players to follow him and with a flap of his wings he flew away, generating a powerful gust of wind that kicked up a cloud of dust and rubble in the ruined fortress.

"Take Shamash and Azeus with you." Khag' Dagmai growled.

Belakor flinched, but he nodded and the two warriors blurred as they dashed after him.

"I am also coming with them." Ozo announced in his whiny voice. From the dark colors of his bubble, he was in a gloomy and vengeful mood.

Less than 45 seconds later, a terrific explosion akin to a small atomic bomb resounded a few kilometers away from them, causing another earthquake and a series of rockslides.

A few moments later, Belakor and his assistants returned with a complicated, but not totally dispirited countenance.

"Well?"

"They managed to rescue Aisling, but the Mutant Carmin and the other people this Player wanted to save did not manage to escape. On the other hand, someone was also captured."

Azeus nonchalantly dumped a trussed and swollen body at the feet of Deimos and Khag' Dagmai and they were slightly surprised when they recognized him.

"Grimwald Dracul... wasn't he supposed to be imprisoned?" Ashun pouted in wonder.

"He was, but obviously he's not anymore. Jake or one of his companions must have freed him. Since Cipher was killed, it's something we could have anticipated. Until he recovers enough strength to find us, we won't know any more." The white Nosk gave the officers a disgruntled look.

"How are the jailers?" Deimos asked again, seeming more interested in the condition of his subordinates than that of the prisoner who had managed to escape.

Belakor, like any respectable demon, didn't care about the Players' lives, but he appreciated following a leader who cared about them. With a reassuring smile, he replied,

"We have 17 seriously injured, but they will recover. It's a good thing our dungeons are large and maze-like, or they would have been able to free everyone and the number of casualties would have been much higher."

"What do we do now?" Ozo asked in his childish voice. "Now that they've freed Aisling we have no leverage to negotiate with Haynt and the Mutants are likely to get their courage back."

Khag' Dagmai snorted at this remark and spat murderously,

"We wanted to conquer Laudarkvik with diplomacy to make it easier for us to take over, but if they don't want our kindness then all we have left is to take the city by force. Deimos?"

The Spartan remained silent for a few moments, then nodded.

"We'll go to plan B. As soon as the wounded have recovered we'll go on the attack. Try to capture Qewie to blackmail the Were-beings. If that fails, we'll have to assassinate Kenway. If Grimwald has been freed, the Dracul clan is no longer under our control either. Warn our allies of this change. On the other hand, I have a bad feeling about this Jake Wilderth. Before he gets the urge to come back for revenge, I want us to have full control of the city. Contact Vhoshaud again and promise him what he wants in exchange for his cooperation. I'm sure he knows more about this Jake and his comrades than we do and we'll need his Undeads."

"Why so cautious?" The Nosk questioned with a puzzled look. "He's only a mortal. Even if his Oracle Rank is equal to ours, he has no chance of winning if we decide to go all out. I'm sure you could have stopped him from running away if you wanted to. We have several soul experts among us, including Shamash."

"You're wrong. Just as we don't want to use all our cards, he didn't want to either. His Oracle Rank was not above mine. I suspect he was using a level 2 or higher Oracle Cloaking, but when I activated my own Oracle Skill Promotion I was able to predict his moves again. If I had actually gone for the kill, most of us would be dead.

" Permanently."

A shiver of dread shook the other Players as they were given this dire prediction. Deimos, was never wrong when it came to fighting.

After all, he was their God of War.

Hundreds of kilometers away in the Wilderness, Jake and two other people met at the base of a cliff. They hadn't set this rendezvous point before attacking the Lost Divinities' stronghold, but Wyatt had easily located Jake by following his Shadow guide.

Jake was already disappointed when he saw only two figures returning, but he was deeply surprised when he saw that the mighty Grimwald was no longer there, but that his daughter Aisling was replacing

him. From Wyatt's gloomy look, he didn't need to ask any questions to know that the rescue mission had failed.

"What do we do now?" Wyatt asked with a weary face, but one that was trembling with hatred. His repeated failures to protect and rescue his comrades had affected him deeply.

His strength was not the issue. Even Jake had to scramble away with his tail between his legs. Their frustration and lust for revenge burned with the same passion.

Jake's composure was better, but as he sensed Wyatt's painful anger, his own rage threatened to overwhelm him. After being outnumbered 3,000 to 1, he had finally realized something crucial:

There was strength in numbers.

And numbers, he had.

Chapter 748: Now We're Talking

"We get payback." Jake finally replied with bone-chilling detachment.

Aisling gulped as she felt the stifling aura welling up from him. In that moment, she almost forgot she was supposed to thank him for his help. The whole emotional roller coaster of meeting her father again, being freed, and then having her father recaptured in the process of rescuing her hadn't made things any better.

Right now, her mood and thoughts were a bit unsettled and messy. The strong, charismatic leader had been pushed into the background, momentarily replaced by a young woman as distraught and hopeless as a child lost in a supermarket.

Wyatt, by contrast, viewed Jake's words as the light at the end of the tunnel. His heart ached for vengeance and he was willing to stake his life to save Carmin and get revenge for his tortured comrades that Jake had previously freed.

Alas, he could not accompany him in this madness. His angst stemmed mostly from what he had recently learned in the Lost Divinities' dungeons, his cold rationality turning against him.

"I won't be able to fight with you this time." Wyatt shook his head, his face apologetic.

"Why is that?" Jake raised a displeased eyebrow. He didn't expect this guy to be such a scaredy-cat. "Isn't Carmin your childhood sweetheart?"

His chiding may have sounded blunt and scornful, but he could understand his reasons. With the exception of Carmin, who was still Lost Divinities' hostage, the other Vampires of his faction imprisoned in the Dracul clan's dungeon had been released. At least the ones that had not been killed before their capture. As a leader, he had to consider the opinions of the other members.

Jake didn't know much about this handsome Vampire who carried the burden and responsibility of several hundred Vampires, but from what little he'd gleaned from Carmine and the intelligence his faction had garnered, Wyatt had, despite his immense strength and noble origins, a refreshingly kind and anti-violent temperament in addition to being prudish, overly polite, and prim.

Hurting and killing, even when it meant drinking blood for nourishment, were for him vile and barbaric acts that went against his principles. To make an apt analogy, he was what one might call a vegan Vampire. His pursuit of virtue and benevolence to the point of denying his physiological urges was only possible because as a Vampire Progenitor he was not obligated to consume blood for sustenance.

His pursuit of goodness and his refusal to drink blood, nonetheless, had taken a heavy toll on his development. Despite his fantastic bloodline, he was much weaker than the other Vampire Progenitors of his age. His clan thought poorly of him, so he founded Pureblood with Carmin and a few other Vampire Nobles of his generation to prove his worth to them.

The raw power and savagery he had shown at the end of the Third Ordeal against Jake had only been possible because of the Corruption. His true nature was much gentler, and even to save Carmin he had not completely forgotten his morality.

Against enemies weaker than him it was inconsequential, but once one put unscrupulous opponents of his caliber in front of him, his character flaws became obvious.

On many levels, Wyatt was responsible for the capture of Carmin and his former companions, but also for the recapture of Grimwald by the enemy. The latter, realizing that Wyatt was not ready to perpetrate a massacre, had taken it upon himself to attract the attention of the enemy players with the unfortunate outcome that followed.

That was what Jake assumed he knew and understood about Wyatt, and he wasn't entirely wrong. However, the reality of the situation was a tad more complex.

As confident as Wyatt was in his personal strength, he at least had the foresight and composure to get his hands dirty when there was no other option. He may have been reluctant to use violence, but as a Vampire Progenitor he had a whole host of abilities that allowed him to hypnotize, manipulate, and even enslave the minds of his enemies. To find Carmin in those labyrinthine dungeons he had not hesitated to abuse his powers.

These Lost Divinities Players were undoubtedly very tough, but subduing one of them in order to interrogate him and search his soul was within his power. Having a good instinct in this respect, he had ambushed one of the hooded Player wearing a crude copper mask and searched his memory without the slightest qualms.

Although he had easily completed the first stage of his infiltration and obtained Aisling's location, but not Carmin's (the interrogated Player knew nothing about it), he had also learned the cruel truth about this mysterious faction.

As he sank his fangs into his captive's throat, Wyatt had already become aware that it would not be enough to kill him. At best, it would only incapacitate this Player for a few days.

He and Jake were not friends, not even allies, and they didn't trust each other. At best they were rivals, respecting each other. Nevertheless, his ethics prevented him from keeping such information to himself. If Jake tried to exact his revenge without being properly informed, all that awaited him was the extermination of him, his faction and possibly his entire home planet.

"Jake, before you decide to take your revenge, I need to tell you something about Lost Divinities." Wyatt stated gravely, ignoring Jake's condescending rebuke, "These Players, they are..."

Jake stopped him with a gesture.

"No need, I have a rough idea of what you intend to tell me." Jake laughed in dismay. "But, my decision won't change. I'll get my revenge or I'll go down trying. If I don't stand up to them in this Ordeal where it's nearly impossible to die, my rating will be affected. This deficit will impact my future Oracle Rank, my Oracle Skills' level and my power. If I or my companions die in the Fifth Ordeal because of my cowardice today, I will never be able to look them in the face again. Even if everything goes well, if I meet Lost Divinities again, my chances of resisting them will be even lower and I will be once again forced to back down. Because of my bloodline and my character, it is simply not possible.

"Your bloodline?" Wyatt muttered with confusion.

"You need blood and time to grow stronger, I need to win." Jake explained with a glittering cold light in his resolute eyes. Vampire remained lost in thought for a moment, before asking with a determined expression,

"If, and I mean if, I agree to fight by your side, how are you going to pull it off? In case you haven't noticed, these Players are unkillable. It won't be easy to defeat them, and even if you succeed, they will come back to life sooner or later. The Ordeal is still long..."

Wyatt had already made up his mind, and he had come to the decision not to reveal what he had discovered. Subconsciously, he feared that by sharing the revelations Jake would lose his courage. If he gave up, then his fragile resolve would instantly wither.

"Now we're talking." Jake smiled a toothy grin. "First of all..."

The two Players began to discuss their scheme for revenge in the presence of Aisling, who grew more and more shocked as she listened to them unravel their nefarious plan. A few minutes later, Wyatt bid them farewell and they set up a meeting point in the underground cavern where Jake had been training for the past three months.

Even if his enemies knew its location, without the power to pass through earth and metal, it was nigh impossible to reach. As for Aisling, she stayed with Jake.

The duo flew to Jake's hideout and the Dhampir Demon nearly died of a heart attack when he took her by the hand and shot down to the ground like an arrow. Although the expected gruesome death never came, when she opened her eyes a few moments later she was greeted by a blast of scorching, sulfurous, low-oxygen air that made her almost regret being still alive.

When she saw where she was, for a brief second she wondered if she was actually dead and sent to hell to pay for her crimes. It wasn't until she found Jake's relaxed, stoic company and heard Jeanie's playful hum that she finally managed to relax.

Aisling was not at all surprised to see Jake acting like a fish in water in this environment, but seeing the little fairy close her eyes and sigh with satisfaction as if this was the coziest place in the world threw her off greatly. Unlike her, there was nothing special about the Minmin's constitution and vitality.

And yet the facts were right before her eyes.

Once they arrived, Jake formally invited Aisling to join the Myrtharian Nerds. Because of the Oracle System's censorship, she hadn't understood all of his conversation with Wyatt, but she had figured out enough to know that these Guilties ran different factions and that accepting his invitation would mean pledging allegiance to him.

Deep down she was hesitant. She knew she owed much of her freedom to this Player, but if it meant forsaking the Mutants of Laudarkvik, then she couldn't bring herself to do it.

Jake could sense her reluctance and he clearly explained the pros and cons of joining his faction. Aisling finally learned why Jeanie was so at ease in this uninhabitable environment. As a gesture of good faith, he offered her enough liquid alloy to create another bracelet, thus officially making her a Player.

Or in her own words, a Guilty.

With her own Oracle Device, Aisling was no longer treated by the Oracle System as a native but as a full-fledged Player. Jake could now explain his plans, his objectives and his origins to her without being hindered by any censorship, unless the restriction came from the Oracle Rank.

After finally getting a full picture of the situation, Aisling stopped hesitating and accepted his invitation. With the recruitment done, Jake logged into the Myrtharian Nerds public chat and began to type a message...

Chapter 749: I Need Your Help

[Jake (Leader): I need your help. I'm near Laudarkvik, in Icarden province, Ret'Asi Empire. Those who can, please join me.]

That was Jake's style. Concise, straight to the point, but not forceful. If they didn't want to come, he wouldn't hold it against them, but with their Intelligence stats none of the Myrtharian Nerds were so naive as to think he wouldn't remember the names of the absentees.

Whether they thrived, stagnated, or floundered in the future might depend on whether they responded to his call or not.

At first, his message was like a pebble falling into a pond. Some of the not-so-busy members noticed, but it was mostly the regular Players, who were chatting about everything and anything.

Will had been so annoyed by this that he had long since added other communication rooms, including one for "Requests, Sharing Information", another for mundane discussions and other similar rooms depending on the level of authority and responsibility of the members. The main chat where Jake had dropped his message was reserved for important announcements from the officers and even they refrained from posting on it if it was not absolutely necessary.

[Xort: My lord, may I know the reason if it is not improper?]

The old goblin and his wife Niss may have come from a primitive world, but they quickly became accustomed to the Oracle's technology. Their IQs were initially a true liability, although they were quite shrewd for goblins or they wouldn't have lived this long. However, after three consecutive Ordeals they were now fairly smart.

To ask this question might seem disrespectful, but the old goblin knew his limits. To best help his savior, he needed to know his circumstances.

Jake's answer came quickly, and it was as short as ever.

[Jake: Another player faction that I need to teach a lesson to. It's either me or them.]

Gasp!

The Players who had been silently monitoring the conversation felt their hair stand on end as they read the text, their blood boiling with excitement. Their leader was promising to lead them to war! How glorious that would be!

[Nicolet: I'm in. Let's kill them all!]

The Player still harbored intense resentment towards the actions of Bhuzkok and Shaktilar's factions that had put them through hell in the past. He had graduated from his three Ordeals with an excellent rating and was now a skilled warrior. His buddies Diccon and Takoyaki would have loved to be there, but he could make them proud by helping their leader teach those bastards a lesson.

[Ingranus the Bold: Count me in too. My spear and my old bones will fight to the death.]

As expected from a former knight. After three Ordeals, the old spearman had grown noticeably younger, looking like a thirty-year-old at the prime of his life. Among the ordinary members of the Myrtharian Nerds, he was by far the strongest and wisest.

After these first two volunteers, a dozen or so responses quickly followed with a flock of players eager to prove their worth in battle and get in their leader's good graces. This did not last, though, and soon the chatroom fell silent. Most of the Players were either busy or in no hurry to make their decision.

After a while a timid message appeared in the thread.

[Secyone: I wish I could come but I can't fly. Can someone come and pick up my sons and I?]

[Peter Brady: Where are you? I just had a bounty put on my head by the King of Dagot and I have to flee the kingdom anyway. If you give me your location, I can pick you up.]

The former redheaded lawyer was unfamiliar with this character, and while any help was welcome, she couldn't help but express her reservations.

[Secyone: It's okay by me, but what did you do to get chased by an entire kingdom?]

[Peter Brady: I don't know. I found some kind of herb with a scratchy purple starfish-like flower in a park and I swear, with one sniff, it flipped my brain. The best shit I've ever tested. I gathered everything I could. How could I have guessed that this park was actually the palace gardens and that this grass was actually this kingdom's Godly Spirit? By the time I realized that those jerks were worshipping a fucking flower, it was too late...]

[Everyone: ...]

[Lord Phenix: This Overlord agrees to offer you his help. With my presence, you can consider your problem solved.]

[Everyone: ...]

Jake nearly choked on the orange turkey's condescending message. The real shocker was that he hadn't yet ended up roasted on a native's plate. Still, he couldn't demean him after he had so generously offered to help. Maybe he'd regret it when he got there.

[Jake: Sure... I can't wait to see it with my own eyes.]

After that, there was no response and Jake began to prepare for the inevitable confrontation. Meanwhile, in the Ret'Asi Empire and surrounding lands, this announcement went on to cause a stir on the continent.

On a calm sea stretching as far as the eye could see south of Quanoth, a massive three-masted galleon braved the waves, its red sails and skull-and-crossbones flag striking fear into the hearts of fishermen, merchants, and ocean creatures across the region. Huge oars swung powerfully back and forth in unison, propelling the buoyant fortress at a blistering pace despite the lack of wind.

On the ship, the atmosphere was quite different.

On board, hundreds of reconverted pirates were busy with their duties, a servile and submissive expression on their faces at all times. At the back of the ship, a bubbly young woman with pink hair tied back in a ponytail, and sporting a healthy tan, was barking orders while holding the helm. She had traded in her pretty, form-fitting armor for a white shirt with rolled-up sleeves and leather pants and boots.

Her looks could turn the head of any man and stimulate the perverted instincts of the most squeamish of eunuchs, but none of those notorious former pirates with criminal records would dare to fantasize about her giddy cleavage. The last one who tried to make a pass at her had ended up as fish poo ages ago...

This dreaded and dashing pirate captain was Enya.

At that moment, the door of the lower cabin on the deck burst open and another woman looking just like her, but with a slightly shorter haircut, came out with an overexcited expression on her face. Without a doubt, it could only be Esya.

With a somersault, she landed on the dock next to her sister and shouted,

"Jake left a message! He needs us!"

The ship's captain momentarily let go of the helm to consult their faction's chat and after finishing her reading a giggle escaped from her mouth, then she barked,

"It has been a pleasure to have you under my command, but alas, we have to part with you. If you want to keep fighting by my side, destination Laudarkvik. If not... I wish you all the best and hope you don't do any more stupid things. "

On these words, Esya and Enya undressed unashamedly in front of the horny pirate crowd to put on their armor, then by releasing a burst of scarlet flames took off into the skies, turning into a trail of reddish light heading towards Laudarkvik.

Still dumbfounded several minutes after their departure, these abandoned pirates quickly reverted to their former selves. A pirate was still a pirate.

"We're free!"

"We need a new captain!"

"And that can only be me, Bolat!"

"You? Peeh! And why not your sister while we're at it? At least she wouldn't have too much competition since she sucked the whole crew dry, bwahaha!"

BAM!

"I-I'll kill you!"

A full-blown fight soon broke out, repainting the ship's deck with blood, but it was already no longer the two sisters' concern. It wasn't until long after the battle was over that the survivors realized that all the treasure they had amassed over the past three months was gone from the hold.

Empire of Ret'Asi, Gondonete Castle.

A long siege had just ended. On the southern rampart, a beautiful woman in bronze armor with olive skin and long golden hair and irises was admiring her new army. Several hundred battle-hardened knights in shining armor stood fearlessly alongside several thousand lizard men with a pair of membranous wings on their backs: Dragonids.

Lucia, summoned here with the identity of a Knight Captain, had defeated the invasion and gained control of the stronghold after the death of her general. At this point, she too received notification of Jake's message. After reading it, her expression changed and a fierce glint flickered in her eyes.

"My friends... another war awaits me. It has been an honor to fight alongside you."

She bowed to them, then left with red eyes, leaving the two reconciled armies stunned. All those familiar faces, those brothers in arms she had fought with, she would probably never see them again.

As she traveled down the path, she heard a deafening commotion and the earth shook slightly beneath her feet. Turning around, she saw several hundred knights mounted on their noble steeds and several thousand Dragonids with resolute expressions. She burst out laughing, a happy tear rolling down her cheek.

Jake would not be disappointed with her performance.

In a desolate jungle, a black oriental dragon nearly half a kilometer long lay lacerated on a half-destroyed mountain. Its breathing was labored, and its huge yellow eyes with slit pupils glared helplessly at a pale, black-haired young man with a dark blade in his hand.

"Will you submit?" Sigmar asked gently as he pointed his sword at the creature.

The staring duel lasted an instant, but eventually the invincible dragon surrendered. The former Fluid Grandmaster had just signed a Pet Contract with the creature when he received a notification. Reading the message, he mumbled thoughtfully,

"I've been in this faction for a while and haven't contributed much. Well, I owe him that much. Let's see how he does after all this time..."

A man and a dragon flew off together, leaving the lawless, ruleless Wilderness to head for a dying civilization.

Chapter 750: The Missing Answer

Throughout the continent the same script was playing out over and over again.

Deep in the heart of the forgotten Drutsia Tundra, northwest of Quanoth, a lava lake about 100 meters wide and 30 meters deep was spewing out suffocating sulfur fumes. The blizzard raging over the area was unable to freeze this anomaly.

Suddenly, the magma in the lake began to swell, bulging as if some abysmal monstrosity were trying to escape. An explosion resounded, followed by a geyser of lava as high as a skyscraper. As the lava poured back down, the cooled fragments were blown away by the icy winds, revealing a dark and imposing figure in the center of the former lake.

This dark-skinned human was as muscular as he was intimidating, and even sitting cross-legged he was as tall as an elephant. Totally naked, the translucent fangs of his lower jaw were so massive that they jutted out of his mouth like a pair of short tusks, giving him a primitive look and a crude elocution. His claws were like red-hot daggers and with each exhale a cloud of flames would shoot out of his nose, putting the finishing touches to this scary picture.

In front of him, a huge sword radiating an unbearable heat at the origin of this lava lake was stabbed deep into the cracked rock. With a 1.4m handle and a 4.5 meter long blade, 45 centimeters wide and 16cm thick at its thickest part, this weapon was just like its holder: An abomination reeking of brutality.

Opening his eyes with a sleepy face, Gerulf scratched his head in a daze, then looking for his sword, a stupid smile spread on his face when he finally found it. After standing up and causing the earth to shake, he retrieved his sword and set off, muttering in a sleepy voice,

" Above all, not confuse the Shadowguide with one of these snow trolls or I might get lost again... "

There was only Gerulf to make such an error in judgment.

In Skalurvi, a volcanic archipelago region in the far south of Quanoth, a man with a physique just as oversized as Gerulf's was sleeping curled up in a ball in a huge glacier filling the crater of the only dormant volcano in this barren land.

A notification from his bracelet rang in his mind and he opened his eyes. His muscles tensed and the enormous glacier, almost a kilometer thick, suddenly softened and he swam to its surface.

Rogen, the leader of the Throsgenians, was also planning to join in the fun.

Closer to Laudarkvik, in the neighboring province, a young woman with long silky blue hair glistening like seaweed and eyes as clear as water commanded a group of people, who dressed and looked different, but had in common the same focused forehead.

From this group was gushing out a fantastic spiritual energy and they were currently using it to lift a boulder as heavy as a small mountain that had recently ravaged the city they had settled in. Two days prior, a Grog, a mountain titan revered as a local deity, had suddenly flipped out, destroying the valley and surrounding mountains where it had lain dormant for nearly a thousand years before stomping off northward, causing havoc and desolation in its wake with countless earthquakes.

Without Asfrid and her Eltarian friends, the city would have been wiped out. In exchange for generous rewards, the group of Players agreed to help rebuild the city when they all received a notification from their wristbands at the same time. After seeing the message, their eyes simultaneously locked on the seaweed-haired young woman as they awaited her decision.

Inexpressive, she telepathically relayed her answer and the tight-knit group headed west with nary a word once Asfrid returned their rewards to the stumped city marquis.

By a river, in a badly damaged crystal city, thousands of water elves danced and sang in celebration of their victory over the wood elves controlling the vast surrounding forests. Year after year, their situation had deteriorated until the appearance of a certain Guilty, who was also a Water Elf like them.

Vincent Wilderth was currently sitting with a crestfallen and self-conscious face on a crystal throne, a pretty elf wearing a tiara sitting on each of his laps with their arms entwined around his neck. The two local princesses were gazing adoringly at him, and Vincent just like the two women wore an identical crystal ring on his right ring finger much to his chagrin.

Right next to them, a gray-haired elf still handsome and bearing a resemblance to the two princesses was staring at them encouragingly, along with a score of menacing guards, as if he wanted to make sure the groom wouldn't try to sneak away.

Vincent only had to nod his head to move on to the culminating stage of their arranged marriage: the honeymoon. Normally, a single young man like him with a high sex drive would have been overexcited at the prospect of the upcoming threesome, but these elves had a most wanton custom: the wedding had to be consummated in "public" and it was not uncommon for the parents and relatives of the bride and groom to partake in this most crucial hour of debauchery.

When Vincent got an unexpected notification from his bracelet, the overwhelming feeling of salvation he got from it filled him with so much hope and joy that he clung to it like a drowning man fallen overboard in a storm.

After many explanations and pleas, the old elf was full of regrets, but agreed to let him go... Nah, as if it was possible!

Hence, Vincent, his two wives, their father and all their people set off towards Laudarkvik, determined to defend the cousin of their future king...

This kind of scene was recurring in various parts of Quanoth, and most of them, regardless of their circumstances, readily gave up the missions, titles and projects they had undertaken to answer their leader's call. Without this incident, Jake would never have known the importance and prestige he held in the hearts of the other members.

Sadly, this was not so for all of them. Sometimes, even when the mind was willing, the local context and the realities of life simply prevented these players from leaving.

In a luxuriously furnished room with stone walls and a king-size bed large enough to fit five people, one of these Myrtharian Nerds was experiencing this very problem.

The King of Beskyr, Ulfar, jolted upon receiving the notification, but after reading the message he let out a dejected sigh as he slumped back into his seat, his hands nestled comfortably behind his head.

"Damn it, this boring Divine Academy is driving me crazy! It's worse than a prison..."

For a second he considered escaping, but as he remembered what happened last time a chill of utter fear made his whole body shiver. Being teleported from the beginning of the Ordeal into the Divine Academy was a blessing, but the Oracle was fair. To get here so early thanks to his absurd luck was to his credit, but then he had to prove that he deserved to be here.

In reality, the Divine Academy was not much safer than the outside and the Ordeal Missions he had received were insanely hard to complete.

Therefore, after reading Jake's call to battle, he had no choice but to politely decline the offer. In exchange, he ordered all the other Beskyrians who were not stuck in the Divine Academy with him to assist him as best they could. As their former king, he still enjoyed tremendous authority among his people.

Tim Paradis was in a similar predicament, but unlike Ulfar he dreamed of being imprisoned in one of the Divine Academy's luxury suites. Having appeared in Celestial City, his luck had backfired.

Here, the competition was inhumanly tough and the indestructible city had turned into a battle royale where thousands of factions were fighting to secure a piece of land. Because there was still time before the destruction of Quanoth, the factions fighting each other were mainly Drurs, the local aliens ruling the Shatug Empire, as well as lone adventurers and monsters who had arrived here early.

What they all had in common was their immense power. This was the minimum required to have any hope of surviving here for more than a few hours. To survive until now, Tim was doing pretty well...

Actually, it was taking all his energy and even if he managed to get out of the Celestial City, he would then have to cross the Shatug Empire under martial law, then the vast Maze of Mirik swarming with Shron bugs.

Crawling through the city's sewers, the boy covered in filth, feces and other questionable fluids couldn't help but burst into tears as he read the message.

[Lily: My dad and I are coming!]

'Fuck! Even Lily will be there with Jake.'

At that moment, Tim wiped away his tears and was momentarily tempted to rush south no matter what, before he came to his senses and remembered that he had no chance of succeeding.

'I miss her...'

Of course, he couldn't show this vulnerable and pitiful image of himself and he summarily replied,

[Tim: I won't be able to come. The Shatug Empire's surveillance is too strict. -_-']

[Lily: Oh no! Don't worry, we'll fight twice as hard to make up for your absence. :P]

[Tim: You mean four times. I'm strong you know. ^^]

At least he hadn't forgotten how to flirt.

Similar apologetic messages were gradually posted after Ulfar's and Tim's reluctant refusals, but their number did not exceed a few dozen. Yet, whatever their reasons for declining, all took the time to respond except for one person:

Will Hopkins.