

Oracle 791

Chapter 791 Ice And Fire

The Soul Stone was valuable, but so were his subordinates. If they were willing to sacrifice half a Bloodline level for the Myrtharian Nerds' sake, he had to be equally prepared to lead by example.

Either way, the Eltarians were the most important cornerstone of his faction. There were only 238 of them, but without them Jake would not be able to guarantee the mental safety of his troops.

The slaughter in the Myrmidian ranks had made him realize how important their presence was. Without them, these fierce warriors were just pawns at the mercy of enemy Spirit Mages.

"Thanks, boss." Asfrid thanked him with sincere gratitude.

Until now she didn't know if she had made the right choice in joining his faction. It was only because of her complete trust in Lucia that she had agreed to take the risk.

Now, however, she had no regrets. This Soul Stone was precisely what she and the other Eltarians needed to recover in a few weeks and even transcend their former limits.

Seeing her eager gaze, Jake feared the worst and hastily added,

"Once you've recovered, give it back to me. It's the only one I have..."

Asfrid gave him a weird look.

'Forget it... A leader like this is still better than nothing.' She shook her head as she put the Soul Stone away.

After getting her promise to return it to him as soon as the Eltarians had regained their strength, she scrambled away before the urge to take it back crossed the stingy man's mind.

Having a bad feeling, Jake suddenly wondered if he had made a mistake, but in the end he grimaced bitterly and turned his attention to the shell in his hands. He nicked his finger and let a drop of his blood drip onto it.

The artifact glowed for a short second and then became inert again. However, he felt a connection between himself and the object that had not existed before. When he responded to this strange connection, his mind was drawn into a much larger network and he perceived a vast constellation in which new stars were constantly lighting up. He understood that it was the Eltarians and the Myrtharian Nerds having soul-binded their shells.

His attention focused on several lights brighter than the others and his mind made contact with them, merging slightly with them.

At this moment, he was overwhelmed by all sorts of emotions and he felt suffocated by the sheer depth of feeling that this soul seemed to hold for him. Nervous, he stole several glances at Lucia who was staring at him calmly and he eventually looked away.

"Now you know how I feel about you." She mouthed boldly.

Seeing the two sisters and Aisling stare at him excitedly, Jake cleared his throat and preemptively cut the mental link to his Spirit Shell before too much love overwhelmed him. He wasn't ready for the responsibility.

When he pulled back from the spirit shell, he noticed Esya and Enya's distraught looks and a rueful smile appeared on his face.

'After this Ordeal, I will give you an answer,' he promised telepathically.

Lucia would never take no for an answer. She was a Myrmidian to the bone and she would never accept defeat. Unless she fell in love with someone else, she would not give up.

As for the two sisters, he had a harder time gauging the sincerity of their emotions. Their interactions were limited, and he feared that they might be confusing love with a mixture of admiration and infatuation. Their father's urging had undoubtedly influenced their feelings.

Finally, there was Aisling... For now, no need to worry about her. The Dhampir-Succubus had only known him for a few days and felt at most some gratitude and vague interest in him.

To clear his mind, he took the opportunity to scan the artifact.

[Spirit Shell: An artifact that looks like a shell, but is actually a masterpiece of engineering. The main material is the shell of a common ocean crustacean from Quanoth known for its long-range telepathic abilities. This Spirit Shell has been pre-synchronized. Ability 1 : Spiritual link between Spirit Shell holders belonging to the same network. Ability 2: Soul Energy Transfer. Ability 3: Spirit Merging]

Jake expected this, but the item was not recognized as an Aether Artifact by the Oracle Scan. The Spirit Shell qualified as a Soul Artifact, but did not offer any bonus stats. Its role was purely functional.

Yet in terms of pure utility, this artifact was in some ways even more useful than a Bronze Aether Artifact. For future Ordeals, these Spirit Shells would no doubt save countless lives.

After personally testing his Spirit Shell, he felt a little less regretful about having lent his Soul Stone to Asfrid. It was worth the investment.

Once each Myrtharian Nerds had received their Spirit Shell, the crowd dispersed and the camp became quiet again, everyone returning to their training.

Jake retired to his tent and patiently excreted Adamantium with his Gold Stone Skin ability. On the afternoon of the following day, Hade delivered the Aether Artifact he had promised him.

The Myrtharian had provided the Adamantium and the former Fluid Grandmaster had honored his promise by crafting him a luxurious portable fortress.

[Advanced Aether Artifact: Portable Adamantium Fortress: A 500m² villa luxuriously furnished with all the facilities required for a comfortable life. Recycling water, oxygen and energy, the fortress is capable of withstanding a multi-megaton nuclear attack]

Scrolling further down the list of specifics, Jake was pleasantly surprised. The artifact contained far more Adamantium than he had provided. Several dozen tons in fact, and hundreds of tons of other less valuable magic metals.

But as he held the black sphere in his hands, a disturbing insight flashed through his mind. He was about to go to Hade's house to tell him about it when he received a notification from Lucia.

"Rogen and Gerulf just arrived."

Jake was immediately distracted and left everything in a hurry to go greet his first mentor. He didn't have to look for them long to find the Kintharian.

In the center of the camp, an almost eight-meter-tall flame giant was arm wrestling with another equally muscular giant radiating an icy aura that rivaled the temperature of his opponent. A circle of about 20 meters in diameter had formed around them and was rapidly expanding.

Half of the ice giant's side was completely frozen, encasing the latter inside. Half of the side of the flame giant had long since turned into a pool of lava. Most impressive was the demarcation in the center of the circle that delineated its two conflicting environments. Along this line, fire and cold clashed continuously, forming a tumultuous stream of energy that was only waiting for an adverse slip-up to rush forth.

Behind the ice giant, a crowd of Throsgenians were yelling their encouragement. Likewise, behind the flame giant, a crowd of Kintharians were roaring at the top of their lungs to support their champion.

Of course, the table chosen for the arm wrestling between the two rivals was long gone...

"Hey, Gerulf! Rogen!" Jake greeted as he caught sight of the two bullies who had grown even taller.

When Rogen briefly turned his head in his direction, Gerulf curled his lips, showing his translucent fangs, and his biceps tripled in size.

BANG!

Rogen's arm was violently pressed into the ground and the imposing Throsgenian slammed into the thick layer of ice he had himself produced. A small crater instantly formed underneath him upon impact.

"Cheater!" Rogen bellowed as he drew a huge war hammer with a steel head as wide as a car.

Gerulf grinned victoriously as he drew his own giant sword.

"Bweweweweh! The victor is always right. This is an undefeated Gladiator champion telling you that." The Kintharian guffawed loudly.

"Eat my hammer!" Rogen roared in response. Eloquence had never been his strong suit.

SMASH!

Gerulf was nailed to the ground up to his neck and an icy shockwave blew half the tents in the camp over, turning the entire clearing into a frozen tundra.

"Shit!" Jake cursed as he watched the two brutes brawl as soon as they met again. The two bullies were both friends and rivals and spent their time challenging each other to any kind of challenge. Because of their propensity to cause trouble, Lucia and Asfrid usually limited their competitions to harmless games like video games or dancing...

But this time, they were too late. Having not seen each other for several months, the two Players were eager to show their progress and prove that they were definitely the best.

Lucia and Asfrid appeared at Jake's side just in time to see the hole in which Gerulf had been hammered suddenly explode. A mighty geyser of lava shot up from the ground, raining magma down on the camp as the smug Rogen was lifted off the ground by a monstrous uppercut.

A little groggy, Rogen growled angrily and retaliated with a massive headbutt. Gerulf's head was knocked hard and the giant staggered back two steps before stabilizing.

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Taking advantage of this brief delay, Jake and Asfrid quickly teleported between the two giants. With lightning speed, the Myrtharian carved the word "Placate" on Gerulf's chest while the Nereid Eltarian soothed Rogen by simply sticking her index finger between his eyes.

"Sleep."

The ice colossus rocked back and immediately began to snore. Seeing his rival sleeping, Gerulf, who was busy fighting Jake's mental influence, lost interest.

"In the end, I'm still the best." He bragged happily.

"You mean the worst!" Asfrid snorted as she smacked his thigh.

"Gerulf!"

A dumb smile lit up the Kintharian's face as he recognized the sweet voice calling his name.

"Lucia!"

The princess jumped into his arms and he scooped her up in a big hug. After a moment, when she began to pat his shoulder vigorously because he was about to break her ribs, he put her back down.

"You've gotten smaller." He noted in a guttural voice.

"You too." He added while looking at Jake who was in his miniaturized form.

Lucia giggled happily while listening to the giant's gruff remarks.

"Idiot, it is you who became bigger. Soon you won't even be able to get through the doors!" She lectured him with a feigned air of reproach.

Jake said nothing, but inwardly he couldn't help but think that this was already the case. The Kintharian hadn't walked through any doors in a long time. It would be the same for him if he didn't have the Miniaturization Spell.

Gurgle!

A thunderous stomach rumbling sounded simultaneously from Rogen and Gerulf's stomachs and an awkward silence replaced the joyous atmosphere of their reunion.

"Let's talk over a nice meal." Asfrid tactfully suggested.

A few moments later, the two giants were sitting cross-legged side by side with a mountain of roasted legs, meats and fish piled up in front of them. There were also several buckets of ice cubes, magic metals, and a myrthril barrel filled with molten rock as condiments.

Like Jake, they had swallowed a Plutonium pill before their meal and could now gorge themselves without worrying about running out of radiation. As soon as they began to eat, the witnesses to the scene lost their appetite, but Jake, Lucia and Asfrid were used to this kind of event and watched them feast with indifference.

Once the pile of food and materials had been gobbled up, Rogen burped a tiny blizzard as he patted his tummy and let out a satisfied sigh,

"Ah, Rogen's full."

"Gerulf too." The Kintharian grunted as he closed his heavy eyelids.

ZZzzzz!

The two giants fell asleep shortly thereafter in a sitting position, their snores echoing throughout the camp. With a relieved expression, Asfrid immediately ordered the other Kintharians and Throsgenians to move their leaders to the area outside their assigned camp.

"Finally quiet." She rejoiced as she rubbed her temples wearily.

Lucia gently massaged her shoulders with a sympathetic smile, but that didn't stop her from whispering in her ear,

"Gerulf and Rogen are going to take a nap for a while, but the other Kintharians and Throsgenians haven't eaten yet..."

The Eltarian suddenly stood up and left the pavilion in a hurry.

"Poor Asfrid." Lucia giggled as she stormed out of the tent after her.

Jake, who hadn't been asked to do anything, didn't hesitate and went back to work on producing Adamantium.

After Gerulf and Rogen, more Myrtharian Nerds continued to show up throughout the day and by early evening he learned that Kyle's sister Maeve had also arrived with Kewanee, the American Native. Not having seen her for a while, he suddenly felt the need to check on her.

Enya and Esya had made him aware that the young woman had become obsessed with the idea of saving her brother from this Hecate. She felt responsible for her brother's circumstances and hated the demons as much as she hated herself.

After all this time, Jake hoped she would have recovered a little, but that hatred had turned into an obsession for revenge and for that she had to become stronger.

At the beginning of the Fourth Ordeal, he had learned that she had completed her first Three Ordeals like the other Myrtharian Nerds, but he didn't know any more about her beyond what the two sisters had revealed to him. He just hoped that hatred hadn't clouded her judgment too much.

Beyond her brother's fate, what worried him was the brainwashing and abuse inflicted by Bhuzkoc when she was his slave. Certain commands had been engrained in her mind and had almost become instincts. He doubted she would ever be able to return to normal.

Maybe Maeve knew that too.

Jake went to the tent assigned to the young woman and announced his presence.

"Come in."

Upon spotting the handsome man entering her tent, Maeve squinted her eyes guardedly, unable to recognize this individual. However, after studying him more closely she recognized the galactic glow pulsing behind his pupils.

"L-leader?"

"In the flesh." Jake smiled calmly.

He looked at her in turn and detected something in her aura that immediately made him frown. Compared to a year earlier, the young woman had traded in her brown hair for long jet-black hair. Her pale skin was flawlessly smooth, her ears pointed, her nails black and he could make out fine canines under her full lips. Even her brown irises were now pure emerald green and he could make out two protuberances behind her back.

To be quite frank, if she was pretty before, she was now a heaven-toppling beauty capable of bringing down nations. This kind of change was normal among Evolvers, but in the young woman the difference seemed a little too extreme. Her breasts had doubled in size for no reason and her curves, the way she fluttered her long eyelashes and more generally each of her gestures were an act of seduction.

But the most worrying change was the strange black smoke charged with negative energy that oozed from her skin, forming a halo of darkness around her.

Miasma.

"You became a demoness?"

Maeve wasn't surprised that he'd figured it out. He was her leader after all and she hadn't tried to hide it.

"That's right. I deliberately chose my archenemy's bloodline to better understand her. It also happens to be a good fit for my personality..."

"I see..." Jake sighed impassively, then asked in a concerned tone, "How are you? Are the orders given by Bhuzkok back then still affecting you?"

The young woman twitched, but answered apathetically,

"Bhuzkok and my brother are not dead. Where they are they cannot influence me, but technically I am still his slave."

"I promised myself to save your brother or avenge him if need be, so I will." Jake said in a reassuring manner.

"I don't need your help. I will get my revenge alone." Maeve retorted stiffly. Her experience with Bhuzkoc had shown her that men couldn't be trusted. Their kindness and promises were just a means to make them their plaything.

Jake did not take offense, but glided right in front of her and immobilized her with his telekinesis. Wide-eyed, a deep hatred flashed across the young woman's features.

"What are you doing?! Release me!"

He ignored her cries and activated his Myrtharian Vision to peer deep into her body.

"The Slave Contract is still in effect, but it is indeed harmless for now. However, the Demon Bloodline you have chosen is clouding your judgment. In order to gain power quickly you have absorbed too many negative thoughts without taking the time to purify them. If you don't fix this issue in time, you will become a demented evil spirit who has forgotten the very reason why he sought revenge in the first place."

Without giving her time to respond, he tore off her shirt and carved the Word of Power "Purify" on her chest. The miasma that oozed from her body was instantly compressed into a strand of pure energy that he pumped back into the young woman's body.

Chapter 793 We Need A Zoo

Maeve immediately felt the difference and stopped complaining. Without a word, she sat cross-legged and closed her eyes to focus on the pure energy strand just waiting to be digested.

Jake stepped out of the tent and stared blankly at the black sky above him. On top of a brawling ice giant and lava giant, his faction now had not one, but two Demonesses.

The next few days promised to be no picnic...

BOOOM!

As if to taunt him, a deafening shockwave shook the earth and as he turned his gaze to the east, Jake saw hundreds of uprooted trees streak across the sky like a giant firework.

"Fuck! What's going on now?!" He complained drowsily.

Helping Maeve purify the miasma in her body seemed easy, but it took all his mental strength. On the surface, Words of Power seemed omnipotent, and they were, but only within the confines of his True Will and Spiritual Energy.

Every time he used this Soul Class Spell, he depleted his Soul in more ways than one. Having lent his Soul Stone to Asfrid and the other Eltarians he had no more quick fixes to recover.

'I guess I'll have to resume my Spirit Body training.' He sighed as he flew towards the shockwave's epicenter.

On the way he crossed paths with Lucia, Asfrid, Enya, but also Drastan heading in the same direction to take a look around.

"You met Maeve I can tell... What did you think of her?" Enya asked gloomily.

The two sisters were familiar with Kyle and had wanted to take his sister under their wing, but the contact had been difficult. Recently, they had found the young woman increasingly taciturn and asocial, and they had concluded that she did not enjoy their company.

"Until Kyle is rescued I won't be able to fully address her issues." Jake replied flippantly. "But it should get better already."

No one could completely solve her problems unless they erased her traumatic memories. The abuse she had suffered at the hands of Bhuzkok was known only to him, Will, Fumdalf and Svava. And Kyle of course.

Fumdalf was the Nawai Spirit Mage who became pals with Will after he betrayed Bhuzkok. For obvious reasons he avoided hanging around her. The last time they had run into each other Maeve had tried to kill him. Fortunately, he was a post Fourth-Ordeal Player and he wasn't on Quanoth with them.

In reality, it was more of a tragedy for them. A Spirit Mage would have saved them a lot of losses against Shamash.

"I must apologize for Maeve's behavior." Drastan said out of the blue.

Jake and the others were taken aback by his guilty face. The Troll Hunter never gave them the impression that he was the kind of person to screw up.

"Hmm, what did you do?" Enya inquired worriedly.

The dark warrior chuckled bitterly at her question.

"Not much to be honest. While we were talking, I just mentioned that in order to defeat the Versing Trolls from my home planet, I became one myself. Sometimes you have to treat evil with evil. I didn't think Maeve would take my advice literally..."

"And how did you expect her to interpret it, dummy?!" Asfrid slapped him gently on the back of the head.

With an awkward look, the Hunter scratched his head and explained,

"I wanted to make her realize that not all demons are necessarily her enemies. This Hecate surely deserves to die, but her hatred should not be extended to their entire species."

"And you couldn't tell her directly?!" Enya yelled at him with an infuriated scowl.

" ... "

Trying to pacify the tensions, Jake grunted,

"Anyway, it could have been worse. She seems okay for now but we'll have to keep an eye on her. She seems to hate men so Enya, Asfrid and Lucia I'll leave you to deal with it. I hear she gets along well with Kewanee, so tell her to be extra vigilant and report any suspicious behavior immediately."

With that, they reached the epicenter of the explosion and an unexpected scene of conflict appeared before them. It looked like the standoff of a Western gun duel.

The first party consisted of fifteen huge, familiar-looking felines plus a huge bird.

The white lion at their head was four stories tall at the withers and was as long as a diplodocus with its tail. The tiger on his right was only slightly less massive, but his thick fur was wrapped in a dense halo of black lightning making him invulnerable.

It was obviously Mufasa and Shere Khan. In the band of felines, he also recognized his cat Crunch, as well as the pompous Lord Phenix.

His cat had also changed. His flattened head still looked as goofy as ever, but his long black fur gave the impression that he was even bulkier than Mufasa. His tail had also become freakishly long like a marsupial's and he kept it curled up like a spring.

A huge turkey with plumage varying between golden yellow and vermilion red was perched on his head, its wings spread as if it wanted to cover Quanoth with its shadow. Each harmless beat of its wings raised terrifying gusts of flame, which a torrential rain continuously extinguished.

Lord Phenix, aka the orange turkey, had finally realized his dream. He had become a true phoenix, although he still had the soft, fleshy growth on his head characteristic of turkeys. It took away some of his charisma, but compared to before it was praiseworthy.

Behind these felines, thousands of equally imposing beasts stoically awaited their orders.

Among them was a mammoth the size of a building, a diamond-skinned rhinoceros five times longer and thicker than a tank, several birds of prey with the wingspan of an airliner, and a cobra long enough to circle a skyscraper several times.

It was the Giant Mammoth that continuously produced the torrential rain with its trunk to extinguish Lord Phenix's bursts of flame. The beast seemed to possess an inexhaustible reservoir of water, its skin attracting the humidity of the air from kilometers away like a super-powerful magnet.

The opposition was composed of only two individuals who seemed tiny in comparison: Lysander and Kenway. The two Alpha Werelions were glaring at the felines with arrogance and anger. Especially Lysander, he was fuming.

"What?! You refuse to submit to your Alpha?!" Lysander roared with rage as he transformed into a Werelion.

From a tall human, his body swelled to a humanoid lion of over twelve meters in height. Accompanying his younger brother, Kenway also transformed into a Werelion over twenty meters tall.

The two brothers simultaneously activated their Soul Class Skill Daemonification and their size doubled again, an overwhelming spiritual pressure falling on the enemy beast army.

Most of the animals subconsciously prostrated themselves, but the behemoths in the front line remained unmoved. Instead, Mufasa, Shere Khan and the other twelve felines stepped forward and let out a terrifying roar,

"ROOOOAAARRRRR!"

The sound wave of their roar overlapped, forming a supercharged blast that clashed against the fists of Kenway and Lysander. A shockwave dozens of times more powerful than the previous one resulted from the collision and Jake couldn't help but exclaim,

"We need a zoo..."

Chapter 794 Laudarkvik's New Leader

"I agree." Asfrid grunted in annoyance.

"In that case, I'm afraid we'll need a very large zoo..." Lucia chimed in, curling her lips in amusement.

"It can't be any worse than the field assigned to my Troll army." Drastan grinned as he looked at a patch of desolate forest several kilometers behind them.

Since he and his Trolls had arrived, the creatures had uprooted half the trees in their assigned camp space.

Meanwhile, the conflict kept escalating. The sonic blast generated by the felines had, against all odds, repelled Lysander. His ego could not endure such an affront and he pounced like a wild beast on Musafa with the firm intention to bite his head off.

Mufasa was prepared and he reared up on his hind legs before slamming his paw down violently, claws out, in a mighty downward slap. Lysander raised his arms to shield his face in time, but his entire body was smashed into the ground, forming yet another crater.

Kenway wanted to rush to his little brother's aid, but a black lightning bolt as thick as Gerulf's thigh prevented him. Dark lightning struck his body and although it did no apparent damage, the Alpha Werelion realized he was partially paralyzed.

Before the situation could get any worse, Jake teleported between Lysander and Mufasa, who was about to slice his jugular with a claw. Asfrid cast a pacifying Soul Spell with perfect timing, while Lucia appeared in front of Shere Khan to thwart the sneaky tiger's attempt at a lethal attack.

As for Drastan... He was far too slow and when he arrived the battle was already over.

"Jake?" The huge white lion held back his paw as he eyed him hesitantly.

"What? Don't you recognize me anymore?" Jake joked good-naturedly.

"You've gotten smaller."

Jake's face twitched. It was the second time he had heard that line today. It seemed that if he wasn't in his Gold Myrtharian mode, his friends weren't taking him seriously.

'High makes right...' He sighed before remembering that it wasn't the proper expression.

When he was feeling down in the dumps, a ball of black fur enveloped his field of vision. A certain cat didn't care if he shrank.

"Damn cat!" Jake barely had time to yell before he was tackled to the ground by a furry black ball weighing several dozen tons.

Blinded by the long fur almost as dense as a jungle, the Myrtharian had no choice but to do what he knew best.

He kicked.

BAM!

Crunch was catapulted into the air, lifting off the ground at least a hundred feet as a stream of slime spewed from his mouth, drenching the human below. Jake, lying on the ground, and Asfrid protected themselves in time with a telekinetic dome, but Lucia, Drastan, Lysander, and the other beasts got soaked.

"Dammit Crunch!" Shere Khan roared, his figure turning into a trail of black lightning that struck the huge cat in midair.

Crunch's long hair bristled like a hedgehog's and a burning smell hung in the air. When the cat crashed to the ground, all the other felines pounced on him, pelting him with blows...

"Meooow! You assholes!"

"Shut up, Crunch and accept this beating!"

Overhead, a certain Lord Phenix loomed high, flapping his wings lazily as he circled over them. His beak crooked with disdain, he chirped in a low voice,

"A Lord like me should consider making new friends... Their stupidity might rub off on me in the long run."

BANG!

Shere Khan's black bolt of lightning sent the bird plummeting to the ground and he crashed right next to his buddy Crunch. The nearby felines heard his slur and switched targets. Soon clumps of yellow, orange and red feathers littered the plain, as if someone had just punctured a pillow.

"All's well that ends well, I guess..." Lucia commented, holding back from bursting into laughter.

Drastan held out his hand to Jake to help him up, but Jake rose to his feet by himself, levitating in a bad mood. Leaving Asfrid and Lucia to deal with the aftermath, he flew without turning back to his own residence.

A whole valley was put at the disposal of the felines while taking care to station them as far as possible from the Trolls, but also from Lysander and Kenway. By questioning Mufasa, Lucia had already confirmed that felines and Werelions were like cats and dogs.

The reason was as follows. Just as Kevin could easily command bears, Mufasa and the other lionesses of his pride felt a compulsive need to obey Lysander and Kenway. For an Alpha at the top of the food chain like Mufasa this was just unacceptable and the only solution to this problem was to eliminate the ones responsible for these symptoms.

If it were up to him, Mufasa couldn't care less about these two Werelions. But the thing was, he felt his control over his lionesses weakening in their presence and that he could not tolerate.

In the end, it was Hade who found the solution. Lysander and Kenway having agreed to join the Myrtharian Nerds, the two parties simply signed an Oracle Contract making them promise not to seek to harm or control the opposing group. Still, even after the contract was signed, the two sides continued to avoid each other.

The rest of the night went smoothly and the next morning the last of the Myrtharian Nerds reached their campsite. The only Player missing was Will and incidentally his dragon Charizard.

This was the signal that Jake and the other officers were waiting for to take action. In the morning, each Myrtharian Nerds received a notification to prepare for war and gather at the entrance of the camp.

There, Jake, Hade, Lucia, Aisling, Kenway, Lysander, Gerulf, Rogen and Astrid were waiting for them with arms crossed and a tough look in their eyes. Jake and the other Kintharians had been working hard for the past few days and each Player was wearing a brand new Adamantium helmet on his head. Scanning the resolute crowd, the sole Myrtharian of this faction spoke only a few words,

"Laudarkvik is ours."

Less than ten minutes later, the Myrtharian Nerds marched gloriously into the city, and the inhabitants fled terrified into their homes, praying that the conquerors would not slaughter them.

With Duke Gole dead, the Dark Races stripped of their leaders, the Demons gone, the Undeads defeated, the Werebeings exterminated, and the Vampires in a bad spot, Jake's army swept through the city without any resistance.

When Gerulf arrived at the villa of Prince Edric, the temporary regent of the Human Faction, he immediately prostrated himself in terror, all his men throwing down their weapons without being asked to do so. Abbikesh had apparently left the country as soon as Lost Divinities' absence was reported to him.

The Dark Races resisted fiercely, especially the Night Elves and the dwarves, but what could they do against Rogen and the other Throsgeians. After several blocks were turned to ice, they surrendered willingly.

Lucia and the Myrmidians took care of the recalcitrant Undeads such as the Ghouls and Draughts, wreaking havoc on the city, while Drastan and his army of Trolls pretended to subdue the Dracul Clan, whose leader was merely a shapeshifting puppet in Jake's service.

Among the factions whose power was virtually intact were the Metamorphs, the Thrajah Clan and the Zangruth Clan. For these recalcitrant enemies, Jake spared no means.

The felines and their army of beasts invaded the Metamorph district, their keen senses and superhuman instincts allowing them to sniff out most Shape Shifters from miles away. The female leopard Duchess in particular had an ability to determine if someone was lying. As soon as the harsh interrogation began, the two leaders, Syn and Melion, who had been hiding in the crowd, surrendered repentantly.

Aisling, with the help of Kenway, Lysander, Asfrid and the Eltarians, took charge of arresting her mother, while Seskel Thrajah and his clan were captured by Jake effortlessly. A single ultraviolet pulse was enough to make all those unruly Vampires bend their backs.

By the time lunchtime rolled around, Laudarkvik had a new leader.

Chapter 795 Loyalty And Promise

"AARRRRGGH! Laudarkvik will never submit to the tyranny of a repulsive Mutant!" Seskel spat in Jake's face, who was glowering at him in disgust as if the Vampire was already dead.

While conquering the Thrajah clan stronghold, what Jake had discovered inside had turned his stomach. Next to it, the Dracul dungeons were like an amusement park for children.

In these catacombs, there were no Vampires or criminals imprisoned, but only tens of thousands of young humans crammed into vast cells, locked up like cattle raised in batteries.

The hygienic conditions were abysmal and depending on the look and age of the prisoners their living conditions differed greatly. The most worn out and elderly had less than a square meter of living space. They had no clothes, no toilet or latrine, not even a chamber pot to relieve themselves. The smell in these cells was beyond stenchy, enough to make an Undead retch.

These poor humans provided food for the Vampires and Thralls at the very bottom of the social ladder, but also served to supply pasteurized blood bags on an industrial scale. To the Thrajah clan, these humans were effectively nothing more than cattle and had virtually no rights.

In between, there were the freshly captured teenagers and young adults. They were provided with toiletries and enough food to keep them healthy, but they still shared their cells with 7 or 8 roomates, the worst prisons on earth being a better place to live.

Finally at the top of the human cattle social ladder were the slaves, or delicacies as the Thrajah clan liked to call them. These young men and women were generally of extreme beauty, almost comparable to that of the Vampires. Their living conditions were quite decent and they were even allowed to leave their cells.

However, one should not be fooled. These humans were cattle like any other. Although their blood was reserved for the vampire nobility, if one of them called dibs on them, no one would protect them.

They were really just a source of entertainment for the elite of the clan and these Vampires could do absolutely as they pleased with them. No one would complain if they were to disappear.

It was the only kind of life humans could hope for from an abusive vampire clan that considered any other species as food. Alas, this morning they had kicked a hornet's nest...

At this very moment, the leaders of the enemy coalition were kneeling and bound in the center of the High Council chamber at the very top of Laudarkvik. The plush seats once occupied by the nine faction leaders were now occupied exclusively by Jake's companions.

Aisling had reclaimed her seat as the Mutant Leader, and a tiny, finger-sized Haynt stood on his far too large crystal seat. Jen, the Mimic, was still impersonating Remus Dracul and had been allowed to keep his throne.

To taunt Seskel, Jake had taken his seat and for good measure Lucia was lounging on the old seat formerly belonging to Casimir Nosferati, who had unfortunately passed away. His son Louis was gritting his teeth in anger, but there was nothing he could do. He was just too weak.

Enya and Esya had stolen the seats of the two Shifter leaders, while Gerulf and Rogen had destroyed the thrones belonging to the Demons Astraroth and Aggenur in their attempt to sit on them.

All of Laudarkvik's living leaders were present in this room, but the roles had changed dramatically. Most of the seats had been replaced by new faces, mainly Myrtharian Nerds, while the old leaders awaited their judgment with mixed attitudes.

Seskel's was self-explanatory, but Xaverie, on the other hand, retained her regal bearing despite the fact that she was kneeling and tied up. Her slight smile led one to believe that she was not at all worried and seemed on the contrary to be enjoying all these twists and turns. Syn and Melion on the other hand were extremely nervous.

Life was full of irony. They had joined the enemy coalition to conspire in the shadows against the Dracul clan and Nosferati, but in the end they had been arrested before they could accomplish anything. Even their mole, Jen, had become a traitor to the enemy. They had been completely fooled...

Syn was like Jen a Mimic, but level 87. Like Jen, when he was terrified he tended to revert to his birth form which he found more reassuring. That's why Jake and the others currently had their field of vision obstructed by a huge diamond chest as big as a jeep.

For obvious reasons, the Mimic couldn't be tied down, but it was completely immobilized by the Kintharians' Earth Control, the diamond in it becoming its greatest weakness.

Melion was a level 85 Alpha Shapeshifter specializing in Doppelgangers. Like Cypher from Lost Divinities he could copy any appearance down to their bloodlines and memories. On the surface their abilities seemed identical, but Melion could even copy a Grade 11 Bloodline. On Quanoth, the number of living beings he couldn't imitate could be counted on one hand.

The reason Melion was extremely nervous was precisely because there were several individuals among his captors who were nearing the limits of his mimicry abilities. Just because he could copy a Grade 11 Bloodline didn't mean it was easy. It took a considerable amount of time and maintaining the transformation over a long period of time was grueling.

"Shut up, Seskel." Jake finally replied as he bombarded the Vampire with ultraviolet rays causing him to curl up on the floor and shriek.

Ignoring the charred Vampire squirming feebly on the ground, he turned to the other prisoners.

"I offer you two choices. Either submit to my rule, or perish. Jake declared dispassionately.

"I-I promise to leave Laudarkvik and never interfere with your plans again? Isn't that enough?" Syn pleaded desperately, the diamond chest shaking like a leaf.

Gerulf and Rogen snickered.

"No." Jake smiled. "If the world wasn't about to end I might have agreed, but the Celestial City is already here. As long as you have the will to live we are bound to fight if we meet again."

"What happens if we surrender?" Xaverie asked as she leaned forward slightly to give him a straight view of her busty cleavage.

The young woman was even more plump than her daughter. She wore a shoulderless gothic dress of black and scarlet velvet, with a low cut corset that was tight around the waist and highlighted her milky breasts, as well as a flared dress beneath that concealed her long legs almost entirely. In front, the dress opened like the curtains of a theater revealing her porcelain legs and her high stilettos. Her dainty arms were hidden under long tight gloves covering her skin up to her biceps, which together with her mascara and her red lips gave her a femme fatale aura. To complete the picture, Xaverie had a youthful face that resembled that of her daughter Aisling and they had exactly the same crimson red hair and almost the same height.

The only difference with Aisling was that Xaverie had two black horns instead of one and two beautiful black feathered wings reminiscent of fallen angels. Everyone knew that if the demoness wanted to break her bonds no one would be able to stop her.

Jake felt a Charm dozens of times more frightening than Aisling's assaulting his consciousness, but Asfrid and the other Eltarians immediately merged their spirit energy to neutralize this foreign influence.

Seeing that her attempt at seduction was a failure, Xaverie stopped smiling and became much more sensible. Satisfied with her change of attitude, Jake smiled and answered honestly,

"You will have to join my faction and obey my orders until the end of my mission here. To do this you will have to sign a special contract that will make it impossible to disobey until I leave. I will never ask you to do anything humiliating and I will not send you to die in a suicide mission. However, if I order it, you must fight for me. In exchange, you keep your freedom, control over your properties and clans, but your possessions will surely be requisitioned for the war effort. If we don't survive this end of the world, your wealth won't do you much good, will it?"

"So what do you choose?"

Chapter 796 Fishing For Bracelets

"Rather die than submit to a filthy Mutant!" Seskel, who had already recovered, leapt at him using his clan's infamous Celerity Technique.

In the hands of their Vampire Progenitor, the instantaneous speed achieved by this movement technique reached a whole new level, tantamount to teleportation. Sneering, Jake let him sink his fangs into the back of his neck, but just before the bite, his skin became coated with an inch of Adamantium, along with a telekinetic barrier.

Seskel's fangs were stopped dead in their tracks, his jaw unable to close a millimeter. Feeling the force of the bite intensify, Jake rolled his eyes, grabbed the Vampire by the neck like a chicken and smashed his head into the ground.

"Then die."

His foot landed on the back of the Vampire's skull and a radioactive pulse throbbled down his leg. Jake stomped and Seskel's head exploded like a watermelon falling from the 20th floor of a high-rise building. The ultraviolet flash cut off his regeneration and his HP regen dropped to zero as his body continued to melt and bleed.

Seconds later, Jake sensed the final consummation of his soul and knew that Seskel was no more.

The display of power deeply traumatized the other three special prisoners, but before that Jake turned to Seskel's descendants.

"Do you want to die too? I don't mind since you deserve it anyway."

Quillian and Riah, Seskel's two children, stood pale, glaring daggers at him with hatred, but neither of them dared to utter a word, much less a fart. Jake stared at them for a long time, but failing to guarantee their loyalty he said grimly,

"Asfrid, search their memories and ascertain their crimes."

"As you wish."

She and the other Eltarians calmly proceeded to pry into their mental defenses and search their memories. Once hypnotized, a ruthless and meticulous interrogation followed that revealed the full extent of their misdeeds.

When all of their secrets were unraveled in public, Jake and the other Myrtharian Nerds were left with ugly faces as they discovered with horror that none of these Vampires were innocent. Even the seven and eight year olds had tortured dozens of humans for fun and their personalities were so twisted that neither he nor his companions had time to provide psychotherapy.

When the investigation ended, Jake didn't hesitate for a second and ordered,

"Kill them all."

It was their fate anyway. If he hadn't come here, perhaps only Seskel would have stood a chance of getting on board the Celestial City. And even then, it was far from a sure thing.

Gerulf nodded and with a wave of his hand his Kintharian Guard cremated the Vampire prisoners with solar rays so blinding and focused that less than a second later there was nothing left but their ashes scattered on the half-melted tile floor.

After seeing the extent of Jake and his men's cruelty, Syn and Melion didn't dither any longer. They pledged their allegiance to him and Lucia supplied them with enough liquid alloy to produce an Oracle Device. The Oracle Contract was established and they understood with great astonishment that they had not lost out.

Xaverie was disturbed by the strange censorship preventing her from understanding some of the words of their discussion, but seeing the convinced expression of the two Metamorphs she realized that it might not be as horrible as she feared.

"I agree to surrender and become your future wife..." The milf Demoness blushed shyly, but no one was fooled.

"Dream on!" Lucia, Aisling and the two sisters vociferated at the same time.

The Dracul clan also swore loyalty to him without resisting as they realized that Aisling and Remus were already on their side. Wyatt was also on good terms with them and the fear of ending up burned alive like Seskel and his clan was the last straw.

As promised, Jake invited Xaverie, Syn and Melion to join the Myrtharian Nerds and they were briefed on their purpose here. When they learned that their world was just the umpteenth iteration of a planet used as a playground and testing ground for the Players of the Mirror Universe, they were appallingly shocked. Even Xaverie was no longer in the mood to seduce anyone.

Once peace was restored, Jake brought out the subordinates of each faction and soon only the important people were left. The High Council room obviously didn't have enough seats for everyone, especially for such massive felines as Mufasa and Shere Khan, so their first war council was held outside.

Without being told, the Kintharians erected a huge stone forum almost as ambitious as Nucnar's round stone table, and after they left, the invited guests filed in.

Xaverie wasted no time and immediately started the discussion with a hot topic.

"Well done Jake, you have won our allegiance and Laudarkvik belongs to you." She first congratulated him while shooting him a fawning look of adoration. "But what are you going to do next? Don't tell me you're like those morons Seskels and Aggenurs, wanting control of Laudarkvik to satisfy their vanity?"

"Hmmpf, of course not! Jake is not that kind of person." Lucia retorted curtly before giving the latter a sharp glare. "Isn't that right, Jake?"

If he answered yes the Myrtharian didn't dare imagine what would happen.

"Cough, of course not." He finally echoed, clearing his throat. "The goal has always been to survive this Apocalypse."

A knowing smile lit up the demoness' face.

"I see." She said as she looked at him strangely. "So you want to use this population as cannon fodder by dangling to them the false hope that they actually have a chance of reaching the Celestial City if they agree to fight under your banner.

"That sounds as hypocritical as a demon's methods to me. I like this."

Contrary to whatever reaction she imagined, Jake remained indifferent to her mockery. Instead, he nodded to Hade and replied,

"If you had said that a few days earlier, that would indeed have been my plan. The number of seats on board the Celestial City is limited to 10,000, so even with an outright victory only a fraction of us could have boarded. That's more than enough for my faction and Wyatt's, but not nearly enough to save the population of an entire city."

Xaverie frowned, while Aisling wore a surprised, almost anxious expression. She dared not allow herself to hope.

"You see," Jake resumed calmly. "Ever since I became the Mutant Leader I've been wondering how to save all these people under my protection. If it were impossible, I would have accepted it and moved on, but it turns out I finally found another possible path.

"I call this path Fishing for Bracelets."

"Fishing for bracelets?" Xaverie repeated with confusion.

She wasn't the only one confused. Except for Hade, everyone else was in the dark including his trusted allies like Lucia and Gerulf.

"Hade, I'll let you explain." Jake invited him to continue.

The former Fluidmaster walked to the center of the forum with one of his black spheres and activated it. The stone forum was immediately replaced by a spacious, luxuriously furnished metal hall. At a glance, those present could estimate that the building measured about 500 square meters.

Xaverie, Syn, Melion and Haynt immediately understood his intention, but they shook their heads instead,

"It won't work." The Astral declared flatly. "Don't ask me how we got this information, but we know for a fact that it is impossible to smuggle people into the Celestial City via a Spatial Ring, an Hidden Domain or an Artifact. Each person transported will count as one, and this is also the case for Necromancer and Summoner underlings residing in dedicated spirit dimensions."

That meant Vhoskaud couldn't have brought those millions of Undeads back to B842 through the Celestial City even if he wanted to.

Xaverie and Haynt expected to see disappointment on his and Hade's faces, but the two men just smiled.

"No one can fool Auras." Hade admitted matter-of-factly. "We anticipated this happening from the start. To save everyone, we don't intend to clinch our ticket aboard the Celestial City by force."

"So what do you plan to do?"

Jake pointed his finger skyward.

"Leave the planet." Hade grinned.

"What do you mean leave the planet?"

This time Xaverie's confusion was genuine. As much as the other Players could conceive of the idea of traveling into space, it was all fiction to the natives of Quanoth.

It wasn't that it was impossible for them to go into space. Someone like Haynt could obviously survive out there. The problem was what kind of life to live once they did.

Unlike Jake and Hade, they didn't know what kind of life awaited them once this Ordeal was over, and they didn't want to flee into space with their clan and then leave them to their fate in the sidereal void.

But there was another major concern. No one was able to get through those black clouds. Those who had tried never came back.

Chapter 797 We'll Have To Kill Many Players

"Flying off the planet is possible." Jake spoke up again. "I've done it before."

Lucia and the others who already knew about it weren't particularly shocked, but Wyatt and Seren who were attending the council reacted differently.

"You what? When?" The Vampire Progenitor questioned in disbelief.

"A few days ago." Jake revealed honestly. "My intention was not to find a way off this planet, but somehow it allowed me to gauge the difficulty of such a project.

"As you may know, the black clouds are gradually covering the planet. What you may not know is that Auras itself is at the origin of this calamity. And I'm not talking about one of its clones or an avatar, but the real Auras."

This time even an Archdemon like Xaverie couldn't help but tremble.

"You're saying it's Auras who wants us dead?" She conjectured with a sallow face. "Then it's over. If he doesn't want us to escape then we won't escape."

"Who said he didn't want us to escape?" Hade scoffed, "You are not yet Players, but merely new Evolvers who have just received their Oracle Devices. Our primary mission varies from person to person, but it's directly related to survival. For the strongest of us getting on board the Celestial City is the bare minimum requirement, but for the less skilled Players being in the last million survivors of Quanoth is more than enough to pass their Ordeal.

"So for most Players this means that it doesn't matter how they survive, as long as they are alive and kicking at the end of this Ordeal."

Melion, the Alpha Shapeshifter who currently resembled a huge shapeless slime, immediately picked up on the inconsistency.

"You just said that the strongest Players have no choice but to fight for a place aboard the Celestial City. Wouldn't escaping the planet be like failing your main mission?"

Jake nodded approvingly,

" Bingo. What you say is absolutely true, but that's because you're implying that we can't do both at the same time. The Celestial City and its Divine Academy descended from the sky, so it's basically a spaceship. Sooner or later, the ship will leave. As long as you can get on it, whether it's on Quanoth or elsewhere is irrelevant.

" Still, this is all speculation." Jake shrugged. "That's not what my plan is based on. My main mission requires me to board the Celestial City, that's true, but it also makes it clear what the consequence will be if I fail, which is to suffer the Purge with the rest of the damned. We can deduce that as long as we survive the Purge or avoid it, the main mission will remain a success."

A look of realization dawned on the other Players' faces. They had not considered their Main Mission in this light, because it was worded in a way that gave the illusion that failing the first condition would result in their immediate demise.

"You may be able to leave the planet, but we can't." Hephais commented with Drastan concurring. Both men were unable to fly.

"Jake, that's all good and well, but you yourself know how tricky it is to leave the planet." Lucia expressed her skepticism. She knew how much Aether he had spent with his Oracle Shield to get through the Mana Storm. "Not to mention the Aether required, not everyone has the Oracle Shield skill and more importantly our amount of liquid alloy is limited, as are our Oracle Ranks. Your Oracle Device didn't overheat during the Mana Storm, but with a few exceptions our bracelets will fail us within minutes at best after we enter the storm. Unless..."

Her eyes suddenly widened.

"Unless we fish for bracelets!" Gerulf burst into a thunderous laugh.

Noticing that some people were still confused, Jake took the time to clarify for everyone. Inwardly, however, he had to admit that he was astounded that the Kintharian got it right on the first try.

"To leave the planet, there are two major obstacles: the clouds and the Mana Storm. With each passing day, these two entities spread and grow stronger, becoming more and more treacherous. The clouds were not a danger for me a few days ago, but within a month I will also need the Oracle Shield to get through them. As for the Mana Storm, it is impassable without the Oracle Shield. Its effects are too unpredictable and I won't risk it.

"So, as some people have already understood, to leave the planet we'll have to act quickly and put our hopes on the Oracle Shield. The longer we wait, the more the Oracle Shield will be solicited and the faster it will overheat. As Lucia so kindly reminded us, the Oracle Shield's duration is very dependent on our Oracle Device's performance. This is influenced by our Oracle Rank which determines its energy levels as well as the amount of liquid alloy it contains.

"The last important factor is the Oracle Shield level. Below level 3, it will be very difficult to transport people with us and I guess I don't need to give you the current prices for level 3 of this skill in the Oracle Store..."

Several Players like Jake who had the Portable Oracle Store skill checked the prices out of curiosity and winced when they saw that the cost was close to 5 billion Aether point. That might not seem like much to upstarts like Jake, but it was a sum beyond the reach of most Fourth-Ordeal Players.

Buying anything through the Lvl 1 Portable Oracle Store was 200 times more expensive than its actual price. That put the price of such a skill at 1 trillion Aether points...

"If I were to leave the planet with everyone, we would need a massive Oracle Shield, at least lvl 5, as well as a ship big enough to carry everyone." Jake explained wryly after regaining their attention. "It's just not feasible at all."

Then he pointed again to the black sphere in Hade's hands and it all made sense.

"Unless you have artifacts like this at your disposal."

"And how are we going to get those artifacts? It's going to take a lot more than one to get everyone inside." Haynt said in a barely audible voice. With his tiny size, his frown made him look cute and at Esys's eager gaze she was holding back from ruffling his hair.

Lucia chuckled when she heard the question. She and Jake had been pleasantly surprised to discover that the Fluid Grandmaster could easily manufacture all these artifacts. His performance exceeded that of most of Quanoth's Space Mages.

When Jake had asked him to make a Portable Fortress for him, he had been joking. He didn't expect Hade to actually make it for him in just a few days. When the artifact had been delivered to him as promised, that was when he had come up with the idea for this plan.

"Making these Artifacts is not an issue." Hade replied plainly. "A slight alteration will allow people to get inside."

"You heard him." Jake laughed.

The Myrtharian Nerds, Seren, Lysander, and Kenway nodded in agreement. If they could really get off the planet without tearing each other apart, then that was fine.

But not everyone shared that opinion.

"What about Carmin? Elduin? Bhammod? And what about Lost Divinities?!" Wyatt exclaimed angrily. "We let them die?! Forget everything?!"

Jake, Hade and the rest of the Myrtharian Nerds smirked.

"I've been waiting for that one." He chuckled grimly. "I said I had a plan to save everyone in Laudarkvik. That is my promise in exchange for the loyalty of these people and the guarantee that they will not become cheap cannon fodder.

"But did I say once that I would not fight? You're forgetting the crucial step in this plan."

"Fishing for bracelets." Wyatt finally understood.

"Fishing for bracelets." Jake repeated with a meaningful smile. "The population of Laudarkvik is over one million. Hade will need three to four months to make these artifacts and that's assuming he has all the materials he needs. The Oracle Shield at that point will have to be as powerful as possible to get through the atmosphere because I can't predict how dire the situation will be.

"That means we'll need three things for this plan to succeed. A lot of resources to make the Space Artifacts required for the crossing, a lot of Aether to power as many Oracle Shields as necessary, and as much liquid alloy as we can get."

At this point, Jake dropped his pedagogical pleasantries and flashed a devilish grin,

"And for that, we'll have to kill many, many, many Players."

"How many exactly are we talking about?" Wyatt asked with a bad feeling.

"As many as it takes." Jake replied ominously.

Not just Lost Divinities, but all the Players scattered across the continent would now become their prey. It was no longer a matter of morality, enmity or revenge, but simply doing what was necessary to survive.

Whatever it took.

Chapter 798 Eternally Grateful

The sky was getting dark.

The Wilderness had never felt so alien and terrifying. The chirping of birds was gone, as were the howls and growls of animals. All that remained was a heavy, oppressive silence.

Amidst these desolate, pitch-black woods, a long procession of caravans was making its way with the slowness of a snail towards the North, heading with a heavy heart towards their only hope: the Shatug Empire. The land where the Celestial City had taken up residence.

The men and women driving these caravans were typical peasants. Not all of them were human, but all the creatures and aliens present were definitely on the lower end of the social ladder.

Humans, goblins, elves, dwarves, halflings and even more unusual creatures made up this long procession and on each of their faces one could read resignation but also a faint ray of hope. It was this minute hope that gave them the impetus to push forward despite their exhaustion.

This tiny hope rested on the shoulders of only one person.

A Guilty.

Gormer Envalur was a talented Player. An eccentric alien of an almost extinct race. He was barely taller than a goblin, but his build was even larger than that of an adult orc. With his armor on, his huge belly made him look obese, but underneath his chest plate were multiple layers of muscle as hard as concrete.

In contrast, his arms were disproportionately long and thin, with six sets of joints that gave him exceptional mobility. Instead of hands, he had a kind of translucent tuft reminiscent of an old broom, but he could rearrange them at will to give them any shape.

More surprisingly, he had no legs, his rounded belly being in direct contact with the ground. To move around, he had a rotating bust, entirely uncoupled from his skull, functioning like a multidirectional wheel. His arms and head were connected to each other and to this wheel, replacing what could have been an axle.

It was a strange alien but that was not the only reason why these peasants were following it.

Gormer was strong.

But suddenly, in the dead of night, the dirt path they were walking along began to quake, then fissure. A pillar of lava the size of one of their caravans suddenly shot out of the ground with rifle bullet speed, rising right under the vehicle Gormer was driving.

Their esteemed hero... was burnt to a crisp.

A charred alien crashed seconds later into a tree, with only a few HPs left. A dark-skinned giant with a silver mane stood in front of the Player and unapologetically ripped off both his arms and legs, using his own Oracle Device to drain all his liquid alloy and Aether.

"Thank you for your patronage." Gerulf grunted shamelessly.

Germer gave him a hateful look filled with incomprehension, wondering what he might have done to deserve this, but the huge Kintharian just laughed,

"Don't look at me like that. You didn't do anything wrong. I needed resources and you were easy prey. If you want someone or something to blame, blame your bad luck and stupidity for wanting to play alone when you didn't have the skills. Or blame that Oracle who created those sordid Ordeals that drove us to kill each other. Blame Auras. Do whatever you want.

"If you want revenge, seek out Gerulf, of the Myrtharian Nerds."

"Psst! Hey, don't make a sound, the Ruins of Daecadia are just over that cliff." A burly man with a look that was half archaeologist, half smuggler, motioned for the mercenaries traveling with him to stop.

For months, they had been wandering through the peat and swamps of this cursed land in search of a legendary treasure, a tale of a divine artifact designed by Auras. This object, it is said, can bestow invincibility upon its master and his allies. In this context of imminent doom, desperate people tended to give much more credit to these myths and legends.

Especially since after many adventures, these explorers had managed to ascertain that this treasure, or at least the ruins where it was supposed to rest, was not a myth.

With their hearts in their mouths, the mud-covered, disheveled mercenaries waded with renewed motivation through the peat and breathlessly reached the cliff that had been taunting them from afar for many hours. While exploring its surroundings for a while, one of them shouted with joy.

"I found the entrance!"

"HAHAHAhahaha! I knew I wasn't wrong!" The leader of the mercenaries let out a thunderous laugh, tears welling up in his eyes.

"But why do I feel like someone got in before us?" Another mercenary blurted out with concern.

The other mercenaries inspected the entrance to this cave more closely and indeed they discovered that something seemed to have widened it recently. The entrance was wide enough to fit a huge dragon, which seemed insane or this cave would have been discovered much earlier...

Already less confident, the adventurers' boss decided,

"We didn't come all this way for nothing. Even if a monster or a giant beat us to it, if it's still there we'll fight. Without the Codex of Auras we are doomed all the same so we might as well fight to the death right now."

The faces of the other mercenaries frowned and they nodded grimly. Unsheathing their weapons, together they cautiously rushed into the cave.

As they explored, their faces grew more and more tense and less and less confident.

"What kind of evil could have caused such marks..." One of them gasped in abject horror as he gazed at the deep grooves cut into the rock that corresponded to claws longer than his entire body.

Gulp.

"Don't give up, we're close to the goal! The leader spurred them on, sensing that he was losing the morale of his men.

With his promises of glory and incentives, the mercenaries mustered up their courage and pressed on. An hour later, they reached a large, completely empty room.

"T-this... Is this the treasure you promised us boss?!"

"You bastard, I always said you were a crook!"

Their boss who was being insulted sat dumbly, sporting an ugly face. Where was his treasure?!

In that empty room, there was only one thing. The still warm corpse of a titanic Manticore. Normally, they would have run away without hesitation, but the creature was in no condition to harm them.

Its tail had been ripped off, its legs dismembered, its spine crushed by a sharp bite... Its hybrid chimera body was covered with lacerations belonging to huge claws and this otherworldly creature seemed to have been tortured for a long time, slowly bleeding to death before its enemy deigned to finish it off.

Suddenly, the chief noticed a shiny reflection in a pool of dried blood and he bent down to catch the object. The smell seemed familiar.

"Black hair... from a cat?"

While these kinds of scenarios were being repeated over and over again on Quanoth, Jake, Lucia, Haynt, Asfrid and the Eltarrians were preparing for the upcoming migration. Because the clouds and the Mana Storm were blowing north, they had decided to move as well to maximize their chances of success where the clouds were thinner.

Coincidentally, this happened to match the Celestial City's location. The more time passed, the more Jake came to realize that the final clash against Lost Divinity and other competing factions of the same ilk was probably inevitable.

It had been two weeks since Jake revealed his master plan to his allies. Since then, Laudarkvik had changed a lot.

With order restored and the disruptive elements having deserted, perished or joined their cause, the citizens living in fear could at long last leave their homes without worry. When they heard that a Mutant Guilty had claimed the city, they had feared the worst, but now they were grateful.

Because he had given them hope.

It was only rumors at first, spread by the Myrtharian Nerds and the allied factions' underlings. The order to get ready to migrate had been given in advance and enough food to keep them going had been distributed.

No more Vampires were sucking the blood of innocent inhabitants, and the cases of unexplained disappearances had stopped. Crime and cannibalism had fallen to zero, which was attributed to the wiping out of the majority of Werebeings and Undeads.

The depressing and heavy atmosphere had also virtually dissolved when Jake had ordered the purging of all specters and ghosts who refused to submit to his rule. Haynt had already failed to control them, so he had fully supported this measure from the Myrtharian.

By and large, the citizens of Laudarkvik were pleased with their new leader. Respected and influential figures like Aisling, Kenway and Haynt were following him and that was enough for these people. Even if they knew they were going to die, at least their current living conditions were dignified.

Ironically, it was when the apocalypse loomed that they finally stopped living in fear. For that alone, the citizens of Laudarkvik would be eternally grateful.

But this morning, an official announcement was made. At high noon, their new supreme leader Jake Wilderth would make a public statement.

Chapter 799 What's Wrong?

It was hot. The sun was peaking, but it was dark. It was a time to sleep. A time to stay home, dreaming of a radiant future that would never come.

That was how this day should have gone. Like all those of the past months. In the smothering fear of being devoured, sacrificed, forgotten.

Despair had become a tangible emotion that followed each citizen of Laudarkvik like a second shadow. And yet, for the first time in ages, the residents found themselves leaving their homes behind to attend the gathering at the top of the city where their new leader, Jake Wilderth, had convened them.

There was obviously not enough room for everyone on the Fifth Plateau, and the latecomers sat on the steps between the Fourth and Fifth Plateaus. Those who were lazy, physically impaired, or simply too late sat in one of the Faction Districts on the Fourth Floor.

These Districts, normally reserved for official members and families of the nine factions, were now open for the occasion, and for most of these fearful and penniless commoners it was the first time they had set foot here.

Noon rolled around and the nervous and anxious residents who were waiting began to feel the fear and despair creeping back into them. What if they were wrong? What if this leader was like the others? That he did not want their well-being, but to use them to pursue his own interests?

Once the first shadow of doubt, the first fear was awakened, all sorts of negative ruminations flooded their minds and soon the despair they thought was behind them began to haunt them again.

When some were about to fall back into despondency and asthenia, a bright sun shone over them.

Its warm light touched the whole city with its rays, chasing away the darkness of Laudarkvik, but also the one in their hearts. Covering their dazzled eyes with their arms, the inhabitants marveled in awe at the huge figure that towered over them, floating in the sky like a mighty sun god and dispelling the dark clouds for kilometers around.

It was a giant several thousand meters tall, with a handsomeness as ethereal as otherworldly. His shining silver hair and eyes shone like a full moon dipped in molten gold. Hypnotic galaxies swirled rhythmically in place of his pupils, giving the impression that he had access to the most mystical secrets of the universe.

The divine avatar was shirtless, revealing chiseled muscles as hard and lustrous as bronze, wearing only a strange golden medallion of a winged sun around his neck, and a strange shell in his right hand.

This giant staring at the crowd was none other than Jake. Or rather a projection, a hologram powered by his Light Manipulation.

Actually floating only a few hundred meters off the ground and measuring only a little over six meters, the Myrtharian had to admit that he had outdone himself. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Lucia gawking at him with her mouth agape and he could not help but smile.

He owed the credit for this feat to Asfrid and the support of all the Eltarians and Myrtharian Nerds present who had agreed to transfer all their Spirit Energy to him. Right now, he was the embodiment of the One Mind that made the strength of this race and his spiritual fluctuations were currently greater than Haynt's at his peak.

With Shamash's sun disk hanging around his neck, he truly looked like a divine being. Everything else was just a show. The sun shining, the dark clouds dispersing... With his current Mental Strength, he could easily accomplish these feats with his Bloodline abilities and a little telekinesis.

Right now, he was at his most powerful.

Just as the crowd could see him, Jake could distinguish each of them as if they stood directly in front of him. With an untraceable mental scan, he gained a clear picture of each of the inhabitants, natives and Players mixed in with the crowd.

He was about to begin his war speech, when a slight frown clouded his face. He had recognized several players whom he did not expect to see here.

The crease on his forehead lasted only a moment and soon he spread his arms, a welcoming smile plastered on his charismatic face.

"Sons and daughters of Laudarkvik, I am Jake Wilderth. A Guilty.

"My brothers and sisters. I see in your eyes the same fear that would take the heart of me! A day may come, when the courage of men fails, when we forsake our friends and break all bonds of Fellowship, but it is not this day!"

He had always wanted to deliver this punchline.

"On the right and left two seas of death enclose you, without your possessing even a single ship for escape. Unavoidable war on one side if you choose to fight for a glorious death; suicidal resignation if you refuse to participate in this macabre game.

"Isn't that what you tell yourself?"

The crowd nodded glumly. The future was dark no matter which way they looked. Satisfied with their reaction, Jake continued,

"Many of you have spent your entire lives as victims, living in fear without worrying about tomorrow. Mistrust and despair have set in your bones and you don't even have the courage to hope.

"I am not here to dissuade you from one choice or another. If you want to die, stick your head in the sand, or simply enjoy your last moments with your loved ones, I will not stop you.

"I stand before you today with one purpose: The truth and one promise."

Jake marked a short silence after this statement, letting the echo of his last sentence linger in the air.

"For those who don't know, there are only 10,000 seats on the Celestial City located in the heart of the Shatug Empire. Millions of warriors, monsters and Guilties like myself and your former leaders will fight to claim these priceless places. Wars beyond your imagination will rage throughout Quanoth and their fierceness will only grow until only the elite of the elite remain on this planet.

"Even if courage has not deserted you and you choose to fight, there has never been any future for you beyond this apocalypse, unless you possess power great enough to defeat me in a duel.

"That's why... I won't ask you to fight for something as trivial as escaping aboard the Celestial City. If I did, what kind of leader would I be?"

"But I'd be lying if I pretended to expect nothing from you. What I offer you is a ray of hope. If you believe in me, some of you will surely die, but the rest will survive.

"As powerful as I am, even I and my allies cannot guarantee that none of you will die. Hell! I don't even know if I will survive too. Our fates are tied together in victory or defeat."

He paused again and this time he noted the extent of their pessimism. Their faces screamed distrust, and on the surface his speech sounded like any spiel one of their previous tyrannical leaders might have spouted.

"I have a plan." Jake declared solemnly, his gaze peering into the hearts of every spectator. "A plan that doesn't require us to fight for the Celestial City, that doesn't require you to sacrifice yourself in a futile battle.

"Leave this planet."

This time he smiled as he saw the crowd's stunned reactions.

"I know to you natives it may seem absurd, but to a Guilty man like me it's not impossible. Let me show you how."

At that moment, another giant holographic projection appeared above them like a gigantic screen superimposed on the sky. In this video recording, they saw Jake fly faster and faster, higher and higher. They saw him flying through the deadly turbulence of those storm clouds, braving the lightning and thunder.

Halfway across space, they saw him with bated breath looking down on the entire planet below him and saw the clouds spreading inexorably. Then they saw him stop in front of an impenetrable multicolored mana storm, believing at the time that this was the source of the apocalypse predicted by the prophecy.

But again, they were gobsmacked as their leader did not give up and charged valiantly through the storm. His body was tossed about by the Mana impacts for what seemed like forever, and finally, when all seemed lost, the chaos subsided and a vast starry void filled their vision. In the distance, the sun that they had not seen for so long was shining brightly.

The video clip ended at that moment, leaving the crowd dazed and dreamy. Their hope rekindled.

For obvious reasons, he did not show them the part involving Aerae. The result would probably have been counterproductive.

In additional videos, he showed them the performance of his Purgatory, his stellar battleship, and Hade's portable fortresses, clearly explaining his intentions and the conditions and limitations of his plan.

Their spirits lifted, Jake concluded his speech with imperious coolness,

"You know everything now. The ball is in your court."

And then the giant hologram faded away and darkness returned. There was no ovation or shouting. Just silence.

A moment later, Jake landed atop Laudarkvik with a frustrated sigh.

"What's wrong?" Lucia worried.

"Nothing... I've always wanted to drop the mic after a standing ovation, but it took the one day in my life that I give a speech that I don't have to. Heck, I won't ever need one..."

Chapter 800 Ruby Is Here

A few minutes later, Jake appeared alone in a dark alley in the Outer City. A chubby black man with a military haircut and a black uniform was fidgeting with a cigarette, spacing out as he stared at the black clouds above him.

The man wore a bulletproof vest and anachronistic gear by the standards of the Ret'Asi Empire, but what caught Jake's eye was the Earth patch on his right shoulder pad, which gave away his affiliation.

"I didn't expect to meet a New Earth soldier here on Quanoth." Jake abruptly cut off his musings in a not-so-friendly voice. "But if I remember correctly, you're a friend of Ruby's. I should have known she wasn't sent to this Ordeal alone.

"Are you aware of her true nature, Craig?"

Craig looked him straight in the eye, his customary jovial attitude gone, and answered with a wry smile,

"If you hadn't made that grandiose speech a few minutes earlier, I would have found it hard to recognize you."

Jake had once more cast the Miniaturization spell and currently looked just like a handsome and tall man with silvery-golden hair and eyes. It was a far cry from his hulky, ungainly physique of the Second Ordeal and even less so from his almost godlike appearance of a few minutes ago.

"That doesn't answer my question." The Laudarkvik leader threatened in a husky voice in return.

"That's why I'm here." Craig sighed as he stubbed out his fag with his foot to extinguish it. "This Ordeal didn't exactly go as planned for us. Ruby... left her post the day we got here. A lot of soldiers died. We have no news. Except for me and Ryo, no one is looking for her."

Jake feigned surprise. He didn't like Ruby, but her colleagues didn't seem like the kind of friends who would help her resist her wicked nature.

"And what are you doing here if you don't mind?" He asked dismissively. "If you can't find Ruby by following an Oracle Path, I doubt you can predict my location. And more importantly, as you already know, Ruby and I are not on the best of terms."

That was an understatement. She had betrayed him, then tried to kill him the next time they met and he had given her the beating of a lifetime in retaliation before making her his slave. He now knew a lot about her and did not resent her as much as he would have liked.

He understood that she wasn't totally responsible for what she was turning into, but on the other hand she was quickly becoming another person, her hatred for anything that wasn't a Digestor growing by the day.

The Slave Contract only had a hold on her human half, while the Digestor half of her soul seemed to have some resistance to his commands. For this reason, no matter how compassionate he was Jake could never trust her.

"You're right, none of us can locate Ruby. Not even Alef our instructor." Craig admitted honestly. "When the Digestor is in control, she disappears from any radar and is no longer a variable in any Oracle Path.

" Meanwhile, finding you wasn't that hard. You forget that the Ret'Asi Empire is mostly populated by humans. All the New Earths Players mobilized for this Ordeal with Ruby are scattered across the land. Keeping tabs on any events involving a powerful native or Player and comparing them to our databases, it wasn't hard to determine your identity."

"You flatter me..." Jake growled as he realized they had a file on him in their database. It remained to be seen how up to date it was.

"But that still doesn't tell me why you were looking for me?"

Craig chuckled miserably,

"One of our men has a Nightmare Bloodline, a kind of wraith that feeds off nightmares and their negative emotions. Their strength is at its peak in the dark and they hate light. Contrary to what one might think, a Nightmare can be a benevolent ghost when it merely relieves people of their nightmares and traumas. A good Nightmare can save you years of psychotherapy. They are also very good spies and messengers, as their intangible bodies can move from one point of darkness to another very quickly. For

this reason, the Earth Union has formed a whole regiment of Nightmares and every important team cooperates with one of them."

Craig paused for a second and then sighed,

"It turns out that he belonged to Haynt's faction, but when the ghosts rebelled and joined the Demons, he was forced to follow suit to avoid being singled out. He then took refuge in the Dark Races' district, but when it... blew up... then caught fire, the light and flames claimed his life..."

"Oh..." Jake blurted out awkwardly. That meant he was a collateral victim of their clash against Shamash and Vhoskaud.

p "Yeah oh..." Craig rolled his eyes. "He died unfairly, but he never stopped sending us his daily report. We know you've been here for a long time. We even know that Ruby was here at some point too and that you two teamed up."

Jake didn't try to deny it. It was pointless and he saw no reason to lie.

"Okay, Ruby did come here, but she's not here anymore."

"Cough..." Craig cleared his throat with an insistent look. "A rumor also came back to us that she was obeying your orders and was in no position to disobey you."

This time the Myrtharian glared at the coated Player with slight killing intent. This Nightmare could not have accessed such information.

"And where did this rumor come from?" He asked in a chilling voice.

Craig swallowed hard.

"Lost Divinities. It's one of their sources of income."

"Fuck!"

Jake punched the wall to his right and the three-story building that had asked for nothing collapsed like a house of cards. How Lost Divinities had gotten this information there were plenty of possibilities.

It could have been from a Thozuch Clan Demon, from a Beastmaster watching the area through the eyes of any inconspicuous creature like a small bird or rodent, or from Elduin, Carmin and Bhammod who were currently their prisoners.

On second thought, the latter was the most likely. Seeing that Jake was not going to deny it, Craig put on a relieved smile and finally asked in an almost pleading tone,

"Let me meet Ruby. I want to talk to her. Our soldiers need her."

Jake hesitated slightly, weighing the pros and cons, but when he realized he had nothing better to do, he agreed to his request.

"Follow me."

For any other Player, finding Ruby would have been challenging without a sufficient Oracle Rank, especially if her Digestor part was in charge, but for the Master with whom she had signed a Slave Contract it was totally within his purview.

He focused on their connection, a tenuous thread of consciousness, but soon began to sweat when he couldn't find anyone. Through the Spirit Shell, he sent a command to the Myrtharian Nerds and soon a surge of Spirit Energy flowed into his soul, pumping his aura to unprecedented levels.

Craig watched this change with bulging eyes, but seeing Jake's focused face he knew this was not the right time to interrupt. His Spirit Body momentarily boosted, his mental sense finally broke through the fog clouding his investigations and Ruby's presence, faint and distant appeared in his mind.

"This way." He soared, grabbing the soldier by the lapel of his jacket.

The duo flew through the dark sky much faster than a fighter jet and soon Laudarkvik faded into the distance behind them. They passed through many forests, jungles and valleys and Jake was surprised to learn that he had left the Ret'Asi Empire.

Quanoth was a vast planet, but it took Jake nearly a dozen hours to finally sense Ruby's presence above a bottomless, ice-covered chasm. Without fear, he plunged into the abyss, his Myrtharian Eyes glowing like torches in the darkness.

When he hit the bottom of the abyss, Jake didn't stop and charged towards the ground. Before he crashed, the ground ebbed like the tide to let him pass and he flew into the gap. They flew for a few more minutes, the temperature dropped rapidly before finally stopping in front of a palace of ice whose walls emitted an icy smoke close to absolute zero.

"Ruby is here." Jake declared calmly as he let go of Craig's collar.

The man collapsed to the ground on all fours and immediately began to vomit the full contents of his stomach.

"I thought after all those Ordeals, a soldier would have gotten over the fear of heights."

"Oh please!" Craig raved, holding back a gag. "I've been flying once a month since I was eight years old, but never, EVER, have I been on a plane like this."

"I'm not a plane." Jake hissed.

"THAT'S the fucking point! Dammit, even the centrifuges they used to torture us in to get us used to acceleration and gravity changes weren't this violent..."