

# Dimensional Descent

## Chapter 2661: Robot

From the very beginning, it never mattered whether they had actually cheated or not. Leonel truly had no proof, but that was never really the point.

Just like Minerva had said, at a certain realm, the objective truth wasn't all that mattered...

But Leonel did feel that she was wrong about something... even on the lowest levels, objective truth was hardly ever what was most important either.

The idea that truth alone should reign supreme were the ideals of an idealistic and naive individual. Truth was only as important as the way it was packaged, and the way it was packaged was dependent on era, on culture, on the immediate climate...

If one couldn't accept this, you only really needed to look at the historical trends.

By definition, every time the majority changed their minds and accepted another path as their reality, it required convincing.

But how many could truly understand the science that proved the Earth was round and not flat? How many understood the nuance of evolution? How many could read Einstein's paper on relativity and actually come to understand what he was talking about?

And yet most accepted this as the objective truth.

Why?

It was because they had been convinced of it. It was because at a certain point, enough people had been pushed off their current course that it became natural to accept it as the truth.

It wasn't the first time it happened, and it wouldn't be the last by any stretch.

Even further than that, how many times were discoveries ignored for years before they were accepted? How many different scientists had come to prove the same matter, only for just one of them to get the credit for presenting it the best way first?

No matter what realm of academia you were at, the objective truth never mattered as much as the timing and the packaging in which it was presented.

Everything else could be ignored.

And right now, Leonel could see some of those wheels turning. He hadn't made another breakthrough, but he had had a shift in mindset.

He was already doing a lot of this. What was he doing now if not trying to change the public's perception of himself and his Wise Star Order status?

The intelligent and the powerful could always make the truth what they wanted it to be. If a God descended now and told everyone that Leonel was a menace to be killed, would the objective truth even matter?

If these people wanted to play games, Leonel was more than prepared to play along with them. In fact, he would give them more than they could handle.

At that moment, Leonel's pillar began to slowly dim and his point total moved up from 1 point to 3. It seemed that the pillar had deemed his rebuttal worth more than just a single point.

Celestia's expression was flushed with hints of embarrassment and anger. It felt to her like Leonel had just treated her like a child who didn't understand anything. Then, her very own Race's treasures had agreed with him.

This was the most humiliating moment of her life.

Leonel turned toward Lumina as though Celestia didn't exist. By now, she must have realized that Leonel responded exactly the way he did to goad her into responding the way she had. If not for her targeting Leonel on his third place finish, would it even have been possible for things to end like this?

Orion, who stood beside Lumina, felt his heart constrict under Leonel's gaze. Lumina was far too foolish and far too enraged to see what was happening. He could already

tell that Leonel had shifted his target to them, but she was too busy clenching her fists to realize that they should probably prepare.

They were a seed beneath Leonel and had placed fifth. Just below them was Aerin and Lyra who seemed to be close, so they were already at a disadvantage against Leonel to begin with due to the silencing rules.

This wasn't a battle they should have picked, at least not yet.

He pinched the bridge of his nose. That saying about fearing bone-headed teammates was really ringing true right now.

Leonel smiled, but his gaze seemed to be particularly cold when it flashed over Orion. Mimicking him during a fight against his wife already signed this man's death warrant. The Cloud Race member was just very lucky that Leonel wasn't in a position to kill him outright right here and now.

But even so, he could do something else.

Beneath his smile, as expected, Lumina spoke first as Orion was too shaken to stop her.

"You've been doing a lot of questioning and accusing, but you've yet to contribute anything. Have you forgotten what this exchange is all about? This isn't a sparring match."

"Oh?" Leonel smiled. "I don't mind, but that's precisely what it is. Sparring of the minds. Do you disagree?"

"Semantics." Lumina spat. "I used the word sparring to point toward your needless aggression. What your statistics don't account for is the relative upbringing of those here. It is natural that they might have the same answers because they have systematic training that are of relative similarity. The fact that they might draw the same deductions is only natural."

"Ah, so you mean to say that they're robots incapable of self-thought. An interesting summary."

Lumina was flustered for only a moment before she recovered.

"There goes the aggression and ad hominem attacks again. You seem incapable of engaging with the topic and want to constantly obfuscate and hide the truth. We can all see through you.

"First you forced Celestia to answer a question for your own personal gain, and then you don't show any sincerity by providing your own perspective. Instead, you just launched another attack.

"How can such a petty, narrow minded person possibly achieve great things? You'll always be stuck in the same mindset, and ironically you'll form your own barriers and make yourself into your own robot."

## Chapter 2662: Trap

Leonel's smile didn't fade as their pillars began to tremble once again. The challenge in Lumina's words was clear. It was almost like if he did give his opinion now, he would be admitting that she was right and thus lose out on the round. But if he didn't answer, he would also be proving her right by being the "petty" man she claimed him to be, and thus lose anyway.

The only way forward was to thread the needle and get her to move off of her position. However, Leonel didn't seem to be in a hurry to do so.

"I heard that you two were part of the cohort who attacked my wife?" Leonel suddenly asked.

"Don't try and change the subject," Lumina growled. "Answer the question like you've made everyone else before you do."

Leonel chuckled. "The pillar has yet to give its decision yet, so who are you to decide whether I'm changing the subject or not? You've been doing a lot of talking for others, is your favorite position that of an obedient doggy?"

Lumina's eyes opened wide, her fury almost getting the best of her before she just laughed with a tone filled with mirth and derision.

"You've heard him, everyone. This is the response of a man who has no shred of intelligence of his own. It's ironic you call me a dog when all you know how to do is bark and bite back. Did you miss the part where this was a conversation of intellectuals?"

"Mm, so I guess your answer is that you're mad that the pillar hasn't granted you victory yet?"

Leonel shifted the focus right back to the pillars that were still the process of glowing. He uncaringly stirred the conversation back to the topic he wanted to focus on, and it left Lumina not knowing how to respond for a moment.

"Well, you can choose to not answer the question. But I believe that the pillar might take that as a loss on your part."

Leonel's smile deepened and Lumina suddenly realized something.

Clearly, the pillar felt that Leonel's line of questioning was in line with their current debate. Did that mean that Leonel was trying to force her to confess to her crimes with the pillar as support?

Suddenly, her face drained of all blood.

No one knew the full extent of what had happened during the Gathering of Kingdoms. The only projected images were from the actual battles, the happenings in the city weren't well known at all.

However, this Gathering of Minds was entirely different. No... it couldn't be said that it was different, but rather that what was being projected to the world right this moment was this very conversation.

The only saving grace for Lumina, the only hope that she could cling to, was the fact that historically, fewer people watched the debates versus the actual challenge portion.

However, how could she hang her hat on this now?

Not only was this the very start of the debate round as barely a few minutes had passed, but it had all started off with a bang with an immediate clash thanks to Leonel. On top of that, this was the first Gathering of Minds in generations.

How could people not be watching?!

A cold sweat began to pour down Lumina's back.

What they had done was nothing short of sinister. She was afraid to answer, afraid to admit it, afraid to take the consequences of what it might mean.

She wasn't just Lumina, she was a princess of her family and on top of that, she was a proud Owlán descendent. It was something she flaunted everywhere she went, and it was something clear by the illusory wings she always used to carry herself.

Suddenly, the pillar beneath her began to fade and Leonel's own began to glow brighter and brighter.

It was like the last bits of sand in an hourglass were trickling down, painting the very same imagery as the cold sweat that was making her robes stick to her back. They dropped down one after another and time seemed to slow in her eyes.

She only had a few seconds to respond and time was running out. On top of that, Leonel had a silence that he could use on them. If she waited until the last minute, she would never get a chance at all.

She could say that Leonel didn't have any evidence, but hadn't he crushed Celestia even without any evidence to speak of?

Was she really going to have to admit it? If she did, she wouldn't just be implicating herself, but the Owlans. If Minerva was enraged, her family was finished. She could wipe them all out on her own.

Orion, who was standing beside her, didn't have nearly as much riding on this. But it felt that Leonel, sitting there, stroking his wife's hair, was akin to a slumbering dragon.

Every step they took in his layer was like another weight on their hearts, and the pressure was growing so great that he was suffocating.

Of all the ways he had expected this matter to go, never had he thought that things would end like this.

His Cloud Race already had a bad reputation among the Races and they were only able to maintain their prestige through plausible deniability and their overall strength. If he was roped into this...

Watching the two being suffocated like this, many began to wonder if this truly wasn't a battle. The populations of Existence had suddenly never felt that a debate could be so entertaining. The stakes felt so high that it was as though they were standing on the precipice of a cliff themselves.

And that was the entirety of Leonel's mastery. The information, the fact that his wife had been treated like someone to suppress and crush, hardly mattered. Most of those watching probably felt that it was only natural for a human to suffer in such a way.

But if he packaged it like this instead...

Orion suddenly steeled himself and spoke in a booming voice.

"I did hear that your wife was attacked. In fact, I saw it with my own two eyes. However, saying that we were part of the cohort is going a little far, don't you think? My Cloud Race has its quirks, but you shouldn't be reacting like this because I almost defeated your wife in battle, right?"

## **Chapter 2663: Smile**

There was no other choice. They had to fight it out with Leonel on the grounds that they did nothing outside the norm.

He could already see Leonel's intentions. Lumina had accused him of being a brute who only knew how to bark and bite, and now he was asking them what role they played.

"Really? Is that so?" Leonel asked with a smile. "Are you sure that you don't want to retract that statement?"

Orion clenched his jaw.

Leonel suddenly pointed up and an image played.

"Unfortunate," an image of Orion chuckled. "I asked them not to put such a beauty through hardship, there was only so much I could do," Orion shrugged his shoulders in the image. "Those guys are pretty heartless. Well, I think one of them is just acting out of jealousy. Maybe you'll meet her, though it seems unlikely at this point. Lumina is her name. No need to thank me."

The real Orion suddenly turned a ghastly sheen of white. At the same time, his Cloud Figure shook and trembled, the runes in his Cloud Figure looked as though they were about to collapse entirely.

He cursed at himself internally. The worst part about this image was that he hadn't even turned into Leonel at that point in the body, so it was even more difficult for him to deal with the situation.

Just as Lumina glared at him and was about to rage at his sheer incompetence and stupidity. He gave her a pointed glare.

At that moment, they realized that if Lumina suddenly snapped at him, it would be tantamount to admitting her guilt as well.

"Are you aware that this is a debate of the minds? Not a place for your theatrics? There are any number of ways to fake such an image. To form such a perfect one at that? One that so perfect encapsulates my guilt? Do you take the spectators for idiots?"

It was shameless, unmistakably so. However, none of that mattered right now, not in the slightest. This was a debate where the truth was less important than its presentation.

There were certainly people in the audience who would have watched that battle. There were also most certainly people smart enough to realize that Aina was definitely being ganged up on.

But during the Gathering of Kingdoms, even at that round, there were always thousands of ongoing battles. And, back during then, he had spoken those words the instant he stepped into the arena. So even if most would have chosen to focus on their battle because it was a clash of titans, they could have easily missed the start.

However, what made Orion uneasy was that Leonel's smile didn't fade.

"Indeed, I could have faked it, you're right. Your Cloud Race is certainly capable of doing such a thing and are well known for their... distasteful methods."

Orion's expression darkened. "This was what my partner was referring to. Your crude and crass style has no business being in these circles. Mentioning a person's Race as though that assigns fault to their character? You should be ashamed of yourself."

Lumina seemed to finally relax. She felt that Orion was performing better than she thought he would be able to after that video resurfaced.

Leonel's smile deepened.

"Is it that much of a problem? Should we go over your Race's history?"

Orion's expression darkened. "Every Race has their own shades of dark and shades of light. I have no idea what listing out something that I could do for any number of Races will prove. Do you just want to use this as a platform to disparage others?"

"Need I remind you that this is a sanctioned debate, not some crass bar for you to hurl insults in."

"Me? Crass insults?" Leonel chuckled.

Orion kept feeling more and more uneasy. He looked down at the pillars, wondering why they hadn't assigned a winner yet. They were already looping around in circles, shouldn't it be smart enough to understand that Leonel had nothing?

"So, I'll give you two one last chance. Did you, or did you not attack my wife outside the bounds of the Gathering of Kingdoms in order to secure a "brutish" and "crass" victory?"

Orion sneered. "Asking the same question over and over again isn't going to get you a different result."

Leonel pursed his lips and nodded. "Interesting."

He waved a hand and the image in the skies suddenly concentrated into an orb of light. With a flick of his wrist, at astonishing speed, the orb of light suddenly rushed toward the Pillar of Truth.



Orion and Lumina blanched. They had never thought that this would happen. If the Pillar of Truth confirmed that it was a proper recollection of events then-

A figure suddenly flashed in front of the pillar. It was a familiar old woman, one with a proud pair of wings and a dazzling set of armor.

The head of a division of the winged knights, Aurora.

She caught the orb and shook her head.

"I would advise against participant Leonel Morales from doing this in the future. This is not just the first time, but the second time you've attempted to use the Pillar of Truth without permission. The first time, we allowed it, but let the record show that this was not our intention.

"The Pillar of Truth is very fragile and is considered to be an ancient relic that was restored under the great effort of the Pluto Race. It can only be used under the expressed consent of Pavilion Head Minerva. It cannot be used to settle petty squabbles about events unrelated to the Gathering of Minds."

Minerva smiled from high above as Aurora did her dirty work for her.

Was the explanation perfect? Of course not. But it didn't need to be. Plus, no one could deny how special the Pillar of Truth was, and they also couldn't deny that they let Leonel use it freely the first time even when doing so was the reason he was able to gather his first three points in the first place.

Orion and Lumina also both released a breath they hadn't even known they were holding.

However, when everyone's gaze fell on Leonel...

The smile was just the same.

The confusion hit them in waves.

What the hell could he have to be smiling about?!

## **Chapter 2664: Idiot**

Suddenly, the orb in Aurora's palm shattered, catching her off guard. She was thrust into a state of confusion, not quite understanding. She had only caught it with enough pressure to maintain control, she hadn't put in nearly enough effort to crush it. Just

considering the speeds the orb had withstood just to fly over here in the first place, it would take hundreds of times more strength than she applied to crush it like this.

Suddenly, her heart skipped a beat. Could it be? Aurora panicked and her aura flared out. She entrapped the bits and pieces of the orb that she could, and she directly destroyed the ones she couldn't.

Obviously, she thought that Leonel had expected this to happen. So, he set the orb to detonate as a way to get around her defenses and make it to the Pillar of Truth anyway. If those pieces touched the pillar, then her stopping it wouldn't matter anyway.

But unfortunately, she miscalculated.

That was never Leonel's intention at all.

Instead, the world watched as a supposed elite Owlman panicked at the thought of the shards touching the pillars and rushed to stop them.

Was the Pillar of Truth really so fragile that it couldn't stand such a thing? Why were the Owlmen trying so hard to stop it?

Aurora blanched when she realized how bad the optics of what she had just done were. She stood frozen, unsure of what to do. However, when she looked up at Leonel, his smile had never faded.

"If this was such a problem, you could have just said so. Why did-"

Leonel was silenced and his lips seemed to be pressed close under some mysterious power.

It would have been perfect if Celestia had done it, but the Owlmen weren't such fools. Instead, it was Talon and the Dream Asura who had taken action.

However, Leonel didn't seem fazed in the slightest as he turned his smile toward them.

Everyone had heard the rules. You couldn't just silence a person for the sake of silencing them, you had to have a rebuttal for what they were going to say. Leonel really wanted to hear what they could possibly have to say that would be counted as a legitimate rebuttal.

Unless their rebuttal was perfect and unimpeachable, the optics would only get worse. And, clearly, Talon knew that. However, this was simply a matter of picking the lesser evil.

Should they one, allow Leonel to continue talking and make the situation worse? Or two, should they take action to stop it now and take the backlash that might come with it?

The answer was obvious. Sometimes you had to take a loss to earn a victory.

"I believe that is enough," Talon said. "We've gotten far off topic during this debate. I won't make any accusations about what may or may not have happened between yourself and these two, but as the senior said, those were mere petty squabbles."

The moment Talon spoke, his pillar glowed as well. It was inevitable. Now, he was roped into a three-way battle. In addition, when he finished speaking, it seemed that the pillar had taken it as an adequate enough rebuttal because his silencing rights hadn't vanished.

That said, for the next hour... he had no ability to silence Leonel.

"Oh? I didn't expect such a thing from the member of the Barbarian Race. Novel, indeed," Leonel replied.

Talon's eyes narrowed. "That's the second time you've mentioned another's Race entirely unprovoked."

He didn't say anything further, but Leonel's pillar began to dim while his own grew stronger.

From high above, it had taken all of Minerva's self-control for her expression to not become a gloomy mess. She seemed to finally realize that Leonel was playing the same game she was. He had never come here expecting this to be a completely fair arbitration of his skills and intelligence. He was more than willing to play as dirty as they were.

The main issue was that Minerva suddenly couldn't see his depths. Why did Leonel keep digging himself into a bigger and deeper hole?

Even Lumina hadn't mentioned the Human Race even once, even though that was probably the easiest dig to take at Leonel. But now, Leonel had disparaged the Cloud Race, and now he was doing the same with the Barbarian Race.

She couldn't see how this would benefit him at all.

"Was it?" Leonel blinked innocently. "Didn't this Owlman descendant here say that the reason the four of you were able to reach the same exact standard is because of your upbringing? Wasn't that implying that you did better because you were Demi-Gods?"

Talon frowned and looked toward Lumina with a quick side glance before focusing on Leonel once again.

"Your thoughts on the world are so twisted," Somnus suddenly spoke. "I find it both sad and unfortunate."

The Dream Asura shook his head, sighing deeply. When he spoke, the world seemed to resonate and listen. His voice was gentle, yet masculine, soothing, yet commanding.

It was clear coercion.

"Please, do explain," Leonel replied.

"What you should be looking toward here is not a matter of Race, but a matter of Class. It is not because we are Demi-Gods, but rather because we have well-established families within our Race that gave us certain advantages in our upbringing.

"To reduce it to a matter of Race is laughable. There are many of our Races who are entirely incapable of performing as well as you can.

"To make matters worse than that, not only did you reduce such a complicated matter in such a rudimentary fashion, but you also took it a step further and disparaged them as well.

"Don't you find this to be too unacceptable?"

The pillar of Talon and Somnus glowed even brighter.

Leonel's smile deepened.

"Idiot."

The fact Leonel would choose to say this word now of all times, especially when he was being accused of being crass, was shocking to them.

But the confidence in his gaze made them waver.

## **Chapter 2665: Lying Through His Teeth**

"I am the absolute best of the Human Race. I am unmatched by no one other than my lovely wife. I am the Pavilion Head of a Dream Pavilion. I am a Wise Star Order and the wielder of the Life Tablet-"

Somnus seemed to understand what Leonel meant almost immediately, but unfortunately, they didn't have another silence to use, and if Celestia used hers here, the point of Talon intervening on their behalf in the first place would become moot.

"-Now you tell me... why was my answer lesser than yours despite my Class being unmatched within my Race?"

The Dream Asura fell into silence. He felt like everything kept going back to this issue, this one mistake, and no matter how hard they tried to pull themselves out of the quagmire, they couldn't do so. He almost felt that Leonel had done all of this on purpose, even going as far as to weaken his answer just to get this very result...

But he had no proof, nor did he have a good argument to make it sound plausible either.

"Also, don't you think you're a little bit too stupid?" Leonel asked, still stroking Aina's hair. "By definition, just to be capable of coming here, we all have to be of exceptionally high Class.

"One, we had to survive the culling-I'm sorry, I mean the Gathering of Kingdoms. You might not find it to be a big deal since you didn't have to participate, but I'll gladly paint the picture for you.

"Two, we had to have enough resources to practice these two streams of Crafting. Not only did we have to have the resources, but we had to have a teacher that was willing to pass down such knowledge to them, an individual who's likely worth far more than the resources we used to get here in the first place.

"Then, on top of all of that, we had to be the cream of the crop to even show our faces, let alone get to this debate round where there's less than a hundred of us left total.

"So, when you say the Owlman descendent was referring to Class and not Race, it's either one of you is the idiot, or both of you is the idiot.

"If there's a certain Class you can only reach by being a Demi-God, then what's the point of making the distinction? Semantics? Does telling people beneath you that they can definitely achieve what you have-even when their circumstances are entirely different from your own-make you feel warm and fuzzy on the inside?"

Leonel seemed to speak all of this in a single breath, but he didn't raise his force, nor did he rush. Every word was akin to its own resonating hammer strike, even keeled and tempered to perfection.

Those who were watching the multi-layered and multi-staged debate seemed to realize that Leonel was baiting out this interaction from the very beginning. If he never mentioned Race, it would have never gotten so far. And yet, somehow, by mentioning Lumina, he seemed to reframe the entire argument as something she had started.

To make it worse, every time he mentioned her, he referred to her as the Owlman descendent, drawing attention to the actions of Aurora again and again.

Even without mentioning it, everyone was drawing their own conclusions. Why else would the Owlman take action if not to protect their descendent? It didn't seem to matter how far from related Lumina was to them, and it suddenly became a matter of a lesser Race against a greater Race.

As though all of this wasn't bad enough, because Leonel was saying these things to the Dream Asura and not Lumina or Orion, it hit even harder.

There were many members of Races at the same level as the Cloud Race, but because Leonel was lashing out against Somnus, it felt like the whole world was joining him to lambast a silver-spoon-fed elite who didn't understand the plight of those beneath him.

"It's fine, though. I'm very used to this, that's just the natural course of things. The Human Race has been at the bottom of the barrel for a long while. I personally have no ability to raise up trillions of people. If the members of lesser Races that have formed Dharmas couldn't do so, how am I going to?"

"But I would suggest you all watch your words. I may be brash or crass, in your eyes, but my words ring true. So instead of using underhanded means to secure your victories, how about you meet me head on like real men or women?"

"Of course, you could also just directly give up. I can take my victory and go home."

Somnus' expression became placid and unreadable.

Orion and Lumina panicked as they seemed to realize something.

Then, in that instant, the pillars trembled and erupted with a blinding light.

Leonel and Aina's points moved up from three points, all the way to ten.

A silence fell on the arena, a smiling young man sitting there as though the weight of the world didn't seem to matter much to him at all.

He took a casual glance toward Minerva and a casual sneer tugged at the corner of his lips. He had to admit that this little game was almost as fun as Crafting.

Almost.

...

E'Rion watched this scene in a garden that was much of a garden... at least not in the natural sense. Rather than being filled with beautiful greenery and a delicate fragrance, it was instead filled with carnivorous plants that put beasts to shame.

Of course, he had been watching Leonel's performance and he couldn't help but shake his head. He knew what Leonel's goal was, so he could see countless underlying tricks he was playing that others couldn't. That line about how he alone couldn't raise the entirety of the Human Race was especially potent. But what made it even more potent to him was the fact that even though Leonel said all of this...

He didn't believe it at all.

E'Rion felt he knew Leonel well enough to know that that man believed that he could do what even Gods had failed to do.

He was lying through his teeth and yet doing so with a bright smile on his face.

## **Chapter 2666: Ridiculous**

The first hour came to an end and it seemed that there was absolutely nothing they could do against Leonel. In fact, many were scared to engage with him at all, worrying that if they did so, he would veer the conversation back in a direction that they didn't want it to go.

Leonel hadn't gotten the case slammed shut victory he wanted, after all, he hadn't been able to force them to admit to what they had done, but that was fine. He never really expected to. Things had gone pretty much exactly how he had expected them to.

A large part of why he had been able to be successful, though, was thanks to Aina. Thanks to her, he could use the Life Tablet even under the suppression, and as such, he could understand things on a deeper level.

Of course, these things weren't related to the actual debate, but rather how far he could push the pillars themselves.

It was very important to his goals that he could bend the conversations in the direction he wanted, but doing it too much or to too great of an extent could backfire on him instead.

He couldn't just hop into a conversation about fire and make it about water, or else he would get dinged for it. He had to make them at least tangentially related.

It seemed that the Celestia and the others knew this as well, which was why they veered the conversation away from Leonel and made it purely about the Convergences, which was what started all of this to begin with.

After another hour passed, Leonel was still firmly in the lead, with Talon and Somnus, as well as Celestia and Verma, having gained three points each. The rest of the top ten had best one point each, and there was a clear gap between them and everyone else.

By the time the third hour had passed, they had closed it in by another three for a total of six points, while Aerin and Lyra had managed to move up to a cumulative total of four, placing them in fourth place ahead of Orion and Lumina.

It seemed that Orion and Lumina were having their own struggles. They clearly didn't trust one another, and that made working together a nightmare. Sometimes they would even contradict one another, and because they were coming from the same pillar, that was registered as an immediate loss.

Obviously, they had only come together because they felt their individual statuses were too high to go with others, and too low to match with the Demi-Gods. But ironically, this had come back to bite them.

By the end of the fourth hour, the two Demi-God groups were only behind Leonel by a single point, while Aerin and Lyra were just three points behind. They were clearly the shocking dark horses of this event, and Leonel found himself being quite impressed by them, especially Aerin. He was very sharp and he only jumped into battles he was certain to win. At this point, he was the only one aside from Leonel who had yet to lose a single debate.

Though, that was a bit of a biased recollection of events considering the only reason the Demi-God groups had lost was because of Leonel.

As the fifth hour was coming underway, it seemed all too obvious that Leonel would fall out of his first place position.

In the eyes of the participants, Leonel had only been able to claim so many points by arguing about things entirely unrelated to Crafting, so it only made sense that he wouldn't be able to hang in when the conversation was veered away entirely from what he was best at.

This helped many of them to relax. Leonel wasn't some behemoth they couldn't take down, he was very manageable so long as they stayed within the Realms of Crafting.

Soon, he wouldn't have a superior score to them and they could finally challenge him without worrying about his muting powers.



"... I would have to say, then, that the fourth Convergence would have to be related to the Regulator or Regulators. If my position is taken to be the correct one, wherein the Point of Dimension is variable, the Point of Life is the Second Dimension and the Point of Creation is the Third, then there still needs to exist an anchor for the First Dimension, or else there is no real impetus for creation at all."

After Celestia finished speaking those words lightly, Lumina and Orion could only bow out in defeat.

At this point, the two were trying to argue that there was no need for a Fourth Convergence at all as the Point of Dimension was exactly the representation of the First Dimension that Celestia was looking for. Unfortunately, they have inevitably failed.

Like this, Celestia gained another point, gaining an equivalent point total to Leonel. And right then, for the first time in hours, she looked toward him, a light of pride in her eyes.

However, once again, she found a smiling Leonel. No, it was more accurate to say that he was grinning.

All this while, he had just been flirting with his wife. That much was obvious by the way Aina smiled from time to time even with her eyes closed.

However, he suddenly looked active again.

"Finally caught up?" Leonel asked with a smile.

Celestia didn't take the bait. In fact, she wanted to ignore Leonel entirely. Getting into the mud with him would just give him another opportunity to sling some more at her. She wouldn't allow that.

She opened her mouth, ready to move on as though she hadn't heard him, but she didn't expect Leonel to continue first.

"Since the kiddies are done fooling around, I guess I should finally give my stance, hm? Simply put, you're all wrong.

"The Point of Life is the Second Dimension. The Point of Creation is the First Dimension. The Point of Dimension is indeed variable... if you want to describe it in such layman's terms. In reality what it represents is the Seed of Growth and potential.

"Not that any of that matters, considering even Lythariel was wrong anyway."

"That... is the most ridiculous thing I have ever heard."

In the end, Celestia couldn't help herself.

## Chapter 2667: Almost No Difference

"Oh?" Leonel asked with a smile.

Celestia was put off by the casualness, but she shrugged it off immediately afterward. This wasn't a debate about random subjects, this was something she understood intimately. It was impossible for Leonel to pull one over on her, especially when this was something she had been drilled about.

Many of her ideas weren't her own, they were Minerva's. Of course, she would never admit this, nor did she need to. She had already taken the optics loss on this point, so going forward it wasn't as though Leonel could try and ding her for the same matter once more.

Thinking to this point, she felt like a burden had been flung from her shoulders and she unleashed her inner pride. Since Leonel dared to meet her on this sort of battlefield, she would crush him.

"You may not be aware of this, but the word Creation in this case isn't translated from the same Creation that represents the First Dimension.

"If you truly get into the weeds, the latter form of Creation doesn't refer to Creation itself at all, it's rather a spark, akin to the Big Bang. It didn't create anything, it just set the stage for Creation to happen.

"On the other hand, the former form of Creation, the one referred to as the Convergences, is translated from the original Minerva language as actual Creation, more akin to childbirth rather than child conception.

"Just because of this alone, it can't possibly refer to the First Dimension as there aren't any living entities in the First Dimension to begin with, there is only a force of nature that guides the laws as we know them.

"To make your statement even worse, you confused the true definition of Point of Creation and assigned it to the Point of Dimension instead. Then, you topped it off by saying that Master Lythariel was wrong when you misinterpreted her definitions to begin with. How can you even assign correctness and falsities when you're incapable of understanding the underlying argument to begin with?"

Celestia's words were clearly much sharper than they usually were, and she was severalfold harsher. However, no one really blamed her. Leonel had clearly come in, guns blazing, once again.

And, just like before, his smile didn't fade.

"You seem to be quite intimately familiar with the Minerva language, that's good," Leonel said with a chuckle.

Celestia frowned. What was he trying to imply here?

"Then, you should probably understand that when you're translating a language, you should probably understand the culture around it first-grasping the climate of the time and what social proclivities people in that era might have had.

"There are many words that fall into and out of favor depending on the times. Medical terms in one era can easily become insults in the next, there are even words that, when used in the incorrect fashion for long enough, will become the correct fashion.

"Language is a conduit for people to interact with one another. It isn't a rigid structure or set of rules, and if you look at it that way, you will suffer.

"Near the end of the Minerva Race's existence, that version of the word Creation did, indeed, come to mean a spark rather than the actual action or creation itself. However, do you know what was happening during the end of the Minerva Race's era?"

Celestia instinctually used silence, wanting to stop Leonel from talking, but to her horror... she had forgotten that he was still number one. The placements would only change after the hour was up, and even if they changed right now, they had the exact same number of points!

Contrary to that, Leonel could actually still silence her if he wanted.

'No, not like-'

Leonel continued without a care.

"The Minerva Race was obsessed with Creation, obsessed with replacing the God Beasts of Creation. They were not only striving to Create, and yet failing to do so, but they were also dying off as a result.

"In the past, they were filled with optimism and hope for the future, so to them, there was little difference between a spark of Creation and Creation itself. To them, it was one and the same. They were the strongest Crafters to ever exist after the God Beasts of Creation, so practically anything they put their minds to, they likewise managed to succeed in.

"Do you see the issue here, now?"

"You're using the correct definition of Creation... if Lythariel wrote her words in the era you're referring to. Unfortunately for you, she didn't.

"So why are you lecturing me on something you have little understanding of?"

Leonel tilted his head to the side as though he was really waiting for an answer, one that would probably never come.

Celestia's lips parted, but she had no rebuttal.

The pillars trembled and Leonel's points moved up from 10 to 11.

Let alone Celestia, even Minerva frowned. Was what Leonel said true? She had no easy way of confirming. She didn't have an encyclopedia of history in her head like Leonel did.

The history of the Gods was so long and winding that the "end period" Leonel referred to could have easily covered tens of thousands of years. Lythariel definitely existed before then, so the odds that the definition had changed were quite high and plausible...

Celestia gritted her teeth. Verma wanted to tell her to calm down first, but Celestia had already begun to speak.

"You said the entirety of the theory is false, anyway. Prove it. No one here has dared to say such a thing, even those far above myself have never made such a claim."

"Sure, why not?" Leonel chuckled. "My main gripe with the theory is that it treats Crafting and Force Pill Crafting like they're truly two separate existences that can only overlap at these "Convergences". That isn't true at all.

"The truth is that there's almost no difference between the two at all, and that's precisely what makes the world of difference."

## **Chapter 2668: A Statement**

Celestia froze, not understanding what these words meant. She would have normally called Leonel out for speaking nonsense, but she no longer dared to. Was what he had just said truly too profound for her to understand?

She didn't want to believe it.

"People believe the main difference between the two disciplines is that one provides external support while the other relies on internal support. A sword is an external item, and a Force Pill that can raise your Dimension is an internal one. But this is hardly true.

"I can create armors that are a personal and direct increase to my personal stats, they can even go as far as to change my affinities or enhance them. Is that not an internal support?"

"On the other hand, my lovely wife could easily create a Force Pill that could explode on contact with water, having no other purpose but to store a ton of Force that causes a violent chain reaction when the requirements are met. Wouldn't that technically be an external support?"

Celestia frowned. "No. The armor you create almost certainly relies on a Lineage Factor, that I'm sure of. It isn't the armor itself, but rather the interaction it has with a third-party force, that's hardly the same thing.

"As for the exploding Force Pill, how a pill reacts to its environment is precisely the point. The fact that you mentioned it would need an external mechanism to trigger its activation tells you everything you need to know.

"If you made a bomb as a Craft instead, it wouldn't need an external mechanism to activate. You could do it based on time, you could have an external trigger if you wanted, but it would be necessary. You could even have it explode immediately and it wouldn't cause any problems at all.

"You can't play a game of semantics to try and draw lines of parallel similarity where there aren't any."

To Celestia's surprise, Leonel actually agreed.

"But that's exactly my point," Leonel said. "In fact, I believe the Convergences aren't Convergences at all. The Points are locations where the two disciplines come together. Instead, they're the points at which they diverge. I would call them Divergences instead.

"My Lineage Factor can trigger changes to the way my Crafted armor acts precisely because it exists at the Point of Dimension. It represents my potential.

"A Force Pill can explode upon contact with water because that represents the Point of Life. The Second Dimension is the origin of all Forces, and it is where they interact."

Celestia felt her head spinning. "How are they Divergences if it's at those points they can act so similarly?"

She didn't even sound like she was debating anymore, it sounded like she just really wanted to know the answer.

"That's because those points have little to do with Crafts at all. My Lineage Factor is an external item. The water is likewise an external object. They aren't part of the original Crafted treasure or Force Pill.

"If not for the existence of those third parties, it would be at those points that they diverged the most, and it's precisely why those are the very points they can be brought together from."

Celestia felt like an implosion had just gone off in her mind. She didn't even realize that Leonel's points jumped from 11 to 20, and then from 20 to 30.

All of the accumulated point totals from previous rounds of debates where a winner had been decided were added to him. Although this didn't take away points from other participants, it hardly mattered.

This was the other thing that Leonel had learned about the pillars. It was taking note of everything that was being said and noting them down.

Even if a point was conceded in one debate, it didn't mean that it would necessarily be a loss in another debate as well. Some people were better at forming their arguments than others.

However, ultimately, the pillars still pursued truth.

There were two reasons why Leonel had been patiently silent until now, and the first was because he wanted to accumulate all these points for himself rather than having to rope everyone into a large-scale debate.

Wasn't this easier? Plus, he got to flirt with his wife instead of wasting time with these people.

And as for the second reason...

"You claimed to be so humble and in the dark," Lumina's almost shrill voice came to the side, "but now you're speaking as though you're a master on the topic. Are you sure you don't want to retract what you've said before? Admit you were being a bastard the entire time."

Her voice was tinged with hints of madness. They had taken so many losses until now, and it seemed like they had lost their chance at the top four. She couldn't believe that she was about to lose a damned Sparrow, it took everything in her to not spew out all the hatred in her heart.

The moment she caught onto a hint of Leonel's weakness, she grabbed it with both hands and refused to let go.

If Leonel could accumulate points from past debates, then why couldn't she? If he was so boldly contradicting himself, then why couldn't she capitalize on it?

Orion almost fainted. He couldn't believe he had shackled himself to this idiotic woman. He had only come here because he was forced to in the first place and now he was dealing with wave after wave of bullshit.

What did he do to deserve this?

Leonel smiled. "Are you sure you don't want to retract that statement? I'll give you another chance, just like last time."

"I don't need your damned chance!" Lumina screamed. "You're a fucking crass hairless monkey, do you think these people can't see through you?! No one believes that you actually want to be charitable, I fucking hate your kind-"

BANG!

Lumina's head exploded.

Leonel didn't even make a move, neither did Aina. In fact, neither of them even flinched aside from Leonel's grin growing wider.

"The debate portion will come to an end now, please take a day's rest, everyone," Minerva said lightly. "I will issue a statement on participant Lumina's death shortly."

## **Chapter 2669: Stifling**

Not long later, the Owlans issued a statement. It held all of what one might expect. Lumina was lambasted as a divisive individual who hadn't understood the spirit of the debate. However, the worst sin was the fact that she had disparaged one of the participants without rhyme or reason. Of course, the language was far more flowery than this, and the argumentation was actually quite excellent, but Leonel just couldn't be bothered to get anything more than the cliff notes.

He touched his ears, a cold smile curling his lip. His earlobe had been split in two, and it certainly wasn't his own doing. He hadn't reacted to it back then, or more accurately, he hadn't reacted to the sudden pain at all even when he registered it. When it came to Minerva's attack itself, his body couldn't have moved fast enough to get out of the way even if he wanted to.

Aina had moved, but because his hand was on her head the entire time, she got the message to not move as well.

"Cute," Leonel said lightly.

His Vital Star Qi couldn't heal the wound at all. No matter how hard he tried, it stayed just the same, as though no amount of Force he could form could heal it.

"I'm participating," Aina said coldly. Her golden eyes glowed with a murderous intent as she seemed to want to burn the world down.

At the moment, the two were in their hotel room as Leonel's ear continued to bleed without signs of stopping. It seemed that his blood couldn't even coagulate and dry to stem it at all.

Leonel looked toward Aina and didn't answer immediately.

Their goal was obviously to hide Aina's skill. The reality was that Aina's Force Pill Crafting was on a level all to its own. Even if it was filtered through Leonel and lost more than 90% of its usual potency, it would still be enough for victory.

The value of the highest echelon of Force Pill Crafter was much higher than a top flight Crafter. A Crafter could protect you... but a Force Pill Crafter could give you the strength to protect yourself.

These were two entirely different things, and the rarity of the latter was much greater.

Leonel assumed that this difference would disappear and even overlap once he got to the truest highest echelon of Crafting, but ultimately, as with most things, it wasn't just about truth all the time, but rather... perspective.

If Aina's skill in Force Pill Crafting was revealing, it would lead to a different kind of trouble compared to her Blood Sovereignty, but it would be a problem that came with the same level of trouble nonetheless. In fact, it might be more complicated to deal with.

With Blood Sovereignty, it would be Variant Invalid brutes rampaging about in a mostly straightforward attempt to kidnap her, but... in this case, it might not be the same. The plots might be far more sinister, far more multi-layered and variable, and harder to combat.

"Why?" Leonel asked.

"To prove a point," she said with a scowl he was sure was meant to look menacing, but he could hardly see it as anything other than adorable.

Leonel smiled. "And what point is that?"

Aina pouted, not liking Leonel's line of questioning at all.

Leonel sighed. "Honestly, if it was just that, it would be fine. But the main problem is that we have to disassociate our success from the potential success of the Human Race as



a whole. Someone capable of doing what you can do... well, a Force Pill Crafter of a certain level could elevate even a Demi-God Race, let alone our own. We're not strong enough for that yet."

Aina didn't respond, but she didn't look very happy about his words.

"I've going to complete my third Rebirth."

Leonel raised an eyebrow. "You're ready for that?"

"I was a while ago. The only reason I didn't was because we were having fun, but I've been ready since the Gathering of Kingdoms concluded.

"After it completes, I'll break into the Eighth Dimension."

"You want to complete three Rebirths for each the Seventh, Eighth and Ninth, I assume?"

"Yes." Aina nodded, not surprised that Leonel had guessed it. "I think that I might even be able to complete the fourth immediately after I break through too."

"Okay. Well, you know your husband is a wealthy tycoon," Leonel grinned. "I'll support you."

He still had way more contribution points than he knew what to do with. Well, that was mostly because there were too many things he wasn't allowed to trade for, but that was neither here nor there.

"It's not enough," Aina said with a teasing smile, her previous foul move being whisked away as she straddled Leonel.

"Oh? And what would be enough?"

Aina kissed him. "Take them for all they're worth."

"Extorting people?" Leonel's laughter boomed. "That's what I do best."

The couple was quickly lost in their own world.

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The day came and went. With the conclusion round of debates, the four teams that made it through were expected.

Leonel and Aina.

Celestia and Verma.

Talon and Somnus.

Aerin and Lyra.

Each of the teams stood on their own pillars. Today, Aina didn't look last at all. In fact, her killing intent had returned and it made the atmosphere quite heavy.

Leonel could only smile bitterly, but he didn't try to police his wife's actions. She could be just as stubborn as he could sometimes.

Talon kept looking over at Aina, his red, Samoan-like runes pulsing from time to time before calming down. He had to keep reminding himself that he was a Crafter here, not a Barbarian. If not, he would have already jumped out to attack.

Even until now, Leonel's ear still hadn't stopped bleeding. He had no choice but to Craft an earring for himself that had the sole purpose of catching and storing the falling blood.

And that only made Aina angrier. She could fix it, but doing so would reveal too many things.

It was too stifling.

## **Chapter 2670: Logically**

"Welcome to the challenge round. You have all made it to the top four and should be proud," Minerva said lightly. "According to tradition, this challenge round wouldn't normally end in a ranking. Often, it was an arena to settle unresolved differences between Craftsmen from the round of debates, and also a method of exchanging treasures.

"In order to accommodate a ranking, we will make some changes, the first of which is introducing a baseline of treasure.

"Right now, the four of you have earned your top ten placement. As a reminder, this means that you all have earned the Mind Splitting Rune of the top 1000, the Spirit Elevating Force Herb of the top 100, and the Creation Grade Ore and Eighth Order Standard Blueprint of the top 10.

"The lowest tier prize will represent one point, the second will represent three points, and the final two will represent five.

"Any treasures you all bring forward will be ranked on this same scale as well, however you will all start with a total of 28 points. Of course, you will not actually place these treasures on the line, they will be more like vouchers. However, any additional treasures you bring forward will be put on the line.

"As you know, the top three reward, the Ninth Order Standard Blueprint and the Ninth Order Workbench, personally forged by me, is exactly that... a reward reserved for the top three. However, there are four groups of you, so if you would like it, or the top one prize beyond it... it will be dependent on your efforts.

"Now, for the nitty gritty.

"One, even if you have more points than the person in question, you cannot force them to match your points. If you enter a challenge sequence with a higher ranked treasure and you don't want to stoop to the level of your opponent, you will be at your own risk.

"Two, likewise, you cannot force a person with a higher ranked treasure to come down to your level either."

Leonel's lip curled when he heard these rules. He found it amusing because there was definitely a scheme at play here.

It was simply impossible that the Owlans would have a treasure on the same level as the Segmented Cube. So why would they be laying out rules that clearly seemed to benefit him?

He believed that the clue was hidden in the first rule. Not being able to force his opponent to bring out a treasure of equivalent value was like asking himself to shoot himself in the foot.

However, he didn't mind it considering the second rule was there...

No one could force him to participate if he didn't want to, and even if they did manage to find a way to force him, they still had their face to worry about.

For example, even if they brought out a lesser treasure, it couldn't be too much so, or else they would be putting their bias on clear display. The fact Minerva had killed Lumina painted the entire picture.

That wasn't something the Owlans could afford, especially since they were using this as a stage to return to their absolute peak.

"The third rule to offset this is that when a participant puts forward a treasure with a point total that surpasses that of their opponent, and the challenge is willfully accepted, the individual who challenges is allowed to choose which stream they would like the battle to take place in."

Leonel blinked, his eyes suddenly going wide.

Aina looked at him as well, seemingly just as surprised.

Were they serious?

Suddenly, the two laughed silently with one another, realizing what was going on.

It seemed that Minerva hadn't reached the point of treating Leonel like some sort of deity. She was highly confident in her disciple, so of course she would lay out the rules in this way.

From Leonel and Aina's perspective, they felt that it was stupid to allow Leonel, who clearly had the greatest treasure here, the right to force others to pick Crafting instead of Force Pill Crafting.

But from their perspective, it was the exact opposite.

They probably expected that they would have to take their time and goad Leonel out of his hiding spot. They didn't think that he would be willing to bring out the treasures he had immediately, so they thought that they could take advantage of him with these rules.

"The Fourth Rule is that you all must complete at least three challenges before you can bow out. In addition, a challenge can be refused, but you cannot refuse two in a row.

"With that said, the last seed will have the right of first challenge."

Minerva's gaze swept over Aerin and Lyra who were quite shocked to receive this opportunity.

Leonel, though, was again, not surprised in the slightest. If they had a chance to take an advantage away from him, why shouldn't they?

Aerin and Lyra looked toward one another. The two were an unlikely partnership, a member of the Dwarven Race-the bottom of the barrel in terms of Mortal Races outside of the Human Race themselves-and the pinnacle of the Mortal Races, the Pure Blooded Spiritual.

But they had done well for themselves until now, finally making it to this stage.

For Aerin, the difference between a top ten reward and the top three was enormous. The Dwarven Race didn't have a single Ninth Order Standard Blueprint... well, at least not one that wasn't akin to a carefully laid trap or rooted to the earth.

This, though, he believed would be a chance to change all of that. They might be able to shortchange him, but could they do the same to Lyra.

Lyra gave him a smile that made his heart skip a beat. He blushed and shook his head furiously. He was here for his entire Race, not to chase women that would get him killed.

He took a breath. Scanning through the participants, his eyes eventually landed on Leonel. But, he hesitated.

Logically, Leonel and Aina were the obvious target, the other four were Demi-Gods. But no matter how he looked at them... he couldn't help but feel they were the most dangerous couple here.

## **Chapter 2671: Temper**

Maybe it was because they were known as the cowardly Race, but Aerin and his people had always had a keen sense of danger.

Truth be told, Leonel wasn't actually looking at him with the same menace in his eyes. His smile seemed far more genuine and he almost seemed to be encouraging him.

Compared to the arrogant young man that had been here for the last few days, it felt almost out of place... Almost.

However, when Aerin looked at the earring on Leonel's earlobe, he couldn't help but feel his heart tremble.

Most hadn't noticed this detail, but he had. He hadn't missed it at all.

Realizing the kind of troubled waters Leonel was fishing in, Aerin knew that he couldn't get involved. And the best way to not get involved... Was to challenge him.

Aerin cleared his throat. "I will challenge master Leonel and his Aina. I will start with a one point challenge. As for the stream, I will pick the Force Pill Crafting stream."

Leonel's smile didn't change, he had expected this, and he could practically read all of Aerin's emotions on his face even without the aid of Dream Force. Then, his lips parted.

"I refuse."

Aerin seemed to deflate, not out of disappointment, but instead relief. For a moment there, he sensed that Leonel wanted to accept, not out of hate or angst, but because he

felt that any challenge should be met head on. In that brief instant, Aerin had felt suffocated, like he was standing on a battlefield instead of a Crafting arena.

He exhaled a breath and shook his head. Why had he been so worried anyway? He picked the Force Pill Crafting stream, which was Lyra's expertise, not his own. And it shouldn't be Leonel's either from what he understood.

Even so...

With that, Talon and Somnus were up next and Leonel suddenly grinned. He looked at them first before they looked at him, the air rippling and writhing.

"Hurry up." Leonel said.

"Tal-"

A strong palm slapped against Somnus' chest as Talon pushed him back. Until now, Talon had been constantly suppressing his battle intent. Again and again and again.

He didn't care if targeting Aina instead of Leonel was the best or smartest option. What had Leonel done until now to deserve such reverence?

As far as Talon was concerned, the only reason Leonel waited five hours to rebut Celestia back then was because he wanted to listen to everyone's input first so that he could build up his knowledge. It was clear that his training wasn't nearly on the same level as theirs.

And he was correct...

Unfortunately for him, though, that was precisely the illusion Leonel wanted to create. If the first reason he waited five hours was to accumulate all the points at once, the second was to give this exact thought process to those that wanted to challenge him.

But very soon, it would be too late for them to regret their incorrect conclusions.

Starting now.

"I bet all 28 points. Do you dare?"

Leonel sneered. "That's it? Is that all you have?"

Talon's eyes narrowed, sparks of fury flashing in his crimson gaze. Obviously, the plan was to drain Leonel of all his points first and then force him to take out the treasures later, but he didn't expect this.

In the end, though, Talon was far too pent up to take such a thing lying down.

"Are you even capable of taking out something that would land on the scale?"

BANG!

At that moment, the world fell into complete silence as the pillar beneath Leonel cracked so thoroughly it looked as though it would fall to pieces.

At that moment, violet Forces billowed out from Leonel's hair in waves. For a moment, it felt like his King's Might Lineage, after having been dormant for so long, was about to erupt.

But instead, it was restrained in an unintelligible stream. His Dream Force seemed to bump up against the restrictions, a crown flickering into and out of existence atop his head.

BANG!

The Dream Force barrier shattered to pieces and a crown and robe of foggy silver and gold took shape around Leonel.

From the beginning, the barrier was at its lowest setting, ready to be taken down for the sake of allowing them to actually Craft. The restrictions were going to be set instead to block off senses from crossing over into other pillars to protect whatever Crafting secrets they had, but Leonel's own had suddenly shattered as though he didn't care whether others sensed him or not...

But no one was focused on this at all.

Instead, their gazes were all focused on the item that Leonel had just slammed into the pillar, an item so tough and extraordinary that even the pillars of the Minerva Race couldn't withstand a collision with it.

The Life Tablet.

"You want to Craft against me? Then bring out something worthwhile. 28 points? What worth do you think that has to me?"

Talon's gaze constricted into pinholes.

Technically speaking, Talon was the challenger and Leonel couldn't just change the challenge points because he felt like it. But in this case, Talon had called Leonel out first, and if he chose to back out now, he would be humiliating himself.

The problem was...

Did even the Gods have a treasure comparable to the Life Tablet? It was well known to be the greatest invention of the God Beasts. In this sort of situation, what should he do?

A cold sweat formed on his back.

"Coward." Leonel sneered.

Talon's temper raged and his red tattoos glowed, his fury causing a cyclone of Force to form.

A clash of red and violet shook the skies as the pillars swayed back and forth.

"Tell you what, since you're all so poor, I'll do you one better."

Leonel flicked a wrist and a list of items appeared.

"You want to battle for my Life Tablet? Bring out any three of these treasures and I'll welcome any and all challengers.

"Whether Demi-God or not, in the field of Crafting, not a single one of you is my match."

He would let these people know that his temper wasn't for show. When he raged, even Gods would suffer.

## **Chapter 2672: Unacceptable**

Leonel's list was enough to even make Talon's eyes pop wide open with shock. The fact that they would have to bring forward three of these treasures just for a chance at the Life Tablet was even worse.

It had everything from entire mines that were strategic resources even on his world, all the way up God level World Spirits. And yet, it was impossible for Talon to refuse that the Life Tablet was, indeed, worthy of this.

How long had the various races been trying to get their hands on it? And yet, despite knowing exactly where it was, none of them had dared to do much of anything about it. This was the weight of the God Beasts even so long after they had vanished.

Even Minerva had never expected Leonel to do this. She was so hyper fixated on the Segmented Cube that she didn't even hazard a chance at getting their hands on the Life Tablet.

Then, she "understood". Could it be that Leonel thought that this was what they were after all this time?



If she took a step back, it was possible that Leonel simply didn't understand the taboo around the Life Tablet. It wasn't like he had ever tried to hide it, and he had even announced to the world that he was a Wise Star Order.

In a situation like this one, it was very possible that he never thought that they would be after the lesser treasure.

'It can't be...'

Minerva suddenly had a thought that struck with so much fear that her hand trembled.

Could it be that Leonel was doing all of this purpose? Could he be purposely feigning ignorance? Could it be that he wanted to use the Owlans as a shield to obfuscate what he was doing?

Minerva's heart trembled so violently that she couldn't calm down for a long time. Her thoughts were so consumed by this that she couldn't even divert her attention toward doing something to stop Leonel from taking over the entire situation.

The Owlans seemed to be in a much better situation than the humans were... but were they?

They too were heavily tied with the God Beasts of Creation. They too had flown too close to the sun and gotten nearly burnt to ash for it.

Now, they had suddenly gained the support of the Pluto Race which was reportedly on the decline, had suddenly risen into the top 100 of the Dream Pavilions, and now... they were trying to get their hands on the Life Tablet as well?

Minerva paled.

Even she didn't dare to do all of this.

She did believe that her Owlman Race was too cowardly. They were to the former Minerva Race what the likes of Lumina and her people were to them. They were so wholly inferior that no one really took them seriously, at least not on the level of the Gods.

If not for the fact Leonel had kept calling her the Owlman Descendent, Minerva would have never had to go as far as to kill Lumina for being a fool.

However, wasn't that exactly what Leonel was doing here again? Had she been losing this game of chess this entire time?

If the gazes of the world all suddenly shifted from the Human Race to the Owlman Race, what would happen?

From the very beginning, most didn't care enough to take Leonel very seriously. First, he was a Human. Second, as he had said, he was just one person. Even if you counted his wife, that was just two.

Gods weren't the only Races capable of forming Gods. There were Demi-Gods and even Mortals that had birthed Gods before, individuals capable of forming Dharmas, and beyond that, Idols.

However, if none of these people had managed to raise their entire Races to the standard of the Gods, then how could Leonel do so?

What he had said was true.

But the Owlman Race was different.

For one, they were already on the precipice of Godhood. They were a threat that the world would take far more seriously, and that dichotomy would only be driven home even further now that the contrast between Leonel and them was all so clear.

Leonel was being suppressed left and right. The mortals might not have noticed the wound to his ear, but any higher level experts certainly had.

Maybe Leonel could even heal that wound and chose not to on purpose.

In their eyes, he probably looked like a youth who was lashing out at the injustice of it all while in reality, he was throwing Minerva and her people so far into the spotlight that he could slink away into the shadows.

Minerva's murderous intent flared like a raging torrent, but just as quickly, it was doused in a water so cold it made her bones shiver.

She couldn't kill him. It was impossible for her to kill him. If she did, or if anything happened to him on the way back to his world for that matter, what would the world assume?

Obviously, she had killed him and taken the Life Tablet.

Her name was even Minerva.

It was like she had seen a trap and taken a dive into it with both feet, not even testing the waters with a toe first.

'No. No, it's impossible for anyone to think that far ahead...'

She couldn't believe. For the sake of her own sanity, she couldn't believe. It was a necessity, or maybe it was the exact opposite of whatever that was.

In order to set up such a scheme, Leonel had to have a grasp on politics, and even more importantly, her own psyche to the level that he could accomplish this.

But this was only the surface level, because on a deeper level...

No, she really didn't want to believe it...

The Pluto Race was in such a bad position right now. She had only gotten faint inklings of the ongoings.

It was impossible for them to willfully plunge into such troubled waters...

Unless Leonel had manipulated them into doing so.

And that was the most unacceptable fact of them all.

## **Chapter 2673: Fingerprints**

Ultimately, none of this would have as much weight as it seemed if not for Pluto Race. They had sponsored this event, they had rebuilt the Minerva Pillars, they had their stamp all over this. If not for them, maybe even the Owlans would be too small and insignificant for the Gods to give a damn about. But this... and now... No. She couldn't accept it. Had she really been so tunnel-visioned on the Segmented Cube that she missed all of this?

Talon stood frozen, looking at the long list. Leonel seemed to have been prepared for all of this. He couldn't help but look toward his partner, Somnus. But in a rare moment, he found that Somnus' expression was actually incredibly solemn. In all his days, Talon had never seen Somnus take anyone seriously. This was a man who could chuckle and laugh through everything, and even when he seemed to have on a "serious" expression, it was usually nothing more of a facade to lure his competitors into a false sense of security before he unveiled his trap.

Everyone knew the Dream Asura Race. Among the Demi-Gods, they were probably the most dangerous race. They seemed to keep to themselves, but they had hands in many pots. It was impossible to tell just how many things below the God Realms that were actually under their control. It wasn't a surprise that they had sent a participant for this Gathering of Minds, but it also had to be understood that the Clan of Demons wasn't exactly united.

Somnus' actions in coming here were actually for his own goals. As for what those were, even Talon didn't know. Even so, Talon could never guess that the reason that Somnus was reacting like this now was because someone had warned him against coming.

"Somnus, I told you once before. I know you won't listen to me, but the Gathering of Minds is something you should avoid at all costs this time around. It's troubled waters and you could end up stuck in the turbulence. Why do you think most Demi-God Races have politely declined? We're powerful enough to reject the invitation of the Minerva, so take advantage of that and let one of the other worms get caught up instead."

Talon chuckled. "Dear sister, don't you know that fishing in chaos is how you catch whales and sharks? This place is too boring, I hope you're right."

Talon's elder sister looked at him deeply for a moment and then went back to not caring. She didn't seem to care much one way or another as she yawned. As far as she was concerned, she had already done her duty.

"Alright, just don't bring that shit back here. If-no, when what I say happens, know that you're banished from the Clan. You're on your own."

Talon blinked in surprise, but then he smiled. Banished? Did he care? No, not really. There was really no comradery among the Dream Asuras. Everyone was always plotting and scheming. He might as well have been alone to begin with. In fact, he felt that this "warning" was just another one of his sister's schemes. Maybe she wanted to place one of her own people there instead.

"Too bad for her, his standing was more than high enough to claim this spot for himself, while she was too old to participate."

"Plus, when she said he was expelled from the Clan, she didn't have the power to do it. That meant that she was relying on her prediction being correct to push for it first."

"Essentially, once he was stuck in those troubled waters, the Clan would use it as an excuse to boot him."

"He wasn't surprised by this at all. The Dream Asuras were flexible to the point of being spineless."

"Of course, it wasn't out of cowardice. Rather, they always looked to maximize their benefits. There had even been plenty of Dream Asuras who were expelled in the past, only to return upon becoming strong enough. Then everyone acted chummy as though it had never happened at all."

"He couldn't take it seriously at all."

"Without another word, he turned and walked away."

"Flaura watched as her brother walked away and sneered behind her book."

"Little idiot brother, you're so easy to goad into action. Look at you go."

"Flaura chuckled after her brother vanished."

"Too bad. You have no idea that Ancestor's fingerprints are all over this mess. Maybe if it was someone else, you'd have a chance. You might even know I'm scheming against you right now. Too bad... too bad... you were the cutest of my little brothers."

Somnus' eyes flashed like lightning and he suddenly looked off into the distance as though he was trying to see something. The more he looked, the more solemn his expression became. His gaze shifted back to Leonel who was just sitting there. He felt he understood why his sister had goaded him into coming here, their Ancestors' fingerprints were truly all over this world...

"But why did he sense so much of Leonel's as well?"

"Suddenly, he spoke."

"If you don't want to take the 28 point challenge, just say so. And what do you mean you'll accept if three of these treasures are brought forth? If you recall, you've already given up one challenge, you can't reject another one without losing all right to participate."

"Minerva's expression changed and she suddenly wanted to scold Somnus for speaking like this. Leonel obviously knew this as well, so why would he say this?"

"That was obviously because he knew that right now, the only legitimate way for them to claim his things was through a Crafting challenge. If it was any other way, or any time after today, they would be dropping a rock on their foot."

"If Leonel used the excuse of a second refusal to participate as a reason to withdraw, it would all really be over."

"The Owlans would take this loss and not even get the Segmented Cube back out of it."

"Was this what Somnus wanted?"

"Indeed... because he realized that Leonel's withdrawal was the only way for him to get out of this unscathed."

"Unfortunately for him, Leonel wasn't going to play to his tune."

"That familiar smile returned."

## **Chapter 2674: [Bonus] His Stage**

[Thanks to Mr. Ham (1/6)]

Leonel gave Somnus a look, then his gaze landed back on Talon, his smile quirking into a sneer. He didn't say a word. He didn't have to.

Unfortunately for them, Minerva had chosen to do this in partners, which meant that one person couldn't unilaterally decide to do anything.

"Shut up, Somnus!" Talon roared, fuming.

He was shocked by the list, but his fury didn't disappear in the slightest. In fact, he felt that the only way to crush Leonel's pride was to take this Life Tablet. It was just that...

"Fuck!" Talon roared, whipping out an orb.

"What is it you-"

"Shut the hell up!" Talon roared again, shutting the voice on the other side up. "Send me a Demi-God World Spirit and two top class Mine Cores, now."

"What the hell-"

"NOW!" Talon roared.

"You know what, I really don't appreciate the way you're talking to me right now."

"Woman, I will rail you into next Sunday if you don't hurry the fuck up."

"Is that a promise?"

Talon was furious by the flippant replies, but before he could say anything else, the orb popped and a spatial ring was left in its place.

He took the ring and slammed it down into the pillar so hard that it quaked.

"It's here. Now fight me, damned coward."

Leonel laughed. These people truly were rich. He just commanded someone casually and it had appeared just like this? Maybe he had underestimated these worlds far too much.

"Since you're being so generous, how could I not take your offering."

Talon clenched his teeth hard, but soon, his rage became like the smoldering embers of a subdued flame. His crimson runes glowed so brightly that his body seemed to be a

metal that had just come out from a forge, even his belly was so solid it reflected like polished steel.

In an instant, he seemed to have channeled it all into a furious concentration.

Somnus remained silent, not lashing out after Talon's outburst. In truth, Leonel withdrawing wasn't the only way to avoid this, because Talon getting the Life Tablet was another way.

So long as it was anyone but the Owlans.

"We will make bracers-"

"Whoa, whoa, hold on," Leonel held up a hand. "Don't you think you should reveal it to everyone? I need to know what to cross off the list and what if you make me do all this work just to cheat me?"

Talon's eyes flashed, but this time, he didn't seem to be as unhinged.

The spatial ring flashed and three items appeared in a floating orb.

"This is a Demi-God World Spirit from a world that collapsed 2000 years ago. This is the Abrasive Ore and the Urbe Ore."

Everyone's eyes flickered.

Even the simplest on the list, "Urbe Ore", couldn't have possibly been that simple, or else it wouldn't have made it onto Leonel's list. That meant that it had to be the purest Ninth Dimensional Reinforced Urbe Ore, and an entire mind at that.

The Demi-God World Spirit was self-explanatory, but the Abrasive Ore...

The Ore was, obviously, a Ninth Dimensional Ore, but it was more well known for being one of the few Foundation Type Ores like Urbe Ore, but it was on another level entirely.

It worked a lot like Evolution Ore, but rather than just elevating the Forces of an Ore, it could elevate its very substance. It was called Abrasive because it had an extremely rough surface that could attach to anything.

Just with a casual addition of Abrasive Ore, one could raise a weapon formed by the mediocre means of a Moral World into the Realms of Demi-God Realm.

This one in particular, was capable of raising a treasure to a Lower God Realm status! It was an incredibly important strategic resource, and yet it had been brought out like this today.

Leonel smiled. "Okay, now you can go."

"We will Craft braces. We will only use three Ores, Urbe Ore, Elastic Flash Ore and Sparking Rose Ore. Half an hour time limit. Do you dare?"

Leonel chuckled. "You don't need to try and goad me anyway. I've already said it... none of you are my match."

The pillars trembled and the Ores appeared before them.

"Atlas! Come!"

There was a flash of lightning in the skies that sparked and landed right in hand. After a blinding, crackling bottle vanished, there remained a hammer of silver and bronze in Talon's hand. From time to time, it would sparkle with both an ancient light and arcs of lightning.

"Oh?" Leonel was a bit surprised. He had never seen a spirit like this before. But, he was also amused.

It looked like Talon had summoned his Spirit from the skies, but in reality he had just pulled it out from his spatial device. As for the bolt of lightning, it was caused by the Spirit becoming akin to a lightning rod.

He had to admit that it was still very cool, though.

Originally, he thought that it was a Lightning Spirit, but that wasn't the case. It was an Earthen Lightning Spirit, it had both characteristics of Earth and Lightning Force. It was a path of Crafting Leonel had never seen before.

With another flash, Talon's workbench appeared and he smashed his hammer down on it, looking toward Minerva with a fervent gaze.

"You all... may begin," she said lightly.

At this point, she had no choice but to continue pretending to be calm. Whether or not things would fall completely out of her control was still up in the air. She would wait to see how things fell.

**BOOM!**

Talon almost immediately began to work. Every time he struck his hammer down, the skies would rumble and descend with a bolt while the ground would quake to stabilize its energy.



He forgot about everything else and fell into a rhythm. He didn't even notice that Leonel hadn't started. And quite frankly, he wouldn't have cared in the slightest.

This was his stage.

## Chapter 2675: [Bonus] Earthen Lightning

[Thanks to Mr. Ham (2/6)]

As far as Talon was concerned, if Leonel wanted to act arrogant and piss away his chances at keeping the Life Tablet, then it would be on him. All he was here to do was prove that there was more to being a Barbarian than being a barbarian.

And no one would stand in his way. Not Minerva, not Somnus, and certainly not Leonel.

Leonel picked up the ores and rolled them between his fingers, seemingly lost in thought. For the first time, he wasn't actually wasting his time away, nor was he chatting with Aina. He was just silently observing, his own thoughts roaming a bit before snapping back into focus.

Things were going well, but he still had to thread a proper needle. Should he go all out? Should he hold back? Even potentially losing this round on purpose was on the table.

People probably didn't understand just how much control he had over the Life Tablet right now. It was his to command. Even if he let Talon have it for, it would practically be like a loan he took interest on.

At the same time, if he let Talon have it, then killed him and took it back later, how much trouble would the Minerva Race be in? Everyone would obviously blame him.

Defeating a Barbarian in Crafting was one thing, but defeating them in battle was impossible. If the Dream Asuras were the most dangerous, the Barbarians were the strongest of the Demi-Gods. Talon was probably able to hold back from fighting him earlier because he felt it wouldn't be a challenge at all. Who would believe that Leonel had been the one to kill him?

It was a plan that might work, actually. Because while Minerva seemed to have thought of it, and Somnus seemed to have realized it as well, while Talon was intelligent, he wasn't on that level.

'He might not be on that level, but he's smarter than he seems. No Crafter of this level could possibly be a fool.'

Leonel looked up and watched Talon for a long while. Every one of his downward strokes took on a masterful level of control. But even further than that, it was the way he simultaneously controlled the lightning.

Every time the skies rumbled and his hammer slammed down on the ores, the bolts would shatter like fragmented glass, running across the workbench and Talon's body.

Talon would then control these thousands of small strands of lightning in a split moment, feeding them into his Craft and even using them to draw Force Arts.

His hammer, or, rather, his Earthen Lightning Spirit, was actually both his Spirit and his Force Quill.

It was fascinating, and the level of control needed was on a level no less than that of the Life State. He was controlling what was easily tens of thousands of variables at the same time, but that wasn't the shocking part. It was the fact he was not only juggling them, but every second he had to toss them away and begin a new juggle of thousands, each thrown in random locations.

Maybe the most impressive part, though, was also the most obvious.

He was controlling the wild lightning of a Demi-God World.

That sort of thing was hard to beat. It was practically like he was refining his Craft with the world at his back.

This was a level of Crafting mastery that could shock the masses.

Leonel looked back down at the Ores. Even Talon's selection was interesting.

It was easy to use a dozen Ores at their level to create something spectacular, but it was much harder when you limited the number. The room for creativity was lessened and the paths you could veer onto were restricted.

Even beyond that, the Ore choice itself was likewise interesting.

Elastic Flash Ore was a Lightning Force imbued Ore. It was a Vein Type Ore, and what was interesting about it was that it could form a web of lightning within a Craft to give it "elastic" properties. However, not in the normal sense, but rather a more intangible sense.

It wouldn't make a material like rubber, but it was very good at using its net of rubber to transfer Force impacts from a singular location across many. If it was properly applied, that is.

Then there was Sparking Rose Ore. It was a Fire Force imbued Ore and it was interesting because it could take a small spark and make it bloom, thus its name. It was likewise a Vein Type Ore, but it was designed to amplify.

One could see the trouble, then. One had a dampening effect and the other had an amplifying effect.

While the former was good for a brace that would often be used defensively or help one's wrist to absorb high velocity impact, the latter seemed like an absolutely terrible choice to do the same.

That was why Leonel praised Talon's choice. It was well in line with the spirit of the Gathering of Minds and it would definitely elicit a great deal of discussion from the Crafters of the world... if Talon's skill hadn't already done so.

And it was precisely because of this choice that Leonel decided that he wouldn't throw the match.

Every time he interacted with these people, he learned a little bit more about them. Everything he learned, he threw into his Simulations and made decisions on them.

Talon was much more meticulous than he looked. And such a simple plan... wouldn't work on such a man.

It would be better if he crushed him entirely.

Having made his choice, Leonel closed his eyes and sat down. After a single breath, his eyes opened once again as his wife leaned her head against his shoulder.

The world seemed to still, and in Leonel's region, the thoughts and actions of others seemed to have disappeared.

The moment Leonel's arms raised just the slightest bit, the sleeve of silver and gold on his left arm thrummed to life.

## **Chapter 2676: [Bonus] All Talk?**

[Thanks to Mr. Ham (3/6)]

With a tap of fingers, ripples echoed into the world.

Many were shocked. Was Leonel not going to take out a workbench?

In truth, Leonel had never really gotten used to using a workbench. Though, this was mostly his fault. Many of the situations he ended up Crafting in were open spaces like this one. Although he could have brought out his workbench, he never needed to.

He only used his workbench when he needed to completely focus on a task, one that stretched his abilities to the absolute limit. For example, he had never forged any one of his Divine Armors without the help of his workbench.

However... he felt that it was wholly unnecessary in this situation.

The workbench personally crafted by the Minerva Race had no reason to make an appearance here.

\*Bloop

Little Tolly started off with such an innocent sound, and yet in a single instant it rose up like a roaring Eastern dragon, spiraling into the skies.

Leonel didn't ask the little guy to do this, but it seemed it had been provoked by Talon's display. It didn't interfere with Talon's lightning because it felt that this would ruin the spirit of the battle, but that didn't stop its head from growing so large that it looked as though it could swallow the city whole.

ROAR!

The Ores of Owlán Race's Bubble all shook. Mines rose and collapsed, the city walls cracking as though he would shatter a moment later.

Then, Leonel tapped another finger.

Tolliver vanished, becoming small globules of silver that danced in the air. Then, Leonel's fingers became a blurring whirlwind, snapping so fast that booms that dwarfed the thunder in the skies began to ripple out faster and faster.

Many seemed to have forgotten in that moment that Leonel was only in the Fifth Dimension... at least to their eyes.

His fingers were too agile, too quick. They seemed to be on a level all to their own, pushing and pulling back so quick that it seemed he would be overloaded.

Veins of blue began to glow on his forearms as his Vital Star Force quickly followed up, replenishing his hands faster than he could even damage them.

The Urbe Ore was swallowed up by Little Tolly. Although using Cleansing Waters was far superior to any other purification method, much like the workbench... Leonel simply didn't think it was necessary.

In what felt like a brief instant, there was a reflective slab of what looked like shimmering graphite sitting beside what looked like a lump of coal. The latter of which was obviously the impurities, while the former was a perfect representation of a perfectly purified Urbe Ore.

What was especially shocking about this was that it took Talon upwards of five minutes to purify three Ores, while it had taken Leonel barely a second to purify just a single one.

While it was true that some types of Spirits were far better at some tasks than others, especially depending on the Path they took... was it really meant to be so exaggerated?

But then it got worse when Leonel proceeded to do the same for the next two.

What was odd, though, was that Leonel didn't just case away the impure lumps of goal as he began to work on the rest.

One of his fingers continued to tap at the air as he brought out Force Quill... or what they should be supposed to replace one.

Leonel's Metal Spirit combined with his body again, commandeering his hand for a moment before forming into a quill that trembled like a real feather.

It looked so delicate and fragile, and yet at the same time, it radiated strength.

Since Leonel was going to incorporate his Metal Spirit into his Divine Armor... why not get a Force Quill out of it.

One that could pen the world.

For a moment, it felt like he was wielding a spear instead of a quill. Every one of his strokes rang through the world like Spear Dance, as though a Natural Force Art was being birthed just by virtue of the fact he was Crafting.

And that was exactly what was happening.

He didn't even summon his own Natural Force Art, but another was being formed. Every stroke resonated with the Forces, ringing through the Ores and elevating them to a new level.

The golden veins and crimson veins of the Elastic Flash and Sparking Rose Ore formed a network with one another. Sometimes they would branch off from one another, sometimes they would have jumps and skins within that would alternate from gold to red, and at other times they would be directly fused into one another, forming a gorgeous mesh...

And one that looked as though it had every right to explode right in Leonel's face.

However, mesmerized by his technique, most didn't have the mental capacity left remaining to realize that what he was doing didn't seem to make any sense at all. He seemed to be combining the ores into something new, but when they had opposing effects, could that even be possible?

However, when Leonel started using the impure lumps of coal he had just purified them off in his Craft, they couldn't ignore it any longer. It felt like their worlds were spinning on their head, what the hell was going on?

Leonel didn't even seem to notice the shift as he began to incorporate the final Urbe Ore, building around the vein patterns. It was like he had forgotten that it was a foundational ore and he was instead almost using it like an accessory.

Even so, waves continued to billow in the hearts of the spectators. Whether it was Minerva or Celestia, or any one of the others...

He wasn't all talk?

It was the only thought they could have as the brace was completed, falling into Leonel's hands in a pair.

They could have sworn he had just completed one, where had the other come from?

The world was filled with silence and the sound of Talon's hammer.

## **Chapter 2677: [Bonus] Lacking Creativity**

[Thanks to Mr. Ham (4/6)]

The oppressive aura around Leonel vanished and his smile returned as Tolliver slipped back onto his own arm, disappearing from everyone's presence as though it was never around to begin with. It was only now they realized how they hadn't noticed the Metal Spirit earlier...

And then something else clicked.

Leonel was constantly walking around with a Metal Spirit attached to him like that?!

The waves in their hearts that had been doused by Leonel's odd Crafting choices seemed to have returned in even greater force now.

This was on another level compared to Leonel's uncle always wearing his armor everywhere. It wasn't just a physical toll, but a mental one on top of that.

Who didn't know how voracious Metal Spirits were? With just a single roar, it felt as though Tolliver would swallow up the whole planet.

In fact, back when Tolliver had roared like that, the winged knights were all activated as though a great battle was coming...

And yet this was the Spirit that was so well under Leonel's control?

**BANG!**

Talon's final hammer strikes fell and a shimmering silver brace with red and gold veins. He grinned with a swelling pride and looked up, only to find Leonel's wife kissing him on the cheek.

"What, am I very handsome?" Leonel asked with a laugh.

Aina smiled and didn't refute. It was just unfortunate that there were too many people here.

Talon's grin became somewhat ferocious. He had decided that he wouldn't bash Leonel's face in, but taking his Tablet and disappointing his woman...

Wouldn't this be akin to a victory all to itself?

When he saw that Leonel had created two braces, his sneer deepened further. They had only been given enough material to make a single high-quality one. If he made two, both would be inferior products.

On top of that, if he was foolish enough to separate the Elastic Flash and Sparking Rose Ores into different braces as well, he would be ignoring the spirit of the challenge and also lose by default.

He was practically humiliating himself.

Somewhere inside, though, Talon was disappointed. He had been hoping for a good battle. Not this.

With a wave of his hand, his brace floated toward the Pillar of Truth.

Light erupted and one rune lit up, then three, then six. It continued until flashing, attempting to form another group of three before it failed. The lights coalesced, blessing the brace with its grace.

It had to be understood just how excellent this result was. Even though they had received 37 earlier, that was based on theory, and theory that wasn't their own to begin with. What one could describe in theory, and what was actually of substance and real were two different matters.

Just a single rune would have been shocking enough, to get six... well, that was something that among the younger generation of even the Owlans, only Celestia was capable of. In fact, even she couldn't 100% guarantee such a thing.

It was representative of a standard that was just barely shy of the First Order standard of the God Realms.

"Oh..." Leonel said, sounding somewhat bored. After some thought, he tossed one of his braces over.

Rumble.

In an instant, nine Runes were lit.

Talon froze.

But then three more Runes were lit, until 12 were formed. It tried to form 15, but it failed in the end, falling back to 12.

Rumble.

A pillar of light descended, enveloping the brace and shocking the world.

"That's... impossible..." Talon didn't know what else to say. What he was seeing didn't make any logical sense, but his spatial ring was already floating over to Leonel's hands, landing with a grace before vanishing.

Leonel waved a hand and took his brace back, then tossed the other one over. Since he could get them both blessed, why not do so?

Once again, 12 runes lit and he smiled, taking it back.

Talon gripped his Earthen Lightning Spirit so hard that the skies shook as though another flash of lightning might descend.

How was this possible?

"Alright, next. Who are you challenging?" Leonel asked, looking at Celestia with an almost bored gaze.



At that moment, Talon could see the disappointment he had just felt reflected in Leonel's eyes. Except this time, Leonel actually had all the right in the world.

The shocking disparity rocked their souls.

"Explain." Talon suddenly said.

Leonel sent him a glance, his boredom deepening. He didn't know why he should. Was he here to give people lessons? He had much better things to do.

"This is an exchange, you're obligated to do so!" Talon said, his voice booming.

Leonel shook his head. Talon was correct, but that didn't mean he had to like it. Since this Barbarian asked to be dressed down, he didn't mind.

"Is it very difficult? You managed to create a Life Grade treasure that isn't even really at the Life Grade. Isn't the point of the Life Grade to create something new, to make it a single existence that is unrecognizable from the original pieces used to form it?"

"You spent so much time trying to keep the Ores separate that you were bound to fail."

"That's not true." Talon frowned. "I was mindful of their differences, but I created a whole item. If I didn't, the pillar wouldn't even light up, let alone form six runes."

"Sure, if you want to call it that," Leonel shook his head again.

"I-"

Leonel waved a hand. "I know exactly what you did. You used the sparking characteristics of the Sparking Rose Ore and diffused it within the Elastic Flash Ore, creating a brace that could absorb attacks flexibly and reflect them back in a stronger capacity.

"That's something even a child could think of. I'm not even sure why you thought it was so impressive. That shit-eating grin you were wearing made you look so great and superior, when in reality I have more creativity in a single pinky finger than you do in your whole body."

## **Chapter 2678: [Bonus] Enemies of Everyone**

[Thanks to Mr. Ham (5/6)]

Talon kept glaring at Leonel fiercely, making the latter have to use all his willpower to not roll his eyes. Clearly, Talon wasn't going to give in until Leonel explained how he had done it.

"Annoying..." Leonel muttered. His mind was occupied by other things right now. He was still trying to thread a needle, and this bastard was obsessed with something he had done casually. For a moment, he almost wished that he had just given him the victory. But then he might have had to listen to the man's drivel.

"Your thinking is far too rigid. You're obsessed with bringing out the best qualities in both and making sure that they balance, when that's not necessary at all. The point isn't to create the purest treasure; purity is subjective and changes based on the observer. I'm sure there are some cultures who would lambast you for daring to think of touching a woman's hand before marriage, and others that will look down on you for not having a harem of them.

"Crafting is just a reflection of real life. When you start with three separate ores, purifying them to 100% and then trying to Craft with them is like pulling out a rubber band and extending it to infinity while expecting it not to snap.

"The Elastic Flash Ore has its own tendencies, as does the Sparking Rose Ore, and even though everyone just thinks of it as a foundation layer, so does Urbe Ore.

"Your job as a Crafter should have been to mute some of the clashing characteristics and let the others shine.

"The Elastic Flash Ore has a great ability to disperse attacks, forming tracks for Forces to run along. The Sparking Rose Ore is excellent at forcing the Forces to converge onto a single point, while amplifying it.

"The latter works more so with capillary action while the former relies on the principle of flowing from areas of higher concentration to lower.

"If you formed a network of them instead, alternating between whether they converge and where they diverge, taking advantage of their properties, muting them in certain locations and amplifying them in others, rather than forming a treasure that could only act defensively like yours, you could create one that could be used both offensively.

"I don't just need to sit here and wait to be attacked like an idiot, I could flood my brace with my own Force and use it to launch an assault. Likewise, I can flood my Force through in a different pattern to amplify my defenses instead.

"The other problem with your braces is not only the fact that it relies on getting hit first, but it also wastes way too much. It relies too heavily on the fact Sparking Rose can only take on Force from a single point at a time. So while it seems like it's "amplifying" an attack, in reality, it's only amplifying a small portion of it.

"If you had designed it like mine, the Elastic Flash Ore would have diverged the force outward, and then filtered it through several points in the Sparking Rose Ore, allowing it to amplify the whole strength of the attack to be used instead of just a portion of it."

Talon stood frozen.

The problem wasn't that he didn't understand Leonel's words. Theoretically, it was possible. But theory was one thing, actually doing it was a completely different matter.

The fusion points between the Ores would be especially contentious. You couldn't just "use impurities to mute their characteristics" like Leonel had said, that was asinine.

Impurities couldn't just be used like earmuffs in the cold. You'd have to make the change on a molecular level. And that change would have to be extremely stable as well to be part of the overall design, or else any small change would ruin the entire Craft.

The more he thought about it, the more he felt what Leonel was saying was ridiculous. Was he just making things up to piss him off?

He looked at Leonel as though he was on the verge of losing his mind. But Leonel sneered.

"No. It's just that the gap in skill between the two of us is that large. Like I told you before, maybe if you used your fists you'd have a chance.

"But in a battle of Crafting?"

Leonel couldn't be bothered to finish his words, looking toward Celestia who was clearly shaken.

"What? You don't want to challenge me anymore? I could have sworn you were eager. Didn't you want the treasure?"

Minerva's eyes flashed with a dangerous light. Leonel was digging a bigger and bigger hole for them to jump into.

But the more she thought about it, the less sense it made. If he wanted to deal with them, why did he goad Talon into action first? Shouldn't he have hidden his skill or eked out a victory? Why did he perform so well instead?

She found herself getting lost in Leonel's rhythm. There was only one way forward. They had to win an astonishing victory, and it had to be through the Force Pill Crafting stream.

"We-"

"Just going to tell you in advance, if you challenge me in Force Pill Crafting... I'm going to give up."

Leonel's laughter erupted while Aina shook her head and smiled.

Celestia froze. Indeed, Leonel had just accepted a challenge; he had the right to reject now.

Celestia subconsciously looked up toward her master, not sure of what to do.

"Your master's not going to be able to help you out here," Leonel said, continuing to laugh.

Every one of his words was more lethal than the last.

Celestia's eyes snapped back, but that only made her look more guilty.

"If I might say something," Somnus suddenly spoke lightly, intervening. "Quite frankly, I think you'd misunderstood something, Leonel, right? We are not your enemies here. Contrarily, you've been doing your best to antagonize everyone since the start of this Gathering of Minds.

"Master Minerva gave us all points to begin with, and Talon only mentioned putting up 28 of those, so why are you insistent on using the Life Tablet? No one ever asked you to bring it forward in the first place."

Leonel's laughter faded away, his gaze narrowing as he looked toward Somnus.

## **Chapter 2679: [Bonus] Dream Asura's Scheme**

[Thanks to Mr. Ham (6/6)]

It could be said that Somnus' words were excellently timed. He had given up on trying to deal with Leonel in a head-on confrontation. If they played a game at Leonel's pace, they would end up losing.

"I don't believe that you're acting with good faith, nor are you in line with the spirit of the Gathering of Minds. If it was just a matter of your abrasiveness, I could let it go. But commandeering the rules of the event in order to avoid exchanging ideas about what amounts to half of our purpose for being here... are you looking down on Force Pill Crafters?"

It was an accusation that held a lot of weight, and one that had the potential to be extremely dangerous depending on the situation. Who didn't know that Force Pill Crafters were far rarer, but also held far more influence as a result?

"If I might make a suggestion to help get things back on track to avoid turning this into a farce..."

Somnus looked toward Aerin and Lyra, both of whom almost immediately paled. "Please challenge him in the alchemy stream after he takes his turn. It is a bit unfair, but I believe this was your original intention, correct? This way, you get to force him into the challenge you wanted originally."

Somnus' plot was quite clever, and unavoidable.

It was distasteful to use his status to pressure Aerin, but as he had said, Aerin had tried to challenge Leonel in the Force Pill Crafting Stream before, that was his first choice. Somnus was just giving him an opportunity to do it again.

So, instead of looking like he was pressuring Aerin and Lyra, it actually looked like he was helping them.

But that was just the first layer. Once this round was finished, it would be Talon and Somnus' turn again. Leonel could turn that down, but then it would be Celestia's turn once more. At that point, what could he do?

There was a hole in this plan... or so it seemed.

According to the rules, Leonel didn't have to participate anymore after completing three challenges. He had already completed one, his turn was coming up now and that could be the second, and finally Aerin and Lyra would be the third.

After that point, Leonel could just pat the dust off of him and leave. And because of Talon's loss, he would have accumulated far more points than anyone else. A Demi-God World Spirit was too valuable to even scale properly, it would probably be hundreds of points at worst. That was more than enough for Leonel to be number one.

But there was an obvious flaw to that line of thinking as well...

Whoever Leonel challenged had to actually accept his challenge. If they just rejected him outright, it obviously wouldn't count as a challenge and following his "battle" with Aerin and Lyra, he would still need to complete one more challenge.

It was an excellent plan. Truly an excellent one.

The only flaw were Aerin and Lyra... but would any of them choose to stand on Leonel's side at the risk of offending four Demi-God Races?

Of course not.

By this point, Yuri and Savahn, who were in the crowd of failed participants, looked toward one another, greatly worried. How could they not know that Leonel was only going through so much trouble to protect Aina? If not for these worries, who could match up against this duo?

Leonel looked at Somnus expressionlessly.

"So your solution to me angering you within the rules is to have everyone challenge me continuously?"

"Am I not also angering you within the rules? Now, if you would please proceed with your turn," Somnus said lightly.

Leonel scanned everyone one by one.

Clearly, Somnus didn't care whether Leonel proceeded or retreated. Whether he participated or gave up now, he would win.

Feeling the grips of a Dream Asura latching onto him, Leonel's gaze seemed to lose all its emotion.

"I challenge the Owlans in Crafting. I've heard that they're supposedly the best," Leonel finally said.

Celestia's expression became ugly when she heard Leonel's words. She grit her teeth so hard that they seemed like they might crack, but in the end she exhaled a slow, almost methodical breath.

"We refuse."

Leonel's gaze met Celestia's and she felt a cold shiver.

Aerin gripped his fists hard, his bottom lip trembling. Even if they challenged Leonel and let him win, it wouldn't change anything at all, they were like cogs in Somnus' wheel.

"I..." Aerin looked toward Lyra who seemed to be wearing a similarly helpless expression. "We challenge you to a contest of Force Pill Crafting."

Leonel sent a glance over that made Aerin feel as though he had fallen into an abyss.

"Sure," Leonel said lightly.

Aerin clenched his jaw and looked toward Lyra. She was the expert here.

Lyra stepped forward and set the parameters of the battle. When they were ready to begin, Somnus spoke again.

"Hold on a moment, are you the Force Pill Crafter?" Somnus asked.

"Is there a problem?" Leonel replied.

"Yes. There is. The first round was a judge of collaboration abilities. If your wife is just there for show, it means that you would have been disqualified before the round of debates even began. Of course, if your wife is the Force Pill Crafter, then I would have nothing to say."

"Just for show, you say?" Leonel asked in a light voice.

"Is there something wrong with what I said?"

"Once this Gathering of Minds is over, it will cost you your head."

Somnus' gaze narrowed as a pressure from Minerva descended upon Leonel, almost making his bones shatter to pieces.

"This is a Gathering of Minds. I will not allow any threats, veiled or otherwise. Should Somnus die following this meeting, you will officially be an enemy of the Owlans and I will personally hunt you down."

Leonel swallowed a mouthful of blood that was moments from coming out from his mouth.

The pressure vanished and he nearly collapsed.

A murderous intent suddenly pervaded the skies, dyeing the wind crimson as Aina made a move to stand, but Leonel grabbed her wrist.

Minerva sneered. "Now, begin the round."

Leonel sat behind Aina, pressing a hand to her back. It seemed as though he would be guiding her, but Somnus said nothing about this, finding it amusing.

The round ended in resounding defeat. The Force Pill that Lyra picked, to her credit, was one that even novice Force Pill Crafters could concoct, but it was still too much.

Being controlled through Leonel, Aina's actions looked clumsy and unpracticed. The lag in Dream Force to action was too much, and it was clear that Leonel's knowledge of Force Pill Crafting wasn't very profound in the slightest.

It took two attempts just to finish the simple pill, and the two almost went over the time limit.

In the end, they lost the one point that Aerin and Lyra had wagered.

Blood leaked from Leonel's lips and he wiped it away for what felt like the umpteenth time, his emotionless gaze landing on Talon and Somnus.

The ending of this matter seemed to be all too obvious.

## **Chapter 2680: Mock Defeat**

Somnus smiled lightly, giving Leonel a look. He had to say that he was somewhat impressed. Leonel had yet to throw a tantrum. Though, he assumed that if looks could kill, he would have likely died ten times over. If thoughts could slaughter, he would have been skewered until his own mother wouldn't have recognized him.

Unfortunately for Leonel, it would take more than that to make him give a damn. He was a Dream Asura, there was probably someone, somewhere, cursing him at any given point in the day. In fact, he was selling himself short. Really, there was definitely more than just one person doing so at any given point.

Rather than being put off by it, he relished in the feeling. It made him feel alive.

"We challenge you in the Force Pill Crafting stream."

Somnus waved his hand through the air as though he was brushing through water. There were even slight ripples that echoed through the air as he suddenly reached into space and pulled something out.

He was a Dream Asura. He couldn't trust even his own family members, so it wasn't surprising that he had his own unique methods of hiding his things. Plus, he had come knowing that things might very well go very wrong, so he had taken much of his stolen-accumulated wealth with him.

With a pluck, he pulled out three rings.

"You said you need three items on your little list to accept a challenge, right? Well, I put forward our 28 points, and these items. Each one houses three items on your little list. The first will be a wager for the three treasures you took from my partner, the second three will be a wager for your Life Tablet, and the third third... well, that will be up to you..."

"If you dare."



Somnus' smile was gentle. He didn't look like a demon at all, with otherworldly looks and an inviting gaze that made one feel at peace. It was this sort of dichotomy that made his words all the more piercing, though.

On the one hand, one's instinct seemed to be to trust him with your life. But on the other, there was a bubbling rage that made you want to skin him alive.

One couldn't be rich if no one was poor. One couldn't be happy if you didn't understand sadness. And, one couldn't feel rage if you didn't know what peace was...

Somnus seemed to play on that constantly, pushing and pulling at everyone's emotions until they wouldn't even know what to think anymore. The two feelings would form a polar opposite rush, steadily getting further and further apart from one another until they were so opposing that your mind would collapse.

It wasn't a technique that Somnus even had to use actively. He seemed to enter this sort of state passively, and when you were stuck in the middle of the whirlwind, it would feel like your life was in the palm of his hands.

"Those are the parameters for a battle of Crafting," Leonel said with a voice devoid of emotion, "a handicap I gave you pathetic excuses for geniuses. Can't understand something so simple?"

Somnus' smile curled. Indeed, Leonel was clever enough to specify that those parameters were for any Crafting challenge.

"I see. I just find it unfortunate that you're insulting your wife to such a degree. You have such confidence in yourself, but now her? From what I understand, such a shoddy foundation for marriage is bound to end in failure."

Leonel didn't respond. He looked Somnus right in the eyes, his gaze carrying not a single hint of anything that could be read. There was no sadness, no rage, no righteous injustice, there weren't any of their opposites either.

They sat there in a pair, vacant and as deep as a bottomless abyss.

Somnus chuckled. "That's fine, forget my words of wisdom, then. Instead, how about you tell me what parameters you would accept, then?"

"Ten times what's on the list."

Somnus whistled. "What an appetite."

Just one thing on the list could bankrupt a normal Ninth Dimensional expert of a Mortal Race. Three things and a Ninth Dimensional expert of a Demi-God Race would really begin to feel the pinch.

If you were talking about the entire list, you'd be bankrupting entire Demi-God Bubbles.

Of course, these people controlled many such Bubbles, dozens at worst. But trying to cobble together ten times that was asinine. It could be said that Somnus found this amusing because he obviously felt that Leonel had picked out this number because he felt that no one would actually bring forward such stakes...

And he found that to be very naive.

The comparisons he had just given were for "normal" Demi-God Races, or Demi-God Bubbles under the control of Mortal Races that had yet to ascend to that next tier of level.

However, the Owlans were a very special case. Being the descendants of the Minerva Race already put them on a different tier compared to other Demi-Gods. But when their Crafting skill was taken into account, it was a different beast entirely.

Somnus put his hands up in mock defeat.

"Unfortunate, unfortunate. I'm not so rich. I'll have to lower my bid, then. Just the 28 points and the one ring of three items to try and get my partner's stuff back, what do you say?"

"I refuse." Leonel said lightly, causing Somnus to laugh uproariously as though he had already expected it.

Much like he had thought, one way or another, he won.

If Leonel withdrew after Celestia challenged him, then he would avoid getting drawn into this mess.

If Leonel accepted the challenge, Somnus was certain that she wouldn't be foolish enough to ask for the Life Tablet. Instead, she'd ask for the Segmented Cube he went out of his way not to mention. That would, once again, allow him to dodge this mess.

Either way, victory was his.

As expected, Celestia parted her lips to speak...

Only to be interrupted.