

Oracle 751

Chapter 751: Blessing In Disguise?

No matter how diligently Jake was preparing for the upcoming battle, splitting a strand of his consciousness to keep an eye on his faction's server wasn't that hard. Receiving all these enthusiastic responses, his reclusive soul was greatly taken aback and he came to the realization that he was in fact less alone than he thought. Just as the other members relied on him, he could also rely on them.

In making this request, with his distrustful and individualistic nature, he had expected a few dozen positive responses, at best a few hundred, but not much more. Seeing that practically every Myrtharian Nerd was about to join him, he could only be delighted and sincerely grateful.

Even the few negative replies were justified by their situation and geographical position and whether these Players were honest or not their excuses seemed genuine.

While at first he didn't expect much, as he watched one Player after another respond, he found himself becoming more demanding, his attention focusing more on those who didn't respond. When at dusk he noticed that all but one person had responded, his good mood instantly soured.

'Will, with everything that's been going on lately I'd forgotten that I wanted to have a serious talk with you, but it seems I wasn't imagining things.' Jake concluded grimly to himself.

To avoid misjudging him, Jake still gave him the benefit of the doubt, but deep down he was starting to feel dissatisfied with his attitude. Will was only the Vice-Leader, but he acted as if he owned the faction, using Jake as a deterrent presence he was not accountable to.

Although Jake originally tacitly approved of his methods, he had made it clear from the start that all important decisions and reports had to go through him or at least be relayed back. While he normally wouldn't have held it against Will for not responding, the fact that he was the only one who didn't give a reply only highlighted the faults in his conduct that Jake already blamed him for.

'I hope he has a good excuse...' Jake muttered before refocusing on the task at hand.

Currently, his current condition was a bit complicated and he didn't know how to tackle the issue. After returning to his previous hideout with Aisling and Jeanie, the first thing he had wanted to do was obviously heal his wounds.

On the surface, his body had long since regenerated and he had no visible injuries. Due to the fact that he had been nearly disintegrated and had lost astronomical amounts of blood, his biomass had clearly decreased and his bloodline had somewhat regressed in some aspects.

Only in some aspects and that was the problem. If Jake didn't feel so weak and sluggish compared to his optimal state, he would have been inclined to say that he was on the verge of a breakthrough. It was a gut feeling that came from deep inside him and he could feel viscerally that his bloodline was suffering from an inexplicable blockage preventing him from evolving.

The sensation was unnerving, almost painful, as if his body was overflowing with energy but had no idea what to do with it. After having suffered the blast of Ozo's explosion, he had taken a lot of damage but he had also voraciously devoured as much heat and radiation as he could.

In order to rebuild itself after each explosion, all Bubble Aliens would imprint each particle of their being with a spirit mark containing a trace of their consciousness that was a bit special, having a will of its own but still connected to the main Bubble Alien.

Taking the concept even further, the Bubble Aliens could even merge with each other to form a super entity, their consciousnesses merging to form one unified mind. That was why Ozo had reacted so badly when Jake had forcibly absorbed some of the blast energy.

In addition to digesting a copious dose of radiation and heat, Jake had also ingested a significant amount of spiritual energy. This unintentional feat plus the other battle achievements under his belt had allowed him to rack up 3 Spirit Body levels in a matter of minutes, allowing his Spirit Body to reach level 37.

This may not seem like much compared to the natives, but with each subsequent Spirit Body level being harder to attain than the one before, his Soul had actually strengthened by over 50%. If he hadn't spent so much mental power he would have felt the difference right away.

It was partly for this reason that his threat and fighting prowess had only increased during the battle, arousing Deimos' suspicions. The other reason was obviously his Aether and Soul Tribute skill. In just those few minutes of battle, his Aether stats had uniformly increased by about 10%.

All in all, Jake had definitely gotten stronger even though he had lost a significant amount of his biomass and Bloodline Aether. So why was he feeling so bursting with energy and convinced that his Bloodline was about to advance to the next level?

He couldn't explain it to himself. But with each passing minute, his body was growing more and more uncomfortable. At first he didn't worry too much about it, blaming it on fatigue and injuries from the fight. Except that almost six hours had elapsed since this clash of titans and Jake should have long since recovered.

"Is it because my Aether Sun Core isn't giving me enough energy?" Jake wondered doubtfully as he conjured it in the palm of his hand.

The once dazzling sun was now barely glowing, a faint red light radiating from its dim surface. This degree of heat and radiation was so insignificant to Jake that it almost seemed cold.

Seeing the state of his Aether Sun Core, Jake stowed it away with a sigh,

'This battle of egos has really cost me dearly. Distracting them for so long and they still failed to save Carmin and the others. At least they freed Aisling. I didn't do that for nothing...'

It was a meager consolation, but that was the plan they had agreed upon. Wyatt and Grimwald could have created a diversion instead, but those were seasoned Players in front of them, not fools. They knew how to counter Vampires, and one radioactive blast from Ozo would have surely annihilated them in a heartbeat.

Jake was neither invincible nor omnipotent, but unlike them he had no weaknesses. He was the only viable choice.

All of a sudden, a sharp pain swept through his body, his muscles twitching so much that he nearly convulsed on the floor. After the seizure, Jake was drenched in sweat and as he caught his breath, he mentally communicated with his Oracle AI with obvious anxiety on his face,

"Xi, do you have any idea what's happening to me? My Bloodline looks both stronger and weaker than before. My biomass has decreased and so have my body stats, but that doesn't explain this increasing pain. What's happening to me?"

Xi's hologram appeared in front of him and at each of her appearances Jake could not help but marvel, his mind blanking out of all thoughts. For a moment, he stared at the mesmerizing beauty with a dumbstruck look on his face, before another bout of pain brought him back to reality.

"Jake, are you okay?!" The young woman freaked out as she saw him collapse again, her red and black eyes riddled with worry.

As quickly as she could, she searched through the Oracle System archives she had access to find the cause of his predicament, but Jake's bloodline was a new hybrid bloodline, so documentation on the matter was extremely limited. To make things worse, everything about System A16 was classified and that included data about the Myrmidians, Kyntharians, Eltarians and Beskyrians that made up his bloodline.

After skimming through thousands of documents, Xi finally found a clue when she investigated a species with similar abilities and growth processes to the Kyntharians.

"I think I've got something." She said excitedly as Jake panted like a dog after his third seizure.

He groaned painfully in response.

"Tell me everything. Quick!" Jake urged her as he felt a fourth seizure brewing even worse than the previous ones.

Aware that the situation was urgent she downloaded the information straight into his mind and Jake closed his eyes to digest the flood of data. After reading it all, he laughed darkly, completely ignoring the painful convulsions of the fourth seizure. When it was over, he complained tiredly,

"The answer was so simple, but I had to come close to death to figure out what I was doing wrong."

Xi smiled wily, apologizing over and over for not identifying the problem earlier. As her hologram faded, her soft voice echoed in her mind,

[Your hunch was right. Your Bloodline has both progressed and regressed. Your Myrtharian Bloodline has four attributes, Heat, Radiation, Earth and Metal. You have accumulated far too much Heat and Radiation over the past fifteen months and these two attributes have long since reached the threshold required for the next level. Conversely, your Earth and Metal attributes are behind. Although you did not forget to bury yourself in the ground during your training last year, and thus your biomass increased accordingly as you absorbed these nutrients, this was not the case during the last three months as you were training your Soul at the same time.

[Lastly, as when your Myrtharian bloodline evolved into a Silver Myrtharian bloodline after assimilating the Silver Soul Alloy, we should have realized that it had a strong potential to evolve based on the type

of soil and metal ingested. We made the mistake of treating these materials as fuel like heat and light, when in fact you do need them to evolve.

[If my hypothesis is correct, your Grade 9 bloodline that is supposed to plateau at level 4 may actually have the potential to reach Grade 10 or even higher.]

Chapter 752: A Crunchy Meal

Jake's heart skipped a beat when he heard Xi's confirmation. The thought had crossed his mind as well, but it was different when an AI connected to a near omniscient Oracle System corroborated his thought.

"Then what do I do now? Do I bury myself in the ground like before? Or do I eat rocks until I'm full?" Jake suggested with a pensive frown.

He wasn't kidding. Covering himself in dirt was how his body had absorbed all those minerals so far. Although he could chew and digest stone, it had never crossed his mind. After testing it once to make sure he could do it, he never tried it again.

After all, eating rocks was no fun, even if one enjoyed crunchy food.

His consumption of radioactive elements such as plutonium or enriched uranium was the exception, but these were wholly different in that he only needed a very small amount to derive very long-term benefits.

The downside, and Jake had only just realized it, was that it had undoubtedly contributed to the imbalance between his attributes in favor of radiation.

Seeing his face distort from the pain with the coming of the next seizure, Xi didn't dare dither any longer and offered him a serious solution right away.

[Both of the methods you proposed are viable, but to speed up the process you'll still need heat and light.] She reminded him first that like a plant, his Myrtharian Bloodline needed soil and sunlight, and that if he lacked either, his progress would be greatly reduced.

[I'll be honest with you.] She went on to say in a solemn voice. [I don't think ordinary soil like the one under your feet will do the trick. At least not if you want to go beyond your limits and advance the Grade of your bloodline again. If you just ingest tons of common stones and metal, you will recover the lost biomass and your bloodline imbalance will be rectified sooner or later, but once you reach level 4 you will reach your limits. To put it mildly, if you make this choice you will become like those Space Digestors that look like garbage because they have only gathered Aether to evolve due to the lack of available prey.]

Jake nodded with a serious face. His bloodline's Grade could evolve by assimilating rare materials like Silver Soul Alloy, but there was a good reason why it was categorized as Grade 9 and not Grade 10. It was not an innate ability.

In System A16, from where the Kintharians originated, these aliens were born, lived and died on the same planet. Their evolutionary potential was determined by the composition of their planet's soil and the proximity and properties of their solar system's star.

This constraint actually applied to the vast majority of species. This was true for Vampires who could only metabolize the blood of their own pre-vampire species, but also for humans who could only eat very specific organic foods such as vegetables and meat, and only those that their digestive system was adapted to.

Nonetheless, if an ordinary Vampire drank the blood of an exceptional human with godlike power but with perfectly neutral and readily assimilable attributes, then he could undoubtedly transcend his limitations. If such an improbable situation occurred, an ordinary Vampire could very well surpass the Vampire Progenitor who bit him in the first place.

In fact, this applied to humans as well. An ordinary human with a Grade 0 bloodline could very well by fluke or twist of fate taste the meat of a billion year old divine bull and suddenly gain the strength of a near god.

To put it plainly, what Xi was trying to convey to him was that his bloodline was limited by his Grade. The only difference from humans and Vampires was that his diet was much more varied and lenient.

To maximize the chances of breaking his Bloodline's shackles, Jake would have to consume unique items that fit into his diet. It could be food, drink, a special rock or some type of flame. The possibilities were almost endless and he was spoiled for choice.

"I know what I need to do now, but it won't be easy to find what I need." Jake exhaled breathlessly on all fours, his muscles shaking with fatigue and dripping with sweat after the seizure ended.

Jake took a look at his Space Storage, then the Faction Vault, and immediately regretted not buying or storing special materials when he had the chance. In retrospect, Elduin and Bhammod's mithril armor and weapons might have been appropriate for a first test.

"Quanoth has rare metals like mithril, adamantium, and orichalcum." Jake listed as he stood up. "Most of the A-rank and above adventurers we came across had at least one piece of mithril equipment. It should be possible to get our hands on it legally."

[Too bad Laudarkvik is practically under Lost Divinities' control. They have pawns in every faction of the city, and the Shapeshifters and Demons are all under their control. Only Xaverie, Aisling's mother, remains a question mark, but with her demonic nature I doubt she is unaware of her daughter's capture. The fact that she was not tortured, unlike the other prisoners, is the most compelling evidence of this.]

"How do you know the other prisoners were tortured?" Jake raised his eyebrows in suspicion.

Xi didn't see any point in keeping the truth from him.

[Wyatt didn't tell you everything so you wouldn't be discouraged, but his Oracle AI is much more talkative.]

Jake's eyes narrowed slightly in wonder.

"Doesn't that go against his host's interests?" He asked warily. "Does this mean you can defy my orders at any time if you think I'm wrong?"

[...]

"No need to answer. I'm not accusing you." Jake reassured her, massaging his temples to help himself think.

Their consciences were linked and if she really tried such trickery he would soon realize it. Instead of worrying about what she might be doing behind his back, he would rather focus on the benefits he could reap from this Oracle AI's loquacity.

"What else did Wyatt's Oracle AI say?"

Sensing that he wasn't angry, Xi hurriedly spilled out everything with as much exactitude as possible, leaving out no detail,

[Carmin is probably fine, but Wyatt and Grimwald found several badly tortured but still alive Mutants in those dungeons. In order not to push Aisling into doing something stupid, like committing suicide, the guards were ordered to keep the Mutant captives alive to serve as hostages. Now that Aisling has been set free again, they might choose to sacrifice them.]

"That means we won't be able to count on many people in Laudarkvik. Are there any decent Mutants left willing to fight with us?" Jake inquired pessimistically.

[I don't know, but it's best to assume not.]

"In that case, let's take a trip to Laudarkvik. It will be a good opportunity to find out what the situation is like there and see if we can buy rare materials.

[If we can't find anything, Jake, you can also create these magic metals yourself. You are an Aetherist now. Your only sky is your imagination."

Jake felt his heart grow warm as he heard this rare encouragement. Smiling, he said,

"If nothing works, I'll try this solution."

Having decided on their plan for the next few hours, Jake then forced himself to gobble down as many rocks and metal as he could for the first time in his life. As they watched him listlessly chew and swallow rocks and iron nuggets as big as his head, Jeanie and Aisling's eyes nearly rolled out of their sockets.

Jake was tempted to give up several times, but the prospect of another bout of pain gave him the motivation he needed to finish his meal. When his belly was so bloated he could barely breathe, and almost three tons heavier, Jake finally stopped eating.

With all the stones in his stomach, Jake would be lying if he said he felt good. He felt like a python after eating a sheep whole. Sure, his digestive system could melt and purify these materials by generating an extreme temperature, but without a push it would take many hours.

Looking at his Aether Sun Core's dim glow, Jake sighed in defeat, but fortunately there was still the magma chamber where he stood. Without worrying about the stares of the two dumbstruck women, he dove into the lava.

Alas, he soon realized that the effectiveness of this bath was too limited. A year ago, this lava would surely have been enough to stimulate his bloodline, but today this magma felt barely warmer than a

turned-off radiator. It wasn't totally useless, but compared to the amount of earth and metal he had just ingested it was negligible.

The lava itself held enough energy. If the temperature was inadequate, he could simply extract the thermal energy from more magma. The limiting factor this time, and it was more obvious now that he was aware of the problem, was the lack of radiation. To solve the issue, he cast an Aether Spell to produce sunlight and swallowed another plutonium pill and the charm finally worked.

With his meal digested, Jake felt instantly better and he understood that the looming crisis had been temporarily averted.

He also knew now, however, that he needed a new Aether Sun Core as well.

Chapter 753: Empty Room

"W-What?! You're going back to Laudarkvik?!" Aisling stammered, her eyes as wide as saucers.

"I need some materials I can't find here." Jake vaguely explained out of laziness to elaborate.

"What do you need?"

Jake opened his mouth at first to tell her that he would figure it out, but changed his mind when he recalled that she knew the inner workings of the city far better than he did.

"I need any special materials of the earth, metal, fire, light or spirit element." So he revealed, relying heavily on the concept of elements to make his point. "Otherwise, I am interested in any treasure, herb, potion or food that can make me stronger.

On Quanoth, where Mana was the predominant energy system, the notion of affinity and elemental mana particles was widespread and even children knew what it meant.

Aisling quirked her eyebrows in surprise after listening to his strange request. This Guilty had quite an appetite. She didn't answer him right away, weighing the pros and cons of what to do. Eventually, she let go and suggested an unexpected alternative,

"What you are looking for can be found in Laudarkvik, but these are resources controlled by the 9 Factions. With the escalation of hostilities over the past few months, Laudarkvik is close to civil war and all the stores selling these resources have been closed and without a permit you won't get far."

Jake's heart sank as he learned just how bad the situation had gotten in the last few months. He hadn't realized it when he sneaked into the Draculs' HQ, but Qewie's ambush should have tipped him off. On the surface, the city seemed peaceful, but most of the population had already chosen sides or would soon be forced to make a choice, willingly or not.

"You wouldn't be telling me this so quietly if you didn't have solutions to offer." Jake suddenly remarked as he sensed the young woman's slight nervousness.

"That's right. I do have a proposal. After my capture and that of the other officers, my Mutant faction has become worthless, but as long as Haynt and the coalition formed by Duke Gole are still standing I doubt they will have the guts to push their luck. If we go back to the Mutant HQ, I'll give you full access

to our vault. We may be the poorest of the 9 Factions, but after all these years we've amassed quite a bit of wealth..."

It was now Jake's turn to be silent. In life, when a gift seemed too good to be true it often was.

"Going back to the Mutant HQ could be dangerous... What do you want in return?" Jake asked.

Aisling visibly relaxed when she saw that he didn't immediately refuse. With a rosy face, she looked him straight in the eye and said in one breath without catching her breath,

"My previous offer still stands, but this time it's not a vice-leader position I'm offering you, but my whole body and soul. You can do whatever you want with me and what belongs to me and that includes what's left of the Mutant faction. I have only one condition: You must also accept my little sister into your faction and if possible save my father."

The Dhampir Demon was bright red after offering her body to a man she barely knew, but Jake ignored her blush to properly consider her offer. In truth, Aisling was very clear on her situation and considering her own interests, she wouldn't lose much in the process.

The Mutant faction was worth little or nothing. The 26 elite Mutants, including the three Vice-leaders serving as the backbone of her faction, were either dead or captured by enemy factions like the Demons or Lost Divinities. All the Mutants who were able to resist had fought to the bitter end to repel the invaders and had paid for their courage with their lives. Now, apart from a few adventurers on missions and some retired veterans, there were only cowards and non-combatants left.

By handing him the leader position, Aisling wasn't doing him any favors at all. Especially knowing that there were only 10,000 places available in the Celestial City and that the Mutant district had at least a hundred thousand civilians. Aware that she couldn't save them all, she had made peace with herself and given up this vain hope to devote herself to the only person who was truly dear to her: her sister.

The rest didn't matter. If her father hadn't sacrificed himself to try to save her she would probably never have included his name in her terms.

In the end, Jake accepted her pledge of allegiance wholeheartedly and they set out for Laudarkvik. Aisling with her level 82 and hybrid bloodline was much stronger than Carmin and the duo had no trouble sneaking into the city. By now, the former Mutant leader didn't have the energy to be surprised, and Jake's magic tricks left her unimpressed.

The city had indeed changed a lot in a short time and the inhabitants' discontent was growing louder. The miasma of negative thoughts formed a black cloud over the city for those who could see them, while crime had skyrocketed in recent weeks.

The number of disappearances, kidnappings, and deaths by bloodletting or cannibalism was only increasing and at this rate there would soon not be enough people in the Slums to feed the Vampires, Were-beings, and Demons enjoying themselves.

The Thrajah clan no longer shied away from feeding in the open. All the Were-beings clans that had joined the Demons had no restraint either, treating the Outer City as their private hunting ground. In the slums' filthy streets, splashes of dried blood, rotting human bones and other gruesome scenes were commonplace, and the residents lived in terror of their impending death, slowly sinking into madness.

If before the commoners of the city were treated like milking cows that were kept for as long as possible to maximize their milk supply, now they were just cattle waiting for slaughter. The ghosts and specters who once obeyed the Astral had betrayed Haynt to serve the demons, and there was nothing to keep them from tormenting the population to feed off their desperation.

At this rate, even if a civil war did not break out, Laudarkvik would still go under.

Before reaching the Mutant HQ at the peak of Laudarkvik, they made a stop at the fourth plateau where the Mutant district and its office were located. Aisling immediately broke down in tears when she saw the state of her former territory.

Apart from rats and crows, there was not a living soul here. There was blood and corpses everywhere, and the colorful buildings and villas lining the roads had long since been looted if not outright destroyed. At the end of the main road, a once stately five-story building had been replaced by a mountain of rubble.

Aisling fell to her knees, petrified with horror and despair, as she stopped in front of a small, lifeless body crushed by a rock the size of a pickup truck. Jake scanned the corpse with his mental sense and reassured her in a soft voice,

"She's not your sister."

"No... But I knew her too. Her name was Cecil and she was Norton's granddaughter."

Jake remembered the grizzled Mutant who had led their rescue mission to Lodunvals. He, too, had died in a cruel way. Now even his innocent granddaughter had passed away.

Scanning the rest of the wreckage, he found several corpses with similar features, all of which had been tortured to death or worse, especially the good-looking men and women. This was probably not Lost Divinities' style, but rather the handiwork of Demons or Vampires from the Thrajah clan.

"At least she died on the spot." Jake consoled her earnestly. It wasn't until she saw the other bodies that Aisling realized what he was referring to.

Her face turned livid as she recognized each of his bodies and she began to shake so badly that he thought she too was about to have a seizure. Fortunately, this didn't happen and after a while, all emotion left her face, leaving only a bone-chilling coldness.

"I guess it's over for the treasure?" Jake quipped as he reached the spot Aisling had indicated.

The secret entrance to the underground staircase leading to the vault had been exposed and the orichalcum door protecting its treasures had been opened. Perhaps because it was too heavy, but the raiders had left it where it was after robbing everything.

However, as he examined the empty room and the orichalcum door left intact, Jake couldn't help but voice his doubts.

"It wasn't the Demons who stole the treasure." He swore as he inspected the strange lock made up of multiple cogs, but most importantly the same magical optical security scanner found in the Draculs' mansion. "And there's no blood here either. If this isn't a setup then the treasure was removed before the district was attacked. Any idea who it might be?"

Aisling fell silent for a moment, then violently punched the wall to her right, a 40 centimeter crater denting the stone wall where her fist had landed.

"Besides me, only Rifalen was allowed to go here." She gritted her teeth so hard Jake could hear them grind. "I didn't see his body among the casualties and he wasn't with me when I was captured because I had instructed him to take care of the HQ in my absence."

Jake watched her for a second, but he felt obliged to say it,

"In that case, unless he was forced to, we have to face the facts and consider that he betrayed us as well."

Chapter 754: Do I Need One?

Jake refrained from telling her that this could also be the work of their "allies. If it was Duke Gole, Haynt or Usadra (the only surviving seat of the Dark Races) who gave the order, then Rifalen might very well have chosen to cooperate to avoid unnecessary bloodshed.

All things considered, this theory was quite likely. After the Mutant higher-ups were killed or captured, the coalition that included the Mutants may have determined that their faction was hopeless and chose to cut their losses by raiding their treasure room before the enemy.

The supporting argument for this was the fact that the vast majority of the Mutant corpses lying around were mostly civilians. There were very few warriors and adventurers, except for those who had the misfortune to be there at the wrong time. The other possibility was that they knew what was going to happen and chose to stay.

Jake attempted to locate Rifalen alive with his Shadow guide and as he expected the latter began to jog off in a certain direction.

'To the northeast... If I'm not mistaken, that's the Astral district.' Jake acknowledged thoughtfully. 'Anyway, with this Orichalcum door I have just what I need to test Xi's idea.'

Before pulling the door out of its hinges, he shared his suspicions with Aisling and surprisingly she agreed with him. Knowing Rifalen's pragmatic nature it was more in keeping with his temperament and much better than imagining him as a traitor. The number of people the young woman trusted could be counted on the fingers of one hand and Rifalen was definitely among them.

Jake stowed away the heavy metal door, then the duo, or trio including Jeanie, set off again. This time heading for Haynt.

The Astral district's vibe was somewhat different from the other neighborhoods. The most appropriate word would have been... bipolar.

The few Astral leaders of this faction were powerful light beings cultivating their power with starlight, while the other 98% of the population was made up of lost souls, ghosts and specters who had outlived their bodies for one reason or another.

Most of them were plagued by regrets and remorse from their past lives, and the dark thoughts that enveloped them greatly resembled those of the evil spirits behind the demons. In reality, these two

paths were similar and a specter could evolve into a Demon and vice versa if the circumstances allowed it.

The main difference between the two was that Demons were a much broader category, but almost always associated with evil. Each culture had its own conception of Demons and they could take on all sorts of forms. Conversely, the notion of ghosts changed little from one culture to another.

Traditionally, the Astral people were the bane of ordinary ghosts, specters and evil spirits, and they had to behave themselves if they wanted to exist here in peace. Even if the ghost was once a holy man, he would still be vulnerable to harsh lights, lightning or flames. This was true for both friendly ghosts and evil spirits unless their soul possessed a specific attribute that allowed them to resist these elements.

For this reason, although the ghosts that roamed the empty streets gave off a more positive and docile aura, they too kept their distance from the Astrals' private dwellings.

Because of this racial shiism, the district was extremely dark and gloomy, but remarkably clean because the ghosts never defecated. At the heart of the district, in a small area representing a tiny part of the territory, magnificent crystal castles radiated a gentle radiance that served as a deterrent against these ghosts.

The largest crystal palace in the center belonged to Haynt and that was where the trio was headed. On the way, they couldn't help but notice how few ghosts and Astrals were on the streets, as if the ghost town had somehow truly become one, if that even made sense...

As they neared the palace, two Astral men standing guard in their human form blocked their way to ask why they had come. The two men had ageless faces and short snow-white hair. They wore robes of the same whiteness and carried long crystal spears to match.

"Halt!"

The first guard stalled them with the tip of his spear, but before he could ask them a question another low, booming voice covered his,

"Let them through."

The guard threatening them with his spear immediately lowered his weapon, then the two Astral men stepped aside without a word to let them pass. Once inside the palace, Haynt was already waiting for them along with a wrinkled old man with grayish skin and thin pointed ears.

"Rifalen!"

Aisling and Jake recognized the Vice-Leader instantly. The old Night Elf gasped with joy when he caught sight of his former leader unharmed, tears of relief running down his face. But when he remembered what had happened a few days earlier, his face turned ugly.

With no warning, he fell to his knees, his forehead pressed to the ground.

"Boss, forgive me! I failed in my duty!"

Seeing the devastated and guilt-ridden face of the old elf, Aisling began to sob as well and hurried to lift him up.

"It wasn't your fault, it was mine. If I hadn't fallen into that trap none of this would have happened." Aisling comforted him with a bitter, wistful grimace.

"It wasn't your fault either." Haynt finally spoke. "No one could have predicted what would happen. I mean, we could... But we'll talk about it another day."

Once the emotion of the reunion subsided, Rifalen explained what had happened to him, Haynt filling in the gaps in his narrative to give a clearer picture of the events. After hearing their side of the story, Aisling had lost all her cheerfulness.

"So if I understand correctly..." She resumed, her face utterly pale. "The Duke Gole refused to protect the Mutants after I disappeared and ordered you to grant them access to the vault to contribute to the war effort or else he would wipe out the entire faction. He also disbanded my faction and forcibly enlisted its members. Those who refused were ordered to leave the district and it was made clear to them that they would not be protected in case of an attack. After they left, the enemy coalition raided the district like a swarm of locusts and destroyed everything in their path. Did I miss anything?"

"Cough... No, that was a good summary." Rifalen looked down with a dejected air, his mind on the brink of collapse.

"At least Rifalen wasn't a traitor." Jake commented tactlessly. "That's still good news. As for your sister, she's still alive, I can feel her presence, but she was probably captured too. Last but not least, we know where the treasure you promised me is."

Rifalen nearly choked on his saliva when he heard Jake suspect him of being a traitor with such aplomb, but when Aisling's sister was mentioned, his memory abruptly came back.

"Ah! Your sister was also captured by Duke Gole. He didn't believe in your release, but just in case he chose to detain your sister as a hostage to ensure that you wouldn't choose to join the enemy side upon learning what had transpired here."

Jake sneered as he learned of the Duke's shameful actions. This aristocrat had little scruples, but he knew what he was doing or he wouldn't have been appointed as the head of the Empire's Imperial Guard. After hearing what he wanted to know, he stood up from his seat and headed for the palace exit.

"Where are you going?" Haynt asked in puzzlement.

"To retrieve my treasure, of course." Jake chuckled as he waved goodbye to them without turning back. "And incidentally to free Aisling's sister. I have a feeling that the Duke Gole and I are going to have a nice long chat between men. In the end this battle is bound to happen and I will pacify this city or die trying. Those who stand in my way and attack my friends deserve no mercy from me."

Haynt was taken aback by the overwhelming determination and confidence he exuded. When they had last met, Jake had seemed uninterested in power struggles and his attitude was not as unyielding. What had changed since then?

Although he had his doubts, he still held this Guilty man in high regard. His aura had grown a lot since the last time and the old Astral caught himself feeling a trace of danger in his presence. If he felt that way then his enemies must have been pissing in their pants.

Jake didn't bother asking why Haynt hadn't stepped in to save the Mutants either. As part of the Duke Gole coalition, he of course had a say, but because he was so powerful he had been ostracized. Not only that, but he had to deal with a mutiny in his own ranks, which explained the deserted district. Furthermore, his enemies feared him greatly and took the threat he posed seriously.

His every move was closely monitored.

The district looked peaceful, but Jake had detected three massive auras above level 80 as soon as he arrived, one of which was almost on par with Haynt's. It was abundantly clear that even if he wanted to, the powerful Astral couldn't easily interfere.

It was easier to destroy than to save or rebuild, and if Haynt had been forced to fight, the mutant district's destruction would have been the least of their worries, for Laudarkvik as a whole would have been wiped out. Because of all these considerations, Haynt had no choice but to stand by where he was.

Still, he had done his best to save those he could and had welcomed with open arms all the Mutants who had managed to flee to this place. They numbered a few hundred and were currently housed in another residence.

"Do you have a plan?" Haynt eventually asked.

"Do I need one?" Jake smiled as he pushed open the door.

Chapter 755: And You Are?

Haynt let out an amused chuckle from his seat.

"You're right, you need no plan if you're strong enough." The Astral replied after a while, standing up as well, when Jake had already left.

"Where are you going?" Aisling asked Haynt anxiously as she saw the two cornerstones of her confidence walk away.

There was a reason why the female Dhampir Demon had not immediately stormed off after Jake. Although she was immensely grateful to him for being part of her rescue, her last impression of him dated back to three months earlier.

The only noticeable improvement she could perceive from before was that his spiritual aura was substantially brighter, but for a native like her above level 80, going from level 28 to 37 didn't mean much. That's why from her viewpoint staying close to Haynt, who was above level 90, was a thousand times more sensible.

She couldn't understand where he got all that confidence.

On this point, at least it could be seen that Aisling was not malicious or manipulative. She was taking a huge risk by offering him the leadership of what was left of the Mutant faction. If it wasn't for his Guilty status, that he had saved her twice, and that she had just joined the Myrtharian Nerds and gained some much needed perspective, she would never have consented to such an act.

The other, less overt reason was that Aisling had lost her motivation and drive after learning that she couldn't save everyone. She just wanted to protect her sister and survive to the end.

To her, Jake's confidence was nothing but arrogance and she feared he would soon pay for it with his life. Inwardly, she began to wonder if she had made the right choice in swearing allegiance to him and her angst only grew.

"Relax." Haynt smiled reassuringly as he ruffled her hair.

Only Haynt could treat her this way as if she were still a kid. Even her biological parents had never been given that privilege.

"You underestimate his abilities. Just follow him and watch. It promises to be entertaining."

"Che!" Aisling sucked her teeth adorably after the Astral left the palace, but she decided to trust his judgment and ran after him to catch up.

Rifalen, who had been overlooked inside, suddenly realized he wasn't in his own home and his curiosity overcame his cowardice. In his heart, he also hoped that Jake's strength could match his cockiness.

When Haynt departed his palace, all the Astral and Mutant refugees who were still loyal to him started to move out after them. The Astral had decided to abandon his territory.

As soon as he and his retinue left the district, those who spied on him in the shadows relayed the news to their superiors, and a flood of Demons, Specters, Were-beings, and Vampires swept through his relinquished territory, reclaiming the lands fearlessly.

From the northeastern district of the city, they made their way back through Laudarkvik, this time heading east. Good thing it was the district right next to them.

As they left the deserted and gloomy Astral district, the group felt an obvious relief and even Haynt sighed when he saw what his territory had become. Except for a few hundred Astrals who were still loyal and a handful of useless ghosts, all the specters and most of his subordinates had betrayed him to join the Demon King Astaroth of the Thozuch clan.

The latter was an expert in spirit and soul matters and controlling a bunch of moronic and starving spirits was a cinch for him. His expertise also made him one of the most dangerous Quanoth natives.

No Fourth Ordeal Player stood a chance against Astaroth. Not Deimos, not Jake, not anyone else except maybe Sigmar and a few other anomalies whose cultivation was based on their soul force.

Each additional Spirit Body level strengthened and added yet another increment of Spirit energy both qualitatively and quantitatively greater than the preceding level. At level 90, Haynt's Spirit Body, even with his Myrtharian Spirit bonuses, contained 40,000 times more energy than Jake's.

If natives at this level were not digitized and could dissociate their souls from their bodies like some Players, then not only Haynt, but even Elduin and Bhammod could have had a shot at annihilating Jake's spirit in their first clash.

That was the extent of the gap between Quanoth natives and Players. Alas, the cruel irony of fate had decided otherwise. Without a specific Soul Class, the boundless power of their minds would be forever denied to them, limiting them to projecting a tiny sliver of their aura according to the limitations of their respective Soul Classes.

But Astraroth was an exception to this rule. This Demon King was a Grandmaster Soul Destroyer and the name itself spoke volumes about his abilities. No Player was to ever come near him under any conditions. Facing him would undoubtedly result in death... forever.

Even the Oracle could not ensure the survival of their souls under these conditions. Haynt, who understood the threat posed by the natives much better than Jake, was well aware of this discrepancy. On the way, he taught him everything he knew about the enemy coalition leaders, with particular emphasis on those he was expressly forbidden to engage.

In addition to Astraroth, Jake also had to beware of Xaverie, who relied on her charm to bewitch the souls of her preys, especially the men, but also of Xellmezon, the Undead seat that had vanished for several weeks. As a Wight, he could awaken and command the dead, but also corrupt the living if necessary to expand his forces. All of these abilities relied heavily on his Spirit Body's superior strength and control.

Jake began to develop a headache after Haynt's lecture. In addition to these three dangerous leaders, he also had to be on the lookout for any Spirit Mages or other Soul Specialists who might be lurking in the city. If he carelessly got too close to one of them, even a level 55 could turn him into a vegetable.

'It's going to be troublesome... When I get back, I'll have to find a solution to this problem as well. I can't count on others for such a big handicap.' He reminded himself, his forehead creased with worry.

"In that case, can I count on you to handle them?" Jake asked smoothly. If Haynt agreed, the problem would be half solved.

The old Astral laughed happily.

"I was waiting for you to ask." He replied with a glint in his eye. "If you have a solid plan, you can count on me. But it'll depend on your performance."

Jake caught his hint. If he was too weak, or his plan too flawed, Haynt could even join the enemy if it increased his chances of survival. The Astral owed him a favor, but that didn't automatically entail loyalty. The mind of a nearly 1,000-year-old Astral was not so easy to fathom, and it was a safe bet that he could be insanely devious and calculating when the circumstances called for it.

"Deal." Jake nodded in a low voice.

It was good timing, they had just reached their destination. Sire Gole had taken up residence with Prince Edric in the Human district. Leaving aside the fact that Laudarkvik was plunged into almost perpetual night, this Human district established on the fourth plateau resembled the wealthy residential areas of the capital.

It must have been a good place to live not so long ago, but because of Abbikesh's betrayal, the situation had changed for the worse. The latter still occupied their central office as well as two thirds of the district, which said a lot about who had the upper hand. As for the rogue dwarf Gimdli, who had earned his fortune through slavery and smuggling, he had joined Abbikesh with little hesitation.

The arrival of Jake, Haynt and Aisling did not attract much attention at first, thanks to Jake's stealth spells, but that changed as soon as they revealed their presence outside the inconspicuous villa where Prince Edric had moved in.

Perhaps because he was aware of his inadequacy and the danger he was in, the prince was overly cautious, and their group had to pass through several pat-downs before they were allowed to enter. At the very least, there were several hundred fallen knights stalwartly defending the villa.

"Welcome back Haynt! It's always a pleasure to see you!" An elegant young man enthusiastically shook the Astral's hand, a glimmer of awe and reverence in his eyes. "I'm surprised you were able to slip out of your palace."

With a noble, clean-shaven face, slightly tanned skin, a pert little nose, full lips, and long, sandy blond hair, this prince could have been mistaken for a princess if he wasn't wearing his gleaming armor. His voice was also ridiculously deep, ruling out any risk of misunderstanding.

At that moment, the prince noticed the people accompanying Haynt and he finally noticed that another man was walking at the same level as him, and even slightly ahead.

"And you are?" He felt some danger meeting Jake for the first time, but with Haynt and Sire Gole nearby there was nothing to worry about.

"Jake."

"Aisling."

"Rifalen."

Prince Edric nearly fell over when he heard their names. Jake's name had become famous after saving Aisling and Haynt from certain death, and he was one of the current Mutant Vice Leaders. Rifalen's fame was not small either, while Aisling's was self-explanatory.

What was most shocking was Aisling's return. The prince was only a tiny pawn on the Laudarkvik chessboard, but he was well aware of what Sire Gole and the other leaders of the coalition had done. Thinking back on their disgraceful actions, he suddenly feared the worst.

And when he met Jake's galactic eyes and was shocked to the core by an overwhelming killing intent, he knew they were doomed.

The coalition's leadership was about to change hands.

Chapter 756: I Was Told You Owe Me Money

'I need to get the fuck out of here right now!'

Obviously, Jake wasn't going to give him the chance. Firmly grabbing him by the shoulder, his thumb and forefinger pressed mercilessly into his collarbone, the prince squealed out an unintended groan of pain before shutting up right after being scowled at.

"Bring me before Duke Gole and the other leaders, shall we?"

The prince swallowed hard but nodded obediently. No shit?! If he refused, he better get ready to lose his pretty head.

"F-follow me." He stuttered with a constipated smile that was close to a grimace.

Jake's fingers were still pinching his collarbone and the pain was so great that he was starting to tear up. His image of a refined and mysterious prince had been ruined in an instant. What a disgrace!

Aisling's beautiful crimson eyes widened slightly when she saw Prince Edric's drastic change of attitude, whom she had known for a long time. He was even one of her most fervent suitors and she no longer counted the number of bouquets of flowers he had sent her. The royal bastard was making a commendable effort to act all cool and unfazed, but inside he was definitely bawling his eyes out.

'Damn it! Why on earth did I go and greet them in person... I should have sent one of my guards instead...' The Prince blubbered to himself as he breathed an involuntary sigh of relief when Jake withdrew his fingers from his collarbone.

As one of the most influential humans in Laudarkvik, and the unacknowledged son of the Ret'Asi Emperor, he wasn't weak at all. But next to Jake, he was like a gnat trying to swat a tyrannosaurus, it was as futile as it was laughable.

Even so, the young man demonstrated his resourcefulness by instantly readjusting his attitude and his sense of priorities. He wasn't 100% sure yet, but in his heart he was already convinced that Duke Gole was in for a rough time. As a result, his loyalty shifted unhesitatingly and he began to blather on without reservation as if Jake were already his new boss. Before he even started spilling the beans, Jake had already isolated them under a sound barrier.

"In the meeting room is Duke Gole and his only two remaining griffin knights, Usadra with also two bodyguards, Louis Nosferati, the replacement for the late Cazimir Nosferati, as well as Remus Dracul." The Prince first divulged the identity of the men they were about to meet, which was no secret to anyone, before continuing in a whisper,

"Louis is unimportant, he is only here to observe, and his power falls short of that of his late father. On the other hand, you must beware of Remus and Usadra. Remus has always been a cruel and violent Vampire, but he places the law above all else. At least, that used to be true. Over the past several years, his behavior has changed radically, and he is said to be involved in many shady deals involving Demons and Undeads, including human trafficking and even Vampires from his own clan. The number of Vampires from the Dracul clan that have mysteriously disappeared over the past decade is in the hundreds and many of his recent choices have severely depleted his clan's coffers."

Stealing a glance at Aisling, he then added in a low voice.

"According to my contacts, he was also involved in the capture of Aisling and the other Mutants, but I don't know if that's true..."

The group remained expressionless as the young prince tried to gauge their reaction, but inwardly Jake couldn't help but chuckle. Remus Dracul was there too? Wasn't that his new slave, Jen the Mimic? It was going to be a lot of fun...

Seeing that the two Mutants were still unmoved, Prince Edric felt a bit awkward and so he started prattling on again to get past the embarrassment.

"Usadra used to co-lead the Dark Races together with Fodnyr, but since Fodnyr's death he has been given total authority over his faction. He is a Night Elf like Rifalen, but his lineage is pure. These elves are

all born assassins and are known to be promiscuous, thievish and greedy. I don't know if the rumors are true, but if they are, Usadra is the perfect specimen..."

"What about his strength?" Jake interrupted him bluntly. He could get that information from an Oracle Scan, but these high-level natives would surely notice.

The Prince was momentarily taken aback, but after a brief pause he gathered his thoughts and answered honestly.

"According to the latest rumors, his last breakthrough was last year and he is a lvl 82 Grandmaster Shadow Assassin. When he accepts a killing contract, no target ever escapes. He is said to have killed several thousand aristocrats and other influential people over the past few centuries, including several princes and S-rank adventurers. Had he not suggested the plundering of the Mutant HQ treasury to Duke Gole to support the war effort, this plan would never have taken place. He even actively participated in the operation..."

"I confirm." Rifalen, who had been silent until now, suddenly began to rant with rage. "Although I was willing to open the vault to avoid unnecessary bloodshed, I had originally intended to let them stew for a few days in the hope that Aisling would return. Even if I failed, Usadra's and the coalition army's presence in the Mutant District would have served as a deterrent against the Demons and all those hyenas wanting to devour us to death. As you can imagine, it didn't work. Usadra found the secret passage to the vault in the blink of an eye and managed to foil all security mechanisms, including picking the supposedly tamper-proof lock on the vault door. As the only thing left to clear was the optical scanner and given that he could easily get my eye from my corpse, I had no choice but to open the door..."

Just by looking at his face, which was purple with anger, one could tell that he kept a bitter memory of it.

"Hmm... He is on the same level as Aisling so." Jake commented indifferently.

"Hmmp, don't compare me to that sneaky pipsqueak who only knows how to backstab." The pretty Dhampir Demon snorted complacently when he compared her to that nasty elf, "In one-on-one fair and square, I'm sure I could kill him in less than ten breaths."

"Sure..." Jake rolled his eyes, inviting the prince to carry on with his presentation.

"... Well, there's still the Duke Gole. He lost his company of griffin knights at the council battle, but it's no fluke that he's survived until now. He's not the commander of the Emperor's Imperial Guard for nothing. From reliable sources, he is level 86. His Soul Class is not known, but like all griffin-knights he knows how to wield a bow, a spear and a sword and fights best when riding his griffin, which has been accompanying him since his youth. Dismounted, I'm not sure how good he is, but he must not be that strong or he wouldn't have been so badly injured during the council battle."

The end of Prince Edric's account coincided with their arrival in front of a large ancient wooden door that was none other than their destination. A heavy silence suddenly fell over the group.

Wordlessly, Jake's right index finger claw began to glow red, then in a flash he carved all sorts of injunctions over his chest. His aura flared up dramatically in an instant, but after a few low-key Aether Spells, his presence vanished completely.

Jake then patted the Prince's shoulder to signal him to wait outside, then after removing the sound barrier, he took a deep breath and then...

BANG!

Jake disappeared from his position, reappearing in the room behind the door, just above a shifty-looking Night Elf, relaxed in his seat with his feet crossed on the table in a posture reeking of arrogance. His body spun, his leg following suit. Then a powerful hammer kick mercilessly struck the top of the elf's skull, smashing his head down against his outstretched legs on the table.

The sheer violence of the impact of Usadra's forehead hitting his knees crushed both his forehead and his knees into dozens of broken pieces, the joint of his outstretched legs suddenly forming a V in the wrong angle.

"AARRRRRRGGHH !!!!"

The harrowing howl of pain that escaped the "Grandmaster Shadow Assassin's" mouth alerted the other leaders in the room, including Jake's companions across the door. As Usadra's shattered head was gradually being reconstituted through digitalization, Jake grabbed him by the neck like a chicken, then with a twist of his wrist snapped his head completely off.

Dismissing Usadra's agonizing body with a casual kick, Jake calmly sat down on the seat that had just been freed, crossing his legs on the table in the same pose as the Night Elf earlier.

"You don't know me yet, but I'm Jake Wilderth, the Mutants' new leader." Jake introduced himself with a toothy grin revealing his long translucent fangs. "I was told you owe me money."

Chapter 757 Demonic Charm

Louis Nosferati, Duke Gole and their bodyguards swallowed with difficulty after his introduction. With the exception of the Duke, who was relatively calm, the others all held their sphincters tight as if they were afraid of crapping their pants at any moment. As for Usadra's bodyguards, they were paralyzed with terror, unable to move an eyelash.

In stark contrast, Jake was focused on something completely different.

[Your Spirit Body has reached level 38.]

Killing enemies with a higher spirit body level than his was always rewarding, but alas, it would be even more so if he could defeat them spiritually. His Aether and Soul Tribute skill was somewhat biased towards his Aether stats and his Spirit Body only benefited slightly. Without the Eltarian part of his bloodline, he would get nothing at all, only an Aether gain.

Quanoth was full of enemies with a Spirit Body superior to his, but in practice their stats were often too low for his Myrtharian Bloodline to judge them as worthy opponents.

However, one should not be misled. This Usadra was certainly strong. The mere fact that Jake's Aether stats had jumped by 5% spoke volumes. If he hadn't ironically ambushed this assassin, defeating him in such a short time would have been much more hazardous.

In any case, his objective was achieved. His interlocutors were taking him seriously.

Duke Gole was a sturdy, athletic middle-aged man with a stern face and thick, perpetually creased eyebrows. His brown hair draped over his shoulders and his zygomatic muscles clenched regularly as if he were holding back from barking, emphasizing his square, chiseled jaw.

Cautious, he wore his general griffin-knight armor, save for his helmet, which lay on the table at arm's length. After Usadra's swift assassination, the warrior had immediately drawn the short sword at his belt before putting on his helmet again right after.

Louis Nosferati was a rather skinny young man, not to say emaciated. With his ghoulish skin and lackluster black hair clinging to his skull, he lacked the ethereal, bewitching beauty that Vampires were commonly known for. Still, the corner of his lip was constantly curled up as if he was mocking the other leaders, while his sharp, owl-like nose made him look uncharismatic and sly.

Even after Jake's dramatic entrance, the Vampire continued to sip his blood cup as if nothing had happened, his eyes half squinted like those of an expert oenologist sampling a new wine with great focus.

As for Remus Dracul, or rather Jen the Mimic, he spat out the contents of his glass at his bodyguard, so stricken with shock that he had to hold onto the armrests of his seat to keep himself from fainting.

'The fuck?! What is the Master doing here?'

Seeing his slave's frightened mouse-like reaction, Jake winked at him to play along, but this discreet wink was interpreted in a very different way by Sire Gole and Louis Nosferati who sat nearby. A wink might go unnoticed by regular humans, but not by natives with powerful souls like them.

'Is he hitting on me?' The Vampire looked left and right, then behind him before swallowing with fright.

'Does he know Louis or Remus? Unless it's one of our bodyguards?' The griffin knight sprang back together with his bodyguards, slamming his back against the wall to fend off any surprise attack.

Upon seeing the very different response of his audience, Jake immediately understood what was going on and although he didn't take offense at the Duke's explosive reaction, his face darkened when he saw the Vampire's horrified and disgusted attitude. For a moment, he regretted not killing him instead of Usadra.

'Even if I were gay, look at yourself in the mirror first.' Jake hastily averted his gaze, as if looking at this prick any longer might pollute his eyes.

As if the heavens pitied him, the door swung open at that moment and his eyes were immediately blessed with the gorgeous vision of a certain fiery Dhampir Demon. If normally his gaze would not have lingered on her for more than a moment, this time he felt it necessary to gawk at her a little longer, as if his soul needed that to curb its urge to commit a second murder.

He didn't know exactly when, but the young woman had gotten rid of what was left of her busted breastplate. Glancing behind her, he found a large piece of mythrill covered in cracks that matched the missing breastplate.

Since her release, Aisling had not changed her clothes, and her once pristine mythrill armor, which contoured her body to perfection, had suffered greatly during the intense battle that led to her capture. It was only at this point that Jake realized how badly.

One of her leg plates was missing, her breastplate and shoulder pads were damaged beyond repair, and the rest of the metal plates that made up her armor were either deformed or heavily dented. The black leather of her tight-fitting outfit underneath had not fared much better and one could see a fair portion of her thigh skin, her lower belly as well as a cute belly button along with the side of her left breast where the protective fabric had been ripped.

If one looked closely, a nasty dark green gash could still be seen, proof that a powerful poison or corrosive magic had been used to injure her, which was the only way to counteract her great regenerative abilities. The young woman had hidden it well until now, but her status was displaying several malus, and her stats were not at half their normal values.

At this point, she was rather weak, but her countenance was as deadpan as stone, and one could sense an unwavering resolve. By tossing off her battered breastplate, she was exposing the injuries she had incurred as well as her vulnerability, but she was also making it clear that she had survived and escaped her captors and was ready to reclaim her rightful due.

If she were still the leader of the Mutants, she would never have risked showing herself in such a suggestive and pitiful light, but since she had joined the Myrtharian Nerds and Jake had proven his strength, she had nothing to worry about. As soon as Usadra had been disposed of, all her misgivings left her.

She was a Dhampir Demon. Her greatest asset was not her swordsmanship, but her charm. Watching her mother turn men into lapdogs, including her father, she had long ago learned how to tame the hearts of men. If she gave up her pride and principles, she could easily resolve the situation without bloodshed.

When she entered the meeting room, the mere act of flashing half of one of her perky white breasts instantly raised the temperature in the room by several degrees, and as Jake felt a certain unruly part of his body react against his will, he unhesitatingly stabbed his claws into his own thigh.

Before his symptoms worsened and his consciousness slipped, Jake drew several protective Aether Spells to guard his mind and repel the pheromones emitted by Aisling, then sensing that this was not nearly enough he also pulled out his Soul Stone to purge this harmful influence from his mind.

Louis, who was himself a high level Vampire, withstood her charm with great difficulty, but he too, biting his lip in humiliation, was forced to look away to avoid being unknowingly hypnotized by her glowing crimson eyes.

Remus Dracul was a Mimic indifferent to human charm, but that also meant that his desires were much simpler. The aroma of adventurer's meat like he hadn't tasted in centuries captivated his senses, the

young woman emitting this fragrance suddenly transforming into a shimmering diamond chest promising wonders. The next moment he was drooling like an idiot, his eyes turning blank.

As for Duke Gole, his level was higher than Aisling's, but he was only human. Like Jake, he decisively planted his short sword in his thigh, letting out a muffled grunt, and only by barricading his mind with all his might did he manage to barely endure it. If he wasn't level 86, he would have definitely fallen under her spell.

The most frightening thing was not the charm itself. At this level of intensity, even Jake had the means to react to protect himself from it. The true danger was that Aisling was doing absolutely nothing to achieve this result.

It was as if she had been holding her breath for years and suddenly decided to breathe normally for the first time. Such a high degree of charm, she could maintain it all day long. Too bad her body and soul were digitized, or her hypnosis abilities could have reached an unimaginable level of prowess combined with her level 82.

It was a blessing for the other natives, but also for all the Players scattered across Quanoth.

"Where is my sister?" Aisling asked politely as she sat demurely in the vacant chair to Jake's right. Noticing his claws digging deep into his thigh and his shifty look, she couldn't help but giggle endearingly.

Sire Gole gritted his teeth to refrain from speaking, but Jen the Mimic spilled the beans on the spot with adoration.

"She's kept in Usadra Castle. He must have sensed that you might not be dead and took your sister hostage as a precaution."

" ... "

'Damn it. I only needed to ask him instead of coming here.' Jake complained inwardly as he realized he could have known everything with a snap of his finger just by questioning his slave.

Aisling immediately put on a relieved and happy expression. Jumping to her feet, she seemed ready to leave when Jake grabbed her arm without looking at her and reminded her,

"Hmmm, what about the treasure?"

Clapping her fist into her palm, her mouth made an O of realization, then Aisling turned to Duke Gole as she leaned forward in an impish manner, offering a dizzying glimpse of her cleavage.

"Hmm, what about the treasure?" She simpered again.

" ... "

Chapter 758: I Have Never Regretted Anything In My Life

When the group walked out of Prince Edric's villa, Aisling was beaming while Jake, who was walking a few steps ahead had a conflicted expression on his face. From time to time, his facial muscles would

twitch uncontrollably as if he were restraining a brutal urge to pin her to the ground and rip off what was left of her tattered clothes.

" Bloody hell, when are you going to stop doing that thing?!" Jake yelled angrily as he suddenly turned around. If his Body Control wasn't so high he'd be waddling around with a glowing pole between his legs by now.

Gently placing her finger on his lips, the mesmerizing young woman crooned with an innocent air,

"I don't know what you're talking about..."

Now that Jake had turned to face her directly, he realized the big mistake he had just made. Luckily, his gaze immediately met with Aisling's instead of roaming down to her neck and the top of her tantalizing breasts or he would have forgotten what he wanted to say.

Still, while riveting his eyes in hers he felt like drowning in two wells filled with molten ruby and if he had not stabbed his claws in his leg again, he might have regretted the outcome. Taking a deep breath, he snapped a little more curtly than he intended,

"Stay away from me."

"Hahaha..." Haynt, who was walking behind them laughed outright when he saw Jake's hilarious plight.

With his level 90, his soul was naturally immune to Aisling's charm. Not to mention that he was an Astral, an energy being whose behavior was not dictated by the needs of the flesh. Even to reproduce, Astral beings resorted to a kind of mitosis and all newborn Astral beings were essentially identical before they found the star or constellation that would define them throughout their lives. In fact, before developing their personality, the Astrals had an unstable appearance and when they took their physical form their silhouette was only a bunch of indistinct contours. It was only when they grew up that they would adopt their final appearance which would then become permanent.

Astral people could also copulate like normal humans, but it was such an unnatural urge that very few of their kind would ever try it and grow to enjoy it. In his long life, Haynt was one of the few Astral people to have fallen in love with a human and experienced the pleasures of the flesh, but he had long since lost interest in that kind of flirtation.

From his perspective, Aisling's teasing and Jake's miserable face were extremely entertaining and if he had a bag of popcorn he could keep watching this drama all day.

Trailing just behind Haynt, but more than fifty steps back, the old elf Rifalen sported an utterly different kind of expression. His face was red and burning like a male in heat, and he was walking strangely, squeezing his legs to hide a prominent bulge stretching a certain area of his pants. His bulging eyes reflected his puzzlement and fear, but also his shock and shame at the dirty and unspeakable thoughts that constantly surfaced in him and threatened to overtake his mind.

'What the fuck is happening to me? Since when did the leader possess such a fascinating charm? Even my dead wife never put me in this state. Get a grip Rifalen, Aisling could be your granddaughter!'

Rifalen and Jake were enduring a similar torment, but their thoughts were vastly dissimilar. While the aging Half-Elf was consumed with lust, shame and guilt, Jake was racking his brains trying to find a solution to his embarrassing symptoms.

'Xi, tell me you have a solution...' Jake sounded out his Oracle AI's opinion in a troubled tone. 'Aisling is one of us, and aside from the inconvenience and humiliation that comes with it, I can handle the consequences. But if this technique is used by an enemy it could be dangerous...'

Xi obviously understood his concerns and for once she didn't dare tease him about the kinky, not to say depraved thoughts that kept filling his mind. Their consciences being interconnected, she didn't dare to admit it but she was also affected. If Jake could see her face, she would definitely be blushing. For this reason, she too wanted to find a solution as soon as possible.

[Vampires are known to have a high Charm. The purer their bloodline, the greater their innate Charm. The Charm stat alone amplifies the attraction you feel towards Aisling, and every movement and word she utters, even the most ordinary ones, will seem incomparably hot and sexy. However, unless her Charm stat has surpassed 100,000 points, you shouldn't with your current mental stats be affected too much beyond viewing her as the most attractive woman you've ever met.]

'So what's wrong with her?' Jake pressed her anxiously, stifling new lewd thoughts and a furious urge to let his growing insanity run wild. 'I don't think she's using a spell or she would have stopped it long ago.'

Xi, was also struggling with her own fantasies, and it took a few seconds before she offered some semblance of an answer.

[Like Charisma, these attributes affect both the body and mind of their users, and many techniques and spells depend directly on them to be cast. As with the Luck stat, these are abstract concepts that do not exist by default, but when their existence is acknowledged they affect our perception and the workings of the universe at its root. Aisling's Charm is such that it represents a substantial source of energy that goes well beyond her physical appearance and as such she can control it to some extent. Earlier, she repressed her natural Charm, but that must have been almost as unnatural as holding back from eating or drinking when you're starving. It's the same kind of effort you'd have to make if you were asked to walk on eggshells without breaking them at your current weight. Although you can do it, it's certainly not as easy as it sounds. For reasons of her own, Aisling suppressed her Charm for a very long time and finally decided to let go. Although... I have to admit that this Charm is a bit weird... Rather than love or idolatry it triggers something more...]

'Sexual?' Jake suggested.

[Yeah! That's right...] Xi nodded a little too enthusiastically, but then immediately sank back into silence to cover her embarrassment. After a moment, she said in an unexpectedly shy voice, [Vampires have a great Charm... But the nature of it is not so lewd... Therefore, I can only think of one other explanation.]

Jake immediately understood what she was getting at.

Her Demon quality.

Once the cause identified, it became easy to identify the true origin of such a Charm and why Aisling had so decisively chosen not to use it.

"You're a Succubus." Jake blurted out out of the blue without looking back, shaking Rifalen who was listening to their conversation from far behind them.

Her secret revealed, Aisling stopped grinning so teasingly and a mixture of sadness, shame and anger, close to self-loathing, slowly blackened her gorgeous face.

"I didn't choose to be the way I am. Do you regret accepting me?" She whispered against his back, her tepid breath blowing on his neck.

There were only two possible reactions once a man learned she was a Succubus. Either they would run away, scared to death of being bewitched and having their life force sucked dry. Or their lust and self-confidence would override their rationality and they would use this as an excuse to unleash their baser instincts, justifying their actions by claiming that a Succubus would probably like it anyway.

As for women, contempt was most often the norm while the rest would be wary of her and do everything to keep her away from their sons and husbands.

In any case, her value as a person would be demoted to that of an object and no matter how hard she tried or how talented she was, it would all become insignificant next to her despicable nature.

There was, of course, a third possible reaction, like Haynt's. Those who were educated on the subject and had absolute self-control had no reason to fear her presence.

This was especially true when sex carried no particular connotation in one's culture or society. In many races, it made no difference whether someone needed meat, blood, saliva, perspiration or seminal fluid to survive. After all, on the scale of the universe, and even on Earth alone, there were many cannibalistic, scatophagous species that had adapted to much worse diets. The fly was a perfect example.

But this was not knowing Jake well. While it would be a lie to say that he didn't entertain smutty thoughts in her presence, he wasn't among the previous three categories of men either. Having undergone a bloodline change himself and all the physiological and psychological alterations that go with it, he was well aware that it would be rather petty of him to judge a person by their birth species.

"Regret what? I've never regretted anything in my life." Jake finally replied as he began to walk again. "If I can't resist your Charm, it just means I'm not strong enough yet. You can keep testing me as much as you want."

A radiant smile blossomed on the young woman's face, sweeping away the gloom that was clouding her face. At that moment, her loveliness became so dazzling that even the roaming ghosts nearby who witnessed this unforgettable scene began to get nosebleeds. Silent tears streamed down her face, then after wiping her eyes clean with her sleeve she trotted back behind Jake, this time in a much happier mood.

The suffocating Charm that enveloped her also dissipated, causing Jake, Rifalen and all the men in the neighborhood to sigh with relief as their sanity returned.

Chapter 759 Shopping Spree

The last part of the journey went smoothly. Jake enjoyed the quiet and peacefulness, while Aisling regained her usual composure. Rifalen kept his distance, and Haynt just kept smiling all the way, his true thoughts a mystery.

In the space of an hour or two, Jake had visited over half of the city's districts. Including the Vampire district he had visited a few hours earlier, he had only four left, all of which were, with the exception of a few sub-clans, part of the enemy coalition.

The Dark Race District was both as Jake had imagined and yet different at the same time.

Just as he imagined because the Night Elves, despite their reputation, had the same penchant for aesthetics and harmony as the other elf species. Usadra's manor where Aisling's sister was kept hostage looked like any other elven palace of the legends, except that the stones, gildings and paintings tended towards cold and dark colors.

And also different, because the Night Elves were not the only race in the Dark Races, although they were by far the most influential, but not the most numerous. The Black Goblins had the largest numbers, followed by the Albino Orcs, the Shadow Dwarves, and the Ash Gnomes. There were other minorities belonging to rarer species, but their presence was also strongly felt, such as the Subterranean Trolls and the Blood Ogres.

Depending on their prevalence, these species greatly influenced the local architecture and sanitation, and because of the rampant population of goblins and orcs, it was no exaggeration to call this district a giant dumping ground.

The goblins' and orcs' reputation preceded them and it was not uncommon to see them urinating, defecating and fornicating in the open in the middle of the street. Brawls and score-settling events were also frequent and no one seemed willing to put a stop to them. Of course, neither Jake nor anyone else in their group had any intention of intervening.

Haynt, Aisling and Rifalen, of all people, were completely desensitized to this debauchery as if they had long since become accustomed to it, but the young woman who was half Succubus and half Vampire had enough common sense not to release her charm or the consequences for them, but especially her, would be catastrophic.

It was Jake, mainly, who shook his head, seeing the endemic number of goblins and orcs and their lack of civility. Without Fodnyr and Usadra, the Dark Races were left leaderless, and he had high hopes of recruiting them before coming here. After seeing how these goblins and orcs behaved and lived, he changed his mind. At best, all he could do with these creatures was to use them as cannon fodder and nothing more. If he won, reorganizing and leading them would be a pain in the ass and he would also have to be prepared for betrayals, and other insurgencies once the real end of the world became imminent.

It wasn't worth the trouble.

This district did have its strengths, though. The cosmopolitan atmosphere had its charm, and every time they changed streets there was a refreshing change of scenery. From the depraved and insecure dump of the Black Goblins and Albino Orcs, one could suddenly transition to the spotless residences of the elves, the scorching forges of the dwarves or the steampunk workshops of the gnomes.

With a specific goal in mind, their group did not actively seek out sightseeing or shopping, but that didn't stop them from being attentive to their surroundings.

Jake, for instance, acquired a 6kg nugget of Mithril in the dwarf district, as well as another nugget of Xasnite, a magic material which, when ground into a powder and added to an alloy, improved its hardness and Mana conductivity.

By the way, Fodnyr, one of the two deceased leaders, was a Shadow Dwarf and his death had put his race in a tough position. This partly explained how these precious magical ores could be found on sale in a street stall.

For payment, it was Haynt who generously volunteered to pay and Jake was not one to turn down free stuff. Now that he knew he had a wealthy tycoon with him, Jake gave up his last qualms and began buying samples of any materials, plants or tools that caught his eye. The former Astral continued to smile imperturbably, as if these expenses were a drop in the boundless ocean that was his fortune.

The most shameless part of all this was that Jake was now far from poor. Thanks to Aisling and Jake's irresistible Charm and deterrent intimidation, their combination of softness and hardness had overcome the Duke Gole's opposition in an instant. With Usadra's unexpected death, Louis Nosferati's silence, and the push of the fake Remus backing their request, the head commander of the griffin knights had no choice but to capitulate.

It was by far the best call he could make. Duke Gole was just there to oversee the recapture of Lodunvals and avenge his son's death. After two near-death experiences in a short period of time, his values were becoming more flexible every day than he would have ever thought possible three months earlier. Jake and Aisling's strength had convinced him, and they had the same goal. Once Jake's plan was clarified, the warrior immediately promised his support.

Moments later, Jake and his group arrived at the palace of the defunct Usadra. The Night Elves had not yet learned of his death and the residence was serene and peaceful except for a few suspicious moans from the adjacent villas.

Two guards in black leather armor and assassin's gear tried to stop them to check their identity and reason for coming, but Jake sent them flying into the walls with a flick of his hand. Impatient and anxious, Aisling's figure became a blur, racing into the mansion at a speed almost impossible to follow with the naked eye.

Waiting outside the entrance, Jake heard a few startled cries and clashing blades, followed again by silence. A few minutes later, Aisling emerged with a beaming smile, holding the hand of a young teenage girl who looked just like her.

"Uncle Rifalen! Uncle Haynt!"

"I would like you to meet my sister, Chloe." Aisling shoved her little sister forward, firmly pressing her shoulders down to make her stand in front of Jake. "Say hello to your new leader."

The little girl was clearly unwilling, but listening to her older sister she made a cringeworthy bow as she trumpeted in a squeaky voice,

"My name is Chloe. I'm 11 years old and level 6."

"Cough... Nice to meet you Chloe." Jake felt embarrassed for her. Even the late Trash had a higher level. He didn't think it was possible to surpass his incompetence.

Only Chloe was also a Dhampir Succubus like her sister. She may have been level 6, but her stats could probably compete with a level 30 or 40 human. Her Soul, on the other hand, was extremely weak for a native. Even with her racial advantages, she would not survive a mental attack. Hell, even a trace of Jake's killing intent could obliterate her soul if he wasn't careful.

'You're not doing her any favors overprotecting her like this.' Jake lectured Aisling telepathically. 'She shouldn't be this weak at her age.'

The Dhampir's smiling lips curved downward at his criticism. She pouted, but didn't dare retort. Deep down, she knew he was telling the truth.

"Any treasures?" Jake inquired unblinkingly, tactfully changing the topic like it was nothing.

Aisling didn't have a Space Storage like he had, but wore a Storage Pouch made through the cooperation of a Magic Rune Inscrber and a Space Mage. Jake was interested in this technology. His own instincts were telling him that it should be within his capabilities since his promotion to Aetherist.

Upon hearing his question, the young woman remained silent, but she opened her Storage Pouch for him to take a look inside. In there, Jake saw millions of gold and silver coins, as well as a fair amount of enchanted armor and weapons made of rare metals. There was also a significant amount of unknown Mana rich materials in the corner that could match his expectations.

"Good!" Jake exulted as he burst into laughter, barely holding back from giving her a hug because of how ecstatic he was.

With the Mutants' wealth that the Duke Gole had returned to them, plus Usadra's entire fortune, Jake had what he needed to test his theory. Jen the Mimic, currently impersonating Remus, had also promised to hand over all the rare metals from the Draculs' vault to him a little later.

"What's the plan now?" Haynt asked imperturbably, hands in his pockets.

One should not forget that in addition to their small group, there was also the procession of Astrals loyal to Haynt following closely behind them, as well as the Mutants loyal to Aisling that they had met on their way along their various stops. Their force of several thousand was already attracting attention and the enemy coalition had certainly been informed of their movements.

"For the time being, I would like Haynt, Rifalen and the other refugees to remain in the Human district controlled by Duke Gole and Prince Edric. I'm sure they'll be delighted. You'll take the opportunity to rally the scattered Mutants as well as the Dark Races who are undoubtedly about to descend into anarchy before long."

"What about you? What do you plan to do?" Aisling asked when she saw that he hadn't mentioned her name, or that of her sister.

"You will wait with me until the rest of my faction arrives at my previous hideout. I'll have to go away for a while, but I've already told them to lock their Shadowguide on you so they can find you."

A day earlier, Jake's words would have been incoherent gibberish, but now Aisling could pretty much understand what he was getting at. Having nothing to complain about with this plan, she silently nodded. In truth, she was pretty curious to find out what kind of subordinate such a man was actually leading.

The group split into two groups, one small, one large, and moments later Jake, Aisling and her sister returned to the underground cavern where Jake had taken up residence.

The time had come to explore the limits of his digestive system.

Chapter 760 I Don't Really Have A Choice

Before starting his private sampling of exotic rocks, Jake first invited Aisling's sister to join the Myrtharian Nerds as promised. It pained him to part with half a kilo of his liquid alloy stash again, but it was for a good cause.

The underground cave connected directly to a magma chamber had blistering temperatures and unless he accepted little Chloe into his faction, she would have soon succumbed were it not for the Myrtharian Body passive.

"So... Do you need... You know... I mean blood and..." Jake asked awkwardly out of a sense of hospitality.

"No." Aisling snapped back fiercely, giving him a glaring look, her red face thoroughly scandalized.

" ? "

Chloe's innocent expression showed that she had no idea what he was referring to, and it made Jake realize that he had gotten it wrong more clearly than Aisling's ill-tempered response.

[Your question wasn't silly, though I doubt your outburst of helpfulness was entirely selfless...] Xi scoffed in his head.

'Tsk, you never know, right? I'm not worried about Aisling, who has a ton of vitality, but it could have been far more embarrassing for her younger sister. Maybe I'm more open-minded than I used to be, but having to give you know what to an 11 year old so she doesn't starve to death is way beyond the moral limits I set for myself...'

[And what would you have done if the answer was yes?]

'I don't know, and I'm glad I don't have to answer that question.'

Faced with Jake's silence and scrunched up face, Aisling momentarily assumed that her aggressive retort had pissed him off. Replaying his words in her mind, she also mistook his intentions, going so far as to convince herself that he was making a pass at her. And if it was advances... Then she had just turned him down!

Flustered, she quickly made excuses, asking her sister to cover her ears during their conversation.

"Blood and you know what are the perfect source of energy for me and my sister, but unlike real Vampires and Succubi, we are not reliant on it. Anyhow, only the lesser Vampires and Succubi are slaves

to their urges. Vampire Progenitors and Archdemons do not need to feed at all to survive. My father, Grimwald Dracul is the direct descendant of the Dracul clan's Vampire Progenitor and my mother Xaverie Zangruth is the Primordial Succubus of her clan.

"If we are hungry, normal food is more than enough. So don't mention this subject in front of my sister again, she doesn't know anything about it."

"...Very well." Jake finally answered after a short pause.

What Aisling hadn't said was that while it was true that she didn't need to eat to survive, it didn't change the appeal that blood and that other precious fluid held for them. When Chloe hit puberty, her older sister would sooner or later be forced to tell her the whole truth.

Thankfully, that wasn't his problem.

Now that Jake knew there was no pressing emergency, he let Jeanie frolic with them, then without delay dove headfirst into the magma lake. A year earlier, that lava would have burned him alive, and even if he hadn't died, he would have felt the pain. Now, it seemed almost as fresh as rainwater.

"This isn't going to cut it." Jake sighed wearily, his body floating arms and legs spread wide like a starfish on the magma surface.

This heat wasn't enough. His cells were relentlessly sucking in the heat energy around them, including the molten rock serving as ideal nutrients, but such a mild boost was no longer enough to stimulate his bloodline to new heights.

"No big deal. This will do for now." Jake muttered as he brought up the heavy orichalcum door from the Mutants' vault.

He had already used his Oracle Scan on it to analyze the magical substance in detail. The result had surprised him, but in the end it made more sense.

In the writings of the Greek philosopher Plato, Orichalcum was a legendary metal that existed in abundance in Atlantis and explained the advanced technology of that extinct civilization. Whether this city really existed or not, the research of more recent historians leaned towards two other theories to explain Orichalcum: platinum and brass.

Atlantis having allegedly existed more than 9000 years BC, it could fit with the copper age with some imagination and that was why the brass hypothesis prevailed over the platinum one, which was a much scarcer metal.

The Oracle Scan had given reason to the second group of historians. Orichalcum was nothing more than brass, in other words an alloy of copper and zinc, but which, after having been immersed in an environment saturated with Aether and Mana, had ended up being transmuted into something else. Simply put, it was brass with its own Mana/Aether Code.

"Amazing." Jake muttered in a low voice, deeply impressed by all the mysteries the Mirror Universe held.

If Orichalcum was just a magical variant of brass, then surely this phenomenon applied to the other precious metals of Quanoth, and probably those of the entire Mirror Universe. In other words, the

periodic table of elements was still relevant. It was just that Aether added an infinite number of variations.

Glancing through his Space Storage, he could confirm that Mithril was nothing more than steel forged from Mana-saturated silver, while Adamantium was based on tungsten, the hardest natural metal above iridium and titanium. Generally speaking, all the natural magic materials in his possession were related to an ordinary element.

After confirming the origin of these materials, he refocused on the Orichalcum door before him.

Even with his colossal strength, he could clearly feel its weight in his hands and as he held it, his body immediately began to sink. Undaunted, he brought his teeth to a corner of the door, then bit into it mercilessly.

CRACK!

His masseter muscles tightened as hard as they could, followed by all the muscles in his jaw and even those of his throat. His bones and joints cracked, but the orichalcum door stood firm. After chomping on it with all his strength for nearly a minute, he gave up, leaving a glowing stream of drool on the metal door corner.

Even submerged in lava, the Orichalcum was still cold, demonstrating the extraordinary potential of this magic metal. Inspecting his work, Jake found slight indentations only a few millimeters deep, the only evidence that he had not bitten into that door for nothing.

'At least my teeth held up.' He consoled himself as he massaged his sore jaw.

[You can try heating the metal to soften it, otherwise it might take a while.] Xi suggested sweetly.

'I'll try that.'

Jake cast a few Aether Spells, then began to channel all the heat from his cells and the surrounding lava into the door corner he was trying to chew. The metal went from cold to warm to hot, but it never glowed. However, when Jake bit into it again, the Orichalcum buckled under his teeth like marshmallow.

"It works!" Jake rejoiced with relief. If it hadn't worked, his little experiment would have ended prematurely.

[Don't get too excited, the real test is just beginning.] Xi dampened his spirits with a casual comment.

As the chunk of Orichalcum fell into his stomach, he realized how right she was. Far from melting, the orichalcum marshmallow behaved exactly like the liquid alloy he had once tried to swallow, sitting like a stone in his stomach.

Unlike liquid alloy, Jake could feel that digestion was still possible, but the process was agonizingly slow. At this rate, it would take him months to digest that tiny lump of Orichalcum. It was totally incompatible with this Ordeal's time constraints. Not to mention the fact that he still had an entire Orichalcum door to devour, plus all the magical materials and metals stored in his Space Storage.

Disheartened, he stowed away the Orichalcum door in his hands, then rose to the surface.

" So in the end, I will have no choice but to restore my Aether Sun Core if I want quick results."

Flying to the nearby cave where the fairy and the two sisters were bonding, he informed them of his intention to leave temporarily, then with a leap he crossed the rocky ceiling, emerging a few moments later to the surface.

[You're going to do what I think you're going to do?] Xi asked gravely.

Jake nodded slowly, "I don't really have a choice."

He could easily make new Aether Sun Cores, but without external help it would take them years to reach the level of his previous Aether Sun Core at its peak. The easiest thing to do was to revitalize the one he already had.

And to accomplish this feat he could only think of one solution.

Quanoth's Sun.

Jake had already tried to break through the planet's atmosphere at the beginning of the Ordeal to see what was lying beyond those black clouds, but he had been forced to give up. With his new stats, he was confident he could fly much higher. If that still wasn't enough, he was ready to resort to his Purgatory Artifact.

With a solemn expression, Jake looked up at the swirling mass of opaque clouds above him that kept the Laudarkvik region in darkness, and then after a long exhale, he shot into the air.

In just a few meters he broke the sound barrier, setting off a deafening shockwave that raised a cloud of dust behind him. His speed kept picking up until he was only a blurred, untraceable silhouette. When his body broke through the first layer of clouds, they dispersed in a 100-meter circle as if a bomb had been dropped, and he continued his ascent with gritted teeth.

The real challenge had only just begun.