

The Oracle Paths

Chapter 1001: Insurmountable Issue

If they had escaped, news would have reached Oros long ago, and he couldn't fathom Digestors squandering their remains when they could infect them to make deadly and loyal Sinewshades.

Suddenly, the sickly image of Cekt came taunting his mind and a lightning bolt of understanding flashed through him. If he wasn't mistaken, keeping a Rank 3 Aetherist captive wasn't as easy as this Dungeon Digestor wanted them to believe.

He had already begun to harbor some doubts after defeating the Voidshifter earlier. Had it been just slightly stronger and mature, it would have been him lying lifeless after the first distortion. His intuition told him there were others here, but they were requisitioned elsewhere...

Just as Jake started to believe that this slaughter of Sinewshades would never end, to the point of considering pulling out the big guns, Saros finally arrived, armed with a hefty blade in each hand.

"Need a hand?" The alien chuckled, hacking through every monster in his path like an adventurer cutting his way through the jungle with a machete.

Noticing that it wasn't enough, the Oracle Guardian pulled out a strange sort of grenade from his Space Storage, and biting the pin off, threw it into the mouth of an enemy over a hundred meters away.

Jake expected, at the very least, to see its head explode. Instead, the Sinewshade's head, then its body, and everything within a fifty-meter radius were instantly sucked inside as if by a black hole.

"Gravity grenade," Saros growled matter-of-factly.

"Good stuff," Jake praised enviously. As soon as this was over, he would take the time to do some shopping in the Oracle Store.

The Oracle Guardian threw several more similar grenades ahead of him, opening a path straight towards the fleeing Syrbarun and what remained of his considerably reduced escort.

"Go for it. I'll deal with this small fry," the alien growled, opening fire on the creatures trying to suicidally close the created space.

Jake nodded wordlessly, appreciative, then dashed forward, closing the gap between him and Syrbarun in the blink of an eye.

Syrbarun, who had never taken his eyes off him, nearly pissed himself this time, which was progress, but instead of the expected panic, Jake narrowed his eyes

vigilantly, catching a fleeting flash of malice in the minotaur's gaze. Immediately, he noticed the empty syringe lodged in the Vrusug's neck, sniffing a disturbingly familiar scent in the air.

"Voidshifter blood essence!" Jake exclaimed, realizing he should have considered this possibility.

Syrbarun's fur had already darkened significantly, seeming to be coated with a translucent sheen reminiscent of frosted glass, while the silvery network of blood vessels glowed conspicuously for all to see.

Still, Jake didn't slow down, nor did he halt his attack, but the Vrusug had also anticipated such a turn of events. His lips twisting into a contemptuous, hideous grin, he quivered,

"Instead of killing me, you better worry about your precious darling."

Jake froze at hearing this, and following Syrbarun's gaze, he saw a certain Sinewshade with a recognizably conqueror-like aura charging suicidally towards Saros several kilometers behind him. The oblivious Oracle Guardian had already coldly raised his blade, ready to cleave the monster to shreds as soon as it was within reach.

"SAROS, NO!" He screamed, braking on the spot to point his palms towards both the alien and Lucia, desperation etched onto his face.

SLASH!

Silver blood sprayed into the air, but no head fell. Just before Saros' blade reached its target, the Oracle Guardian's body had frozen imperceptibly, while the Sinewshade was violently yanked backward as if its master had sharply tugged on an unseen leash.

Caught between Scylla and Charybdis, Jake's head pivoted from side to side, torn between tending to Lucia and pursuing the Vrusug. He stood stock-still for a brief moment, his visage curling into a snarl of frustration until he spat,

"Damn it! Well played, you bought yourself a few precious seconds."

His facial muscles tightened, signaling the resolution of his inner turmoil. Before Saros could blunder yet again, Jake flickered in front of Lucia in her Sinewshade form. With a casual wave of his hand, he immobilized her, and with a mental strike as swift as a cobra's lunge, forced her into unconsciousness.

The mindless creature's eyes rolled back into her skull as she compliantly crumpled at his feet. Nearby Sinewshades pounced fiercely upon seeing him linger, but their skulls cracked against an unseen barrier, only to be sent catapulting back whence they came, crushed skeletons and all.

In the meantime, Jake retrieved another vial of the antibody serum he had fashioned to save Ulfar. Grasping Lucia's grotesquely raw-fleshed paw, he pierced her wrist open with his claw-like forefinger.

The beast moaned in her sleep, twitching violently as though caught in the throes of a seizure, her muscles and veins swelling to the point of bursting. Jake frowned at the sight of such violent reaction — far more severe than Ulfar's response to the antibodies. Had Lucia's contamination level advanced to an irreversible stage?

"Hold on, Lucia. I know you can fight this. You're our future goddess of victory, after all..." Jake whispered encouragingly, holding her monstrous hand between his, anxiety pulsing through his veins.

He would be lying if he said he wasn't eaten alive by worry, yet he had to maintain a semblance of normalcy in front of Saros, who was eyeing him oddly. Associating with a Sinewshade had already raised enough suspicion.

The Oracle Guardian, who had silently assumed the role of exterminating the remaining Sinewshades, was currently wrestling with a startling revelation.

'Did he truly discover a cure for the virus? If so...!' The alien's eyes widened in astonishment, his expression a blend of horror and awe more than hope.

In the vast expanse of the Mirror Universe, this wasn't the first time someone had developed an antidote, a vaccine, or a cure for Digestor viruses. Yet it remained exceedingly rare, and largely depended on the rank of the Digestor that spawned the virus. The one they were facing could afflict eight-Ordeal beings and possibly those above, making it a high-ranked virus indeed.

Yet... there was a reason why such solutions remained obscure and rare within the Evolver communities. Curing a victim only addressed half the problem...

The insurmountable issue that remained post-miraculous recovery was one that even the greatest Evolvers in the Mirror Universe's history had yet to reach a consensus on.

As Saros ripped the last Sinewshade to shreds, he occasionally glanced at Jake with a complicated expression. Meanwhile, Lucia's convulsions had begun to taper off, diminishing in intensity.

Jake's eyes lit up at this welcomed change, and his spirit buoyed further as fresh, newborn skin started to cover Lucia's raw flesh. Her muscles regained their healthy hue, and her bald skull sprouted a cascade of dark-gold locks that fell hypnotically down to her waist.

A few seconds later, Lucia's still eyelids fluttered before her eyes snapped open, a look of extreme confusion marring her face. "What happened to me? I feel like...

I've been trapped in a long nightmare," Lucia rasped, her voice rough and unfamiliar to her ears.

Jake twitched at Lucia's transformation, grappling with the words to break the news to her. His antibodies had worked miracles, but they hadn't reversed the irreversible mutations to her skeleton and musculature.

It was akin to the acne scars that remained even after a successful acne treatment. Even if the acne problem was solved, it didn't mean the damage caused was repaired.

Unfortunately, if it were just a few scars, it wouldn't pose a problem to an Evolver like Lucia. But the consequences she now had to deal with were more akin to those of significant cosmetic surgery.

Seeing Jake's strained expression, the freshly awakened Lucia began to panic.

"Jake! Tell me what's happening..." She grasped his arm in distress, only to freeze at the grotesque sight of her veiny, enormous hand.

Horried by her monstrous appearance, Lucia teetered on the verge of fainting. Anticipating this reaction, Jake offered a bitter smile, drawing her firmly into his arms.

"Relax, there's something I didn't have time to tell you," he soothed her, affectionately caressing her hair. "I've purged the Digestor virus from your body, but to fix your appearance, I'll have to destroy your body as well. Tell me when you're ready."

Lucia went limp in his arms, relief washing over her at the knowledge that her monstrous form was only temporary. Otherwise, she wasn't sure if she would have the courage to go on.

However, the second insurmountable problem that Saros fretted over had nothing to do with these cosmetic inconveniences. Wearing a grave expression, he walked calmly toward the couple, drew a resigned breath, and stepped into Lucia's line of sight...

Whooosh!

As soon as Lucia's gaze fell upon the Oracle Guardian, her pupils constricted, blazing with malevolence and hostility. The next moment, she was growling like a ravenous beast, breaking free from a flustered Jake, and pouncing savagely on Saros.

Chapter 1002: Corrupted Or Uncorrupted?

The unexpected reversal left Jake so confounded he momentarily lost his bearings, watching his rabid girlfriend slip from his grasp with his mouth ajar. By the time he recovered, she was already snapping her teeth at the Oracle Guardian's carotid artery.

Or at least, she was trying to. Seeing what was coming, Saros deflected her mouth from his sturdy neck with icy calm, his large hand effortlessly cradling Lucia's skull, keeping her at arm's length. The stark contrast of size and strength made escape impossible for the Myrmidian princess.

Still, within a fraction of a heartbeat, the enraged Lucia changed tactics, shifting her attention to the hand that held her head in a vice. Grasping the massive thumb that kept her jaw shut, she yanked with all her might and, as soon as her mouth was partly free, she bit down hard.

"This bitc- She bit me..." The Oracle Guardian was speechless. Were it not for Jake, he would have sliced her into mincemeat for her audacity.

Of course, his gauntlet, which met the defensive standards of a Silver Artifact, protected him from any real pain. Even if Lucia possessed jaw strength and teeth a hundred times stronger, she wouldn't have been able to dent his armor.

Nonetheless, his patience was wearing thin. "Jake, take care of your girlfriend now, or I will assume it's within my rights to end her torment," Saros warned coldly, a fleeting hint of killing intent seeping from his gaze.

Caught off guard, Jake looked stricken, like someone who'd been doused in icy water. His face hardened as he emerged behind Lucia, knocking her out cold with a swift chop of his hand. Lucia's eyes opened wide, flickering with a glimmer of lucidity, before she collapsed into his arms, limp as a rag doll.

In his arms, she felt feather-light and frail, but her allure was gone. As he gently laid her down, he stayed silent, a somber shadow hanging over him, then turned his questioning gaze toward the Oracle Guardian.

"Explain what just happened," he demanded, exhaling sharply to regain composure.

"Smooth move. You control her brain waves, right?" Saros shifted the topic, then noticing his compliment fell flat, pursed his lips. Knowing he couldn't evade the question, he sighed heavily and conceded, "Why ask what you already know? It's the Corruption, as always. She's too far gone this time..."

Before Jake could question him further, Saros reluctantly brought out a device resembling those used for body scanning at airports, purposed to measure an individual's Corruption level.

Opting for demonstration over explanation, he swept the device up and down Lucia's body, finishing with forcing open her eyelid to carry out a retinal scan. The results came back promptly and decisively.

Jake's heart sank at the values displayed on the screen.

"Corruption: 89%, Stage 8. Recommended course: Immediate extermination of the patient."

Reading the diagnosis, Saros, too, gave a wry smile. Despite expecting it, confirming such a fact was never a joy. He patted Jake's shoulder, who seemed entirely bewildered, and sighed,

"My condolences."

"Must I really kill her?" Jake asked impassively a few seconds later, his voice devoid of emotion.

Xi, connected to him and aware of his feelings more than anyone else, also held her breath, knowing full well Jake was a ticking time bomb ready to explode. Saros could feel it too, and after clearing his throat awkwardly, he answered with a conflicted expression,

"No, you don't. If you want her to live, you just need to prevent her from coming into contact with any lifeform from the Mirror Universe that's over three Stages below her Corruption. Basically, anything and anyone whose corruption is below 50%. It's a rough estimate, though. Simply put, she should avoid contact with the uncorrupted. My corruption is at 52%, but my soul is strong enough to suppress the symptoms. Thus, I appear to her as uncorrupted."

Jake immediately picked up on his implication.

"Hmm? Then why doesn't she attack me? My Corruption is also above 50%, but like you, I don't believe I've lost control."

Saros looked at him oddly, following his comment, a bitter, envious chuckle rumbling from his throat.

"Indeed... You don't seem to have lost control," the alien admitted in an ambiguous tone. "But you are indeed Corrupted, a Trojan Digestor or whatever you are. That's probably what interests the Oracle about you, and why I'm tasked with watching you."

"I see..." Jake muttered grimly.

"By the way..." Saros continued, breaking into his dark thoughts, "Don't we have something more urgent to address?"

Jake blinked, a moment passing before understanding dawned on him. A fierce vengeful glint sparked in his eyes, an overwhelming killing intent radiating from him.

That's right. While he might not be able to revert Lucia back to normal, he could still make the culprits pay. Moreover...

[If anyone can bring a Corrupted back to normal, it's probably you,] Xi encouraged him in an utterly sincere voice.

She genuinely believed it. Since they'd been together, he'd proven time and time again that his future feats couldn't be predicted based on his past achievements.

"Thank you, Xi." Jake's grin softened, the comfort of her companionship laced through his relief like a silver lining around the darkest cloud. Her presence was the anchor that steadied him against whatever storm might rise.

[Of course, hehe.] Her giggle echoed warmly in his mind before her voice took on a playful lilt. [After all, why fret? Lucia is merely corrupted. Strip away her insatiable hunger and violent urges, she should remain fairly the same in your presence. Isn't that what truly matters?]

Jake's lips parted, poised to concur, but he swallowed the words unspoken as he realized that was his perspective alone. Lucia, the victim, would most likely beg to differ.

'Unfortunately, we have no other option...' He rued inwardly, his expression shrouding in gloom.

"Time is of the essence." Saros prodded, noting that Jake's inner discourse with his AI was becoming a lengthy soliloquy.

Jake blinked back into reality, nodding absentmindedly. His gaze fell upon Lucia, pondering over what course to take. To leave her behind posed one risk, to place her in his Inner Space Dimension with Ulfar and Siri awaiting his updates was another gamble.

Realizing they must be growing anxious, he quickly updated them about the unfolding events, including Lucia's predicament. After finding a temporary fix by sedating the young woman, he resumed his pursuit with Saros.

Ensuring Evolvers remained unconscious, given their robust constitution and vitality, was currently a complicated task. Jake thus assigned one of his Familiars to the duty.

Jeanie, plagued by boredom in her Spirit Dimension, had volunteered instantly. Boasting the highest intelligence and possessing vast experience, her selection was a foregone conclusion.

"Me! I'll do it!" She giggled, materializing in her spiritual form before him.

Without waiting for Jake's command, she dived straight into Lucia's forehead, disappearing within. The diminutive female fairy spirit swiftly took over from Jake, controlling Lucia's brain waves. Satisfied with her performance, Jake then placed Lucia in his Inner Space Dimension next to Ulfar and Siri, who had already been informed of his intent.

To simplify the process, Saros also decided to don his full armor-a completely sealed steel ensemble obscuring his true form and scent.

Combined with a proficient Stealth ability-a skill every Oracle Guardian was expected to have in their arsenal-he explained to Jake en route that this would mitigate hostility from the Corrupted, should they regain consciousness. He was referring to the other disciples still waiting for rescue.

Nevertheless, it was a patchwork solution, ill-suited for the long term. Past field experiences had long since proven that a Corrupted didn't necessarily need to see its prey's true form to wish them dead...

The psychological factor played a role as well.

Several miles ahead of the duo, Syrbarun jerked his Sinewshade mount to a halt with a vicious spur, his gaze darting behind him, anxiety and sweat pervading his features as if he expected to see a phantom. Recognizing only his grotesque monster escort in the gloom, an overt wave of relief washed over him, and an inadvertent laugh of joy cracked from his throat.

"Ha, haha, I've shaken them off! The sentimental card always does the trick with these shithead humans."

Triumphant in his evasion, a smug sneer carved itself onto his bovine face before it darkened, his mind turning over how Rigel had heartlessly abandoned him.

"That bloody rock on legs. I swear I'll make you pay once this mission is over-if we make it out alive."

Chapter 1003: Soul Essence

"You're absolutely right. You need to survive first." A deep, chilling voice, rich with an intimidating masculinity, echoed from behind him, its guttural undertones enough to make those who heard it shiver in fear.

Sybarun subconsciously nodded at this affirmation, freezing when he realized the voice was not his own. A gust of wind, followed by a shockwave, rushed over him from behind, tousling his fur and unseating him from his steed.

Shaking like a leaf, the minotaur pushed himself up on all fours, nearly fainting at the sight of the pool of silver blood in which he wallowed. An eye, still tethered by its optic nerve, from the now-deceased Sinewshade bobbed mockingly in his field of vision, eliciting a high-pitched squeak of terror from him.

A wave of cold fear drenched the Vrusug as he comprehended the horrifying implication of the situation. When he trembled his way into turning around, his heart nearly stopped as he came face-to-face with his two terrifying pursuers — one tall with four arms, the other a tad smaller than himself.

What remained of his Sinewshade escort was a thin mush of flesh and bloody guts.

The apparel of these dreaded adversaries was spotless, as if the gore from the massacre they had perpetrated had nothing to do with them. The sinister grin adorning the human's face stripped Sybarun of any hope of escape, and he prostrated himself before the man, weeping openly.

"J-Jake, it's not what you think. Rigel forced me. I-I had no choice." Sybarun wailed in desperation, clutching Jake's boot and rubbing his snotty face against it, hoping to incite some form of pity.

Wrong move. Seeing the Vrusug, responsible for Lucia's condition, desecrate his boots with bodily fluids, Jake saw red. A vein pulsed on his forehead in rage, and he brutally kicked the minotaur's jaw, propelling the creature's head from zero to over ten kilometers per second in an instant.

SPLASH!

Needless to say, neither Sybarun's skull nor his spine were prepared for such a shock. His head exploded on contact with Jake's boot, and the rest of the minotaur's body turned to pulp, flattened and swept away by the resulting shockwave, along with the remnants of his brain.

What was left wasn't much to speak of. The first thing Jake noted when he shattered the skull with a single kick was its hollowness.

Whoosh!

Out of the blood-soaked mush that exploded from the minotaur's skull, two things emerged. A spectral figure resembling Sybarun and a small humanoid creature barely a few inches long covered with minute tentacle-like protrusions, reminiscent of a sea anemone.

"Brain-Eater!" Saros spat out in hatred, recognizing this nightmarish creature.

"Don't let it escape!"

To the Mirror Universe, this variant of Digestor was one of the most horrendous threats, surpassing even Digestor Viruses.

"That was never my intention." Jake smirked coldly, catching the fleeing parasite and the spectral body it inhabited in a single stride.

The Brain-Eater, desperately trying to escape, shrieked in terror when Jake nonchalantly pinched its tiny head, no larger than a small marble, between his thumb and index finger.

At that moment, the parasite's spirit seemed to shatter comically, the Digestor crying and begging Jake to spare it with a variety of excuses.

"I swear, I will never eat another Evolver again! Look, Syrbarun still has some Soul Power left. I never intended to devour him completely!"

"LIAR!" Saros roared, glaring coldly at the ugly insect. "Don't listen to him, Jake.

That's just how Brain-Eaters operate. They devour their host's brain, spirit, and soul, inheriting their memories and sometimes even their personality. Its nearly-human cowardice is a result of having almost entirely consumed Syrbarun's soul, while being indirectly influenced by his hormones and neurotransmitters. As soon as it's done consuming its host, it will find a new prey to parasite, and its personality will change accordingly."

A surge of murderous intent emanated from Jake when he confirmed that Syrbarun was probably irreparable after his soul was almost entirely consumed.

If the brain were destroyed, the soul was the only eternal repository of memories, and Syrbarun had already lost more than half. As for the brain, it was the Brain-Eaters' first choice to consume, hence their infamous nickname...

Seeing Jake's hardened expression and the oppressive killing intent converging on him, the trembling Brain-Eater panicked and screamed,

"W-wait! It's true I've devoured Sybarun's memories, but not his Soul Essence. I can restore his memory if you save his spirit in time."

Jake's soul pressure receded slightly, allowing the tiny Digestor a breath of respite. Turning to the Oracle Guardian, he asked with a puzzled frown,

"Soul Essence? What is that?"

The four-armed alien furrowed his brow thoughtfully, then declared, "My knowledge on the matter is limited as well. From what I understand, the Soul Essence is the core of an individual's soul, that which makes them unique, different from anyone else. Memories, aura, personality - these can be fabricated.

But not the Soul Essence. It is distinct from the True Will, although the two are intertwined. A Brain-Eater must first whittle away at that last mental barrier to access that invaluable Soul Essence. If forced to define it, I would liken the Soul Essence to a barcode, an indelible portion of your Soul Code around which everything else is arranged."

Seeing Jake's confusion only deepening, the Oracle Guardian scratched his head in annoyance before a spark of inspiration ignited in his eyes.

"Let's try a different analogy. In certain worlds, they believe in the concept of reincarnation. When individuals die, and even when their souls are crushed, their past-life memories and personality are wiped clean, but their souls do not truly perish. They enter the cycle of their next reincarnation, reborn with little to no recollection of their previous lives. Soul Essence is what survives these cycles of rebirth."

Jake frowned, the concept making slightly more sense, but it remained an abstract and distant concept for him. However, thanks to the added insight from the Aetherdream, he felt he was edging closer to the truth.

'Information doesn't disappear in the Aetherdream, even when it's destroyed in the physical world,' he summarized in his mind, attempting to arrange his scattered knowledge. 'The realm of the Aether is layered, from the superficial to the complex, from appearance to truth. That implies that even on Earth, the Soul Essence of humans who die without awakening their Proto-Soul due to low Aether density doesn't truly vanish, since ultimately even matter and electricity are made of Aether. Their information is simply lost in the Aetherdream, eventually decaying and disintegrating, returning to the Aether after a lengthy period. Everything hinges on the level of Aether compression making up the Soul Code runes and this fabled Soul Essence.'

Still, even with this reasoning, it implied that true death was still a possibility.

Keeping a digital photo of someone after their death was indeed a way to preserve evidence of their existence, but it didn't change the fact that they were no longer. The same applied to lost data drifting in the Aetherdream. If they were irretrievable, then one could consider it a true death.

Moreover, his optimism held only if the deceased's Soul Essence was preserved intact in the Aetherdream. In reality, each Aether Rune would eventually disintegrate, scattering to the far corners of the universe. Even if such a Soul Essence, with its memories, could be reassembled, could we still claim that it was the same person?

Not at all. According to Jake, it would be akin to creating a perfect clone identical in both physical and spiritual essence.

If one day Jake woke up with his last memory being that of his death, he would accept this new life as his own. However, he would know deep within him that his former self had perished, and he was merely the successor carrying on the legacy.

"You're saying he still possesses his Soul Essence?" Jake finally verified. "And his True Will?"

"I haven't touched those yet. All the memories I have to impersonate him are from his brain," the Brain-Eater hastened to confess.

Jake and Saros exchanged a meaningful, heavy-laden glance before the Oracle Guardian growled in disapproval, summoning a strange glass cage that blocked all mental probes.

"Congratulations, you've just bought yourself a few extra hours of life," Jake complimented the Brain-Eater with a wicked grin, tossing him with disgust into the cage like a foul, worn-out sock. "How long you survive beyond that depends on your performance henceforth."

Chapter 1004: I Taste Awful

Syrbarun-or rather, his parasite-gulped timidly from within his cage, the minotaur's Spirit Body mirroring the anxious swallowing reflex.

"I-I can guide you to Rigel. Better yet! To the Nexus. Even to Cekt!" The Digestor stammered, layering promises upon promises, understanding on a primal level that his survival hung in the balance of his usefulness.

At least the Brain-Eater lived up to his moniker; his raw intelligence was nothing short of impressive.

Saros and Jake exchanged a stoic glance before echoing each other in perfect sync,
"How?"

It wasn't that they distrusted the Brain-Eater, but his capture by the enemy suggested that his position had been compromised. Likely, he'd been abandoned by the Dungeon Digestor and his comrade. His connection severed, he was just as in the dark as they were.

Grasping their skepticism, the parasite hastily clarified, fighting to keep his panic at bay,

"I know it sounds suspicious, but you don't understand the rivalries among Digestors. I'm more wary of Rigel than you. You're also mistaken about our objective-you underestimate and overestimate us in equal measure. Our true mission, when we sleeping Brain-Eaters were activated, was never to kill you or turn you into Sinewshades. That was just a bonus. The goal was ideally to corrupt or kill Cekt, but more realistically to capture him and hold him here for a few hours. Based on the orders we received, our mission is already accomplished.

"It's no coincidence that the consciousness of the Dungeon Digestor consistently retreats in your presence. It's not merely fear or weakness, but because its energy is on the brink of exhaustion. One of our superiors will likely seize the Nexus in a few minutes, and Rigel and I-if we fail to convert you or kill you-were to rendezvous there for the escape."

The cryptic words of the Brain-Eater sent a shiver of foreboding down Saros's and Jake's spines, especially Saros, who was no stranger to such situations. To merely delay them here for a few hours? But why?

At that moment, Jake, whose mind was linked with Xi's, felt her anxiety flare up, reaching a new peak.

'What are you not telling me, Xi?' He asked gravely, meeting her taciturn silence.

[Sigh... Even if I tell you, it won't change anything. It's already too late.] Xi confessed bitterly, dreading his reaction.

'Xi, I've never pried before, but aren't we supposed to share everything? I'm not some fragile kid. Whatever harsh truth you're hiding, I can handle it. Now, speak.'

At Jake's calm insistence, Xi's final hesitations crumbled, and with a weary sigh, she disclosed her somber speculation.

Initially, Jake was impassive as she began to reveal everything, but as she laid out her arguments and her conclusion, his face twisted as if he'd swallowed a fly against his

will. By the end, when Xi had finished sharing her concerns, he was as silent and gloomy as she was.

"I see... As much as it pains me... It makes sense." Jake admitted wryly, his expression pinched.

Glancing at the Oracle Guardian, Jake scrutinized the alien's face as if hoping to read his expression through his visor.

'Is he aware of what's happening?' Jake wondered, noting the soldier's indifferent demeanor, but quickly dismissed the thought as irrelevant. 'It doesn't matter. The truth will reveal itself soon enough.'

Turning his attention back to the diminutive Brain-Eater, Jake said,

"Stop consuming Syrbarun's energy for now. I'll see if I can restore his consciousness later. You mentioned you could guide us to Rigel, Cekt, and even the Nexus, despite your mental connection with the Dungeon Digestor being severed. Explain."

Anticipating the question, Syrbarun-bis responded without hesitation,

"I can't stand that rock-guzzler and I don't trust him. One of the Sinewshades in his army is actually under my control. The urchin-shaped device I held allowed me to command those brainless zombie idiots as their Alpha, but with a Soul Slave Seal inscribed in their Soul Sea, I can easily control one of these monsters.

It's like leaving a piece of my soul in this Sinewshade, and I can thus determine its location at any time. The Dungeon Digestor's walls interfere with our connection, but determining its direction and approximate distance is no problem."

A chill ran down Jake's spine upon discovering that the seemingly meek and submissive Brain-Eater possessed such a skill. Soul Slave Seals existed in certain bloodlines and soul cultivation techniques, but they did not affect the Soul Sea but rather, the Sea of Consciousness or the Spirit Body.

To his knowledge, tampering with the Soul Sea was nearly impossible and perilous-locating and accessing it was a feat in itself. Jake had only glimpsed his perilous-locating and accessing it was a feat in itself. Jake had only glimpsed his own Soul Sea through the projection conjured by the Stele of Aurae, and that only indirectly.

This suggested that the advanced and unfathomable ability to enslave the souls of others was a racial power of the Brain-Eaters, not something that others could acquire through mere persistence and goodwill unless they stood atop the food chain of the Mirror Universe.

Subconsciously licking his lips, Jake gazed ravenously at the pitiful tentacled creature and uttered with a peculiar chuckle,

"You know... I'm quite taken with the idea of eating you."

The Brain-Eater, who of course understood Jake's intent, began to wriggle in terror like an eel on dry land upon hearing his sincere confession. There wasn't a shred of doubt about his sincerity!

"P-please don't. I taste awful. Y-you can eat Rigel instead. B-better yet, if you capture the Nexus you can have as many Brain-Eater larvae as you wish."

"Hehe, if you say so..." Jake ominously chuckled, his gaze locked on the creature ambiguously, causing it to break out in goosebumps.

Saros, who was witnessing their exchange with arms crossed, pursed his lips in disapproval, fearing that Jake might indeed be serious.

"Eating a Brain-Eater might indeed unlock new powers for you, but your Corruption..." The Oracle Guardian began to interject, but he didn't dare finish his sentence. His warning was crystal clear.

Jake rolled his eyes at the alien's dramatic demeanor. On the surface, he released an amused laugh, but the icy, resolute gleam in his eyes revealed that Saros's words had failed to sway him.

"Thanks for the advice, but at this stage, Corruption is the least of my worries." He finally retorted, sprinting without further preamble in the direction indicated by Syrbarun-bis.

Saros frowned, detecting a hidden meaning in his words, but in the end, he snorted and followed suit, each of his four hands wielding a heavy blade. Before anything else, they had to deal with the other Brain-Eater.

With the loyal Syrbarun-bis indicating the right way, and Jake blasting through every Voidsteel wall obstructing his path with Spatial Blades, it didn't take long for their trio to corner the second fugitive and his escort.

When the Gorgonite saw them burst into the corridor behind him after smashing through the steel wall covering his rear, he jumped in fright, almost falling off his mount. Once the surprise subsided, he bellowed indignantly,

"Bloody hell, how in the world did you find me so fast! Leave me alone!"

Rigel was genuinely baffled. He was so afraid of being targeted that he had initially taken a long detour instead of heading straight for the Nexus, their rendezvous point. It

was a risky gamble, especially if the Digestor responsible for retrieving the Nexus left before his arrival.

His worried mind spun various theories in an instant until his vigilant gaze caught the pathetic appearance of his Brain-Eater colleague floating in a fortified glass cage, pointing at him with a smug, vengeful grin plastered on his tiny head.

It didn't take long for the parasite to piece together the puzzle, and the next moment, his rock-face contorted into an ugly scowl of hatred as he spat out in full fury,

"SYRBARUN! YOU FUCKING TRAITOR!"

The instinct of a Brain-Eater, pushed to the precipice of death, was simply mesmerizing. Rigel was no different from Syrbarun earlier, who had not hesitated to inject himself with the Voidshifter's blood essence and send Lucia on a suicidal mission to distract Jake.

With unflinching resolve, the Digestor plunged a pre-prepared syringe into his thigh, as though he'd anticipated this predicament. With a single thought, he ordered all his Sinewshades, barring his mount but including Drakon and Epsilon, to descend upon them. Meanwhile, he bolted away at a staggering speed in the opposite direction.

Jake's lips curled in disdain at the sight of Rigel's flight. His expression, however, darkened when he couldn't locate Hade among the horde of monsters.

"This bastard..."

Chapter 1005: Same Tactic

Jake's mind immediately flashed back to the underhanded trick Syrbarun had used against him earlier to halt his pursuit.

"Don't tell me..." Jake muttered, his eyes widening abruptly, his head snapping towards a certain direction.

Syrbarun, in his naked Brain-Eater form, was still swimming placidly in his glass cage, while Saros was preparing to stoically face the wave of enemies blindly charging at him, oblivious to their imminent demise.

At first, Jake was relieved to find no trace of Hade, until he noticed that only Drakon was heading towards him. Epsilon had already split from his fellow disciple earlier to charge at the Oracle Guardian.

Sensing something amiss, Jake harrumphed in contempt. The black-silver vortex of his irises whirled as his Cosmic Sight activated, his gaze scanning the surroundings of Saros and his captive.

At first glance, he found nothing unusual, but when he extended his vision to encompass the entire electromagnetic spectrum, his expression turned icy as he spotted a certain Sinewshade that escaped his normal vision.

"Hade. And... Lyra?" Jake mused, noticing that this Sinewshade with a familiar aura was shrouded by a coating of electromagnetic radiation.

No, to be more precise, it was as if this coating of light beyond the visible spectrum had transmuted the creature it covered into the same type of light energy that composed it.

Reaching this conclusion, Jake was even more convinced that it was indeed Hade and Lyra. Of all the other disciples, apart from Epsilon, Lyra was the only one capable of such a feat.

'It's clever to leave Epsilon in plain sight as a diversion, but they underestimate me.' Jake sneered, almost thanking the Gorgonite for making his task easier.

Saros might not be able to see Hade and Lyra approaching him in their state of invisibility, but his perception was high enough to sense that something was off.

Instinctively, one of his arms wielding one of his heavy blades had risen, the latter enveloping itself in an overbearing halo of spiritual energy oozing with killing intent.

This kind of murderous aura blending spirit power and True Will of Killing Intent was a skill that all high-level Evolvers ended up possessing, given time and the chance to slay enough enemies.

The resulting energy had no specific attribute, but it had the merit of working on everyone as long as the targets were alive or at least possessed a soul and the ability to feel emotions.

There was no doubt that Saros would have no problem killing Hade and Lyra in their photon form if he swung his blade in the right direction. Apparently, the Oracle Guardian had a good nose because at that very moment his arm was oriented just right.

Seeing the alien's raised arm decisively beginning its descent, Jake warned him telepathically,

"Don't. I'll take care of them."

Saros promptly halted his motion, displaying an enlightened expression as he probed the empty space around him.

"I see, same tactic, eh?" The alien mocked, shaking the glass cage containing Syrbarun. "You two aren't both Brain-Eaters for nothing."

The trapped Brain-Eater pitifully bounced from one wall to another, trying all of them with his head to his great dismay. When Saros grew tired, the Digestor was sprawled on the ground, arms spread out, looking miserable.

Of course, neither Jake nor Saros felt the slightest ounce of pity for the vile creature.

Meanwhile, Saros was somewhat annoyed because even though he had agreed not to attack these enemies he couldn't see, it didn't mean they had given up their ambush. So, he had no choice but to drop Syrbarun's cage on the ground and preemptively take refuge under his Oracle Shield.

However, he grimaced immediately after discovering how fragile the energy shield he had just invoked seemed. Gone were the days when the Oracle Shield was nearly indestructible since Lure's death.

That's also why neither Jake nor Saros bothered to use it against the plasma storm. It would have been a waste of time and a squandering of their Aether points, which were now more precious than ever.

The Oracle Guardian expected to be attacked and was ready to defend himself in case his shield gave way, but he blinked dumbly behind his visor seeing Syrbarun's cage disappear before his eyes when one of their hitherto visible enemies vanished.

Jake, who was calmly slaughtering the Sinewshades daring to approach too close to him while keeping an eye on what was happening, clearly saw how the moment Hade-Lyra duo picked up the cage, Epsilon suddenly sped up by transmuting himself into light as well.

The only difference between Lyra and him was that his mastery of energy was not limited to light and his field of action was much larger. It was hard to see clearly, but with the clairvoyance offered by his Cosmic Sight, his focused eyes saw space warp at strategic points, forming surfaces as smooth as mirrors, which were conveniently oriented towards each other, except the last one pointing towards Rigel.

When Jake understood the enemy's plan, it was already too late. Transmuted into photons, Epsilon joined Hade, Lyra, and the cage in their hands like a beam of light, then after showering them with his light, the beam carried them away before bouncing off the mirror right behind them.

The rest happened almost instantaneously, at the speed of light. Epsilon and his burden zigzagged in the form of a dazzling flash from one mirror to another, weaving between the other Sinewshades with surgical precision. A single error in the positioning

of the mirrors and the prediction of their allies' movements, and their escape would have ended abruptly.

'Is it just instinct, or does Epsilon still retain his cognitive abilities?' Jake frowned, seeing the beam of light strike Rigel and his mount in the distance before bouncing off a final mirror at the intersection that sent them all straight into a corridor out of his field of vision.

Still, Jake didn't get angry seeing Rigel's rescue plan work, even allowing himself an amused laugh.

'Why get upset when I already know where you're going.' He smirked.

ROARRR!

The scornful laughter on his face faded as his Drakonian fellow disciple finally reached him after he had torn apart another dozen Sinewshades just for sport.

Using only his Cosmic Force could quickly become boring.

[Given what I just told you, Jake, you shouldn't be taking your time...] Xi reminded him dryly.

Jake's expression darkened drastically upon receiving this reminder, but it wasn't as if he had forgotten. He might have seemed to be enjoying himself, but the Even if it meant letting the culprit escape with the Nexus, saving all these lives was surely what Cekt would have wanted him to do. Alas, Jake didn't have enough fairy spirits like Jeanie for that.

And if he based himself on Xi's hypothesis... These Sinewshades had been like this for so long that wanting to bring them back to normal was just... a fantasy.

Suppressing his feeling of depression and deep dejection in his heart, Jake sighed wearily as he saw the ruby and gold scaled tail of the dragon man lashing at him with the force of a mountain. The Draconian looked normal, but between his distorted scales, one could glimpse the putrid silver flesh oozing underneath.

Extending his arm nonchalantly, Jake expressionlessly grabbed the draconic Sinewshade's tail, then closing his grip on it, he used it to smash the creature against the ground several thousand times in a fraction of a second.

"Pretty tough." Jake raised an eyebrow, noticing that despite the broken scales scattered here and there on the deformed steel ground, the dragon-man's body was still in one piece.

From this, one could see Drakon had not stolen his title of Oracle Knight. It's a pity that his prowess extended only to his physique. If his immune system or even his mind were a little stronger, he wouldn't have ended up in such a pitiful state...

Fortunately for him, although Jake's mercy did not extend to the other Sinewshades, Cekt's infected disciples were an exception. After breaking his skull and pulverizing his brain enough times to make him a vegetable, Jake summoned another fairy spirit, Zephyr, who seemed most enthusiastic for his first mission.

Xi having already briefed his other familiars in the meantime, the little spirit imitated Jeanie without further delay, diving into Drakon's forehead to control his brain waves. Jake then placed the unconscious disciple in his Space Dimension with a well-practiced motion.

Next, he gave Saros a thumbs up to tell him he was done on his side, and the duo coolly flew off in the presumed direction of the Nexus, not where Epsilon and Rigel had fled.

Chapter 1006: I'm Not Too Late

A few seconds later, Epsilon and his luminescent cargo ended their journey, radiating against the Voidsteel wall that marked the end of the seemingly endless corridor into which the last conjured mirror had redirected them.

In their photon form, a portion of their energy was absorbed by the steel wall, but the remainder was re-emitted against the surrounding walls, bathing the austere metal corridor in a dazzling radiance. Under Rigel's slightly belated command, Epsilon terminated their transmutation, and the Gorgonite and his mount reappeared, noticeably emaciated and fatigued.

Soon after, the Gorgonite fell to all fours and began to vomit the contents of his stomach: a conglomerate of gems and minerals, along with other less identifiable substances. The Sinewshade serving as his mount showed no reaction, but its trembling legs and subtle sway betrayed its exhaustion.

Hade and Lyra also ended their fusion, separating from each other. The Sinewshade version of the Fluid Grandmaster remained as stoic as Rigel's mount, but his pallid appearance also indicated that the energy consumption had been severe.

Their sickly appearance, however, was short-lived, their robust Digestor vitality quickly restoring them. A second and a half later, their group was as fresh as a daisy.

"Goddamn transmutation," Rigel grumbled, struggling to his feet, his expression nauseated. "Epsilon, if I weren't certain that the Sinewshade virus has indeed affected you and that you're completely loyal to me, I'd swear this was intentional."

Next time, deactivate the transmutation before we hit a wall."

"..."

Epsilon provided no response, but Rigel didn't expect one anyway. Although his former fellow disciple had more or less managed to preserve his original appearance due to his ethereal nature, the virus had significantly degraded his consciousness. Obeying simple commands was already the best one could hope for from him.

Anyway, even if Epsilon had all his mental faculties, he would probably have responded that he couldn't have done anything anyway. Once transformed into light, he moved so fast that controlling his trajectory was already the best he could do, let alone precisely controlling where to stop or turn.

That's why Epsilon's combat style was usually based on premeditation. He calculated and predicted his movements and those of his enemies before acting, with the slightest mistake potentially causing his death if he wasn't careful.

To take the example of the radiation against the Voidsteel wall that had absorbed a fraction of their energy and re-emitted the rest like any non-white surface, one mistake and it was game over for him.

For instance, all it took was for him to radiate against one of those black surfaces specifically treated to absorb 99.999% of the light, and he would end up crippled.

Worse, the remainder would be re-emitted and would ricochet off the surrounding walls thousands of times at the speed of light, draining his energy all the faster.

A single timing error could indeed be fatal to him. Rigel had every reason to be upset with him. Even a surface absorbing only 5% of the emitted light could do a lot of damage after the cycle of re-emission/reabsorption had been repeated a few hundred times.

"At least, I managed to recover Syrbarun," Rigel growled contemptuously, taking the glass cage from Hade's hands.

A sadistic smirk crept onto his rocky face as he saw the pitiful Brain-Eater floating in a morose and depressed manner in his glass prison.

"Haha, you can't know how happy it makes me to see you so miserable," the Gorgonite chuckled, openly reveling in the parasite's fate.

The apathetic silence of the miniature Syrbarun quickly killed his excitement until Rigel realized with astonishment,

"It can't see me?"

He then attempted telepathic communication without response, then tried to break the glass cage in vain.

"Alright, it's pretty tough. I'll have to take a look at this later," the Gorgonite admitted temporary defeat, his stone nostrils dilating and cracking in response to his frustration.

Rigel didn't dwell any longer on this setback and, mounting his mount, ordered his small escort to get moving again. Even if he had shaken off Jake and that damn Oracle Guardian, he knew he wouldn't be so lucky next time.

For this reason, after a few detours to confuse the tracks with the help of the Dungeon Digestor reshaping the corridors, his group rushed straight to the Nexus as originally planned, aware that their ticket to leave the Magnetic Resonator would be played out in a matter of seconds.

If he missed the boat, they would be abandoned without mercy by the Digestor supposed to repatriate them and left to their own devices.

Rigel, despite the worry and persistent discomfort knotting his stomach for a while, began to feel a resurgence of optimism as he approached his destination without further incident. In the middle of the long corridor opening directly onto the Nexus chamber, the Gorgonite's hopeful excitement was at its peak when something unthinkable happened:

The presence of the Dungeon Digestor retracted abruptly at a blistering speed. It was so sudden that the Brain-Eater first thought that Jake had caught up with him and that he had just been discarded by the Digestor like Syrbarun a little earlier.

He turned around in panic, his eyes bulging with extreme fear, but he was only more confused when he found that the corridor stretching behind him was resolutely empty.

"Maybe the Dungeon Digestor recalled its Spirit Body because our driver just arrived?" Rigel guessed to reassure himself. The more he thought about it, the more it made sense.

Once self-convinced of his theory, the Gorgonite found himself even more motivated and anxiously spurring his mount, he launched it at full gallop to cover the distance separating him from the end of the corridor. Epsilon, Hade, and Lyra followed without a word, as expressive as robots.

A few seconds later, Rigel and his escort burst into a vast metal room whose ceiling was shaped like a large dome. The chamber was as spacious as three football fields,

and a twelve-story building could fit comfortably between the floor and the vaulted ceiling.

In the center of the room, a translucent, diamond-shaped structure with multiple facets but iridescent with silver light veins levitated, slowly spinning a meter above the ground. These facets, like miniature mirrors, hypnotically reflected the light, creating a kaleidoscope of dancing reflections with each movement. Each of these crystalline faces was a work of art in itself, cut with a precision that no jeweler could imitate.

Rigel let out a loud sigh of relief as he recognized the gem.

"Praise the World Eater, the Nexus is still here! I'm not too late," he congratulated himself, cheerfully jumping off his mount.

"Indeed, you arrived just in time. We were waiting for you," an unpleasantly familiar voice immediately echoed his joy, a horrible chill running down his spine.

Stiffening, the Gorgonite slowly turned his head, his face tense, his gaze empty as if life had just left his body. A bitter smile then distorted his face.

"In the end, I was still too late," he grimaced, activating his Oracle Shield without hesitation.

Unlike theirs, his was black and its fluctuations were stable, not seeming ready to run out of Aether for a while. Seeing this, Jake and Saros immediately realized that of the two Brain-Eaters, the Digestors attached more importance to Rigel than to Syrbarun.

Was it because the former was more competent or because of their host choice? A Gorgonite undoubtedly had a higher potential than a Vrusug in terms of bloodline.

Without knowing it, Jake was quite close to the truth. Brain-Eaters devoured the soul and brain of their hosts, but their mutation potential was almost nonexistent. Their value was mainly determined by the host they controlled.

However, this did not mean that the digested genetic and Aetheric material was lost. Brain-Eaters could also grant bloodlines and abilities to their hosts if they wished, based on their own internal database. If they were devoured by another Digestor, the latter would obtain all their genetic and Aetheric database in the process.

A Brain-Eater who had possessed powerful hosts was therefore a powerful tool to increase the quality and guide the evolution of other Digestors and Evolvers. From this point of view, Rigel was certainly more valuable than Syrbarun, whose only host he had ever controlled was a mere Vrusug.

Jake and Saros watched the Black Oracle Shield enveloping Rigel with vigilance.

Jake was just wary and curious, but the Oracle Guardian had a much more ominous expression.

"So, you've already managed to establish your Aether network up to here," Saros said with extreme coldness and gravity. "Is it the death of Lure and what you stole from our Aether Network that allowed you to develop so quickly?"

"Who knows?" Rigel responded vaguely, backing towards the Nexus without taking his eyes off them.

Chapter 1007: They Really Made Me Sweat

Though the Gorgonite projected an indifferent, even haughty, façade before the two Evolvers, his actions and body language told a different story.

The way he stumbled backward, a jittery dance toward the Nexus, never daring to blink for fear of losing sight of them-it was evident he was gripped by terror.

'Damn it, why isn't the Nexus reacting?!' Rigel was internally shrieking in panic, teetering on the edge of hysteria. 'Why isn't it summoning its bloody Avatar?! Can't it understand that our lives hang in the balance?'

The nonresponse from the translucent gem silently levitating behind him was maddening. Seeing himself abandoned, the frantic Brain-Eater decided to stall for time by striking up a conversation. Hopefully, this would buy the Digestor, stained with the task of their extraction, the few seconds needed to reach them.

Fortunately, he didn't have to feign curiosity. He had many questions.

"H-how did you find me?" Rigel asked, his tone fraught with bewilderment. "Or rather, how did you reach the Nexus before me?"

It was a legitimate question. Just as the Dungeon Digestor was forever reshaping its corridors, the Nexus room didn't have a fixed location either. Logically, if the Dungeon Digestor didn't disclose its whereabouts, it was virtually impossible to find, let alone reach it, in such a short time.

The Brain-Eater's mind flitted back to the Dungeon Digestor's sudden withdrawal, automatically connecting it with the silence of the floating Nexus. His face fell, realization washing over him at the extent of the implications this might have.

Jake and Saros undoubtedly saw the desolation gradually etch itself onto his stony countenance, although they had no part in his undoing. Truth be told, on arrival, Saros

had warned him to prepare for a grueling fight against the Dungeon Digestor's Avatar. Instead, they were met by a hyper-anxious and nervous Rigel.

The Gorgonite was under the mistaken impression that they had arrived long before him, but in reality, their arrivals had nearly coincided. Of course, neither Jake nor Saros intended to correct him on this confusion.

Still, even though they knew the Brain-Eater was just buying time, they were willing to play along. Simply because they too feared another trap, particularly Saros, whose own experience led him to anticipate an imminent ambush.

The Avatar wasn't the Dungeon Digestor's only last resort to defend its Nexus.

Generally, the final boss's chamber would be guarded by elite Digestors, spawned solely to protect its existence. The absence of such despite their proximity to the Nexus was unnerving. For Saros, it was all the more suspicious, and Jake could only agree.

Maintaining a cautious twenty-meter distance from the Nexus and Rigel, Saros suddenly materialized a glass cage identical to the one Rigel was clutching. The Gorgonite's eyes nearly popped out of his head as he recognized the formless creature leisurely swimming inside.

"S-Syrbarun!" The Brain-Eater exclaimed, suddenly losing his composure before throwing a scornful look at his own cage. 'No wonder communication was impossible. There's nothing inside this cage. It's an illusion...'

"I see you've caught on," Jake chuckled. "You're correct. The second cage mirrors the contents of the first. Syrbarun has always been in our possession. As for how we found the Nexus, it's simple. Although its location constantly changes, as soon as its life was explicitly threatened, your obliging parasite comrade promptly divulged your extraction point's coordinates. It would indeed be strange if the Digestor meant to retrieve you accidentally teleported into a Voidsteel wall after the Dungeon Digestor's internal structure was rearranged. A beacon or signal marking its location so obviously would be detectable even to us, which would be counterproductive."

The Gorgonite's shoulders sagged in defeat as the Brain-Eater realized that he'd been dancing to his enemies' tune from the start, never successfully deceiving them.

'No! I made it to the planned extraction point. If I can hold out until reinforcements arrive, I can still escape.'

Jake and Saros immediately noticed the fanatic hope flaring up in Rigel's face, but instead of attacking, it sent them into retreat, their eyes scanning the large room for hidden enemies.

When nothing happened, the Oracle Guardian's expression tightened with humiliation and he decided to finish it.

"I don't know why the Dungeon Digestor isn't summoning its Avatar, but if we attack it, we'll soon find out."

Jake nodded grimly, and with unspoken agreement, the two Evolvers charged at the Gorgonite and the Nexus. Jake targeted Rigel while the Oracle Guardian lunged at the levitating gemstone with full force.

Rigel nearly soiled himself as a blur closed the distance between them at lightning speed, materializing right in front of him to grab his throat viciously.

Jake was starting to enjoy this method of execution after having tested it successfully on the Voidshifter.

Perhaps it had something to do with his True Will of Grabbing. The act of crushing living or non-living things with sheer force had become a sort of twisted pleasure for him.

However, Rigel was neither a Voidshifter nor a formidable warrior. Jake had mentally prepared for all sorts of reactions, but when the Gorgonite's body went limp as a chicken whose neck has just been twisted, he was left utterly speechless.

'Is that it? How disappointing...' Jake remarked, an air of disenchantment lacing his tone.

Simultaneously, Saros reached the Nexus and brought his four heavy blades crashing down on it with all his might, only to halt his attack at the last moment.

The edge of his weapons had slightly chipped the large gem, but it remained eerily unresponsive.

"What is happening here?" The alien blurted out, overt confusion etched on his features. This was not what he had anticipated.

It was so easy and unexpected that it only made the Oracle Guardian more convinced that something had gone horribly wrong long before their arrival, or that a terrible event was about to unfold.

Click, clack, click.

The sharp sound of footsteps on the steel floor echoed from above them, then the dome-shaped ceiling abruptly opened, revealing a grand entrance for a wrinkled little green alien that bore a striking resemblance to a lizard.

Jake was on guard and ready to engage the newcomer when he looked up and stammered out, "Cekt?"

"Master?!" Syrbarun exclaimed in shock from within his cage, while Rigel, who was regaining consciousness, gawked at the green alien with the same dumbstruck expression.

"You have quite the nerve calling me master after your betrayal." Cekt shot him a snobbish, disapproving glance that made the parasite shudder before his ageless gaze turned to Jake. "Sigh... In the end, you too fell into this trap despite my attempt to warn you."

The green alien shook his head, disappointment etched on his face, and floated down to the floor with aloofness, his hands clasped behind his hunched back, giving him a patronizing air.

Jake's brow twitched in silence, understanding all too well where he had made his blunder. It was only a few minutes earlier that he had grasped, thanks to Xi, the intricate trap he had blindly walked into.

Not that he could have avoided it... The moment Lucia and the others ventured into the Magnetic Resonator without him, he had no other choice but to follow them inside.

"I thought you were imprisoned somewhere or held captive by some strong Digestors." Jake justified himself with a grunt, although he knew very well that even if that were the case, his reinforcement wouldn't have made any difference.

"Oh, I was indeed held somewhere by those monsters." Cekt acknowledged with a sardonic grimace. "They really made me sweat."

As if to emphasize his last statement, he waved his small hand, and a rain of corpses of massive Voidshifters and Sinewshades crashed before them, sprinkling the Nexus's vacant room with a touch of gore.

Jake, Saros, and even the two other Brain-Eaters squinted their eyes, sensing the lingering Aetheric fluctuations from these corpses. Judging by their appearance and their intimidating auras persisting even after death, these monsters were all very powerful Digestors.

Each Voidshifter lying on the ground was at least one or two Ranks above the one he had fought and let escape. As for the Sinewshades, Jake finally knew where those infected with eight or more Ordeals under their belt had ended up.

As expected, they were all mobilized to keep their master busy. What he hadn't anticipated was that it wouldn't be enough. In the end, the small alien had never needed their help.

Chapter 1008: I Will Remember This Affront

A weighty silence fell over the room in the wake of such brazen arrogance, punctuated by the panicked gulps of Rigel and to a lesser extent, Syrbarun. The latter found a thin veil of security in the fortified glass walls of his cage, thus allowing him some semblance of self-control.

Jake's eyes fastened on the tantalizing remains of the Voidshifter. He barely held back a slaver, but he nonetheless asked Cekt,

"Master... Can I have these bodies?"

The green alien cast him an askew, dubious look, which the audacious disciple met with an innocent smirk. The wrinkled creature's facial muscles twitched as if suppressing a sharp retort, but eventually, the Wendok offered an indifferent nod, "Sure.. Enjoy yourself."

"Thanks, master." Jake flashed his most charming smile, then, with a wave of his hand, made all the bodies vanish into his Space Dimension. He hastily spat back out all the Sinewshades, realizing that most of them were still breathing.

"Fuck, they're alive ?!" Jake cursed as he scanned the zombie Digestors one by one.

Upon hearing his remark, Cekt's creased face smoothed for the first time, and he explained, "I knew some of the employees working on this base, hence the choice of this Magnetic Resonator for your test. I'm willing to let them live here, corrupted and self-sustaining, rather than kill them myself."

Jake understood his master's reasoning, having had the same thought concerning Lucia, yet he felt the gremlin was holding something back.

Suspicious, he began examining the alien's appearance, paying no heed to possible rebukes. Before long, he found what unsettled him.

"Master, are you infected too?"

A bitter smile distorted the little alien's face as he realized his disciple had seen through his deception in a heartbeat. He had no intention of concealing it, however.

"Hehe, I can't hide anything from you. I had a Grade 9 broad-spectrum serum for this kind of situation, so you don't need to worry â€” my symptoms are stable. It gives me plenty of time to research a vaccine against this Digestor Virus."

Jake studied the alien's expression for any trace of falsehood, but his master was behaving as usual. Recalling that the Wendok was a renowned Rank 3 Aetherist, he thought he might genuinely mean what he was saying.

Still, a Grade 9 all-purpose serum for this Digestor Virus seemed somewhat wasteful. Anytime 'Grade' was used as an adjective, it usually referred to either a bloodline's grade or the level of Aether compression. Both were closely related but didn't mean the exact same thing, depending on the context.

For instance, his Cosmic D Starfeyrves Bloodline was above Grade 10, but his Aether stats, having only recently breached the 100,000 mark, were only at Grade 5 in terms of quality.

Jake doubted that the reference to the Grade 9 Serum indicated its efficacy on Evolvers mastering Grade 9 Aether, or else Cekt would have healed instantly in the first place. He knew little about this Digestor Virus, but he was sure an Evolver with an Aether Constitution and Vitality surpassing a billion had absolutely nothing to fear from such a viral entity.

Hence, the 'Grade 9' likely referred to the estimated grade of the virus's bloodline, which Jake suspected to be significantly higher given its capacity to infect nearly all organisms indiscriminately, including beings like Epsilon and Lyra with purely energetic physiques.

"If it's an effective vaccine or serum you're after, I can provide one," Jake offered immediately. "I've already created one using my antibodies to cure Lucia and Ulfar, but I can't do anything about the lingering Corruption."

Cekt looked at him in astonishment; this unexpected news was a pleasant surprise.

"Then, by all means, thank you." The gremlin coughed awkwardly before adding in a somber tone, "But not right now. We still have one last issue to address."

"What is it?" Saros grumbled, crossing his four arms in comfort.

As if to answer him, the space above the Nexus began to distort before being torn open to reveal a black curtain: a spatial rift. At the sight of this, an understanding smile lit up Cekt's face and he chuckled,

"To welcome our guest, of course."

A slender white arm with golden nails emerged from the spatial rift, followed swiftly by a body of equal angelic and inhuman beauty.

Jake's blood ran cold at the sight of a Digestor Seraphim, his encounter with Verxes still fresh in his memory, but he quickly regained his composure upon realizing it was not

the same entity. If it had been, he would have been far less optimistic about his master's chances of teaching it a lesson.

At the time, Jake had relished the safety of his Oracle Shield, confident it would shield him from any harm. Yet, with Lure's death, that certainty had faltered. The trust he once placed in the Shield seemed more like misplaced faith now, causing him to question whether he'd fare as well this time around.

Would Cekt, he wondered, prove to be the kind of warrior who permitted his enemy a dignified entrance? His mentor's subsequent action forced an answer, as much as it forced blood from Jake's mouth.

The unidentified Digestor Seraphim had barely squeezed its folded wings through the narrow spatial rift before multihued Aether rings materialized, forming a lengthy barrel aimed directly at the interloper. Within this cylinder of arcane energy, the end of Cekt's cane glowed with an unworldly light.

"DIE, you wretched spawn!" Cekt's usually jocular demeanor was absent, replaced with a frosted rage that hung in the air like winter's breath.

BOOM!

The arrival of the Digestor Seraphim had been expressionless, its features unchanging, until the threat of imminent death made its chitinous skin bristle.

Without pause, its golden irises, previously casting a soft glow, ignited.

Stretching out its hand, it murmured,

"Time Rewind."

The thin beam of multicolored laser, poised to vaporize the creature, retreated as if reversed by an unseen hand. As it vanished, an invisible field bloomed from the Seraphim, its epicenter.

The confrontation might have concluded there, yet Cekt sneered as his ultimate attack was thwarted. The Aether ring nearest his cane, spectral in color, began to rotate, emitting a peculiar aura opposing the enemy's mysterious field.

Suddenly, the rings and multicolored laser reappeared, events continuing their natural course. The Digestor Seraphim suffered a backlash from its technique, coughing up a stream of golden blood. Quickly, it conjured a black energy screen just in time to face the condensed ray of light emitted from Cekt's cane.

Jake anticipated the Digestor being impaled or incinerated by the energy beam, or, at the very least, for its black screen to halt the attack. Instead, the space fractured at their

collision. The open spatial rift became unstable, the Seraphim caught between the distorting rift behind it and the rapidly fissuring space ahead, both impeding any teleportation attempts.

Unmoved by the chaos unfolding, the Digestor called upon his command over Time and his fierce Destruction Intent to obliterate the spatial fractures in their infancy. Amid the chaotic dance of the ever-nearing rifts, this creature of supreme allure invoked a sword of sheer golden brilliance. This divine instrument was then bathed in a halo of somber gray and pitch black, a manifestation of a uniquely hybrid destructive force. With it, he proceeded to methodically cleave and dissolve each threatening spatial crack, dancing a deadly ballet on the edge of existence.

In the end, the Digestor Seraphim still cast an annoyed glance at Cekt. With an almost inaudible snort, it folded its wings -which it hadn't even fully extended and dived back into the spatial rift it came from, disregarding the distortion.

Deep, bloody gashes marred its surface as it made contact with the spatial cracks, yet it remained stoic, keeping its trajectory unflinching.

When it was already inside, and the spatial rift on the verge of closing, its angelic voice, tainted with resentment, echoed softly in the Nexus' devastated chamber, "I will remember this affront."

Cekt remained vigilant. Indeed, right after, the gem serving as the Nexus shot towards the closing spatial rift as if trying to escape. The old Aetherist snorted at the sight, attempting to halt its flight, but to his surprise, someone beat him to it.

An immense invisible hand clamped down with overwhelming force, not on the Nexus, but on the spatial rift, mere inches from the Nexus. Turning his head in intrigue, the Wendok found his disciple also clutching at the air, a sinister expression etched onto his ethereally beautiful face. The surge of True Will and Cosmic Force radiating from him like a tidal wave was utterly blasphemous to a post-fourth-Ordeal Evolver.

Chapter 1009: Just Don't Kill Me

A chilling silence fell in the wake of the forced closure of the spatial rift, with Cekt gawking at his disciple in a mixture of astonishment and disbelief.

It was a formidable True Will Move, of a kind that could snuff out even an average Oracle Overseer if they chose not to defend. Such absolute telekinetic force, with the capacity to collapse space itself, simply could not be countered by mere physical robustness.

The Wendok had never been feared for his physical prowess, so he knew in his soul's marrow that he would not survive such a space-collapsing attack if he did not resist.

Saros wore an even graver countenance, if that were possible, his self-assurance primarily rooted in his tough musculature.

"That is a terrifying technique you've unleashed," Cekt commented casually. "Your high Spirit Body level reflects your mental strength, but I'm genuinely impressed by the quantity of Soul power you've managed to harness in a single move. If crushing objects from afar is not your overwhelming obsession to the point of awakening a Soul Class, I deduce that your Soul Strength must be extraordinary. Given your youth... I assume it's due to your intelligence and the vast amount of information your soul has absorbed over the past year."

The small green alien had glimpsed Jake's status before their botched expedition, so despite his deductive tone, he merely restated established facts.

Jake, of course, had no intention of contradicting him. His Soul Strength had indeed grown considerably over the past year from accumulating all sorts of memories and knowledge, but the fraction of Soul Power he employed in this Grabbing Move was not as insignificant as his master seemed to think.

Understanding the importance of possessing one or two ultimate techniques that could turn the tide when all else failed, Jake had practiced this technique daily since developing it to cultivate the corresponding True Will. He might not have reached the point of obsessively thinking about crushing distant objects, but he would be lying if he said he didn't ponder it at least a few hundred times each day.

This was akin to the kind of impulses a person on a very restrictive diet must resist when their favorite dish is placed before them. The difference was that his mental faculties were currently so heightened compared to an average human that it was far easier for him to detach himself from them despite their amplified intensity.

However, rather than feeling gratified by his master's praise, Jake was preoccupied with something else.

"Is it normal that the Nexus isn't resisting at all?" He asked, genuine bewilderment adorning his features. "As soon as the spatial rift closed, it started playing dead again. I can't even feel its fluctuations."

Cekt ceased to stare at him as if he were a fascinating specimen upon hearing his question, a proud smile spreading across his wrinkled face.

"Hehe, that's quite normal. It might not show, but its mind has been severely injured courtesy of me for having me held captive against my will for several hours..."

Rigel's expression drastically shifted as he recalled the moment when the Dungeon Digestor's consciousness had abruptly retreated. He had thought it was to prepare for their urgent extraction from the Magnetic Resonator, but it seemed that it was actually because its mind had been damaged and forced to beat a hasty retreat.

Jake and Saros were equally stunned by the news, the Oracle Guardian especially being profoundly shaken. Was the gap between a Rank 3 Aetherist and himself truly so wide?

Nevertheless, the astonishment and admiration on Jake's face soon faded, rapidly replaced by a spark of avidity, his covetous gaze locked on the large gem placidly levitating.

Cekt chuckled knowingly at his disciple's thinly veiled desire, preferring honesty to pretense. Amused by his reaction, the gremlin gestured generously and said,

"You can have it. I didn't know how to reward you if you passed my test, and oh well... Despite a few unforeseen events, it seems like you're the only one who has."

Jake's desire-filled eyes lit up at his master's approval, but before he could grab his due, Cekt tempered his enthusiasm with a tease,

"But not now. I fear we'll need its help soon to repair the damage, although, unfortunately, it won't be enough to turn the tide..."

Jake and Saros' eyes narrowed at his last remark, while the two Brain-Eaters barely suppressed their laughter, purely relishing their predicament. Yet, a frosty glance from their master was enough to freeze their smiles into ugly grimaces.

"Is it because of the trap we fell into?" Jake asked gravely to confirm his worries.

Cekt looked at him suddenly with new eyes, as if truly seeing him for the first time.

"So you did understand the kind of trap we fell into," the alien sighed before showing a weary, tired smile. "So, you know the implications it holds for us, don't you? I must say, you're handling the news better than I'd have expected."

Jake's face fell despite his master's mild compliment, having finally received the official confirmation he dreaded.

It appeared that Xi had not been mistaken, but it was far from a comforting revelation.

Both he and she would have rather been completely wrong.

"We'll discuss this later," Cekt declared, cutting off any questions before they had a chance to form. "First, we have more pressing matters at hand, like healing our companions. I'm infected, remember."

Jake swallowed his impending inquiries upon hearing his master but nonetheless asked a question he deemed vital.

"What about the Seraphim Digestor? Should we be expecting him to return soon with reinforcements?"

It was a legitimate concern, but, thankfully, Cekt had no additional bad news to dispense.

"The notion of zero risk is a myth, but it's highly unlikely," Cekt replied after a moment of contemplation. "Seraphim Digestors are a handful to deal with, but they rarely act of their own accord. They strictly follow orders from above, and if I've read their plan correctly and they stick to their usual routine, after his failure, he would have immediately moved on to his next destination."

The Wendok cast a curious glance at his disciple to gauge his reaction, a smirk creeping onto his lined face as he noted the skeptical furrow in Jake's brow.

"What? You don't believe me?"

"I didn't say that," Jake responded, shaking his head. "I just find it hard to comprehend why he would abandon a valuable Dungeon Digestor and an Aether-generating base like this just due to an unexpected setback. It's not like we completely defeated him. I mean no disrespect, Master, but it didn't feel like this Seraphim was any weaker than you... We were just better prepared. If I had the same power as that creature, I would have stealthily returned to another point in the Magnetic Resonator after I had left. Then I would have patiently planned my perfect ambush. That's if acting alone. If he can call for reinforcements, then his chances of success are practically guaranteed."

The smile on Cekt's face didn't fade as he listened to his disciple's argument. On the contrary, it broadened even further into one of wholehearted agreement.

"And you're absolutely right... if it were an Evolver like you or me," his master cryptically added. "I realize you know very little about the Digestors apart from what the Oracle deems fit to share based on your Rank. We'll need to address these gaps in your knowledge when we return. In short, you can sleep easy. Unless we're cursed with insane misfortune and have stumbled upon a vengeful lunatic, he won't return. Digestors don't think in terms of material loss as we do, but in terms of objectives and instincts. It saddens me to say this, but I fear their mission's objective has largely been achieved... Right, Rigel?"

The Gorgonite, who hadn't expected to be directly addressed, stiffly nodded before freezing in terror. Was the hour of his reckoning at hand? The icy stare of the gremlin, contradicting his nonchalant smile, was enough to convince him... The gremlin's subsequent words sounded the death knell.

"Give me a good reason not to annihilate your soul right here, right now," Cekt ordered, his voice chillingly sinister, his murderous intent looming like a tangible cloud.

Feeling his life was more on the line than ever, the Gorgonite fell to his knees without hesitation, pressing his face against the ground as he hastened to swear through his tears,

"I-I'll cooperate! Just...just don't kill me."

Chapter 1010: Relax, Guardian

Saros sneered with distaste, viewing the Brain-Eater pitifully squirm in hollow promises.

Any Evolver who'd dealt with Digestors as much as he had would know their words held no weight, no credibility.

Even if the Digestor's promises held sincerity, a miracle born from fear, their natural tendencies "rooted in their nature and origin" would persist, continuing to shape their behavior and character fundamentally. Once fear faded, these two Brain-Eaters would naturally start their plots anew.

Of course, how could a wise and seasoned Rank 3 Aetherist like Cekt be deceived?

Much like the Oracle Guardian, the old alien's lips curled downwards in disdain and aversion, coldly pronouncing,

"And why should I believe you?"

A chill of terror raced along the spine of the Gorgonite, perceiving the hostility seeping from the voice of his former master. Aware that his life depended on what he'd utter next, he began sweating large droplets of mineral oil, soon coating him like engine oil "the smell was all too similar.

Rigel racked his brain for an adequate response. His counterpart Syrbarun,

peacefully floating in his glass cage, took a perverse pleasure in his current inability to answer.

With walls designed to block sound and telepathic signals both incoming and

outgoing, the imprisoned Brain-Eater could easily lip-read, yet his predicament spared him the existential pressure his comrade was facing.

It wasn't that he fancied himself safe from Wendok's wrath â he knew he'd soon face the same interrogation â but for the moment, he savored the spectacle of his fellow Brain-Eater enduring a dreadful grilling.

When Cekt and the others started losing patience, the Gorgonite's frantic eyes suddenly stilled, and, prostrated before the old alien, he looked up and proclaimed with newfound confidence, an eureka moment, "I-I am ready to sign an Oracle Slave

Contract!"

He anxiously awaited the green gremlin's response, only to be met with collective laughter. Even Jake couldn't help but sneer, retorting with a biting tone,

"Did you really think we would let you live without signing one? That's not enough.

Oracle Slave Contracts don't work well with your kind. And I know what I'm talking about as one of my Oracle Slaves is a Trojan Digestor."

Of course, he was referring to Ruby. He had firsthand experience with the limitations of the Oracle Slave Contract when it came to these creatures.

Cekt nodded, arms folded, hearing his disciple's words. His icy gaze then landed back on Rigel and he snapped sharply,

"You heard him. I'm giving you a second chance. Know this, if the answer doesn't satisfy me, I won't hesitate to kill you.

Because even though I can force you without asking your opinion, I have no good reason to. Whether you live or die is up to you."

The Gorgonite's face contorted in despair and anger at the ultimatum. With his intelligence, he knew precisely what the old Wendok meant.

The Brain-Eater's features soon furrowed into a horrid grimace faced with the terrible dilemma. Jake could tell by the chaotic spiritual fluctuations how hard the choice was. Even if he didn't know what Cekt

planned exactly, he knew it boded nothing good for the Digestor.

The Brain-Eater was likely choosing between dying now and surviving, regretting every day he was still alive. In other words, the Gorgonite's choice would hinge on how

much he valued staying alive, or rather, how much he dreaded his own death.

Jake had his hunches about this aspect, and, unsurprisingly, Rigel didn't disappoint him.

"I... want to live. Whatever the cost. Alright, brainwash me. But please, don't manipulate too much with my personality or alter my memories too much. I want to know that I've been brainwashed and that I accepted this change willingly."

'As expected.' Jake nodded inwardly, hearing the Brain-Eater's decision.

Brainwashing was indeed the only real way to influence a Digestor's behavior. The only unknown was what kind of brainwashing

they were referring to?

If classical hypnosis-based brainwashing was an effective remedy for Corruption, the Oracle and Mirror Universe wouldn't have made such a fuss.

Therefore, logically, Cekt and Rigel were referring to a deeper, more permanent type of brainwashing, the kind that directly affected the soul. If he was not mistaken, it was something akin to the hereditary Soul Slave Seal that Brain-Eaters could innately use by sacrificing some of their Soul Power.

The only thing that still bothered him was that he didn't know his master was capable of such a feat. Wasn't it only Rank 5 or above Aetherists who had the level and experience required to manipulate the Soul Code?

In this case, it was likely a perk of his bloodline, a Soul Class, or some sort of Soul Cultivation Technique. Otherwise, it could only be made possible with a one-time-use item like the invaluable Phasing Scroll used earlier by Saros.

And indeed, Cekt immediately proved his last supposition correct when he summoned a peculiar red scroll that resembled a sheet of congealed blood, adorned with a complex design suggesting a large gold-inked blotch.

Jake found nothing of note about the scroll based on its aura or its materials, yet the reaction of Saros and Rigel proved quite the opposite.

"H-how?! How did you get this?" Saros

stammered out, his face contorted in shock, while the Gorgonite started trembling with horror, bowing without any hesitation.

"Anything but this, I beg of you!" the Brain-Eater whimpered, weeping copiously and shaking with terror.

Even Syrbarun, who was gleefully twitching in his cage, turned stiff, his terrified gaze pinned on the crimson scroll. His enjoyment of his fellow creature's misery was long forgotten.

"Oh? So, you know what this is." Cekt

chuckled at their stunned reactions. "Good, it'll save me some time."

"What is it, master?" Jake asked with

curiosity, the only one seeming indifferent to the scroll's appearance.

"Something that even works on Digestors because it originates from the same source,"

Cekt explained solemnly. "Don't bother looking for this item in the Oracle Store, you won't find anything. Even in the Mirror World, it's pricey just to get information about it. In our Mirror Universe, only the Oracle, the Ancient Designers, and some exceptional elites can lawfully acquire it."

His master's explanation only made Jake more doubtful, raising new questions. If it was so hard to acquire, then why did he have one of these rare scrolls in his possession?

More importantly, why waste it on a lowly Brain-Eater?

Even without reading his disciple's thoughts, the gremlin could guess his concerns, and he answered with a shrug, "What I can say is that I obtained a fair number of these legally."

Saros' pupils narrowed at his ambiguous response, and he instinctively gripped his four blades tighter, as if preparing for a fight for his life.

"Relax, Guardian." Cekt scoffed, rolling his eyes, "I'm not so petty as to silence you after summoning this scroll in your presence.

However, you're right about one thing. Now that you've seen this scroll, I have to ensure your silence. Let's sign an Oracle Contract."

The four-armed alien immediately relaxed upon hearing this order. On the surface, it was humiliating for him, but considering what he had witnessed, he got off

remarkably lightly.

"Do I need to sign one too?" Jake asked, his brow furrowing.

"No need." Cekt dismissed him with a wave of his hand without looking his way. "You don't know what this is, and Oracle

Contracts no longer hold much sway over you. Let me handle them while you take care of your infected companions. We'll discuss the rest later."

Jake didn't protest, but pointing at Epsilon, Hade, and Lyra, who were standing apart from their group, he inquired, "What about Epsilon and Hade? I don't think they're fully under the virus's influence."

Cekt momentarily turned away from Rigel at his remark, taking time to inspect his favored student and then Hade. After a quick mental scan, he confirmed, "You're right. There's a Soul Slave Seal in their souls. The

Sinewshade Virus isn't as effective on inorganic etheric races, and Epsilon, with his powerful and near-unfaltering spirit due to his power's nature, isn't an exception. As for your friend, it's more surprising, but it's due to his high Spirit Body level and decent Soul Strength. He must've also used a technique at the time of infection to protect his soul from the virus."

Turning back to Rigel, he bluntly growled, "Your handiwork?"

The Gorgonite quivered like a leaf under his scathing gaze, but knowing denial was futile, he quick

ly announced, "I've just removed it."

Chapter 1011: Curing Everyone

"Very well," Cekt approved, his countenance calm and undisturbed.

The instant the Soul Slave Seal controlling Epsilon and Hade's thoughts and movements dissolved, the aura of Epsilon's energy undulated notably, signaling his reawakening.

"Thanks, master," the disciple bowed swiftly, his embarrassment overwhelming him to the point of avoiding the alien elder's gaze. "I'm truly ashamed for being caught off guard so easily."

With a gratified smile, Cekt encouraged him to rise straight with a telekinetic gesture.

"The fault is mine for leading you into such peril without prior reconnaissance," the Wendok admitted, not shy of recognizing his part in the misadventure. His expression sobered as he solemnly queried, "How do you feel?"

Probing his body and mind with focused concentration, Epsilon finally disclosed, "I can only maintain lucidity for another hour or two. Beyond that, even if the virus is removed, the corruption will overcome my sanity."

"Ugh... I suppose you're faring better than the others," Cekt winced, massaging his temples to quell the impending migraine. It had indeed been a grueling day.

In the meantime, Jake was assessing Hade, baffled by his persistent nonresponsiveness. However, with Xi's input, he concluded that the Sinewshade's altered brain and hormonal status prevented him from forming coherent thoughts. His friend was still conscious, yet his mental fortitude was entirely consumed in battling the invading, corruptive virus.

As for Lyra, despite being an ethereal being like Epsilon, her Spirit Body level and Soul Strength were considerably lower. Despite her advantage over the virus compared to organic life forms, her spirit had been affected nearly as swiftly as Lucia's.

'I better get to work,' Jake grimaced, realizing that Hade and the other disciples' conditions were rapidly deteriorating.

With the danger passed, he allowed Ulfar and Siri out of his Inner Space Dimension but left Lucia and Drakon inside to avoid any mishap. The Beskyrian was more than glad to finally be outside and made it known.

"Hahaha, I was beginning to feel claustrophobic in there!" The warrior exclaimed with elation. "You should consider furnishing that space if you plan to invite guests in the future. It's far too dreary for the moment..."

Knowing that excessive curiosity would do him no good, Jake cleared his mind and dedicated the subsequent hour to producing a batch of antibodies to create enough serums for everyone.

The first to benefit were Hade, then Epsilon and Lyra, and finally, the Sinewshades sedated by Cekt. It was fascinating to see them revert to their original appearances, although grotesquely altered due to bone and muscle modifications.

However, he had to admit he was relieved they were asleep, and Saros was absent.

Otherwise, he would have had to brace for a tough fight as he didn't have enough fairy spirits to neutralize them all, especially since many of these Evolvers were at Saros's level or even higher.

Thinking of Lucia, Jake suddenly turned his head to Ulfar, who had been standing stiff as a post all this time. He was struck by a detail, or rather its absence, that he had almost overlooked.

'He should be nearly as corrupt as Lucia. Am I lucky he didn't react to Saros's presence, or is he holding himself back?' He wondered with a stern expression.

[Everyone will likely need to be tested for corruption levels once Cekt returns.] Xi noted with a weariness in her voice. The thought didn't exactly thrill him either.

His brooding was swiftly interrupted when he saw Hade walking towards him, clearly having regained his bearings. He had seen him communicate briefly with Ulfar telepathically and knew he was more or less abreast of the events since their separation. He halted a step away, and the two men stared at each other before Jake broke into a smile.

"It's good to see you. Before you say anything, know that you're not to blame. No one could have foreseen this."

Jake didn't know if Hade was the type to wallow and self-flagellate with misguided guilt, but seeing his face and shoulders visibly relax at his words, he knew he was right to have said them.

"In any case, I'll ensure this doesn't happen again." Hade vowed with a solemn expression. "Even if I can't protect the other Myrtharian Nerds, I'll continue to look after those who are here. You can rest easy, I'll take care of Lucia."

Jake's lip twitched at receiving the pledge of the Fluid Grandmaster, who appeared even younger than him. Clearly, unlike the other disciples, Hade was cognizant of his condition. He knew returning to a normal life was a far-off dream, if not an impossibility.

"Rest for now. We'll talk more when Cekt returns," Jake abruptly ended their reunion after a short, somber conversation in which neither was in the mood for a joke.

Watching Hade's retreating figure, Jake's heart felt heavier than ever. It was hard to believe that their lives could crumble in a few hours.

It was hard to believe how swiftly their lives had spiraled into chaos. Ulfar was the only one who seemed his usual self, probably because the full weight of the situation hadn't sunk in yet.

During the brief respite, Jake received gratitude from Epsilom, Drakon, Lyra, and even Siri. The first two especially apologized for any harm they may have inflicted on him and his comrades. Jake forgave them with ease, knowing their only fault had been to play solo.

Finally, noting that Cekt wasn't back yet, Jake decided to ascend to the Magnetic Resonator's surface to log in to the Mirror World. Once linked, he asked Xi to gather as much information as possible about current events on B842 and what they had missed in these "few hours."

Minutes later, Xi's hologram reappeared before him, her expression grim. Meeting Jake's gaze, she offered a bleak nod. Jake's heart sank at this final confirmation.

She then transferred the data she'd compiled, and Jake's fists clenched white-knuckle. It took him a good half-minute to unclench them and draw a calming breath.

After gathering what he needed, he disconnected from the Mirror World and returned to the gloom of his comrades and co-disciples. Cekt was still absent, so he seized the opportunity to also address the "aesthetic" issues of the healed Sinewshades.

Before embarking on Lucia's cosmetic surgery, he first practiced on the sedated Evolvers. Ultimately, he was grateful for their deep slumber, for the amount of blood splattering the ground by the time he finished suggested they would have endured tremendous suffering awake.

At least he could confirm his body-reshaping techniques, combining the Life Element and his telekinesis, worked like a charm. Of course, he then set about restoring his girlfriend's former beauty.

Unlike the Evolvers, Lucia wasn't sedated, but in an artificially-induced coma maintained by Jeanie controlling her brain waves. Consequently, her body reshaping was much more painful, Jake's heart breaking each time her face contorted in agony within her sleep.

Earlier, he had already recalled Zephir, allowing Drakon's awakening. In Saros's absence and his master's presence, he deemed the risk minimal.

Minutes later, having been much more meticulous and cautious with her than the other infected, Lucia's eyelids fluttered, then slowly opened.

The first sight she beheld was her beloved's face, but this time, her response was not one of excitement. Her eyes, brimming with sadness, quickly welled up with tears. Weakly lifting her arm to caress his cheek, she murmured,

"I'm sorry, Jake. I don't think we can stay together."

Chapter 1012: See? Told You?

"I'm sorry, Jake. I don't think we can stay together."

Jake turned eerily calm and expressionless upon hearing her apology, followed by an surprising declaration. Brushing off Lucia's tender touch on his cheek with unemotional resolve, he said flatly,

"I hope you realize what you're saying, Lucia. Because once we're done, there's no turning back."

He couldn't help but feel a glimmer of anger. She had been so bold, nearly forceful, pushing him to face his emotions and insecurities, and now, as he was barely getting used to the idea, she wanted to call it quits?

Lucia's face filled with panic as she watched his warmth turn icy, aware that it wasn't like him. Seeing him so hurt and cold towards her was a first, and her chest tightened, aware that one misstep could erase her from his heart forever.

"It... it's not what you think." Lucia stammered, struggling to mend the situation, but the more she tried to explain, the more her eyes welled up with tears.

Jake let her struggle with her emotions as she fumbled for words, and then, without warning, he pulled her into a tight embrace. She could barely breathe, let alone speak.

"I know what you meant." He murmured gently, stroking her hair. "But it doesn't suit you, Lucia. I didn't know you were one to admit defeat so easily."

"I-I didn't say I was giving up!" Lucia blurted out, shoving him away forcefully, only to regret it. "It's just..."

"Just what?" Jake echoed.

"It's just that... I know it will take time. A lot of time... Maybe my condition will never change." She admitted in a barely audible voice, staring down at her toes, her face a mask of sorrow.

Dismissing the idea of trying to comfort her, or reason with her, Jake suddenly blurted out,

"Lucia, do you want to kill me, right now? Do you hate me? Is that why you want to end things? Don't lie to me."

From her earlier actions towards Saros, he'd wrongly concluded that the Corrupted's hostility and hatred didn't apply to him, given his own high level of corruption. But he seemed to have been mistaken. His paradoxical condition, both one of their own and an enemy from the opposite side.

Jake too had been wrestling with conflicting feelings towards his close ones ever since he mutated after devouring Ruby. Unlike Lucia and other Corrupted, his mental attributes were ridiculously high compared to peers who had experienced the same number of Ordeals.

Thanks to that, along with his bloodline's adaptability trait, it was undeniably easier for him to distinguish and control himself. Truth be told, this didn't only apply to the Corruption, but also to the expected side effects of his Soul Class that weren't as overt and alienating as the previous ones.

It wasn't that he didn't suffer from these detrimental effects, but like his urge to crush objects from a distance, they hadn't reached a threshold where they would stop him from being himself. This was his normal, but he had to admit that for others, their reality was far different.

Jake calmly observed Lucia's reaction as she searched for words, catching the flickering glimmer of hatred and the distinct killing intent that had burned in her eyes when he'd asked if she wanted to kill him.

Lucia seemed to be battling herself, her face scrunching up, her brows furrowing as if she was concentrating with all her might to push away dreadful thoughts.

Seeing her suffer like this, Jake felt bad and was about to tell her she didn't need to answer when, out of the blue, Lucia asserted,

"I still love you. That won't change. But..."

"But?"

"But I also want to kill you. I can't lie about my feelings. And right now, I want to kill you more. If we stay together, or if our relationship goes further, I fear I'll lose control. I don't want to hurt you..."

Jake looked at her with a peculiar expression, halfway between shock and flattery at how charming she could be while looking so embarrassed and sad as she uttered such ridiculous words.

After a few seconds of silence, Lucia glanced up curiously, only to find Jake bursting into laughter, her beautiful golden eyes widening in disbelief.

"Hahahahahahaha!"

Watching Jake double over, laughing uncontrollably until his stomach cramped, Lucia was left dumbfounded, her brain unable to process what was happening.

Yet, as he continued to laugh relentlessly, utterly ignoring her, a different kind of irritation began to well up inside her.

Frustrated, she stomped her foot on the ground and, her face turning bright red, she yelled,

"Damn it, Jake! If you don't tell me what's so funny right now, I'm going to lose it!"

Jake's laughter caught in his throat as he noticed the change in Lucia's tone and mood. Despite her ultimatum, he still chuckled a bit more before regaining control. When he finally felt composed enough to respond without bursting into laughter again, Jake uttered with an air of grave seriousness,

"Lucia, the thought of you accidentally killing me is what's hilarious here," Jake began, his tone touched with dry amusement. "I didn't want to dent your ego, but under the circumstances, I'm going to lay it bare. Unless you unleash your Myrmidian Sword, pouring all your True Will and Aura of Victory into a single strike, you've got no shot at killing me. If you don't obliterate my body and soul in one go, I'll be back on my feet before you can blink. And if you could do that, which is yet to be proven, you'd need your brain speed and reaction time to be thousands of times greater than they currently are to even have the slimmest chance of catching me off-guard. Otherwise, I'll see your attack coming from a mile away, and have a countermeasure in place before the thought's even fully formed in your mind. The gap between us is just that wide."

The Nexus room suddenly felt heavy with tension. Not only Lucia, but even Hade, Ulfar, and the other disciples eavesdropping on their conversation with feigned nonchalance, wore sour expressions as if they had just swallowed a wasp.

The poor guys were probably reassessing their entire lives, wondering at what point they had royally screwed up. It was particularly humiliating for Hade, who was the oldest, as well as Epsilon and Drakon who held the same rank of Oracle Knight as him.

Although they were grateful to have been saved, their goodwill towards him had likely plummeted. Judging from the way they were grinding their teeth, it was evident, especially in the case of Drakon, from whose nostrils smoke could practically be seen billowing out.

"No hard feelings, guys." Jake smirked unapologetically as he scanned the crowd of sneaky eavesdroppers. "That's why I've spent the last few hours busting my hump to clean up your messes and wipe your asses."

Jake's gaze then returned to Lucia, looking her eyes to gauge her reaction. Had his jab hit home or made things worse? But seeing her cutely clench her fists and teeth, her face screaming defiance, he knew that the obsessively competitive Lucia, who couldn't stand losing, was back in full swing.

For a fleeting moment, Jake thought she might explode or even attack him when she abruptly grabbed his throat with both hands, bringing her face close to his.

But when her lips met his and a triumphant giggle echoed in his ears, he realized Lucia's intentions were entirely different.

When their lips finally parted, Jake noticed not only the playful smirk on her bewitching lips that could lead a saint astray but also the disbelief that his neck hadn't even reddened despite her squeezing it with all her might.

"See? Told you." Jake smirked back, gently catching her forearms, as if encouraging her to try again as much as she wanted.

Lucia huffed, quickly releasing his throat as if it was a hot iron, before coughing and clearing her throat, avoiding his eyes.

"Cough... Well, since you're so sure I can't kill you," she began, her voice tinged with annoyance, "I suppose I have no choice but to challenge you and see if you're as 'resilient' as you claim to be."

"By all means, do," Jake replied, his grin turning provocative.

"...In bed, of course," Lucia added, her smirk taking on a seductive edge that mirrored his. "Otherwise, it's no fun."

Chapter 1013: A Few Days?

Jake found himself at a loss for words. Part of him longed to rise to her banter, yet he feared aggravating the situation further, forcing him to prove his mettle right here, right now.

Not that it bothered him, but given their circumstances, they undoubtedly had other priorities...

Thankfully, the timely return of Cekt, Saros, and the two Brain-Eaters saved Jake from his predicament. He instantly noticed that the cage holding the parasitic Brain-Eater, Syrbarun, had vanished, but the real Syrbarun was back. He had entrusted the Vrusug's body to his master at his request before their separation.

"Good job, Jake. It's quicker and more miraculous than I anticipated," the alien elder praised, noticing that all his disciples and even the Sinewshades had reverted to their original forms. Noting the peculiar ambience between Jake and Lucia, he chuckled, "Am I interrupting something?"

"Cough, cough, no, we're done," Lucia cleared her throat, blushing slightly, much to Jake's astonishment.

Casting a warning glare at Jake as he held back laughter, Lucia huffed softly and retreated, ending their flirtatious exchange as Cekt arrived.

Cekt had watched the scene with some interest, eager to tease his disciple, but first, he needed something from Jake. Stretching out his hand, he unabashedly asked, "And my serum?"

"Right here," Jake tossed him the antibody serum cartridge. "Just keep in mind, I'm potentially a Digestor and my Corruption level is high. I'm not sure if it'll have negative effects on you."

"Tsk, tsk, tsk. You worry too much," Cekt dismissed his concerns casually.

"Remember, I've been infected with the virus too. I'm much, much older than you and my Corruption level has long surpassed a normal Evolver's limit. The only difference is that it happened more gradually for me and my mental stats and self-control could keep up. Sure, every day isn't smooth sailing, but I've got enough experience to handle the storms when they come..."

Jake and the others shifted uncomfortably, surprised to hear their master admit that he wasn't always in control of himself. As nonchalant as he sounded, they could sense that the reality was far from rosy.

Who knew how many unfortunate incidents had occurred before the Wendok managed to gain control without harming others? He might have even lived in isolation for a long time before daring to mingle with other Evolvers from their Mirror Universe.

Then, in front of them, the gremlin injected the antibody serum into his veins with a syringe sturdy and sharp enough to penetrate his skin. In terms of hardness alone, this syringe was at least a Silver Artefact.

It took mere seconds for the serum to work in tandem with the Wendok's high vitality. A satisfied and admiring smile soon graced his face, indicating complete recovery.

"Thanks, Jake. You've no idea how much you've lifted off my shoulders," Cekt thanked him sincerely, handing back the empty cartridge. "Without your help, it would've taken much longer to develop the vaccine, and who knows how high my Corruption level would've risen."

"I could've given it to you earlier if you had waited a bit," Jake shrugged. "I didn't think you'd be gone so long with Saros."

"Hah... I didn't think it'd take me this long either, but at least now I'm sure my brainwashing won't be an issue. Consider our two Brain-Eater friends on our side.

Syrbarun and Rigel are back to their old selves, but the Brain-Eaters are temporarily inhabiting their bodies, cohabiting in their skulls. For now, aside from the Corruption, their relationship is more akin to a symbiosis, benefiting both parties."

Jake was curious but refrained from asking more questions. Instead, he wanted to know when Cekt planned to broach the elephant in the room. Seeing Jake's anxious expression, the elder alien suddenly became serious and clapped his hands, commanding everyone's attention.

He then asked them to gather for a briefing, having important matters to share.

Some, like Hade or Epsilon, already had a sense of impending doom based on their gloomy expressions, but others were blissfully unaware.

Jake had thought that Cekt would rouse the other sedated Evolvers before the briefing to avoid repeating himself, but apparently, this wasn't his main concern.

Contrary to his expectations, Cekt even commended his sharpness for not foolishly trying to wake them up. When Jake questioned why, the little alien merely shook his head with a weary expression and answered cryptically, "You'll understand when you see what happens to an Evolver once their

Corruption reaches 100%. To familiarize you with the reality, I'll show you what it entails before you leave this place..."

Once his apprentices and Jake's companions had assembled, the Wendok took a measured look at each of them, then began,

"Firstly, I need to apologize for the questionable execution of the test I had planned for you. Yes, you were indeed tested, and some of you handled it better than others... But let's be honest, it wasn't meant to go down this way."

A bitter laugh escaped from Lucia, and several disciples, including Lyra, Drakon, and Siri, repeated her sentiment, finding little humor in the situation. As an aside, Siri remained in the body Jake had created for her, reflecting her emotional state.

Her expressions and gestures seemed unquestionably more human.

A sigh grew within Cekt at their dismayed faces, but he had no choice but to swallow the bitter pill and continue,

"Regrettably, I have only one piece of good news amid a sea of bad. But before I drop those bombs, I need to explain what has transpired here so everyone's on the same page. Following Lure's death and the compromise of the Aether Network, the Oracle Overseer, Oros, drafted all competent Aetherists and Evolvers yesterday to fortify the Aether Network around B842 whether it is in terms of energy production or transmission. The Gravitation Oscillators and Magnetic Resonators that harness energy from black holes play a pivotal role in our planet's energy ecosystem, so I was sent out to oversee this Magnetic Resonator and many others. Up until now, I haven't told you anything new."

Jake and the others gave him a nod, prompting him to continue his narrative.

Having received their consent, Cekt dived headfirst into the crux of the matter, "The presence of Digestors on this Magnetic Resonator was anticipated, hence the test, but what I didn't foresee was that it was a trap. Both you and I fell into it, but we weren't the intended targets-this was designed for B842 as a whole and, more openly, for the Oracle. I'll be blunt with you. It was a temporal trap.

"The Magnetic Resonator had long been under the sway of a Dungeon Digestor versed in space-time laws, and as soon as we arrived here, the trap had already been sprung. To avoid arousing suspicion, the Dungeon Digestor waited until I had ventured deep into the Magnetic Resonator before activating its temporal trap. Then, once everyone had entered the Dungeon, it deactivated the Aether Array protecting the Magnetic Resonator from the temporal distortion resulting from the black hole's proximity, thereby reducing its Aether consumption. That's why this Dungeon Digestor was so passive, and why there were virtually no monsters spawning in this Dungeon except these Sinewshades, who were

infected Evolvers like you and me. Almost all its energy and focus was not on keeping me under control, but on maintaining this temporal trap over a vast area."

At that moment, he shot Jake a complicated glance, the meaning of which Jake grasped immediately. The distorted voice of Cekt in the message Jake had received hinted that his master had fallen into a temporal trap where time was significantly slowed. Had he been more cautious, he should have immediately left the Magnetic Resonator.

But how could he have guessed that the temporal trap wasn't just confined to a small area holding Cekt, but covered the entirety of the space occupied by the Dungeon Digestor's consciousness? Given that abandoning his friends was unthinkable, he was in checkmate from the moment Lucia had managed to

breach the barrier and chose to explore the funnel without him.

It was a tough pill to swallow, but indeed, Lucia was the one who had led Jake and Hade astray. Had it been up to them, they would have certainly thought twice before taking any risks.

Now, judging by the ghastly and horrified expressions on Lucia, Ulfar, and other disciples, it was clear that they were starting to catch on to the old alien's implication.

Lucia, especially, was short of breath, so mortified by guilt and shame that she struggled to breathe. She was slowly realizing that her recklessness had likely sealed her companions' fate, dragging them down with her.

Just as her mind was about to shut down under the weight of overwhelming guilt, Jake's hand on her hair jolted her back to reality. Looking up, she saw him smiling gently at her.

'What's done is done. You've already paid enough for your mistake, there's no need to punish yourself further,' he chastised her telepathically. 'Making mistakes isn't a sin, but repeating them is. Remember what happened here for the next time.'

This advice applied to him as well. Be it because of his bloodline, Soul Class, the Corruption, his Digestor instincts, or his own personality, he also tended to err on the side of overconfidence, almost irrationally, despite his extraordinary intelligence.

Just when Jake thought he had managed to lift Lucia's spirits, it was precisely at that moment that Lyra's soft voice posed the disheartening question that was on everyone's lips.

"Um, Master... When you say 'time trap,' how much time are we talking about? A few days?" Her voice was tinged with anxiety as she held her breath.

Unfortunately, Cekt's reply boomed like an irrevocable judgement and could only let her down.

"Four years."

Author Note:

For those who are good at math, yes, the period of diplomatic immunity has already ended. Of course, I could have chosen a less 'convenient' date, but that would have meant writing the story in a way that doesn't necessarily suit me.

For those worried that Jake is four years behind the others, don't get too excited. Don't forget, he still got the Nexus from the same Dungeon Digestor responsible for his situation, which I think is worth it.

Chapter 1014: Ton Of Bad News

"To be precise, it's been four years and 22 days," Cekt added immediately.

His audience, already bracing for the worst, deflated further upon hearing the exact number. Hade, who'd been obsessing over a specific deadline, changed his expression drastically, exclaiming in dismay, "So... does this mean B842's diplomatic immunity period ended nearly... two months ago?"

"Indeed," Cekt responded sternly, the news being just as disastrous for him.

Upon confirming the old alien's revelation, his disciples fell into chaos, while Lucia and Ulfar felt an urgent need to check on their friends and loved ones. Jake and Cekt shared a bleak smile, having anticipated this upheaval.

Jake himself had wanted to contact them sooner, but placing a call through the Faction Chat had become far more challenging than it was four years ago.

Nevertheless, he'd asked Xi to investigate what had become of the Myrtharian Nerds during their absence.

On learning that the Myrtharian Nerds still existed, he managed to regain a semblance of composure. Of course, not everything was rosy, and the bombshell Cekt had just dropped was the least of their problems, even though it was the root of everything else.

"Okay, simmer down and listen. Don't waste time trying to reach them; none of you can afford it," Cekt chuckled sourly, watching their faces fall one after another upon realizing that communication with their friends was impossible.

They wanted to quickly ascend to the Magnetic Resonator's surface, believing it to be the reason for the Oracle System's silence, but those like Jake, Epsilon, and Drakon with access to the Mirror World knew it wouldn't make a difference.

Regrettably, much had transpired during these four years, most of which hadn't played out in their favor. To say that the Mirror Universe and their planet were in dire straits would be an understatement.

When Cekt finally managed to regain their full attention, his demeanor changed radically, his weathered face becoming a mask of stern solemnity.

"What I'm about to disclose will chill you to the bone, but I urge you to remain calm and not interrupt until I'm done," he began ominously. "Only by acknowledging and accepting the truth can you prepare for what lies ahead. I warn you again, it's a series of grim revelations stemming from the first.

"Firstly, the temporal trap we fell into wasn't an isolated incident. It pains me to admit it, but the Digestors' plan was so flawless that only an Oracle Path orchestrated by an entity equal to or greater than our Oracle could have achieved it. Regarding our temporal trap, all the Magnetic Resonators and Gravitational Oscillators orbiting the mega black hole at the heart of B842 were part of the enemy's web. Digestors were poised on each of them, ready to snap their jaws shut. I don't know how they managed to pull all this off without drawing attention, but it just proves how long they've been orchestrating their plan. The death of Lure, the sabotage of the Aether Network, and the swift but predictable reaction of authorities from various Systems and Planets to reinforce their own Aether Network were all part of their prediction. They already knew where we'd go and what we'd try to do. Of course, we knew it wasn't risk-free, but

nobody could have imagined that Digestors were capable of coordinating on such a large scale across the entire Mirror Universe."

Siri calmly raised her hand, interrupting her master's musings.

"Yes, Siri? Am I rambling?" Cekt forced a smile.

The Delkron android, or rather, the unusually pale young woman, shook her head and asked, "I wouldn't presume to interrupt. But indeed, I'd like to know the facts first. Theories and explanations can come later."

Epsilon, Hade, and Saros quietly agreed, sharing the same sentiment. Speaking of the Oracle Guardian, Jake had been confused for a while as to why neither Lucia nor any of the other infected disciples seemed inclined to attack him.

His curiosity finally got the better of him, and he discreetly activated his Cosmic Sight, then his Lucid Aetherdreamer mode to scan him thoroughly. His mouth formed a surprised 'O' upon discovering that the alien wasn't physically present. It was only a holographic projection.

Apparently, Cekt had expected this problem and had taken him elsewhere, setting up this device to allow him to stay with them. Despite this, Jake could see it wasn't perfect, with Lucia and the other disciples occasionally shooting him hostile looks he wouldn't wish on his worst enemies.

"I understand," Cekt sighed, addressing Siri's question. "Here's the hard truth: 81% of our planet's Magnetic Resonators, Gravitational Oscillators, and other key Aether sources have fallen into enemy hands. In other words, the Aether they produced is no longer ours, and every recapture attempt has been verified as a failure, with those deployed considered either dead, infected, or corrupted.

"2%-which includes us-have shown recent signs of life, but their losses are severe, and the Aether source they protected or were supposed to reclaim has been more or less damaged. 3% have stayed functional throughout, meaning that B842's Aether Network, instead of fortifying as expected, operated at less than 5% of its energy capacity over the past four years. The remaining 14% are also in enemy hands, but unlike the other 81%, we have good reason to believe that the forces sent there are still fighting, mainly due to the Oracle Nobles in their ranks who regularly communicate their situation via the Mirror World."

The Wendok took a brief pause to let them digest this information, but Ulfar, striving to maintain his usual sarcastic composure, couldn't help but drop a bitter remark.

"That's a ton of bad news, huh..."

The little alien shook his head wearily as if contradicting him, then, seeing his confusion, continued, voicing a gloomy proclamation.

"Everything I just mentioned constitutes only a single piece of bad news: the massive decline of our Aether Network. Thanks to Oros' responsiveness and power, we are faring slightly better on average than other planets-some of which have lost up to 100% of their Aether production-but we can't say the same for our System. Being a young System, the Digestors hit us hard, and the Aether Network connecting the different planets was completely dismantled. You need to understand that a planet's contribution to its System's Aether Network in terms of Aether production is relatively trivial. Each System, in addition to the numbered planets it contains, has its own central Aether source, responsible for most of its Aether production and supporting all its functions, from the Oracle System to inter-cube teleportations. The Mirror Universe's central Aether Network had already been sabotaged, and now it's our System ZZ831's nodes that have fallen. Add to this the fact that our planet B842 currently has less than 5% of its usual passive Aether production, and you'll see we're in deep trouble.

"... But all that is still just the tip of the iceberg," Cekt finished, his somber expression seeming weighed down by the world's burdens.

Lyra swallowed hard, then raising her hand, her voice shaky, she asked, "Th-then... What are the other bad news?"

Before answering, Cekt surveyed each of them for a second, then taking a deep breath, he said, "There are two more, but like the first, the ramifications of their consequences are quite expansive. Combined with the first piece of bad news, they explain the chaos engulfing our planet B842 and the Mirror Universe at large...

"Well, here goes. The sooner I reveal it, the sooner you can deal with it and move on... Sigh, the second piece of bad news is... the Digestor Virus, or more precisely, the Sinewshade Virus that infected you, was not an isolated case either. It would be controllable if it only affected the teams sent to reclaim the Aether generators, but it didn't stop there. Just as we were unaware that the Magnetic Resonators and Gravitational Oscillators had fallen into the Digestors' hands, they managed to spread their Sinewshade Virus to almost all Oracle Shelters and Oracle Cities right under the Overseer's nose without raising any alarm... After questioning our Brain-Eater friends who parasitized Syrbarun and Rigel, it appears they didn't act alone. Only God knows how many renowned Oracle Guardians and Evolvers are currently possessed by these creatures. It seems they found a new way to evade the Oracle's security protocols and penetrated every level of our hierarchy undetected."

When the two in question, Rigel and Syrbarun, felt their comrades' eyes on them, they tensed up, forcing strained smiles. Even if their master uttered it wasn't their fault, they would live with this shame and guilt until their deaths.

Continuing to temporarily coexist with their parasites made things worse. But considering the magnitude of their sins to be redeemed, it was a small price to pay...

Authors note:

I quickly respond to those who were disappointed by the time trap's resulting time skip and expected something different or better. Although I know from my writing experience that pleasing everyone is impossible, I didn't pull this plot twist out of thin air. From their location to the passive attitude of the Dungeon Digestor, even the distorted and drawn-out voice of Cekt in his message, there were enough clues to see it coming. The most insightful would've realized it from the start, while most did when it became increasingly explicit in the later chapters.

The time trap isn't merely a handy Deus ex machina to inject a sense of urgency and pressure on Jake. Sure, it reshuffles the deck and alters the stakes, but consider it beyond that. Jake also gained from this perilous adventure. Beyond this, this arc introduced a host of elements, like the Voidshifters, the Digestor Virus...We learned more about the Brain-Eaters, Jake's powers, and the Corruption.

Had I taken a more linear approach (why not), Jake would logically have continued his training, developed his Floating Island, visited his family, advanced his relationship with Lucia, grappled with Enya and Esya's father wanting to force him into marriage to solidify their alliance, interacted with New Earth, and the eventual arrival of Kali (the female Silver Zhorion), etc. At some point, you would've encountered a time skip, but one without consequence or stakes. The thing is, even though that might be interesting in itself, it's highly predictable. If you already know what's going to happen (perhaps not in which order, but still), it makes it even more challenging for me to wow you.

Conversely, had we conducted a poll 100 chapters earlier about what would happen after the end of his Fourth Ordeal, I'm certain that no one would have imagined it.

Chapter 1015.2: Ton Of Bad News (Part 2)

Fortunately for them, the other disciples and Jake's companions swiftly lost interest, as reality crashed into them like a jolt of electricity.

"I-I need to get in touch with Gerulf," Lucia stammered, feigning a sprint to the surface, but Jake halted her with a strong grip on her shoulder.

"I-I must call my consorts," Ulfar chimed in, a worried and anxious look spreading across his face — a sight Jake had never expected to see.

All of the disciples, barring Epsilon - a unique being - had loved ones they worried for. Yet, none of them belonged to a faction as significant as Jake's. Foreseeing their

reaction to this news, Cekt rushed to pacify them as best he could, "Calm down. I've already checked in the Mirror World, and your loved ones are faring better than most. The initial victims of the Sinewshade Virus pandemic were, of course, the entry and exit points of the Oracle Cities and Shelters - the Yellow Cubes. Even Thelma suffered greatly.

"However, while some factions acted recklessly, most barred entry via their Yellow Cubes unless the visitor's identity and purpose had been verified. Our planet, B842, is undeniably in turmoil, with most nations and factions embroiled in civil war or having lost significant portions of their populations to the Digestors and their virus.

"Altogether, it's estimated that about 60% of B842's population has been turned into Sinewshades or perished at their hands. With the most competent Aetherists and Evolvers trapped like us, only ordinary healers were left to treat the infected and develop a cure. But because our Aether Network had been crippled, even the Green Cubes were reserved for a select few who could afford it. It's estimated that 10% have been cured, but their Corruption had long since exceeded the critical threshold, sparking a resurgence of civil wars everywhere.

"The only silver lining is that primarily Civilians were infected, as most of the larger factions protected themselves by sealing their Yellow Cubes. The deterioration of the Aether Network also helped. As you know, B842's orbital space spans billions of light-years, and without Yellow Cubes, travel between Floating Islands can take years without an advanced warp-capable spaceship. On the surface, B842 appears to have fallen to the Digestors and the infected, but it will take hundreds, perhaps thousands of years for these monsters to genuinely seize control of the orbital space. This is not comforting news for us, as this is how Digestors usually operate, and such a situation almost always precedes the fall of a planet.

"Cases where a planet's Evolvers have managed to regain control in such unfavorable circumstances are rare and were almost always due to reinforcements. Something that has no chance of happening now that the Mirror Universe's Aether Network is out of operation, and the Yellow Cubes have been disabled to prevent the spread of the Sinewshade Virus..."

Offering a serene nod to Lucia, Hade, and Ulfar, who were pale with worry, Cekt then said,

"Your faction is faring well. Your vice-leader, Will, I believe? He banned the use of your Floating Islands' Yellow Cubes as soon as he grasped the situation. Although the Mirror World largely depends on the cooperation of the Oracle System to stay up-to-date, I can guarantee that the Myrtharian Nerds still exist. You'll have to meet them in person to clarify their exact situation, though"

The Wendok then turned to Jake and continued,

"Your family seemingly sought refuge on your territory before it was too late, but you probably already knew that. Some were working for the Earth Union

government, and I'm less certain about their fate. New Earth, unfortunately, is among the factions that have descended into civil war, primarily because one of their ambassadors on Thelma became a host for a Brain-Eater without their knowledge. They thus let the Sinewshade Virus in, despite being one of the most responsive when the outbreak occurred. I still suggest you contact someone from your faction as soon as possible. While getting there may be complicated, I promise to help you communicate with them, even if it's out of my own pocket."

Jake and his companions nodded grimly, aware that this might take a significant toll on their master, given the near-inoperative state of the Aether Network. After that, Cekt informed each of the other disciples one by one about the status of their loved ones.

Overall, they were doing well. The one who had lost many of his kind was Syrbarun, but then again, the Vrusugs were not exactly known for their intelligence. Being as dull as they were, they fell like flies once the virus broke out, stupidly engaging the Sinewshades in close combat instead of trying to confine them using ranged weapons.

The most vexing part of it was that Vrusug Sinewshades were darn brutes, forming an army of low-cost troops for the Digestors, with their immense physical strength perfectly complementing their outrageous regeneration.

"I know you have more questions about this, but we'll get to that," Cekt resumed, eyeing Siri and Hade who had their hands raised. "Let me finish. What I explained about the Brain-Eaters and the Sinewshade Virus is merely the tip of the iceberg.

The main blow, the third piece of dreadful news, is a direct consequence of the first two: The Digestors have capitalized on this chaos to extend their domains and multiply. Latest reports suggest that almost all of B842 has become Digestor territory, with only a few Oracle Shelters surviving the onslaught. Many have transformed into Digestor Dungeons, while others have merely become feeding grounds, energy reservoirs for these insatiable beasts. The Oracle Capital, Thelma, is under siege too. Though it still holds up according to the Mirror World, I'm pretty sure Oros has ordered to abandon the Floating Island it was situated on, safeguarding the Oracle Palace and other Oracle Buildings and Cubes.

"Now that Thelma and the Oracle Shelters and Cities on B842 have fallen, the Digestors will target the various Evolver factions' Floating Islands. Using Thelma and the planet's surface as a springboard, they'll sweep through the surrounding space, obliterating everything in their path and systematically conquering every Floating Island they encounter. Those who were foolish enough to set up shop in low orbit will be the first to fall, while those in higher orbits, further from Thelma, might have a few decades, or even centuries, left. By the way, well done, Jake. I don't know if it was a stroke of luck or

calculated planning, but your faction is situated far enough from Thelma and the surface that the Digestors won't target you for several decades."

Jake remained stoic at the compliment, having indeed chosen his orbit location considering such a possibility. The only reason it was a few decades and not centuries or millennia was because he decided to station his Floating Island in the space territory occupied by the Earthlings and, broadly, the humans.

Regrettably, this zone was practically nearby to Thelma.

Under normal circumstances, this would've been a plus, except Thelma was among the first to fall due to its high visitor traffic.

His companions and the other disciples had fallen silent a while ago, their moods having plummeted long back. The only upside was that they were gradually becoming numb to this torrent of harrowing updates.

Regardless, their luck had run out, as Cekt had yet one more piece of bad news to share.

"...This brings us to the final significant blow of the day," the small alien coughed awkwardly. "The end of the diplomatic immunity period. As Hade mentioned earlier, it indeed ended a few weeks ago, but it shouldn't have concerned you, at least not this soon. So far, I've only briefed you about what's happening on B842, but I haven't discussed the situation elsewhere, particularly on neighboring planets."

Taking a deep breath, the Wendok shot them an apologetic grimace and exhaled, "From B835 to B846, almost all fell in one swoop. Some, like B839 and B841, were already in dire straits before the Digestors unveiled their grand scheme, so it's safe to say they were doomed from the start. Except for the bastions defended by their largest factions, they've lost almost everything, their Aether Network entirely dismantled, or even pilfered by the Digestors. In the case of planets B835 to B841, where the Corruption and Aether density were far higher than ours, they decided to abandon their planets without hesitation. They could have chosen to relocate to any other planet, but because Jax, the Oracle Overseer of B839, had already convinced Zaya and others to take shelter under Oros's wings before the whole mess happened, they decided to go all-in with their plan. Oros, currently short on manpower... chose to turn a blind eye to their invasion. The journey without the Aether Network will drain all their savings, but this means all the powerful factions from these planets will move down on B842 with their full forces, and they have every intention of staying.

"It's a risky gamble, betting their future. To survive, these Oracle Overseers and large factions have decided to bet everything on our planet, turning B842 into their final fortress. And this... is bad news for you."

Chapter 1016: Generous Aas

Long after the Wendok's final words, his followers remained motionless, spellbound by the staggering weight of this cataclysmic news.

Jake and his companions, caught in a whirlpool of urgency, had to forcefully rein in their impulsive desire to rush to the surface's Yellow Cube and bolt for home. The bitter irony that they couldn't even afford the journey proved a chilling constraint on their eagerness.

When Cekt gauged they'd had enough time to digest the grim revelations, he cleared his throat yet again and resumed, his voice now tinged with a brighter note,

"Now that you've taken the punch of the bad news, I'll focus on the silver linings or at least, what we can do in our predicament. But first, we must address the issue of the Corruption that plagues us all. Although I know you're itching to see your loved ones, I strongly advise against it. Without mental fortitude and appropriate adjustment, making visual contact will only lead to disaster..."

The elderly alien then detailed the physical and psychological symptoms they could expect at each Stage of Corruption, based on its percentage. To preempt any disputes, he measured each of their Corruption levels, including Jake's.

Unsurprisingly, their Corruption ranged between Stages 7 and 9, with levels oscillating between 71 and 96%.

Despite Epsilon and Drakon being the first infected by the Sinewshade Virus, Lucia bore the highest Corruption in the group, while Hade fared the best due to his late contamination. His superior Soul Strength and Spirit Body level also played a part.

By Stage 7, a typical Evolver would struggle to resist attacking even their own family. In isolation, control was possible, but the insatiable hunger and corrosive, destructive thoughts gradually eroded their personalities. This was a long and painful process that would ultimately make them forget who they were. Some stubborn individuals managed to live with these urges without forsaking their values, but that was a rarity.

At Stage 8, the symptoms worsened, the overpowering hunger and hostility towards Mirror Universe beings diminishing their cognitive faculties. According to Cekt, if they didn't yet feel a difference, it was because their Corruption levels had surged too quickly and their current horrific hunger was yet to become their new normal.

The threat of alienation loomed as these inhuman emotions slowly became their default mood, quickly making them forget their past sanity.

By Stage 9, they were nearing the critical threshold that the Wendok defined.

Beyond Stage 10, or over 100% Corruption, they would be rejected by the Mirror Universe, seen as foreign invaders akin to Digestors. This subtle transformation would rewrite their psyche on an Aetheric level, instilling them with the same unyielding hatred and animosity that drove Digestors to their destruction.

The old alien didn't sugarcoat the truth. He honestly outlined their chances of retaining their identities and cherished values based on their current Stage of Corruption. Lucia and the others were understandably crestfallen by the time he finished.

Lucia, given her current Spirit Body level and Soul Strength, knew that without help, she would become an unrecognizable ball of hatred and bloodlust within a few months, barring a miracle.

Jake was equally disheartened after hearing his master's warnings, but he managed to calm down when he continued,

"For that reason, you'll have to stay here under my supervision. I'm not doing this just for you. I, too, have been infected by this virus. I'm dealing with the same symptoms, perhaps worse, given my circumstances. I need to isolate myself and strengthen my Soul Strength to leave without endangering others. During this time, I promise to do my best to help you acclimate to your Corruption. It may be hard, but helping Evolvers of your level is within my abilities."

Cekt was a capable Aetherist, well-versed in science and magic, and they knew they could trust him. Be it through potions, pills, enchantments, spells, meditation, or other methods, they had no doubt his aid would significantly increase their chances of managing their Corruption.

According to the gremlin, the key was to enhance their mental parameters enough to proportionally reduce their Corruption percentage. This was not straightforward, as the Corruption was closely intertwined with their pure Aether.

Corruption had the perk of gradually infecting the pure Aether it encountered, which was how Digestors insidiously corrupted the Mirror Universe.

According to Cekt, the opposite was also possible, but it was incredibly improbable, so much so that a complete recovery was unheard of. The best strategy was to accumulate as much pure Aether as possible until the corrupted Aether became a minority.

After he finished explaining how they should proceed and train to potentially stabilize their condition, Lucia and the other followers now saw a glimmer of hope.

The Myrmidian princess seemed pumped, ready to wage the ultimate battle against the Corruption preventing her normal life. Ulfar was his usual confident self, trusting his luck to pull him through once more, but Hade's melancholic expression was striking.

'At least in this state, I might be able to understand what my son was going through,' mused the Fluid Grandmaster, a furrowed brow betraying his inner conflict.

Once Cekt had wrapped up his strategy briefing and morale-boosting, he clapped his hands one last time to recapture their attention, casting a meaningful glance at Jake.

"Now, let's talk about your Fifth Ordeal, and Jake's departure. He's the only one among you that I'm willing to allow to leave. His Corruption is at Stage 7, but due to his unique circumstances, he's barely affected..."

"What does Jake's departure have to do with the Fifth Ordeal?" Lucia mumbled under her breath in a dejected tone, but her grumbles were caught by all present.

"Everything," declared Cekt with a benevolent grin. "With the Aether Network near collapse, using the Yellow Cube to return home will require an astronomical amount of Aether, tantamount to the energy needed for teleportation across such immense distances. Remember, we're talking about hundreds of billions of light years... Such energy, without the aid of the Aether Network, is almost unfathomable. I have the resources to finance such a journey, but I'd rather use them to help us reduce our Corruption if we hope to leave this place someday.

"If there were no other options, I would have reluctantly allowed Jake to return to his faction, but it turns out that the Mirror Universe hasn't entirely forsaken us.

Aas, the Cube Ancient Designer, has fully shouldered the operational costs of the Oracle System services during the Ordeals, including that of the Red Cubes, throughout these four years. How and why, can only speculate, but it's a windfall for you. The Red Cubes are teleportation devices too. By making a request beforehand, you can select another Red Cube as your exit point at the end of your Ordeal, free of charge."

Jake's eyes ignited with comprehension.

"So, you want me to..."

"Exactly," Cekt beamed. "To leave this place, you'll enter through my portable Red Cube and undertake your Fifth Ordeal. Regardless of how long it takes within, it will end 24 hours later according to B842 time zone. It's not as instant as teleportation, but it's better than nothing."

Jake was sold. It was indeed a perfect solution given the circumstances.

It also had added perks, like the fact that Aas, against all odds, had kept all Oracle System services running during the Ordeals, which included auxiliary Oracle Skills like his Portable Oracle Store. If the Oracle Store remained accessible without any additional costs within, there were indeed many advantages to this fifth Ordeal.

However, he couldn't help but be skeptical at such generosity. Even for a filthy rich Ancient Designer of several billion years, taking on all the operation costs of Ordeals across the entire Mirror Universe must hurt.

As for why his master uttered the Fifth Ordeal also concerned the others, the answer came shortly after.

"You all will also participate in your Fifth Ordeal at the same time as him. The Oracle wishes to help its Evolvers resist their Corruption and has long established protocols to utilize you in the Ordeals without jeopardizing stable Players. You're likely to be separated from your uncorrupted friends and pitted against Corrupted Players from other Mirror Universes, but it's also the simplest way for you to strengthen your mental resilience thanks to the Ordeal Rewards."

Ending on a more negative note, the Wendok concluded without enthusiasm, "The only difference from Jake is that, depending on your performance and the evolution of your state, you will have to return here in the end. Of course, that's only if you make it back alive..."

Chapter 1017: Besides...

Long after Cekt's barrage of distressing news ceased, his disciples sought an exit with their hangdog faces, their eyes glazed and devoid of hope. Jake's allies were hardly faring better, but their despair was less evident.

"Jake, stay," the Wendok halted him as he too began to politely withdraw. Noticing Lucia, Hade, and Ulfar's curiosity, he graciously allowed them to stay as well.

Silently, he gestured for them to follow him into an adjacent room, Saros'

hologram trailing them like a spectral chaperone, resolved not to lose sight of his protégé even if he couldn't physically show himself to his corrupted companions.

Minutes later, the aged alien came to a stop in a barren room that had been stripped bare during a renovation by the Dungeon Digestor's spirit. Wielding his cane like a maestro, he then cast a soundproofing spell to shield them from prying ears before he said, "I didn't disclose everything earlier, so as not to load the others further, but since you're the Nexus recipient, I must inform you of certain things. Don't worry. This is more of positive news, although for others, it might exacerbate the situation."

He cast a meaningful glance toward Lucia, Hade, and Ulfar, silently questioning Jake if he indeed wanted them to hear what was to follow. Jake hesitated momentarily, but seeing the steely expression on his girlfriend's face, he knew it would be futile to try and sway them.

"Don't sugarcoat it. Give them the same direct truth as me," Jake declared, dead serious.

"Excellent... In that case, lend me your ears. The Nexus you've obtained is not riskfree but a ticking time bomb, considering the consciousness of the Dungeon Digestor within, though injured, is still alive. Owning a Nexus with preserved intelligence poses both risks and benefits, but in my view, the advantages hardly offset the substantial risks you'd face."

Jake didn't react upon hearing this. His mentor's aim might've been to alarm or pique his interest, but he simply wanted to get things over with. Whatever the final decision, he trusted the old alien would choose the best option for him.

"Tsk, not fun," Cekt grumbled, not obtaining the desired reaction. Suppressed a weak sigh as if contemplating what he'd done to deserve this, he resigned himself to get to the point and explained, "As I said, it's still alive, but while I was handling the brainwashing of Rigel and Syrbarun-bis, I also dealt with the Nexus's mind. I had it sign the same sort of contract as the two Brain-Eaters. Although I can't show you this contract for your own safety, I've indeed made you Party B of it. The Nexus represents Party A and, according to this contract, must treat you as its absolute master, even ignoring my orders if they conflict with yours. Of course, it's also forbidden from plotting against you, attacking you, or even harboring hostile or negative thoughts about you, and this directive extends to your companions and anything you deem important."

"Sounds pretty positive to me," Jake agreed, stroking his chin in satisfaction. "So. Where's the catch? You mentioned risks."

"As expected from my best disciple," Cekt praised. "Always sharp. Anyway, back to the topic, while this contract is legitimate, foolproof, and in theory, inviolable, the thing is, we're dealing with a Rank 13 Dungeon Digestor. Its spirit is young and immature, but due to its Rank, its Aether stats hover around 17 million. Its Spirit Body level isn't high due to its youth, but it's formidable, and its Nexus plays the role of both a physical brain and a Soul Core, granting it formidable Body Intelligence and long-range Extrasensory Perception.

"While it cannot harm you due to the contract, I can't erase its instincts or change its nature. Therefore, this contract isn't without loopholes, and you must remain vigilant at all times. For instance, this Dungeon Digestor could harm people or things dear to you, genuinely believing it's benefiting you if your instructions aren't clear enough. On the other hand, you can't just forbid it from doing anything in your absence, or it would become nearly useless. It's up to you to find the right balance."

Jake frowned but nodded in agreement once more. Hade was just as grave, having firsthand experience with a Digestor offspring striving to earn his father's love. To say that Nylreg's efforts had been... counterproductive would be an understatement.

"I'll be careful," Jake promised moments later, after mentally discussing with Xi the long list of instructions they'd give the Nexus once it was in their hands.

"No doubt about it." Cekt smiled, his expression quickly returning to its default gruffness. He gave another sympathetic glance toward his disciple's companions before continuing, "Now that you know the primary risk, let's talk about the Dungeon Digestor's biggest advantage-and disadvantage. For you, the drawback will be minor, but it'll pose a meaningful problem for your corrupted friends..."

"Spit it out," Jake growled tersely, a hint of impatience prickling his words.

"Hehe." The alien chuckled, relishing the moment of Jake's frustration. Yet, he did not muster the audacity-or perhaps the mood-to continue toying with Jake and his friends any longer. As his grin faded, he blurted out, "As it stands, you've lost four years of your life. Not your lifespan, relax, but in the fast-paced reality of the Mirror Universe, four years lag is quite substantial. Tomorrow, you'll undertake your Fifth Ordeal, leaving you with little prep time. But as they say where I'm from, only when you court the storm can you ride the lightning. You've lost four years, but you've gained the Nexus behind all this. If it can create a temporal trap that slows time, it can also do the opposite-given you feed it enough energy, of course..."

Jake and his companions sobered at Cekt's revelation. It's not that they hadn't considered this possibility, but it felt almost too positive to be true. And indeed, there was a catch. A big one. Not for Jake, but for his friends, as the Wendok hinted.

"The problem isn't energy," Cekt continued, slipping into a professorial tone. "We have a monopoly on the Magnetic Resonator and while I can't give you back four years with just a day's recharge, I can get you a year and a half. That's more than enough for an anomaly like you to make the necessary preparations and even get a few trump cards with my assistance.

"The real issue isn't that, but the Corruption generated during this period. The true danger of a Dungeon Digestor isn't the Digestors within, who can even spawn generous rewards in the form of artifacts or ingredients. It's the continual, albeit slow, rise of Corruption in the explorers daring to venture inside."

Upon hearing this, Lucia and the others didn't need to hear more to understand the problem. For Jake, a year and a half inside the Dungeon Digestor wouldn't push his Corruption levels to intolerable limits, but for the other followers and themselves, it would likely be the final straw.

"That's right." Cekt offered an apologetic smile to Lucia, Hade, and Ulfar. "Jake can train a year and a half in this Dungeon, but not you. I'll have no choice but to usher you out of the Dungeon Digestor territory within the next twenty-four hours while Jake trains here. That means you'll have to visage your Fifth Ordeal without preparation if we follow this plan. Hade and Ulfar might risk staying, given their Corruption levels are a bit lower, but

I must apologize to you, Lucia. You absolutely must get back to the surface as soon as possible."

Witnessing Lucia's sour expression, the Wendok felt bad for her and, out of guilt, offered a potential solution while scratching his bald head, "I'll try to tweak some things to get you a few more days, but Time Magic and Arrays aren't my specialties either. I can't promise anything..."

Jake was as worried and disheartened as his companions upon grasping the full extent of the matter. He no longer felt certain about seeing Lucia and the others undertake their Fifth Ordeal with him. If anything happened to them, he'd never forgive himself.

On the other hand, if they decided to take their sweet time training and perished during their Fifth Ordeal without him, the regret would be even more torturous.

"You shouldn't hesitate," Hade suddenly declared, crossing his arms calmly.

"According to my Oracle AI, we're not that weak. Even without preparation, we're at least in the top 0.1% of Fifth-Ordeal Players.

"I can confirm that," Cekt nodded approvingly. "The gap between the average player and the top tier percentile isn't as extreme as in the fourth Ordeal. Because of the ridiculously high death rate, participants think twice before risking their lives so there aren't as many cannon fodders. But even so, your friends are still quite strong. They won't go down easily as long as they act wisely. Then it's up to you to do your best to find them and protect them from those who could harm them."

Seeing Jake still wavering, the Wendok rolled his eyes, grinned devilishly, and flippantly remarked,

"Besides... I think you're oblivious to how fearsome your strength is. It's not your friends who should worry, but the poor Oracle Knights who'll be facing you on the other side."

Chapter 1018: Outrageous Phone Plan

A while later, Cekt brought out the Nexus and handed it directly to Jake.

"There are no procedures required for it to recognize your authority," the small alien clarified, under the envious gaze of the others, including Saros' hologram.

"It's not bound to you, but as a sentient being, you only need to communicate your commands to get it to obey. My contract will take care of the rest."

"Okay, got it," Jake agreed, accepting the enormous prismatic gem, which was surprisingly warm to his touch, setting it apart from an ordinary jewel apart from its size and propensity for levitating above the ground.

To test the waters, Jake mentally reached out and touched the dormant consciousness of the Nexus. The comatose spirit of the Dungeon Digestor was immediately stirred and spoke in a surprisingly childish voice, 'Master.'

Jake was taken aback by the innocent and immature tone, expecting something more chilling: gruff, raspy, and undeniably inhuman. Still, he rapidly regained his composure and started awkwardly communicating with his new 'toy,' while Cekt explained further,

"Even confined to its Nexus, the Dungeon Digestor can still control its territory from afar, since it's been thoroughly imbued with its spiritual energy and can be considered an extension of its physical body. If you have the patience and enough Aether to waste, the Dungeon Digestor can even compress the portion of the Magnetic Resonator it controls into its Nexus.

"However, you need to understand that the Magnetic Resonator is only valuable due to its location. If you wish to relocate the Nexus, which I encourage you to do, you'll need to find an equivalent energy source or you can kiss its outrageous time dilation/acceleration capabilities goodbye.

Time Spells of this magnitude consume too much energy to be sustainable in the long run, even for someone of my level."

Jake nodded once more, listening to the Dungeon Digestor list its abilities in detail while already foreseeing such a drawback.

Keeping the Magnetic Resonator as his Dungeon Digestor's core territory would only be worth it if he could take the immense black hole with him, which was impossible.

Even if he could, the continuous Corruption wouldn't allow the sustainable use of the Dungeon Digestor as a time chamber for training or research purposes.

He'd been tempted to devour the Nexus before, and the temptation lingered, but his common sense constantly reminded him that swallowing the core of a creature continuously passively producing Corrupted Aether was certainly not a bright idea... The best use of a Dungeon Digestor was...

"...Once you've relocated it close to your own territory, or even to another dimension, all you have to do is advertise its existence to increase your territory's renown, then charge entry and/or tax the gains within for Evolvers who wish to venture there. In this way, you can easily obtain a plethora of artifacts and ingredients, depending on how the Nexus is configured. Usually, the majority of Dungeon Digestor owners have no contact with the Nexus, just benefitting from its presence by regulating and taxing its exploration.

"With my special contract, you won't have any of these problems. You can confer with the Nexus at any time to decide on the type of spawn and artifacts it can produce. You can even decide on its layout, and climate from one floor to another. Providing it with an energy source can increase its productivity, but be careful; it also helps it to grow and mature faster.

The Corruption it produces, the size of its territory, and the level of the Digestors it spawns will all increase accordingly, which could backfire on you if you let your guard down. Even with the contract's brainwashing, never forget that this Digestor remains your enemy. No matter how obedient and naive it may seem, it's all an act.

"Now, if you have no further questions, you can order it to activate maximum temporal acceleration on its territory for a year and a half, as planned."

Without a second's hesitation, Jake commanded the Nexus in his hands to execute the order.

'Done, master.'

He instinctively thanked the Dungeon Digestor but felt a pang of disappointment when he realized he'd felt nothing.

When time distortion affected such a large area, the spatial changes were so minute and immediate that those inside wouldn't notice any difference, like frogs slowly being boiled alive, unless they deployed their mental sense across thousands of kilometers from the start.

From this, Jake realized just how abstract Time Magic was compared to other elements.

"Do we need to get back up to the surface now?" Lucia immediately asked, her mood instantly plummeting. She wanted to spend more time with Jake.

Cekt wasn't born yesterday and naturally knew what was bothering her. With a not-so-subtle wink, he declared ambiguously, "You have twelve hours."

But before that, the Wendok asked Jake to temporarily deactivate the temporal acceleration within the Dungeon to give them time to ascend to the surface and contact their loved ones as promised.

Jake could only grimace wryly, wondering why the alien hadn't simply waited. Maybe he wanted to verify something?

'Never mind... It seemed to work just fine.'

Upon hearing they could reach out to their friends, Lucia and Ulfar's spirits noticeably lifted. It was the first real piece of good news of the day. Ironically, just that morning,

they were recovering from their Fourth Ordeal, basking in the afterglow of a well-earned reprieve.

Surfacing took merely a moment with the Nexus creating a direct path to the funnel. The barrier, which had so vexed them mere hours ago, recognized them now, allowing passage without resistance.

"All right, let's see how many Aether Points it's going to cost to ring up your friends, now that the Aether Network is ancient history...

Who's up first? I'm already bracing for the worst." Cekt inquired, his strained smile more forced than enthusiastic.

'You know, master, I'm not exactly broke...' Jake couldn't help but think, uncomfortable at letting his mentor foot the bill for a simple call. Instead, after a wordless exchange with his companions, he said,

"Call Will Hopkins, Vice-Leader of the Myrtharian Nerds." Just after uttering those words, he mentally patted his sweaty forehead and his quick thinking for not blurting out this fact aloud when the connection was established and the piercing scream of the Wendok made them all jump.

It was a high-pitched cry of agony from the heart, even worse than if someone had just slain his parents before his very eyes...

"Hello? Who's on the line?" Will's suspicious voice echoed in their heads, Cekt having already initiated the call as a group.

Simultaneously, they could see the consumption of Aether Points per second...

-836 Quintillion AP...

-847 Quintillion AP...

-839 Quintillion AP...

'Psst, why's the price fluctuating?'

Lucia mentally whispered to her friends, thinking she was discreet.

Alas, she'd forgotten it was a group call, and hearing her innocent question, the old alien nearly fainted, then sobbed in a choked voice.

That was nearly a Sextillion AP per second, damn it! Even Jake barely had over 90 at the end of his Fourth Ordeal. And that was with his cheat of a Grade 10 Energy Body, Spirit, and Soul running non-stop for a year!

"No, it's way too much! Something's wrong." Cekt suddenly exclaimed, his alarmed expression revealing a concern far graver than his impending financial ruin.

Lucia and the others' mood, briefly uplifted by the sound of Will's voice, plummeted again as they observed a chilling change overtake the old Wendok's features.

"Lucia?" Will had recognized the young woman's voice earlier. As for the raspy voice hitting high notes... It must be some sort of old coot. Knowing the current number of Aether Points required for a call on B842, he quickly deduced a suspect.

"Jake's master? Jake, are you there too? And Hade? And Ulfar? Are you okay? Why haven't any of you tried contacting us? We were worried sick. You need to get back asap-"

When the hyperactive merchant questioned them with questions, Jake and the others eased up and verified their presence.

"We're all okay," Ulfar chuckled before correcting himself, "Well, mostly..."

The atmosphere rapidly soured after his attempt at humor, a brief silence marring their reunion.

Sensing something amiss, Will inquired tentatively, "What's wrong?"

Noticing the gremlin's countenance deteriorate further, they didn't beat around the bush, rapidly relaying their predicament.

When Will learned that only a few hours had passed for them, he was floored, having difficulty to wrap his head around the news.

Chapter 1019.1: Four years With The Myrtharian Nerds (part 1)

Will didn't respond immediately, carefully choosing his words or perhaps hesitating over something. As the suspense reached a fever pitch and Lucia was on the brink of prodding him, the merchant replied with a wearied voice, more subdued than before,

"Our situation isn't as grim as my response might suggest, but it's far from good.

For starters, let me assure you, we reacted in time when everything went to hell.

As soon as you all became unreachable, we were on high alert, and the Digestor attack hit roughly five days after your departure. Fortunately, I was on Thelma for business two

days prior. I narrowly missed the first Sinewshades of Thelma, and thank God, the preceding Digestor Virus..."

Even recalling it sent a chill down his spine. Shaking off the fear creeping in at the memory, Will continued with a more matter-of-fact tone,

"With the ten sextillion Aether Points you left in the Faction Aether Storage, I planned to buy everything we might need for autonomous living, like seeds to grow our own fruits, vegetables, and spices, livestock, poultry, and so forth.

"Even though we don't actually need to eat thanks to the Cosmic D Starfeyrves Body Passive, I understand how crucial it is for our members' morale. Among our new Laudarkvik members are non-combatant families who've never held a weapon in their life. The shift might be too drastic, and as a merchant dreaming of creating a trade empire, I know it can only be built on a thriving, fulfilled society. For now, we are a small faction of just over 500,000 members, but I believe that one day we will number in the billions, not unlike Earth before the Digestor and the Oracle discovery..."

Will took a brief pause at this point, his optimism evidently waning in comparison to his initial vision.

"Anyway. As you might guess, things didn't go as planned, but at least I managed to leave with the seeds and animals I had planned to raise on our islands. The only difference is that due to the surge in prices following Lure's death, I anticipated that transporting so many animals via the Yellow Cube would burn through our ten sextillion in a flash. So instead, I purchased a variety of stem cells and embryos of these domesticated animals... Yeah, I know what you're thinking, but I was thinking of relying on Hade's scientific expertise to accelerate their growth in a lab and clone them if necessary before releasing them onto our territories. More importantly, it hardly took up any space in my Space Storage, and given the circumstances, it was by far the best idea, though perhaps not the most ethical."

Lucia and Ulfar grimaced, but Jake and Hade, both ruthless scientists at heart, remained stoic. Growing and cloning stem cells and embryos solely to consume their final form didn't pose any moral issue for them.

In many advanced societies, it was even considered ethical as one could directly cultivate these stem cells to produce the desired type of meat. These stem cells and embryos never reached a sentient stage, as they never developed any neurons.

Of course, it goes without saying that vegans and anti-abortion advocates who view the morning-after pill as heresy, and the destruction of an embryo as murder, would also view such technology as blasphemy. Alas, for them, the rest of the universe couldn't care less about their claims.

The Mirror Universe was a dog-eat-dog world where far more horrific things happened every second without anyone giving a fuck about it.

They could either accept it or grit their teeth without being able to change anything unless they became as powerful as an Ancient Designer. Even then, their chances of success would remain slim, limited only to territories under their influence.

"So far, you've managed well," Jake praised, not hiding his appreciation for his friend's foresight. "What happened next? Given your mood, I deduce that everything didn't go as planned?"

Through the Mirror World, he knew the Myrtharian Nerds were faring well, but there's a difference between simply existing and cohabitating half a million members of different origins without any problems in his absence.

Uncomfortable as it may be, his power and image were the glue holding it together.

To make matters worse, Lucia, Hade, and Ulfar were also three emblematic figures of their faction and their absence must not have helped matters. Jake seriously doubted that Will could keep the others in check with only the help of Asfrid.

Gerulf and Rogen were notoriously unreliable in that regard...

"Well, you're sharp, Jake, so I guess you can imagine what happened next," Will replied in a downcast and bitter voice as he recalled those events. "The first few months after we cut ties with everyone went smoothly. I ordered the Yellow Cubes to be sealed, but anyway, apart from me and Asfrid, no one had enough Aether Points to use them since the Aether fee required became astronomical when B842's Aether Network was crippled. At some point, even the 10 Sextillions in the Faction Aether Storage weren't enough to afford a trip, except for visiting FloatingIslands very close by, a few light-years away at most.

"Before that, I managed to bring our families over while the prices were still manageable. Your granddad was glad to come, but those who worked for the Earth Union military weren't allowed to leave and were unreachable anyway... That includes three of your uncles, one of your aunts, and three of your cousins, including your cousin Anya..."

Jake remained silent throughout, but those near him could sense the simmering volcano within, threatening to erupt. Though he had anticipated this scenario, it enraged him that Anya hadn't been permitted to resign. And knowing his uncle Kalen, it was inconceivable he'd leave his daughter behind, so he was undoubtedly one of the three stuck on New Earth.

According to the Mirror World updates, New Earth was in the throes of a civil war, the Digestor Virus unleashed by a Brain-Eater-infected politician before their Yellow Cube

was sealed. Like many other nations, the intel was fragmented, reduced to a rough estimation of their losses and confirmation of whether they were still resisting.

In other words, he had no way of knowing if his cousin was still alive. His only sliver of hope was that, being a soldier, she might have been in one of New Earth's underground military bases when the Digestor Virus hit. If New Earth was still holding out, it suggested they had, at least, had the sense to don airtight suits to stave off infection.

"Go on..." Jake growled in a rough voice. He had already determined to try and contact Anya, his uncle Kalen, and if all else failed, Ruby, even if his master objected.

Will wisely refrained from commenting and coughed awkwardly before resuming, "In addition to the Wilderth Faction, Pureblood - Wyatt's faction, also joined us a few days later, followed by the Velseyel Clan a week after that. They outright teleported their Floating Islands, and I can only assume they got financial help from their respective backgrounds for the journey. I'd say that's when the trouble started, though not directly because of them. Wyatt and Carmin are good souls, but I can't say the same about their elders... As for Phirune, the father of Enya and Esya, he's not a bad guy, but by default, he's only loyal to the Velsyos Empire. If it weren't for his two daughters, he wouldn't give a damn about the rest of our faction. This Fire Archmage is far stronger than I had imagined, but in the short term, it allowed us to keep the elders from these vampire clans accompanying Wyatt in check.

"The first few months of cohabitation were rough, but on the whole, we managed to coexist, if only because we had the upper hand in numbers and your presence loomed large behind us, despite your absence... The presence of your grandfather Antoine and Alfred, another one of your uncles who leads the Wilderth faction, also helped a great deal at first. Training resumed, and our new members gradually participated in their first four Ordeals, rapidly becoming stronger. The looming threat of Phirune and these vampire clans somewhat receded, and we nearly forgot about them. Everything seemed to be going well.

"Until one morning, about six months after we sealed our Yellow Cubes..."

Chapter 1020.2: Four Years With The Myrtharian Nerds (part 2)

Will, consciously or not, inserted another pause into his narrative, punctuating the drama. It might have been an old salesmanship trick resurfacing, but at that moment, Jake and his friends could nearly hear the Wendok mentally blasting their friend with a symphony of colorful curses, if the bulging, bloodshot eyes were any indication.

Jake considered himself to be fairly patient, but considering the severity of the news, his tolerance was on thin ice. As tactfully as he could muster, he said, "I understand it's

been quite some time for you since we last spoke, but for us it's only been a couple of hours. We've got a particularly sour Rank 3 Aetherist kindly footing the bill for this call. If you value your life, I suggest you spill the beans..."

Aware that every second burned hundreds of quintillions of Aether Points, Will froze on the other end of the line, breaking into a sudden profuse sweat.

"Cough, cough, my bad. I'll pick up the pace..." He quickly apologized, feeling a wave of oppressive killing intent momentarily causing him to doubt if he was hallucinating. Regardless, under pressure, he started to spill everything as if his life depended on it:

"Ahem, where was I? Oh yes, six months into the Digestor offensive... To simplify, the vampire clans backing Wyatt hadn't anticipated the ennui and scarcity of provisions that came with our forced quarantine... High-ranking vampires can go a long time without blood, and Progenitors can forgo it entirely, consuming regular food without issue. The problem was their civilians. Without fresh blood at regular intervals, their aggressiveness would spiral out of control, and forced hibernation isn't exactly a popular political move, to put it mildly..."

"Of all the potential solutions to this blood shortage-from rationing, to hibernation, to mandatory participation in their first four Ordeals for resupply- they chose the most direct: To demand, or rather, insist that we and the Velseyel clan provide them with fresh blood from willing donors."

"Hmmpf, these greedy bloodsuckers," Lucia sneered, wondering if they would have had the audacity to make such a demand if it had been her or Jake calling the shots.

"Hehe, that's exactly how we reacted when we first heard their request," Will chuckled with a hint of disdain and arrogance in his voice. "We expressed gratitude them for their visit, promising to discuss it with our comrades. They made the same demand of the Velseyel clan, and they were even colder than we were."

"To be completely honest, after discussing it with Wyatt, who had a foot in each camp, I softened my stance when I realized the hunger these ordinary vampires were enduring was a hellish mental torture. I passed their request on to the others, offering contribution points to willing blood donors. Unsurprisingly, it was quite unpopular. The donated blood couldn't even meet the needs of 10% of their population. Still, it temporarily alleviated the pressure on their end, allowing them to better manage the crisis."

Jake kept his opinion to himself, but he was internally surprised that Will had agreed to such a compromise.

"Tell me at least you charged them for this?" Ulfar asked, looking incredulous.

"Well... That's what I told them when they asked for more blood a few days later,"

Will conceded wryly. "They also demanded higher quality blood, asking our active Evolvers to participate in the donations as well..."

"WHAT?! They dare?!" Lucia exploded upon hearing the merchant's confession.

"Don't tell me you agreed to this? If so, I swear, I'll show you exactly what I'm made of when I return. And I warn you, right now I'm a Stage 9, 96% Corrupted Myrmidian Princess..."

Her final words were half boastful, half jesting, but none of her companions, especially not Will, were in the mood for laughter.

"I didn't..." Will defended himself a few seconds later, his face darkening. "After that, I won't lie to you, our relations quickly soured, and Wyatt soon found himself caught between a rock and a hard place. Thanks to the energy shields protecting our respective Floating Islands, this uneasy balance lasted just over two years.

Wyatt took matters into his own hands and managed to persuade the non-combatant vampires to participate in their first four Ordeals. He hoped to strengthen them and make them more capable of handling blood deprivation upon their return, or perhaps even restock their supply of fresh blood during their Ordeals. Some met these expectations, but for most, these Ordeals only fortified their vampiric arrogance. The average vampire being much stronger than a normal human, the power disparities only widened over time. There were also a few rare talents that emerged after being reforged by the fire of these four Ordeals.

Emboldened, they didn't stop there but ventured into their Fifth Ordeal. It was a bloodbath, but some of the survivors then dared to attempt the Sixth one...

Among them was one of their senior supremacists, Vasilis Yelmaer. Perhaps you remember his great-niece, Seren Yelmaer. You can probably guess where she got her influences..." Jake, vividly recalling the vampire's insufferable personality during their third Ordeal before instilling a seed of fear in her, could not help but facepalm at the mention of her name.

"Let me guess," Jake surmised, eyes closed as he rubbed his temples. "One day, they decided to attack one of our Floating Islands, probably mine since it houses most of our civilians. If there are some Sixth-Ordeal extremists among them, given their clans' vast legacy, they must've used some sort of artifact to breach the shield, and launched a raid to capture our members. You then had no choice but to retaliate."

Will remained silent for a heartbeat, then reluctantly admitted, "Almost. We had internal troubles well before... Seeing their Vampires return from their Fifth and Sixth Ordeals, many of our members sensed the tide turning early on. It was even more evident as these vampire clans weren't really part of Wyatt's faction. As disputes flared, they left Pureblood one by one, forming their own factions around these powerful vampires

who'd completed five or six Ordeals. Pureblood is currently comprised of the Griffith clan and a tiny fraction of vampires who owe them and are loyal. Ironically, Seren Yelmaer didn't follow her great-uncle, so at least take some satisfaction that you left an indelible impression in her memory. Or maybe Wyatt managed to reform her?

"To get back to the point, although I advised them to wait for your return, after two years, asking them to continue waiting was increasingly difficult as we had no news of you. When a conflict with the vampires seemed inevitable, Grimwald and Xaverie, Aisling's parents, chose to participate together in their Fifth Ordeal with their respective clans... Demons and vampires growing stronger, you can guess what happened upon their return. In response to their gloomy silence, Will chuckled mirthlessly,

"Yep, you guessed right. After losing 90% of their respective clans in the Fifth Ordeal, they came back... changed, to put it mildly, but they also made new friends there. A lot of friends... Grimwald and his surviving vampire clansmen began demanding fresh blood in exchange for their allegiance to Myrtharian Nerds.

"By then, everyone had long realized the Aether Network had become irrelevant, rendering our island shields about as reliable as paper tigers, no more substantial than a cardboard wall. Thankfully, due to their daughter's intervention, the situation remained under control. Just so you know, she chose not to participate in the Fifth Ordeal with her parents, deciding to stay behind for her little sister.

"Still, it was a stark wake-up call reminding us that we were safe nowhere, and that even members of the same faction were not entirely trustworthy. Hence, some of our core members, threatened by their lives, enlisted for their Fifth Ordeal. Back then, I was in no mood to stop them, as we desperately needed a counterbalance. Among them were Kenway, Lysander, Qewie, and a Myrmidian named Pyrrakles..."

Jake frowned, not recognizing the last name despite having memorized all their faction members' names. It was a cakewalk for someone like him. Turning to Lucia, he asked, "Ring any bells?"

"Not at all..." Lucia shrugged.

"That's because it shouldn't," Will sighed, his tone weary and slightly shameful.

"You know him better as Asthenes... I'll be upfront with you, it's not me pulling the strings for over a year now, but this guy..."

Jake, Lucia, Hade, and Ulfar squinted, trying to remember the man, and then their eyes widened in unison as they blurted out, "You've got to be kidding, right?" Asthenes, aka Pyrrakles now, was the weakest Myrmidian in their memory. Of all the Myrmidians capable of emerging as a future leader, he was the last they would've thought of.

Chapter 1021.3: Four Years With The Myrtharian Nerds (part 3)

"In Myrmidian, Asthenes translates to 'weak' or 'frail'," Lucia teased, her merriment only half-hearted at this strange twist of fate. "On the other hand, if one were to attempt a literal translation of Pyrrakles, it could be read as... 'Fiery Glory'? Or 'Redhued Flame'? Whatever it is, if it's a bad joke, it certainly has its desired effect."

"What's wrong with changing one's name?" Hade arched an intrigued eyebrow, finding her reaction somewhat excessive.

In his old world, it was common practice to change one's civil name. He was originally called Sigmar, Hade being merely an alias that he had come to prefer over his birth name.

Ulfar, who was well-versed in Myrmidian tradition from dealing with them throughout his reign, burst into hearty laughter at his comrade's naive question.

Jake, too, gave a wry smile, understanding the root of his reaction.

"Forgive him, but to the Myrmidians, their cognomen means everything," Jake swiftly explained. "In their culture, names follow a three-part structure composed of a praenomen, or given name, a nomen, akin to a surname, and the cognomen, their commonly used name. The praenomen is seldom used because Myrmidian praenomens are so limited that they're literally numbers. In 'Sexta Caelia Lucia'

for instance, Sexta just means 'six', a praenomen shared by millions. Hence, in everyday life, the cognomen takes precedence. This can be inherited but is often a nickname that highlights an achievement or a character trait. By changing his cognomen, this Pyrrakles is announcing to the world that he is not the same person he used to be."

"In Myrmidian culture, where victory and glory are everything, 'Fiery Glory' is indeed quite ambitious," Jake concluded, thoughtfully stroking his chin.

"I couldn't have uttered it better myself," Lucia nodded in agreement. "His new name would be insignificant in another context, but given what Will has disclosed, I can only imagine the extent to which he has acted to honor his new moniker..."

The merchant, who had been silent for a while, confirmed the young woman's assumption with a sour voice,

"You're... absolutely right. No one imagined that, when pushed to his limits, he would develop suicidal tendencies that would alter his destiny. After completing his fifth

Ordeal, like a man possessed chasing a chimera, he immediately launched into his Sixth Ordeal, then, without any downtime, the Seventh... In three days, he's gone from an invisible warrior to a heroic figure whose aura and power surpass our own leader's. Sorry, Jake, that's not quite what I mean, but unlike you, he isn't trying to keep a low profile. Anyone can sense the fluctuations of his Aether and spiritual power from miles around. It took at least that to get these increasingly arrogant vampires to fall into line. Frankly, I even encouraged him, as I had a good opinion of his character.

"Who would have thought that his true ambition was to reinstate the imperial system of the Myrmidian empire. The best and the worst of it."

Lucia, Jake, and Ulfar were dumbfounded by this revelation. It was just... ludicrous?!

"And the others followed him?" Hade asked, a tinge of disbelief creeping onto his face.

"Cough, well... Not exactly," Will cleared his throat awkwardly. "Let's just say we didn't have much choice. Grimwald and Xaverie, who had gotten big-headed, were humbled by the emergence of Pyrrakles, but the latter isn't a fool either. With these two strong Fifth-Ordeal Evolvers on his side, it would be much easier to assert his authority. An imperial system has its advantages, with those at the top having nearly all the rights.

"By then, everyone knew that the shields of our Floating Islands were just a bluff, and it didn't take long for one of us to realize that the Faction Subordinate Contract had also become void. It was enough to persuade one of us to disobey one of the faction rules for a reward to verify it.

"From there, everything went downhill. Even though many like Haynt, Gerulf, Rogen, and Asfrid still respect me, I no longer have a say in what happens. The three TX138 models you left us also played their deterrent role. Although they obey no orders, they faithfully protect your Floating Island, responding to anything that endangers it or its inhabitants. For this reason, we all migrated to your island while waiting for your return. Unfortunately, that's not always enough.

Pyrrakles is strong enough with his artefacts to hold his own against all three for a few minutes. That usually gives him enough time to achieve his goals...

"With the intervention of the Griffith clan's elder backing Wyatt, and Phirune stepping into the fray at his daughters' earnest pleas, the self-proclaimed emperor has kept a low profile with his harem. However, not a day passes without some hapless soul falling prey to his lust and being forced into concubinage. He regularly organizes gladiatorial battles on his private island, with combatants seldom volunteering for the spectacle. So dire has the situation become, many women have chosen to brave their Fifth Ordeal rather than endure his attention, while others have deserted our faction to join the Velseyel Clan. Thanks to Enya and Esya's influence, these transitions were smooth. Phirune, for all his oddities, seems to not deny them anything. Alone, Phirune is but a Fifth Ordeal Player, but he's in the top tier, capable of holding his own against some in

the elite 10% of Sixth Ordeal Evolvers, and even surviving a few exchanges against a lower Seventh Ordeal Evolver. His true might unfolds when he fuses with his Magic Tower. With its aid, he can even slay Oracle Guardians."

Jake was stunned by the twists and turns of the narrative, his feelings towards Phirune's timely assistance mixed. The meddlesome man, trying to marry off his two daughters to him, was a prime nuisance, but Jake had to concede he owed him one this time.

As for the Seven-Ordeals-surviving Pyrrakles, Jake wasn't fazed. The power leap from one Ordeal to the next might seem exponential, but there's a reason most Players take their sweet time before tackling the next.

To rush into the subsequent Ordeal unprepared not only slashed survival odds but also compromised the theoretical maximum Ordeal Rating-after all, what could a puny insect do when surrounded by colossal, ruthless dinosaurs?

It's a system where the strong grow stronger, the gap between the mighty and the weak widening with each successive Ordeal unless the Players self-examine and adjust.

And Jake? He was undoubtedly among the strong. Give him one more Ordeal, and he'd flatten this Pyrrakles like the insignificant ant he was.

"What's the body count, after all that's happened?" Jake asked sternly, ready to face the unvarnished truth, whatever it might be.

"Of our 419,000 official faction members, about 40,000 perished during their Fifth Ordeal, with around 70 survivors... that didn't win. Yeah, it's that bad... Among them are Grimwald, Xaverie, Kenway, and Qewie. But Kenway's brother, Lysander, is dead, which led to other complications... Qewie became Pyrrakles's target, so she's since joined the Velseyel Clan. 25,000 were captured by Vampires, and just over 80,000 sought refuge with the Velseyel Clan. The remainder accepted the situation, and a privileged minority, mostly men, can even be considered truly loyal to Pyrrakles. He's even won the support of several Myrmidians, who secretly uphold this new Myrmid Empire. By the way, the fool is still a Myrtharian Nerd. The guy is big-headed, but he's smart enough not to foolishly give up on your Cosmic D Starfeyrves Body Passive."

Lucia and Ulfar sneered with disdain at this last comment. Clever bastard.

"The real issue," Will continued, "is for the nearly 950,000 probationary members that were waiting to join our faction due to limited space. The faction rules, which staved off disaster for the first two years, couldn't protect them, and things went downhill from there. Our islands' shields were the only difference maker, but as you know, that bluff didn't last. After about 200,000 of them ended up as Vampire blood banks, most sought protection from Pyrrakles's empire or the Velseyel Clan without hesitation. We couldn't prevent it because your three TX138 models battle against just one Pyrrakles. Had we

pressed, he might've buddied up with the Vampires for a pincer attack. That would've been even worse.

At least now, everyone has their guns trained on each other, which helped us reach a somewhat constant stand-off less than two years ago. It could've remained that way, but the situation has changed in recent months."

Taking a deep breath, Will sighed heavily, then dropped the bombshell.

"Swarm of Space Digestors have begun targeting our islands."

Chapter 1022: Master's Back!

When Cekt ended the communication, a broad smile illuminated Will's previously ashen and gloomy face. Those standing nearby didn't miss the transformation. It was the first time in months that the merchant had shown a smile.

"Who was that you were talking to?" A tall beauty with unnaturally pale grey skin asked, a cryptic glint in her eyes.

This woman was far from ordinary. In addition to her long golden hair, wise golden eyes, and exquisite dark golden armor molded from the chitin her body excreted, it was the four pairs of deep golden angel wings folded behind her back that truly drew the eye...

'Damn, I had forgotten about her,' Will internally lamented. 'I should have asked what to do with her.'

The woman was none other than Caphriel, the supposed Schwazen Virtue, who had remained loyal to Aurae and escaped the Corruption that had swept through her race. The truth, however, was another story. She had fearlessly confessed to Jake that she was a double agent, a Digestor Trojan through and through.

The only difference between her and someone like Ruby was that Caphriel managed to retain her sanity and obey the orders of her creator, Aurae. Whom her loyalty truly lay with was unknown, but as long as she didn't commit any unforgivable mistakes, both Aurae and the Digestors would continue to use her.

Upon Jake's departure, Caphriel had burst onto the scene, full of smiles, and presented herself as a friend of Jake and Hade, intending to join their faction. At first, Will didn't doubt her words, as they could be easily verified. However, over time, her behavior - far from appropriate for a high priestess of Aurae - raised suspicions.

For instance, his investigations revealed that Pyrakkles and Caphriel had been seen together multiple times before he decided to partake in his Fifth Ordeal.

Whether she merely encouraged him or outright manipulated his suppressed ambitions remained uncertain, but mistrust was present.

Strangely, when Will and Asfrid dug deeper, they found her fingerprints on every disaster that had befallen their faction over the past four years. Grimwald, Xaverie, Lysander, Qewie, and many others, they all interacted with the enticing angel before taking the plunge.

If she had only helped them clarify their ideas or overcome their fears, Will would have nothing to say. The problem was if they had been brainwashed.

For a while now, he had suspected her to be a Corrupted one, not considering the possibility that she could be a self-controlled Digester Trojan given Ruby's unpredictable behavior.

He mentally pondered whether to honestly answer her question but realizing it wouldn't make any difference, he stood up from his seat, a determined aura emanating from him, a far cry from his usual anxiety. Standing tall and with a conquering gaze, he seemed to have shed years off his age.

"Notify our willing members that the time to register for our Fifth Ordeal has come. Order of the boss."

Will carefully studied her expression for signs of panic or annoyance but was taken aback when the angel's beautiful face lit up.

"Finally! I've been itching for some action. I can't wait to see Jake slaughter them all." she giggled, having a hunch why he hadn't returned in four years. Suddenly, she licked her lips thinking about another person. "Hade will participate too, right?"

The merchant frowned, puzzled by her out-of-the-blue question, but he nodded coolly, "He'll be there. So will Lucia and Ulfar."

With that, Caphriel wasted no more time, exiting the building where Will had secluded himself. The next moment, his ears picked up her amplified voice echoing throughout Jake's Floating Island, announcing the good news.

At that moment, it dawned on him that he had forgotten to ask her what she was doing in his Sanctuary, or rather how she got in. Was it because it was a gift from Aurae and she was one of his created angels? If that was the case, he'd need to take precautions next time he went into seclusion. His Dragon Guard was not enough.

When Caphriel's announcement ended, a wave of eager uproar immediately swept through the territory. Having long since restored wifi on their islands, in lieu of the Aether Network, heated comments quickly flooded the substitute Faction Chat, drowning out the previous conversations in the blink of an eye.

[Mufasa: At long last...]

[Crunch: The master's back!!]

[Lord Phenix: About damn time! What's the point of immortality if I get no chance to fight?]

[Gerulf: I never thought I'd say this, but I'm starting to see this Fifth Ordeal as a vacation. With Pyrrakles and these Space Digestors hassling us, I can't catch a peaceful nap.]

[Peter Brady: That's the longest and most intelligible sentence I've heard from you since we met.]

[Gerulf: ...]

[Rogen: I can do better!]

[Peter Brady: ... Please, don't.]

[Enya Velseyel: Will? Is this for real?]

[Will Hopkins: As real as it gets. I don't joke about these things.]

[Esysa: Hell yeah!!! Let's see if that Pyrrakles bastard dares to harass me once Jake is back!]

[Lily Wilderth: That creep doesn't even spare minors...]

[Tim Paradis: Lily, I swear he won't lay a finger on you!]

[Secyone: Sigh... I mainly hope that when he returns, my two sons won't have to give their blood to the Dracul clan for peace anymore. I thought at least with his empire, we wouldn't have to fear these vampire clans, but in the end, the danger came from within...]

[Aisling: I feel ashamed...]

[Maeve Gibson: He'd better have a good reason... Meanwhile, I still have no clue what happened to my brother.]

[Qewie: What's even worse is that he's still alive...]

The comments kept pouring in, and although most were enthusiastic and positive, there were those like Maeve who harbored bitterness against their leader for his four-year

absence when they needed him the most. As for Qewie's clearly hostile remark, no one challenged it, fully understanding her reasons.

Beyond blaming Jake for the massacre of her Avian Clan and her uncles, she also held him responsible for the death of Lysander and numerous Werebeings who were forced to participate in their Fifth Ordeal unprepared.

It was certainly irrational and unfair, but Qewie was still an immature young woman. She would grow up eventually. In contrast, Kenway's silence, even after the good news, was considerably more worrisome.

Judging by certain comments, it was abundantly clear that Pyrakkles and his minions had been shut out from this new Faction Chat. Will had no doubt about the likely presence of spies, but he hardly cared if word of the conversations trickled back to the Myrmidian. After all, no one was hiding their disdain towards him and his shitty empire.

Actually, Will wanted them to be in the know. He wanted them to grasp that the fun and games were over, that their reign would meet its end...precisely at 8 a.m. sharp the day after tomorrow!

While the Myrtharian Nerds' joyous celebration seemed set to last all day, a series of thunderous crashes followed by the shrill blare of an alarm abruptly silenced the merriment.

Will, now comfortably seated cross-legged in his dragon sanctuary, tethered by an unseen spiritual link to his dragons that lurked protectively in the shadows, lifted his head at the noise and grumbled with a sullen expression,

"Here we go again... After the announcement Caphriel just made, I bet Pyrakkles won't be handling this with as much enthusiasm as usual. Charizard, let's go all out today!"

Outside, hundreds of thousands of Space Digestors had already crowded the sky, crashing against their previously nonexistent energy shield, which instantly shattered. Their Ranks weren't too high, thankfully, or they would have suffered heavy losses from withstanding all these attacks from outer space.

The only problem was that the frequency of these assaults, as well as the number and average Rank of Digestors in each wave, kept escalating. For now, Pyrakkles, Phirune, and the vampire clan elders behind Wyatt were more than enough to keep them in check and deal with their alphas, but who knew how long that would last.

Jake's return announcement came just in time. Without him, they likely would've been thrust into their Fifth Ordeal willingly or not within a few weeks to a few months.

This wasn't just because of the recurring onslaughts of Space Digestors but also due to the end of their diplomatic immunity. The emissary from Mirror Vanguard had arrived by

spaceship a few weeks earlier, and the news he brought with him was less than heartening, to put it mildly.

Chapter 1023: I Warned You!

As he hustled into his combat suit within his sanctuary, Will suddenly crinkled his brow, the notification from the AI managing Jake's Floating Island in his absence instantly pulling his attention.

[A person named Kali Zolvhur is requesting access to our territory. Should I unseal the Yellow Cube?] [Access request denied...]

Before Will could finish processing the message that popped up in his field of vision, another identical one popped up, followed by another and another... The AI, with annoying tenacity, seemed to mock him by making the same decision again and again even after consulting him.

Suddenly exhausted, he sighed deeply, face fallen, then set off, grumbling to himself, "Damn it, I just remembered there's someone else besides Caphriel, Pyrrakles, and this envoy who's a bloody thorn in my side..." He shuddered at the thought of this elusive individual who pestered him relentlessly, every damn day.

For a year, there hadn't been a single day where this enigmatic Kali Zolvhur hadn't tried to teleport onto Jake's Floating Island via the Yellow Cube. As he departed from his trusty Sanctuary with a burdened stride and a gloomy disposition, escorted by his Dragon Guard, he continued to mumble to himself, "Kali Zolvhur..."

Zolvhur... If the surname was not a coincidence, it could only be one person. The one Jake had warned him about right after their return from the Second Ordeal.

If she were truly their ally as she claimed, Will would have unsealed one of their Yellow Cubes long ago to grant her asylum. Yet, even the autonomous sub-program left by Jake's Oracle AI firmly denied her access.

In this context, he dared not make any rash decisions. The infiltration by Brain-Eaters was enough to break him into a cold sweat, without adding another layer of worry... If a terrifying Silver Zhorion like Kali were under the control of a Brain-Eater... He shuddered just thinking about it...

BOOOOOM!

Tatatatatatatatatata!

Fortunately, or perhaps not, as soon as Will saw the chaos raging in the blackened sky above, his troubling thoughts were swept aside. His senses now fully focused on the present enemies, his emerald diamond-shaped mark on his forehead began to flash, and Charizard materialized beneath him, rapidly outgrowing Mufasa and most of the other Dragons.

Thrilled to be finally free, the enormous dragon, who now appeared anything but cute, with his massive membranous wings capable of shrouding an entire alley in darkness, let out a rallying roar. As if in response to his call, the other dragons, up to now in their humanoid forms, underwent their own transformations, revealing a terrifying scene.

Then, with a perfectly synchronized wingbeat, the squadron of flying lizards, brimming with violent intent, took off with a powerful flap of their wings, leaving behind a tumultuous hurricane in their wake...

When Cekt ended the communication with Will, Jake and the others remained quiet for a long moment, their hearts heavy. If they had been hesitant to stay a few more days to take advantage of the Magnetic Resonator and better prepare for their Fifth Ordeal, now they were not.

They needed to return as soon as possible.

"Pyrrakles and his empire, Grimwald, Xaverie, the vampire clans behind Wyatt, the Space Digestors, and possibly the imminent invasions of Evolvers from other planets..." Hade summarized with a dour look. "That's a lot of enemies..."

While Ulfar managed to put on an amused smirk at this blatant realization, Lucia was trembling with barely restrained rage. Only a thin but persistent thread of rationality held her back from demanding Cekt to teleport her there right away, even if it meant incurring a debt that would take a million years to repay.

"This Asthenes... How dare he betray us? If he truly respected the Myrmid Empire, then I am still his princess! This is clearly a ploy to seize power!"

Lucia spat out through clenched teeth, her golden eyes gleaming with a lethal and enraged glint that made the king of Beskyr swallow down the tasteless joke he was about to crack.

Jake, who was standing off to the side, lost in thought and oblivious to his girlfriend's fury, turned to his master and asked bluntly, "I want to call someone else."

Cekt, whose tiny heart had barely recovered from the cost of their brief 6.07-second conversation, stiffened upon hearing his disciple's serious request.

It was worth noting that 5.6 seconds had elapsed before Will decided to speak in a rushed manner after Jake's reminder...

"Whoever you want to call, I'll hang up after 3 seconds, not a millisecond more," the gremlin warned in a dry voice. "If it's just a Civilian, you'd better give up."

Jake stiffened, thunderstruck. He wasn't certain about his cousin's capabilities. Could her mental stats handle high-speed telepathy? Well, there was only one way to know...

"I wish to contact my cousin, Anya Wilderth," He declared resolutely. "If it fails, attempt to reach my Uncle Kalen, then Ruby Hale, my Oracle Slave."

As long as he heard their voices, he'd at least know they were still alive. As for Ruby Hale, he wasn't overly concerned whether she lived or not. But he knew she'd know the state of New Earth and his cousin if the first two calls failed.

Fortuitously, to the old alien's chagrin, the call connected immediately.

"Hello? Who is this? Is this you, Jake?"

-836 Quintillion AP...

-847 Quintillion AP...

-839 Quintillion AP...

[Tut-tut... End of communication.] No sooner had Jake's face brightened at his beloved cousin's voice than Cekt severed the call, at precisely three seconds... Jake's brow twitched in a glare towards his master, but there was nothing he could do to convince him to reinitiate the call.

"I warned you. Three seconds. Not a moment more,"

The Wendok harrumphed, tilting his chin up and looking away with an infuriatingly smug expression.

If he weren't so fucking strong, Jake would have lunged at him.

Next, Cekt allowed Jake to contact his Uncle Kalen and Ruby, but each time the communication ended before Jake had the chance to truly connect with them.

Being a regular human, Jake sent his uncle a voice message so concise that calling it hidden would be an understatement. On the plus side, his master assured him that the message could be decompressed and decoded by his Oracle AI, much like any audio recording. It would just take some time...

Ruby, on the other hand, hung up on him despite clearly hearing and understanding his telepathic message. Stumped and decidedly peeved at his "soulmate's" insolence, Jake eventually dropped the matter with a loud snort.

A barely perceptible wave of worry nonetheless flitted across his face, an anomaly not missed by Cekt and Hade.

"You fear the Digestor Trojan she was may return?"

The Fluid Grandmaster questioned gravely. "A legitimate possibility."

Cekt, unaware of this saga, inquired about the conversation, and Jake gave him a succinct rundown on how he'd purged Ruby of her Digestor half by a stroke of luck, thus acquiring his new unfathomable bloodline.

He also shared his doubts about their past, pointing out their similarities and the often-invoked soulmate narrative by the Oracle to persuade him to save her, despite common sense and the fact he owed her nothing. When the Wendok heard his musings, his expression became solemn, and he retreated into thoughtful silence. Saros' hologram, which they had almost forgotten, displayed the same grave expression.

A bit later, the alien shook his head as if giving up, and stated, "I must conduct research. I'll update you when I have news. All I can tell you is that you indeed can't let this Ruby perish. If my intuition is right, 'Soulmate' refers to your souls, not some romantic ideal." He shot a sarcastic glance at Lucia.

"There's some bond between your souls. As for the why, I dare not speculate..."

Jake could tell from his master's ambiguous tone that he was concealing something, but he didn't press. He knew the Wendok would inform him in due time.

In the following minutes, it was Lucia's, Hade's, and Ulfar's turn to contact their loved ones. Given that Will hadn't specified which of the 40,000 members had perished during their Fifth Ordeal, their concern was justifiable.

Having confirmed that Gerulf was alive, Lucia preferred to forfeit her chance, fearing she would become even more infuriated upon learning who else among her Myrmidian compatriots had betrayed her to support Pyrrakles' new Myrmid empire.

Hade, had no loved ones among the Myrtharian Nerds despite getting along with a few like Asfrid.

Since his ethics prevented him from squandering sextillions of Aether Points just to ease his mind, he gladly gave up his chance.

Thus, in the end, it was Ulfar who gladly accepted their shares, dishing out gushing gratitude wrapped in bear hugs and hollow promises.

After that... they watched him, expressions numbed and eyes glazed, as he contacted each of his girlfriends one by one, from his Beskyrian wife to his latest triumphs during his Last Ordeal...

Chapter 1024: 12 Hours

When Ulfar ended his last call, a sunbeam smile spread over his face. In contrast, Cekt's lips had set into a grotesque grimace, his expression looking more constipated than ever.

"Marvelous, truly marvelous..." The Wendok's face twitched ominously for a moment, but the Beskyrian had yet to realize the thread of his life hung by a spider's silk.

Compared to him, Jake, Lucia, and Hade had already put some distance between themselves and the playboy king, wanting nothing to do with their comrade's reckless crimes.

It turned out that Cekt had kept his word: each call lasted no more than 3 seconds. It was a strict rule at first glance, but none of them dared object considering the cost per second of a long-distance call.

Implicitly, anyone with a shred of common sense and etiquette would read between the lines, understanding the real limit was to not abuse the generosity of the old Wendok. Apparently, and they just learned it today, Ulfar was a literal kind of guy.

He took the offer at face value, ignoring the unspoken condition: you can make as many three-second calls as you want, as long as it's not the same person, and it's someone you genuinely care about.

The outcome was 57 calls, far more than Jake and his companions would've dared to imagine. By the time he ended the last call, their jaws had long since hit the floor. 2

As they grew more and more convinced that Cekt was about to explode, he suddenly displayed a wicked grin, rubbing his hands together like a merchant about to secure a great deal. Turning to the still daydreaming Beskyrian, the alien cackled sinisterly in his throat and said, "You're lucky, aren't you? Come with me!"

Before Ulfar could respond, Cekt whooshed past him, and when he thought he'd gotten away, a clawed hand gripped his hair, yanking him mercilessly backward. In the blink of an eye, he disappeared into the distance, dragged by the angry gremlin.

Agape, Jake and the others could only gawk, wondering what in the hell had just happened. As Jake pondered what to do next, a telepathic message from his master echoed urgently in his mind.

"You can now activate the Nexus's time distortion, but first, you must sign up for your Fifth Ordeal either through a Red Cube or the Mirror World. As an Oracle Knight, I'll leave it up to you. But do it fast, so your companions can sign up with you."

With his master and Ulfar gone, Jake didn't hesitate and immediately explained to Lucia and Hade what he planned to do. With Xi's assistance, figuring out how to sign up for his Fifth Ordeal in the Mirror World posed no problem. Since Lucia and Hade didn't have access, he also had Xi sign them up in the same group as him, with their consent.

"Well, this is more straightforward than I thought." Jake rejoiced as he finished his registration in a few clicks. Compared to Earth's bureaucracy which had given him administrative phobia, it was almost relaxing.

After that, as he was preparing to leave his friends to return to the Nexus, Lucia held him back, gripping his sleeve with a sad expression on her face. Seeing her bite her lip and blush slightly, as if holding back from saying something, Jake guessed what was bothering her. Lifting her chin gently with two fingers to force her to meet his gaze, he whispered in a smooth voice, "Don't worry, I haven't forgotten my promise. You're free to try and kill me in any way you want. I'll take it all, in a bed or elsewhere. If you want to act on your threat now, I can delay my training for a few hours..."

Not expecting Jake to be so bold, the proud Princess Myrmidia turned scarlet, realizing that Hade was still present. In contrast, the mature Fluid Grandmaster cleared his throat, clasped his hands behind his back, and strolled away casually, whistling, "Just pretend I'm not here."

Unfazed, Jake was 70% serious. If Lucia truly wanted to take their relationship further, he wouldn't back down.

[Hehe, you should have done more research about the customs of the noble families of the Myrmid Empire.] Xi suddenly commented in a teasing tone, her amused voice echoing in his head.

Jake, wondering what she was talking about, understood in an instant as he saw Lucia avoid his gaze, her face flushed and flustered, her body trembling with embarrassment and anxiety.

'Ah, she's a virgin.'

He had suspected this due to the Myrmidians' customs, but he had forgotten seeing her so bold and proactive in their relationship. Because of her outgoing, flirty, and

competitive nature, refusing no challenge, he had come to believe she was comfortable with sex, but it was the complete opposite.

Lucia was indeed not shy, but the thought of losing her chastity was an event in her life she greatly valued. As a princess of an archaic empire, her purity was pledged to her betrothed on their wedding day.

Her perspectives had radically shifted upon entering the Mirror Universe, but it wasn't as easy to dismantle deep-seated preconceptions that had been ingrained since childhood. Jake was no exception, despite considering himself remarkably adaptable.

Lucia might possess the forthright and ribald banter of a soldier, having spent time in a ludus teeming with sweat-drenched, rough-hewn gladiators, but deep down, she was still rather innocent.

Upon seeing her fists tighten until her knuckles blanched in an effort to suppress her burgeoning internal panic, Jake's desire to joke her further evaporated. Without any warning, he drew her into his arms, tenderly stroking her golden silken hair.

"I was just kidding. There's no rush. Let's take our time," Jake reassured her in a soothing tone.

"Hmm." All tension drained from Lucia's body, and she closed her eyes to savor the placating scent of her man.

As they stood entwined, oblivious to the world, Jake suddenly felt a wet pressure against his neck. Lowering his eyes, he found, wordlessly, that Lucia had attempted a lethal bite aimed at his carotid artery.

Instead, he'd only acquired a shy hickey that was already fading. Caught in the act, the culprit realized what had transpired and tried to escape, wiping her lips. But Jake tightened his embrace, holding her in place. Looking her straight in the eyes, he earnestly repeated, "I've told you before, you can try to kill me as often as you want. This first attempt puts the score at 1-0 in my favor. Train hard and never give up." Jake chuckled, flashing his most obnoxious grin.

Embarrassed but also feeling somewhat less guilty, Lucia pouted endearingly, displaying a feminine vulnerability he never thought he'd see in a warrior as outgoing and brawling as her. Softly poking his chest with her small fist, she buried her face against his torso and whispered, "And you have to keep winning. This victory... I don't want it."

Jake shuddered at her last words, realizing from the force of her embrace how unnatural it was for a Myrmidian princess like her to utter such a thing. It was perhaps nearly as unnatural as reversing the flow of one's own blood.

Following this, Jake returned with Lucia to the Dungeon Digestor and activated the temporal distortion. As promised, they flirted together for the next twelve hours, exchanging stories about their respective pasts between kisses.

Of course, exploring each other's mouth and body took up most of this time, and by the end of this impromptu date, despite Lucia's psychological resistances, Jake proudly managed to reach second base. In the heat of the moment, as amorous as she was, she still tried to kill him a few dozen times, either by biting off his tongue, gouging his eyes, or trying to strangle him.

Needless to say, none of her murder attempts worked. His tongue was indestructible, and she even cracked a few teeth. His eyes were like two polished diamond orbs that no nail polish could scratch, and even if she did manage to strangle him, he didn't need oxygen to stay alive.

During this time, Jake learned quite a bit about his girlfriend's early years and was surprised to learn that her upbringing hadn't been as golden as he'd imagined for a princess of an empire. She never knew her real father, her mother had suddenly become inexplicably cold, and in retrospect, it was evident that she was already under the influence of a Brain-Eater then.

Her only ray of sunshine was her sister Livia, but she, too, had died along with everyone else when the Digestors were prematurely exposed and launched their offensive. As for the other benevolent people she had met later, like Cassius, or Khazus, all had perished except for Gerulf and Jake. That's why she clung to him so much.

When the twelve hours ended, Jake escorted her to the surface, and they shared a lingering kiss one last time. Lucia was surprisingly attached during their farewell. She didn't know why, but despite seeing each other again in less than 24 hours, she felt an unexplainable separation anxiety.

In contrast, Jake, who was about to train in seclusion for a year and a half, was utterly serene, feeling invigorated. It was a difference in perspective created by their respective outlooks on the future. He was confident, while she was more doubtful than ever.

Unfortunately, apart from training harder and regaining her self-esteem through self-transcendence, there were no shortcuts. To become the strong and serene Lucia she once was, she would first need to conquer her own Corruption.

Chapter 1025: Should've Listened To You

Countless light years away from the Magnetic Resonator where Jake was poised to retreat into solitude, another group of humans toiled diligently, their countenances unmarred by the pervasive gloom that haunted almost all the Evolvers on B842.

They numbered in the hundreds of millions, their ranks bolstered by diverse alien races that had rallied to their side, cohabiting on a Floating Island marginally smaller than Jake's. On first glance, one might have mistaken this territory for a expansive nation or a planetary government, but that couldn't be further from the truth.

This huge island belonged to one man alone: Cho Min Ho. The cosmopolitan population, counting several hundred million members and hundreds of factions, came together under a grand organization known as the King's Idol Alliance, this island being their primary stronghold.

Around it, numerous smaller Floating Islands orbited, drifting slowly in the vast expanse of outer space. At face value, everything seemed harmonious, and indeed it was.

Whether it was the flurry of skyscrapers under construction, the bustling activity, or the perpetual clamor blending laughter and shouts of all kinds, this territory was undoubtedly in the throes of effervescent growth.

However, if one were to pay closer attention, they would notice a somewhat artificial vibe to the inhabitants' enthusiasm and vigor. While none of them appeared to be manipulated, their carefree attitudes towards escalating external threats had an unsettling quality.

A troubling detail was the frailty of many residents, their faces pale and shadowed as if stricken by anemia or sleep deprivation. On Earth, this wouldn't raise any eyebrows, but in the Mirror Universe, such physical signs on an active Evolver population were borderline supernatural.

Not everyone was smiling, though. A few individuals bore faces permanently creased in ominous scowls, aware that something was amiss but unable to pinpoint exactly what.

If Jake were present, he would have surely recognized two of these individuals: Amy and Cho Min-Ho's bodyguard, Lee Yoon.

On the flip side, others were genuinely happy, robust, and fearlessly relishing the good life.

At this exact moment, in the heart of the King's Idol Alliance's grand headquarters, Cho-Min-Ho lounged comfortably amid opulence. The mansion, their nerve center, was a spectacle of luxury, mirroring a five-star hotel or a presidential suite, with an aura of wealth and power suffusing every corner. Magnificent chandeliers hung low, shimmering in the glow of the artificial sun above, casting shifting light patterns on the expanse of polished marble beneath. Walls adorned with intricately detailed tapestries chronicled the faction's many victories, while plush furnishings invited their members to savor the comforts their status afforded. In the background, the distant clinking of crystal and the low hum of expensive machinery lent an air of sophistication to the ambiance.

Clad in robes befitting his status, Cho-Min-Ho reclined lazily on an extravagant divan, idly swirling an exquisite crystal glass brimming with the finest Amaranthine wine. His eyes were half-closed in a state of contentment as he reveled in the privileges his status afforded him.

If the self-proclaimed Emperor Pyrrakles were present, he would have surely approved of this grandiose lifestyle befitting his status.

Suddenly, amid the placid lull of luxury, Cho Min Ho's personal device chimed with an unexpected notification. The jarring sound clashed with the soothing rhythm of his surroundings, causing his eyes to snap open and focus on the luminous screen.

The text flashing on the screen was enough to wipe the satisfied smirk off his face. It was a notification about Jake - just moments after he had registered for his fifth Ordeal. Reading this, Cho-Min-Ho's hand tightened involuntarily around the crystal glass.

The atmosphere of indulgence suddenly quieted around him as he absorbed the information. The complacency that had once marked his features was replaced by an intense focus, the full weight of the new development sinking in.

"The time has finally come..."

Rising abruptly from his divan, his idle expression completely evaporated, he pondered for a moment before barking out an authoritative order,

"KANG JUN, NATAN."

Like a master whistling for his dogs, a three-meter hulk with slicked-back sandy beige hair and a nightmarish-looking insectoid alien blinked into the room as silently as shadows. It was almost as if they had been there from the beginning. "What's up, boss? Do you need more... people, if you catch my drift..." Kang Jun greeted sinisterly, half-serious, half-joking.

Cho Min Ho didn't respond to his insinuation, and the bodyguard's face froze, a flicker of anger sparkling fleetingly in his orange eyes. Natan, whose insectoid face made his emotions unreadable, was more discerning and retorted in a voice that could make one's teeth grate, "I told you he and his faction wouldn't go down easily. As long as you can assert your superiority in the upcoming Ordeal, absorbing his faction and power will be a piece of cake. Besides, with only one other Oracle Knight to deal with, we can handle any unforeseen situation if our ally proves disappointing. Victory will be ours."

Kang Jun, a bit slow on the uptake, changed his expression as he grasped the gravity of the situation, appearing solemn on the surface, but seething with excitement deep down. Still, upon hearing the sinister words of the insectoid alien, an involuntary shiver ran down his spine.

He knew exactly what Natan was referring to. It was their leader and King's Idol Alliance's biggest secret. It was the root cause of their meteoric rise in both power and wealth, but it was also a curse to its members.

Joining King's Idol Alliance was akin to riding a tiger, once you were atop, stepping down was not an option, unless you fancied becoming its next meal. Everyone's fate was entwined tightly with their leader's.

Of course, save for a select few like Natan and himself, most members remained oblivious to the Damoclean sword hanging over their heads. The more suspicious, like Amy and Lee Yoon, could only harbor inklings, nothing more. Moreover, it was a fact that the King's Idol Alliance thrived and looked after its members. They indiscriminately accepted everyone, Civilians and Evolvers alike, guaranteeing a full stomach and a roof overhead. A cherry on top, the faction also ensured to bolster the strength of its new recruits safely.

Because Cho Min Ho and his faction lived up to these promises, their development had been explosive, while public adoration for the Korean nearly bordered on cult-like worship.

Yet, behind the scenes, the situation was darker, and their idolized idol had just set his sights on his new quarry...

"We'll engage in our fifth Ordeal tomorrow morning at 8 o'clock. Relay the news to our members, and I expect all volunteers to confirm their participation within 60 minutes. No member of the main King's Idol Alliance faction can back out, or they can kiss their place goodbye. There's no shortage of candidates."

Cho Min Ho finally issued his orders, leaving nothing to chance. They weren't rookies when it came to Ordeals, and both Kang Jun and Natan gave respectful nods before vanishing with a blink.

Minutes later, the entire King's Idol Alliance was on alert, and a wave of excitement rippled across the entire island as a staggering 98% of members volunteered, including the majority Civilian subsidiary factions. It was as if they were oblivious or had forgotten that the mortality rate during the Fifth Ordeal neared 99%.¹ Such fanaticism and faith in their leader were both fascinating and terrifying...

Amy and Lee Yoon, witnessing the fervor over a cup of coffee with resigned, but not surprised, expressions, simultaneously sighed, shaking their heads in dismay. "I wonder which Oracle Knight he chose to partner with." Lee Yoon sneered, then added with a disdainful snort, "I was starting to think he was too fond of his luxuries to risk his life again. These recurring Space Digester attacks must've shaken him from his indolence. To think we were over a billion two years ago..."

"Sadly, he's handling the registration via the Mirror World, so we'll have to wait for him to tell us who our allies are, if any..." Amy responded, annoyance edging her voice as she uncrossed and then recrossed her legs to stretch them.

Inside, a small part of her hoped their cooperation with Jake and his Myrtharian Nerds was still on, but after four years she refused to feed the slightest hope. If she let herself get swept up, the eventual disappointment would be crushing.

'Jake, Will... I hope you're doing well. I should've listened to you...' She mused inwardly, her gaze fixated on a distant point lost in the cosmos.

Back at the Magnetic Resonator, Jake, who had gone to the Conversion Chamber to begin his intensive training, abruptly halted his actions when Xi's soft voice rang in his mind,

[Your suspicions were well-founded. King's Idol Alliance signed up to fight alongside us less than an hour after we confirmed our participation in the Fifth Ordeal.]

Jake had considered this possibility despite the elapsed four years, but he had hoped he was wrong.

"So, there is indeed something off about this Cho Min Ho..." He murmured thoughtfully, resuming his stride.

Despite Amy's favorite idol being at the helm, his Cosmic D Starfeyrves instincts had never steered him wrong. A normal person would never have waited this long.

Recalling this, a sardonic chuckle escaped his lips as an expectant expression solidified on his shadowy face,

"Well, it's a chance to see what he's made of. If I can give Amy a hand for old time's sake, why not. Will would probably be pleased too..."

With that, Jake finally entered the Conversion Chamber where the Magnetic Field Disruptor and the Aether were generated and stored. A captivating smile flashed across his motivated face, prompting thousands of Aether Cores to magically materialize around him, with innumerable more continuously appearing.

In response to his mental command, the huge futuristic device acting as the Magnetic Field Disruptor began to emit an immense magnetic field. Shortly after, a blindingly white column of plasma swallowed his sight and the Aether Cores he had just conjured.