

# The Oracle Paths

## - Chapter 1026.1: A Year And A Half In Seclusion (part 1)

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### Chapter 1026.1: A Year And A Half In Seclusion (part 1)

In the blinding brilliance of superheated plasma, his only company, Jake dedicated the following year and a half to cultivating his energy sources and reserves. This epiphany stemmed from realizing that a simple shortage of Aether could paralyze a machine as finely tuned as the Oracle System.

Without Aether, almost nothing was possible. Long-distance teleportation ceased, no more purchases through the Oracle Store, no more Oracle Shields- nothing. Even making a call to the other end of the galaxy became a Herculean task.

Jake knew one thing: he loathed feeling powerless and destitute. He refused to find himself in a pitiful predicament due to an Aether shortage, unable to afford the solutions to pull him out of it.

Even a Rank 3 Aetherist like his master could only endure the collapse of the Aether Network, showing that wealth alone wasn't enough to withstand an energy crisis of this magnitude.

For now, the only one who demonstrated resilience amidst these harsh times was Aas, the Cube Ancient Designer. Having a model to follow, Jake now had a glimmer of what he needed to do to escape the widespread "poverty" that plagued their Mirror Universe.

Though he knew little about Aas, he had indirectly acquired Vexa's powers by devouring Digestor Ruby. If he wished, he could easily alter his cells to mimic the physiology of the Cubic Race and, with this, had enough clues to understand how the Ancient Designer coped with the Ordeals' costs of the entire Mirror Universe.

Initially, he hadn't realized it, but Vexa's cubic cells functioned in many ways like his Energy Body. Upon opening one of these Cubes, no matter how hard one looked, no Aether Core would be found inside per se. Yet, they had a Grade assigned based on their size and the maximum Aether output they could deliver. The source of this Aether had no precise location, but the Aether continuously produced by these Cubes was undeniable evidence. The material composing these Cubes also served as a remarkable Aether accumulator, storing the produced Aether non-stop up to a storage ceiling determined mainly by the Cube's quality and size.

Of significance, each Cube was connected through a spiritual and Aetheric link spanning distances. This implied that if each Oracle Cube was indeed part of Aas, the Ancient Designer had his own alternative Aether Network.

Jake had initially believed that the awakening of his Energy Body was due to his consumption of the Grade 10 Aether Core. He had changed his mind. It was probably Vexa's Cubic Race Bloodline that originated this ability, the Aether Core merely providing the energy required for its evolution.

Therefore, Jake had multiple goals during this year and a half to accomplish this objective: maintaining the Magnetic Field Disruptor and the Conversion Chamber at full capacity during this period to support both the temporal distortion and his Aether production.

At first, he was afraid that the Conversion Chamber wouldn't produce enough Aether to sustain the temporal distortion or that it wouldn't be part of the affected zone. But he was quickly reassured when he discovered that the energy produced by these electromagnetic clashes between the Magnetic Resonator and the black hole's event horizon was absolutely fantastic.

Better still, the Dungeon Digester could indeed extend the time distortion's influence to the Conversion Chamber and its Magnetic Field Disruptor. If it hadn't done so before, it was to better deceive them.

From the surface unaffected by temporal distortion where Lucia and the others were, they saw a few minutes after Jake bid them farewell the Magnetic Resonator make a violent veer towards the black hole, its speed accelerating to its maximum limit, the giant thrusters on the other side of the structure igniting for the first time since they had landed here.

In the hours that followed, the Magnetic Resonator continued to speed up rapidly until it reached a celerity infinitesimally close to that of light. During the same period, the Magnetic Field Disruptor began emitting under the effect of time acceleration, a magnetic field of power and flow rate inconceivable to the human mind.

Orbiting this quickly against the black hole's natural magnetic field, the resulting clash of the opposing magnetic fields multiplied the Magnetic Resonator's energy production, putting its Voidsteel infrastructure and the barrier surrounding the funnel to a severe test.

Such a machine overclocking could only be maintained for a few days, but for Jake, who was benefiting from the time distortion, he now had the perfect conditions to become a real Aether Core factory.

Every second, thousands of Aether Cores would join the plasma storm, but Jake soon realized that it wasn't even necessary. Right under the Conversion Chamber was an

exquisite Conversion Aether Array of gigantic diameter, converting all the produced energy into pure Aether in a form he had never seen before. Once generated, it would be immediately compressed before flowing down in liquid form into a cylindrical pool equipped with its own Aether Array.

The trickle didn't end there. Having been reconfigured by a second Aether Array an even purer fraction of liquid flowed down into a considerably smaller, lower pool. Its metallic walls shimmered with an otherworldly light.

The cycle repeated multiple times until the end product dripped, microscopic and precious, into a vessel no larger than a bottle cap, hewn from pure Horizon Hardstone. The container was two-thirds empty, hardly enough to moisten one's lips, but the aura of Aether emanating from it was simply staggering.

As for the liquid itself, a single microscopic droplet of this highly compressed and purified liquified Aether held phenomenal energy, perhaps almost as much as a Grade 8 or 9 Aether Core.

However, their value lay not in the amount of Aether they held, but the quality. When only considering the grade of Aether produced, it far surpassed Grade 10. When Jake scanned one of these droplets, brighter than a star and more syrupy and creamy than the most luxurious of hydrating milks, he was left awestruck. Grade 16 Aether!

Cekt had once told him the highest recorded bloodline grade in their Mirror Universe was 17. Even though the grade of a bloodline and that of Aether weren't the same thing, it was clear these droplets of Aether represented the pinnacle of Aetheric technology their Mirror Universe could master.

And these Grade 16 Aether droplets were solely for his use! Even though he could do nothing with them at his level, not even manipulate them without harming his consciousness and Spirit Body, his Energy Core training and production were considerably eased.

Merely sitting cross-legged nearby, Jake could feel his Energy Body, Spirit, and Soul racing, the speed at which his cells siphoned the ambient Aether increasing exponentially.

"Approximately three Grade 9 energy Cores per second," Jake swiftly estimated after submerging several freshly condensed Aether Cores in one of the droplets.

To produce a Grade 10 Aether Point of a given encoding, one needed about 100 Grade 9 Aether points. However, to condense a Grade 10 Aether Core, one needed far more than 100 Grade 9 Aether Cores.

That was because the Grade referred to the quality of the usable Aether and to achieve that required an immense amount of Aether, just as forcing two liters of water into a one-liter bottle needed far more strength than one might think.

Nevertheless, Jake soon found himself flabbergasted when a Grade 10 energy Core, which had required the assimilation of an entire giant sun, appeared before him, rapidly siphoning the contents of the container. He stashed it away in a separate space before disaster ensued. The stifling and deadly void of a zero Aether zone was still fresh in his memory.

Jake quickly realized he couldn't allow the tiny pool to empty as it also represented the Dungeon Digestor's energy reserves. Once depleted, the temporal distortion would instantly end.

For this reason, and to limit danger, he first focused on producing Grade 9 Aether Cores in bulk, then swiftly began experimenting with encoding them in a myriad of different ways.

Jake couldn't create Grade 6 Aether Encodings himself, but he could easily create a lower encoding and use that encoded Aether to condense a lesser quality Aether Core.

Often, the encoding, or energy Code, would be destroyed by the compression of the Energy Core as it gained density. But rarely, the encoded Aether would survive, becoming a more highly compressed version of its original Aether Code. Statistically, this was an occurrence out of 10,000, but for Jake, with virtually infinite energy at his disposal, these fortunate occurrences could be considered frequent.

When he grew bored after several days, he began to experiment with his Cube Magic ability, producing different colored Cubes instead of energy Cores, and acquainting himself with their properties and differences. He soon realized that, unless he intentionally severed the connection, each of his Cubes was a part of him, just like his cells. If he desired, he could even redirect their energy through the connecting link, a phenomenon that worked almost instantaneously over short distances with his current understanding of the Aetherdream.

His plan to develop his own energy Network and become an invincible pay-to-win player was already on track.

## **Chapter 1027.2: A Year And A Half In Seclusion (part 2)**

About a month after Jake had immersed himself in the creation of various Cubes and Aether Cores, he was finally visited by his mentor, Cekt, who promised to offer direct aid in his training. To Jake, a month had elapsed, but for the alien, barely more than an hour had passed since their last encounter.

"Ugh? I see what you're attempting here, but these Grade 9 Aether Cores are useless if you can't wield them without risking your own safety," the small alien commented, floating just behind Jake's ear.

With an alertness hardened by the ever-present threat of the Dungeon Digester, Jake remained stoic, simply nodding in acknowledgment of his mentor's words. "I'd like to configure them to draw their Aether from another source like my Energy Body, but so far, the results have been disappointing," Jake admitted, his voice devoid of joy but far from defeated.

This was the inherent issue with Grade 7 and higher Aether Cores. They siphoned the surrounding Aether so rapidly and broadly that the local Aether density plummeted in minutes, sometimes seconds, resulting in a sphere of zero Aether-hostile to any form of matter or energy, since even they are composed of it. In the end, everything was merely Aether in different states.

In the span of a month, Jake had amassed nearly four million Grade 9 Aether Cores and half as many equivalent-quality Cubes, as these were material objects rather than purely Aetheric. Such a fortune would seem unimaginable to the average Evolver, but it was of no use if it could not be utilized.

These four million Grade 9 Aether Cores, based on Jake's current understanding, could only be used in two ways: as a tool of mass destruction or to power an ultra-high-speed structure with Aether, thereby maintaining a stable Aether density. The higher a Core's grade, the faster the object it was attached to had to move.

Because the Magnetic Resonator on which they currently orbited traveled at near-light speed, Jake had already confirmed that his Grade 10 Aether Core posed no immediate danger.

But this didn't mean he could simply multiply the available Aether by invoking his millions of Grade 9 Aether Cores. The issue was that the atmosphere's Aether was finite, as was the speed at which it replenished after being drained. Even at the speed of the Magnetic Resonator, a few thousand Grade 9 Aether Cores in one place would be enough to deplete all the surrounding Aether in the blink of an eye.

More dangerous still, if the Cores were too close, they could fuse together, potentially creating a Grade 10 Aether Core-or something even more terrifying. Regardless, Jake didn't view these Aether Cores as useless. He was confident that merely bombarding his foes with Grade 9 Aether Cores would be enough to decimate anything the Fifth Ordeal might throw at him. Of course, such a cheat would likely be banned from the trial to maintain fairness and competitiveness among Players.

"What you're attempting is not impossible, but it requires a deeper understanding of Aether than you currently possess." Cekt continued, adopting an instructive tone. "The Aetherdream is layered. As long as you don't know how to dig a deeper well, using

these Aether Cores in the way you envision will remain impossible. For you, without the right bloodline, it should remain difficult. Even for me, it's barely feasible. The main obstacle here isn't only your knowledge but also your perception. Those who can perceive the nuances of the Aetherdream clearly are few and far between and are considered precious Chosens by their organizations."

Rather than being discouraged by his mentor's words, Jake experienced a flash of insight, his thoughts landing on one of his Soul Class Skills.

'Aetherdream Inception...'

Wasn't the purpose of this skill precisely to better discern the dissonances between these layers of reality? If he could truly tap into a more enduring and pure Aether source this way, then his dream wasn't as unreachable as it seemed! Nevertheless, this remained a project for the future. Until now, Jake had never detected one of the dissonances between the layers of the Aetherdream necessary to make this possible. As his mentor had pointed out, his perception was probably inadequate. On the other hand, he'd never seriously attempted to find one either.

It was worth a shot. But before that, he needed to take advantage of his mentor's presence to clarify all the unresolved questions he'd accumulated over time.

After all, the Wendok had already warned him that he intended to stay with him for a maximum of one or two months, having to tend to his other disciples who needed him more. This meant he'd be absent for only one or two hours, which was acceptable.

Thus, Cekt spent the next two months guiding and correcting Jake's shortcomings. Jake initially thought his mentor wouldn't have much to offer him, but he was mistaken. The experience of a Rank 3 Aetherist couldn't be dismissed.

Cekt provided Jake with invaluable guidance for devising his own unique Original Spell, a distinct self-created ability each Aetherist worth their salt should possess. Upon perfecting this, Jake would be formally recognized as a Rank 1 Aetherist and merely need to pass the promotional exam to make it official. The best way to accomplish this was by merging his Aether expertise with his unique traits such as his bloodline, True Will, and Soul Class. Without this personal touch, any Rank 5 Aetherist could easily replicate a Rank 1 Aetherist's Original Spell after mere observation. His unique spell needed an extra element to make it impervious to imitation.

In this regard, Jake had numerous attributes making him a rarity even among his peers. If one were to only mention the most pivotal, there were four: His Digestor-derived ability to assimilate the strength and properties of the food he ingested, his adaptability to all types of environments and situations, his True Will Move 'Grabbing', and lastly, his Soul Class.



Cekt had sparked inspiration within Jake, particularly relating to the first and third points, with his sage advice. Regarding digestion, the Wendok wasn't opposed to Jake consuming the arm of the Voidshifter he'd severed. Instead, he insisted quality mattered over quantity in terms of Jake's bloodline.

For other Evolvers, if they wanted a new bloodline, the quality of the Blood Essence received was critical. If its Aether levels were too low, they'd obtain the desired bloodline but in such a weakened form that it could take decades, even centuries, to stimulate any significant progress.

There were remedies for this issue, like the legendary Black Aether. However, Cekt explained its production was tremendously complex and, although it had a price, no market existed for it.

Jake didn't have this problem. As long as he digested a particle containing his prey's complete Aether Code, it would join his internal database alongside the rest, ready to be reshaped at will.

After that, he simply incorporated the portions that intrigued him into his active bloodline, and the rest of his Aether Code would share its Aether with these parts, upgrading them. It would weaken the overall level of his Cosmic D Starfeyrves Bloodline, but not that much. With his Energy Body, this was a non-issue.

This Digestor ability was what made them so terrifying, and Jake had precisely acquired this power while keeping his Corruption at an acceptable threshold. This unusual context made Jake an anomaly in the Mirror Universe.

But compared to the Digestors, Jake had an additional edge: His virtually limitless adaptability and metamorphosis power allowed him to modify sections of his Aether Code in real-time, meaning his bloodline wasn't fixed post-rank advancement like the Digestors'.

As long as he didn't play God with his DNA, Jake would remain incredibly versatile, his bloodline skill 'Artefact Incarnation' epitomizing this paradox.

Under the watchful eye of his mentor, who wished to document the process for future research, Jake ingested a Voidshifter cell, which was digested without a hitch. His mind instantly sensed the difference, an indescribable ecstasy coursing through him as his mental database received the Aether Code of a new bloodline equipped with distinct abilities he didn't yet possess.

Just like Digestors always evolved by selecting the best possible evolution for themselves, Jake promptly altered his active bloodline to include the portion of Aether Code his cells craved.

Right after, his mind trembled, and he felt his awareness of the world subtly shifting, as if he'd acquired an additional sense. It was as disorienting as moving from a two-dimensional plane to a three-dimensional space, and if his intelligence hadn't been so high, the sensory overload could have permanently damaged his mind.

"So this is what the flow of time feels like when you perceive its existence directly..." Jake muttered, a fascinated expression on his face.

Simultaneously, he found it possible to interact with this added element and immediately began experimenting under the enthusiastic guidance of his mentor. Within a few weeks, Jake had perfected the basics and all the theory needed to continue his progress.

It wasn't as overpowered as he'd hoped, but he estimated that thanks to this recent addition to his arsenal, his combat effectiveness had at least tripled.

Unsurprisingly, when he checked his Oracle Status at the end of his first month with his mentor, his bloodline now displayed a new ability:

[Time Manipulation: You can perceive the flow of time and exert some influence over it, forming a positive synergy with your Space and Cosmic affinities.]

With his first goal achieved, Jake and his mentor spent the second month focusing on his Original Spell itself, making use of his True Will of Grabbing. Though Jake had been utilizing this as a straightforward attack, he quickly discovered, thanks to his master's guidance, that such a skill harbored an infinity of variations when woven together with the rest of his arsenal.

## **Chapter 1028.3: A Year And A Half In Seclusion (part 3)**

The key, it seemed, hinged on the concept of compression. When Jake rallied his True Will of Grabbing, the truth was it felt more akin to a True Will of Crushing. To date, he had never employed his telekinetic grip, turbocharged by his Soul Power, to grasp anything.

Not because he couldn't, but because he had honed this move with the specific goal of gaining a decisive strike, a trump card capable of defeating any foe, provided he struck true. He held no regrets for having done so, for this technique had saved his life time and again, proving as valuable in attack as in defense.

Indeed, his telekinetic grip, amplified by his True Will, was so overpowering it could locally collapse the space targeted. Now, what Cekt was proposing was to learn to modulate his True Will, not to grind his enemies into oblivion, but to compress his other techniques to ramp up their lethality.



When his master had mooted this idea, a new world brimming with possibilities unfurled before him. Jake had previously contemplated practice in this direction, but the confirmation from his master cemented his resolve to reach this goal. So, in his second month with the Wendok, Jake strove to control the flow of his True Will better, and to better distribute the forces of his telekinetic grip to avoid total destruction in its use. Despite his high mental stats, this proved far more challenging than he imagined, as Soul Power was inherently difficult to consciously manipulate.

The struggle was akin to a man trying to will himself into an erection. It wasn't impossible to pull off this feat, though. One merely needed to outsmart both body and mind. For instance, a man could visualize an erotic scene sufficiently arousing to elicit a natural physical response. Actors used similar tricks to cry on cue.

By the end of the month, when Cekt decided to return to the surface to join his other disciples, Jake had made considerable progress, yet he was far from crafting the Original Spell his master envisioned.

Before leaving, Cekt bequeathed another gift: a copy of the complete collection of Aether manipulation manuals, novice to master level. The master level equated to the expertise of a Rank 3 Aetherist, and even Cekt didn't claim to grasp all its subtleties.

These weren't paper books, of course. The volume of information they contained was simply too vast. If you printed one, particularly the master level, the book would span several football fields, stand three or four stories tall, and the characters would be so tiny a microscope would be required to read them.

Jake, who had long coveted these, knew their value in the Oracle Store before the Aether Network went offline. He accepted this gift from his master with trembling hands. If before he had harbored doubts about the old alien, now there was no cause for suspicion.

Once Cekt had left, Jake realized three months of his seclusion had elapsed, leaving him around fifteen months to accomplish his objectives. There were numerous things he needed to finish during this period, and he was determined to do so.

Throughout these fifteen months, Jake never ceased producing Aether Cores or Cubes or subjecting his body to ever-increasing Aether thresholds. However, he temporarily halted the development of his Original Spell to read the manuals his master had entrusted to him. He was firmly convinced that once his understanding was up to par, progress in all other areas would become significantly easier.

Reading consumed the next three months, but like his master, he had to admit that understanding all the nuances would likely take a lifetime. Nevertheless, during this period, his understanding and understanding of the Aether undeniably skyrocketed. It wasn't so much the knowledge as the elevation of his perspective that was a game changer.

To start with, the master manual extensively covered the Aetherdream, no longer a secret. By the end of his reading, Jake had a much clearer idea of how to "drill this well" in the Aetherdream.

Knowing how and being capable of it, though, were two very different things. Beyond perception, it required advanced Aether mastery, a powerful mind, and an understanding and affinity for most physical and Aetheric laws. This currently hindered 99.9% of Rank 3 Aetherists and above from achieving this feat.

So, the first thing Jake did after his reading was to resume the development of his Original Spell, and importantly, devote a significant portion of his schedule to sharpening his Perception and Extrasensory Perception.

Thanks to these manuals, Jake learned plenty of tricks to optimize his training and knew he had already reached a level where mere perseverance and talent were not enough.

If pushing the limits of his Aether and Body stats were as simple as slathering on more Aether, then these semi-eternal entities aged several trillion years would have long become invincible. Factually, since their stats and bloodlines were so high, they would also be uncatchable.

But this wasn't the case. The delusion of indestructibility was nothing more than that - an illusion. Both body and spirit were crafted from Aether, and they could gradually endure higher densities after a period of acclimation, but even this method had its limits.

Sooner or later, Evolvers hit a wall, typically when their Aether needed to advance to Grade 6 or 7, equating to Aether statistics between one and nearly a hundred million points. It made sense, considering even the oldest System A0 had an Aether density of 186M and was virtually deserted.

Only a select few Oracle Guardians could venture there, and upon reflection, these Oracle Guardians were worlds apart from Khaanul warriors like Saros. These aliens manned the deadliest outposts, their gear in a league of its own. So how did these gifted Evolvers push past this Aetheric wall? Aside from having a high-potential bloodline like Jake, it was crucial to remember that the complete designation of Aether was preceded by the word 'Dream.'

Anything was possible with Aether, as long as one believed strongly enough. Still, merely wanting to become invincible wasn't enough. It was a notion too vague, too scattered to trigger the necessary Aether transformations to alter vague, too scattered to trigger the necessary Aether transformations to alter one's destiny.

This is where the understanding and control of Aether came into play. Coupled with complex Aether Spells, a good bloodline, focused attention, assistance from artifacts,

enchancements, medicine, spirit enhancements, and nurturing of the True Will of Growth, transcending existence was, perhaps, possible.

True Will of Growth was inherent in every living being and Aether thrived on it. Except for cases of severe depression, everyone wanted to stay alive and improve, to become a better version of themselves. The Life Element Jake had acquired, which was an artificial element, also encompassed this concept of growth, vitality, and multiplication.

Thus, Jake spent the next six months focusing on his mindset, Original Spells, basic stats, affinities, and stimulating his bloodline by exposing himself to all sorts of inhuman environments, as well as combat practice in the inner world of his Purgatory.

During these six months, his Original Spell also achieved satisfactory performance levels, and Jake renamed it: Morphic Grasp. It was, by far, the most terrifying and versatile technique he owned. Even he was freaked out testing its capabilities in Purgatory for the first time.

Several times, he was tempted to devour the remainder of the Voidshifter's arm, but fear of unnecessarily increasing his Corruption held him back. The grain of Horizon Hardstone in his stomach was still resistant, and Jake had entirely given up hope of digesting it during his seclusion. It was simply too hard.

When there was only a month left until the end of the year and a half that Cekt had assured him, Jake stopped everything, deciding it was time to focus on his equipment. One month wasn't enough to make up for what a good artifact could provide, and the Oracle Store was currently out of reach due to exorbitant delivery fees.

He would have to rely on himself before entering his Fifth Ordeal and then make use of his generously financed Portable Oracle Store Skill by Aaas to finally go on a shopping spree

For his new equipment, Jake already knew which main material he would use: Horizon Hardstone.

Failing to digest it, Jake had realized his stomach was also a great way to extract it from the Voidsteel alloy it was embedded in.

Thus, he spent two of the remaining weeks disassembling the walls of the Conversion Chamber and the funnel to harvest as much Horizon Hardstone-enriched Voidsteel as possible. It was grueling, even for him, as he regularly had to make himself vomit once his stomach was full, and spewing out indestructible metallic dust was far from enjoyable.

After obtaining enough for two or three sets of armor, Jake set up an Aether Extraction Array to drain the Horizon Hardstone of its Aether to make it malleable, then got to work.

Forging a weapon from this material proved to be a true test of endurance, but a few hours before the end of his seclusion, Jake emerged from his workshop with a weary but content expression.

Judging that he had no time for anything else, he resolutely returned to the surface after stowing the Nexus in his Space Storage. The Magnetic Resonator could finally resume its normal function.

It was a shame he couldn't take it with him...

## **Chapter 1029: Beginning Of The Fifth Ordeal**

When Jake stepped out from the funnel, he found his companions already assembled, bracing themselves as if they had foreseen his arrival. One glance at his chronometer revealed he was fifteen minutes ahead of schedule. Given that fact, their readiness wasn't as surprising.

Unlike him, they had only a day to prepare, likely having finished their preparations hours ago. Upon seeing him, Lucia's eyes brightened, and she threw herself into his arms with such fervor as though she was trying to ensnare him forever within her grasp.

Xi, watching this from the depths of Jake's mind, snorted at Lucia's brazenness but bit back any biting comment. She knew it wouldn't achieve anything.

She was spared the necessity of further grumbling when Cekt cleared his throat, effectively putting an end to their sentimental display. Lucia released Jake with an embarrassed giggle and a slightly woeful expression that suggested she wanted more, but she understood this wasn't the time for selfish desires.

Before loosening her hold, she whispered in a grave tone into his ear. "For me, you're the only one, but don't wait for me if you find someone else you like. After all, I can't predict how long we'll be apart, let alone when we'll get back to normal life."

Jake, hearing these words, stood in stunned silence, his heart heavy and confused. Was she suggesting he could cheat on her because of their impending separation?

As he grappled with growing confusion and a hint of anger, Xi offered an explanation in a voice rich with empathy-not towards him, but unusually, towards Lucia.

[Lucia grew up in an empire where might makes right, and polygamy is accepted. Influential nobles having their own harems was commonplace. Her own father, the emperor, had dozens of concubines in addition to his wife. As a princess, she likely accepted from a young age that she might one day be bartered away in a political marriage. Her Myrmidian pride drives her to be the strongest, to avoid that fate, but her

love for you and her current predicament have upended all that. This couldn't have been an easy decision for her, but in my opinion, she's not just doing this for you, but also for... others.] From Xi's ambiguous words, Jake could guess who she was referring to, but the revelation didn't sit well with him. It may seem naïve, but he was a bit old school when it came to romance, believing in a singular, profound love.

He could acknowledge that a man or a woman might love two things equally. If he had to choose between a burger or pizza, he'd indeed find himself in a serious quandary.

The real issue lay elsewhere. Even if he could love and attend to multiple partners equally, he'd still be dividing his affection, dedicating half the amount of love and attention compared to if he only loved one person. The only winner in a polyamorous relationship centered around him wouldn't be Lucia or the 'others' she referred to.

In the end, Jake could only sigh, burying this existential conundrum deep within himself, his focus shifting back to the looming Fifth Ordeal.

"Are you ready?" Cekt inquired, hovering a meter off the ground, hands clasped behind his back.

The Wendok could sense his disciple's terrifying fluctuations and silently nodded in approval. The last year and a half hadn't been wasted.

His companions and the other disciples also felt the change, gaining a hint of confidence for the upcoming Ordeal. In response to his master's question, Jake responded with a determined expression, "Ready as I'll ever be."

"In that case, let's begin..." Cekt agreed with a somber nod.

With a wave of his hand, he conjured a large Red Cube, about ten meters to a side. But before letting them enter, he used the remaining time to brief them on the looming threats.

Due to the sabotage of the Aether Network, the Oracle System wasn't as capable of enforcing its rules, so the alien felt he could divulge more without fear of repercussions.

Despite this, Jake didn't learn much more than what Aslael had already told them. Still, the knowledge wasn't entirely useless.

For instance, he learned that Epsilon and Lyra would probably join the same front, while Rigel would likely be alone. Jake and the others had a good chance of landing on the same battlefield. An Ordeal World could be as small as a continent or as vast as a universe, and there were no guarantees of meeting each other there. However, members of the same faction and their allies had a higher chance of spawning in the same zone.

When Cekt finished giving his advice, the atmosphere grew heavy again. Amidst the deafening silence, they all started saying their goodbyes, fully aware from the statistics that this might be the last time they saw each other. For all they knew, they might be dead in the next five minutes...

With the ticking clock dwindling to its final seconds, Lucia and Jake shared a lingering, passionate kiss. But soon after, the Red Cube's pulsing light signaled that the time had come.

Without allowing doubt to overtake them, Lucia inhaled sharply. Her red, moist eyes, full of resignation, gazed for a fleeting moment before she bravely stepped into the Red Cube.

Jake took a deep breath, steadying his nerves. He gave a firm nod to Hade, Ulfar, and the others, then with the same determined expression as Lucia, vanished inside.

Suddenly, his surroundings shifted to an eerie, timeless void, where even the presence of one's own consciousness seemed intangible. Only the Lucid Aetherdreamer mode provided solace, reminding him that this was but an illusion.

No stranger to the process, Jake patiently awaited the Oracle System's familiar notification regarding the conditions of his Ordeal. Given the damage to the Aether Network, he expected potential alterations. His worries proved unfounded when, moments later, the awaited notification popped up before him.

[Participant: Jake Wilderth, Cosmic D Starfeyrves.]

[Successful Ordeals: 4.]

[Awaiting matchmaking for Fifth Ordeal. Allowed species: All (however, location and conditions may vary by species).]

[Matchmaking complete, Fifth Ordeal determined.]

[Type: Battlefield/Total War]

[Aether density: \*500 or 5,000 pts.]

[Number of participants: 16,891,386, with 8,445,693 Players per Mirror Universe.]

[Background: Twyluxia, a flat world where each edge connects to a towering, impassable waterfall. From opposing yet symbiotic natures, the water-rich in energy from each cascade converges at Twyluxia's core, forming the vast Lumyst River, dividing the world into two distinct regions. Due to its scant Aether atmosphere, every conflict in Twyluxia revolves around the power-packed Lumyst water.]



[Lustra Plains, blessed by the Heaven Cascade, finds its half of the Lumyst River brimming with life-sustaining forces. Flourishing flora and fauna, abundant resources, and the more the Lumyst River stretches and nears the boundary, its water quality diminishes until it becomes mundane, only to reverse its properties when it crosses into the second region.

[Duskwight Lands, cursed by the Underworld Cascade, is filled with water bearing a chilling energy, an aura of death that favors spirits but spells doom for the living. These lands are barren and desolate, scarce in resources but teeming with wandering souls that endlessly flood the region, their origins a mystery.

[Lustra Plains consists of various clans, sects, kingdoms, and empires, all under

[Lustra Plains consists of various clans, sects, kingdoms, and empires, all under the protective authority of the Radiant Conclave, ensuring a somewhat peaceful coexistence. Lifemancers, Radiant Mages, and Light Warriors are the prevalent cultivation models here.

[On the contrary, Duskwight Lands has always been mired in chaos with tribes and minor kingdoms fighting for meager resources, to the benefit of Lustra Plains. Soulmanancers, Spirit Enchanters, and Underworld Barbarians dominate their cultivation styles. 1 [However, the status quo has recently shifted. The Dusken Throne, led by an unprecedentedly powerful Soulmanancer, has unified Duskwight Lands, bringing all tribes and races under one banner and declaring war on the Radiant Conclave, vowing utter annihilation. Skirmishes between the Dusken Throne and the Radiant Conclave have intensified, with the final showdown looming. Both sides rally their forces, bracing for the ultimate confrontation.

[As an Oracle Knight and Oracle Colonel of your Mirror Universe, you're part of the last wave drafted into this war, assuming the identity of a lowly, status-less barbarian fighting for the Dusken Throne. A faceless soldier, you'll have to climb the ranks through deeds of valor, starting from the very bottom...] [Main Mission: Ensure the victory of the Dusken Throne at all costs; your final rating hinges on your dedication.]

[Global Main Mission: Players from your Mirror Universe must triumph over the players from the opposing Mirror Universe. Beyond the Dusken Throne's victory, this requires more survivors on your side than the enemy's.]

[Penalty for failure: Half of all you own, 10,000 Rank 5 White Aether Crystals.]

[Mission Benefits & Specifics: A new, temporary identity befitting your Oracle Colonel rank.]

[May fate work in your favor.]

## Chapter 1030: Lack Of Specifics

As soon as Jake finished reading, he steeled himself, anticipating the familiar sensation of his soul being yanked into a void. But after a fleeting moment, he relaxed, taken aback when the expected pull never came.

Of all the Ordeals he'd faced, this was the first time the next step hadn't immediately begun. Disturbed, Jake wondered if there was an issue outside. But when minutes passed and nothing happened, he meticulously revisited his mission prompt, brainstorming with Xi about the delay.

"The first thing that strikes me is the lack of specifics," Jake mused.

Even the identity tied to his Oracle Colonel rank seemed a farce, as he'd join the Dusken Throne's drafted army as the lowest of the low. Yet, would that mean no advantages or disadvantages awaited him there? Jake was skeptical.

"Given your rank and power, it's no surprise the Oracle System withholds details that may be of vital importance to weaker players. But I think it also has to do with the fact that this is the Fifth Ordeal," Xi replied, not sounding very surprised. "But I'd wager an Aether Core that other Players are as much in the dark as you."

"You do realize every Aether Core you bet is technically mine?" Jake teased with a playful chuckle.

"Hmph, ours!"

"All right, all right, ours," Jake conceded.

"But seriously," Xi continued, her tone graver, "if your identity aligns with your Oracle Rank, there has to be something that sets you apart from the other Players. If not your social status, perhaps the timing?"

Were Jake not enveloped in the pitch-black confines of the Red Cube, one would've seen him stroke his chin thoughtfully. The prompt did mention he was part of the 'last wave of conscripts', which made sense.

So, his edge was joining the war... later than other Players? Jake wryly smirked at the irony. Yet, Xi beamed, following his inner grumble.

"Bingo! That has to be it," she exclaimed, certain they had nailed the reason.

As realization dawned upon them both, Jake finally understood why he hadn't been ejected from the Red Cube post-mission prompt. Though his senses remained dulled,

he still had the capability to switch to Lucid Aetherdreamer mode, which he promptly did to confirm their theory.

As he interpreted the ebb and flow of the Aetherdream, Jake utilized his newfound expertise in the Time Attribute to gauge the time flow inside the Red Cube relative to the outside. His master, Cekt, had once taught him a nifty trick for this.

By syncing the space-time of a dimension with a chosen world, its time flow would remain consistent, irrespective of any external influences. Having applied this trick to his inner space, he now had his own unalterable metronome.

Comparing the Aetherdream's revelations with his internal metronome's rhythm, Xi's and his hypothesis was instantly confirmed.

"Time within the Red Cube flows slightly slower than on B842," Jake deduced with a glance.

From experience, he knew Ordeal Worlds usually had an accelerated time flow or a denser space-time than B842. The final possibility? B842 moved near light-speed, while these Ordeal Worlds were virtually static. Either way, Jake surmised that for every minute he spent in the Red Cubes, hours elapsed on Twyluxia. This realization cooled him, but his confidence remained unshaken.

"Now, if I'm not mistaken, the first Players from each Mirror Universe to join the war on Twyluxia must be..."

"The lowest-ranking Players," Xi finished sardonically. "Let's hope the Oracle System didn't keep them as much in the dark as us. The onset of the Fifth Ordeal is known to be quite... deadly."

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As Jake and Xi impatiently traded wild speculations about the events on Twyluxia during their absence, the first wave of Players had long since plunged into a nightmare. Their reality distorted far more brutally and wickedly than either could have imagined.

Leo Vinson was one such Player, a small fish in an even bigger pond. Born into privilege and excessively spoiled by his overprotective parents, he was an Earthling who, despite lacking any discernable talent, coasted through life on his family's coattails. Even after acquiring his Oracle Device, his life trajectory barely wavered.

Luck had it that he and his parents were discovered by New Earth soldiers shortly after Earth's assimilation. They were whisked to the nearest Oracle Shelter and then to New Earth, all expenses paid. Once there, it was his parents who risked everything by facing the Four Ordeals, all for his sake. Astoundingly, he felt no guilt, and his parents never castigated him for his parasitic dependence.

Thanks to his parents' efforts, they quickly reclaimed a life of luxury surpassing their previous standard on Earth. Fourth-Ordeal Evolvers, though not rulers of the universe in New Earth, held significant respect in the corridors of the new world government.

This aimless, cushy existence might've continued indefinitely, had a damned Brain-Eater not chosen to infiltrate New Earth by possessing an ambassador and then releasing that cursed Digester Virus!

From there, Leo's life turned into a living hell.

His mother was among the first infected by the Sinewshade Virus, and she tried to kill him in her delirium. His father intervened but was injured in the process. Just as Leo clung to a shred of hope at the sight of arriving elite soldiers, his world crumbled to the chilling sound of gunshots followed by inhuman, frenzied screams.

Moments later, he stood alone in the world. His protective bubble shattered, the streets overwhelmed with Sinewshades, civil unrest brewing, and the seasoned Evolvers and soldiers of New Earth had bigger fish to fry than to babysit him.

Desperation drove dormant survival instincts to the surface, prompting a rash decision to enlist in the army. Like mounting a wild stallion, once aboard, there was no getting off.

After enduring four Ordeals, Leo remained the same—lazy, deceitful, and cowardly. But now, with a hint more strength. Enough to pique the interest of the King's Idol Alliance, who extended a recruitment offer.

Upon recognizing their leader and the benefits tied to the alliance, Leo ditched the army remorselessly. Shockingly, the Earth Union Government made no attempt to retain him despite their dire need for soldiers. As if they were more than happy to shed a recruit like him from their roster.

For good reason. After miserably failing all main missions from his four Ordeals, and refusing to risk his neck against the Sinewshades, his Oracle Rank was a laughable... Rank 2 Private.

In four Ordeals, he'd never managed to amass 200 rating points...

Any sane individual with such a record would never dare step into the Red Cube again. But for reasons even he couldn't fathom, he found himself there once more.

As he opened his eyes to the haunting allure of the Duskwight Lands, he found himself amidst a diverse procession of ghostly, muscular barbarians.

Though he was the only one not dressed in rags, forgotten fears surged, paralyzing him as an intense force suddenly bore down, like the wrath of the gods.

His bloodshot eyes bulged, vision blurring. There was a cacophony of crunches and cracks from his skull and throughout his skeleton. As his organs imploded and his brain drowned in its own fluid, the words "G-gravity" escaped his lips just before his own weight crushed him.

## **Chapter 1031: Okay, okay! I'll Spill!**

A string of surreal deaths played out across Twyluxia, claiming several hundred faceless soldiers from both factions. The quantity of rank 2 Privates foolish enough to participate in the Fifth Ordeal might have been a rare breed, yet there were some still around—definitely less than a thousand but certainly more than a hundred.

The great irony was, on any regular day, finding a Rank 2 Private in the opposite Mirror Universe would've been nearly impossible. The average skill of their contestants notoriously surpassed those from Jake's Mirror Universe, dominating most Ordeals between their twin realms.

Yet, in a bid for fairness, the opposing Mirror Universe was bound by the vexing task of matching the quantity of Players at each rank—a task that was turning into a considerable headache for their Oracle equivalent.

But the most stunned of all were the native soldiers, freshly conscripted for the imminent war, at the scenes of these "spontaneous squishings". Where Leo Vinson was abruptly crushed by his own weight, the intimidating barbarians marching beside him couldn't believe their eyes. They even pinched themselves, trying to comprehend the reality of the situation.

"Are we under attack?" One murmured, his eyes scanning the horizon suspiciously. Dressed in ragged clothes and wielding a worn-out butcher's knife, he looked quite unimpressive.

"P-possibly," another barbarian agreed, gripping his lumberjack axe nervously.

An older, frail-looking barbarian, eyes shimmering with wisdom, knelt by the remains. He dipped his fingers into the mashed flesh, sniffed, and tasted the blood before quickly spitting it out.

"Ugh! This man must've been cursed. I've never seen a body with such weak life force. It wasn't a spell that caused his death; his organs just gave in to gravity," he remarked with a mocking tone, yet his eyes betrayed a hint of fear.

If this was a new long-range curse conjured by the Radiant Conclave, it was truly terrifying. None would be safe.

The eerie demise of the unknown soldier quickly drew the attention of nearby barbarians, halting the endless snake-like formation of troops. A grim-faced captain was alerted as he noticed the 'tail' of the formation split into two, half paralyzed by the incident.

Grimacing and ready to lash out at those responsible, his expression morphed into horror upon discovering the blood-soaked pool of flesh sprinkled with bone dust. He shuddered, imagining himself in the dead soldier's place.

However, he regained his stern demeanor quickly, barking, "Did anyone know the victim?"

Several barbarians seemed on the verge of speaking, but soon shut their mouths, confusion evident.

"Blast, who was he? I can't recall his name. Honestly, I don't even remember talking to him."

The two barbarians who had marched beside the anonymous soldier and shared a tent with him exchanged glances, whispering, "Come to think of it, I'd never seen him before last week's mass conscription."

"He never told us his name... I even thought he might be mute."

Seeing no one could provide an answer, the captain's face twisted in growing anger. But just as he was about to chastise them, a sense of foreboding washed over him when he noticed all the barbarians kneeling reverently.

Turning slowly, the captain's face turned ashen, recognizing the hovering figure in a black robe. Her graceful form, the hypnotic shimmer of her long black hair resembling a bed of stars, and her enchanting face with a friendly smile ignited a fire of desire in him, yet intensified his dread.

"Your presence honors me, Soulmaner Meridelle," the usually proud leader intoned, bowing deeply, sweat dripping from his brow onto the blood-soaked ground.

"What transpired here?" Her voice, as soothing as a lullaby, asked.

After the captain's briefing, her brows furrowed in intrigue. Flying to Leo's remains, she plunged her arm into the carnage. When she withdrew, her hand held a ghostly figure—a spitting image of the deceased.

It was none other than Leo Vinson, and he was... aware! The Aether density in the area was high enough to sustain a soul, especially in the Duskwight Lands, a haven for wandering spirits.



Yet, Leo was still under the impression this was some form of Ordeal introduction—a cutscene. And in a way, he was right, except usually, there wasn't much after a movie's end.

Having just been rescued by a striking brunette, Leo gave her his most charming smile and his most enigmatic gaze, ready to shower her with thanks. But instead of the budding romance he'd hoped for, an unexpected twist hit him.

With a dispassionate expression, Soulmaner Meridelle uttered, "Soulsearch."

"AAARRRRRRRGHHHHH!"

A bloodcurdling scream echoed, then silence reigned. With an entirely different gravitas than moments before, the young woman trapped the now senseless soul inside an ancient-looking locket and commanded,

"Resume your duties. Pretend this never happened."

Seeing some barbarians still restless, she added, "This won't happen to you. If I'm not mistaken, the Radiant Conclave is facing a similar situation."

With that, she soared away, streaking towards the presumed direction of the Dusken Throne's capital. A game-changing report awaited the Soulmaner King, one that could alter the course of the war.

As for whether the Soulmaner King would allow these foreign Players to use their war as a playground? Not her concern.

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Far to the east in the Lustra Plains, several Lifemancers and Radiant Mages had also their ways to extract soul information. Combining their strength and sacrificing some Lumyst Water rich in vital energy, they performed...

A Resurrection Spell!

A Player's Light Warrior, previously crushed beyond recognition, seemed to rewind in time, every bone and organ reassembling.

Though they couldn't wield spells like the Soulmaners' "Soulsearch," once the resurrected victim was in their grip, they had a myriad of ways to extract a confession.

"AAAAARRRGHHH! Okay, okay! I'll spill!"

A piercing scream, eerily reminiscent of Leo Vinson's, reverberated through the makeshift interrogation room, quickly followed by the expected confession.

Under the care of a Lifemancer, death wasn't an option unless they permitted it. So the Player lived. After being healed with a rejuvenation spell, he was swiftly escorted to the Radiant Conclave's capital. Whatever awaited him there made him wish he hadn't survived.

Within mere minutes of the commencement of the Fifth Ordeal, it was already glaringly evident how it was distinct from the previous four. Here, their identity was no armor.

If they were unmasked, no one would shield them from the fallout.

One way or another, every Rank 2 Player from both factions met their end, either crushed by unyielding gravity or tortured to death after countless resurrections. Whether it was the Dusken Throne or the Radiant Conclave, they eventually uncovered the Players' involvement. But unlike the merciless manner in which they had questioned these weak Players, likened to defenseless chickens, they remained tight-lipped about it afterward. It was just a ripple in a vast pond, and its consequences were quickly smothered.

However, before their demise, both the Dusken Throne and the Radiant Conclave caught a glimpse of the last notification the Players had received before meeting their end. And through it, they knew this series of events was just the beginning...

The notification read:

[ Rank 3 Players will join the war in 36 hours. We suggest that you use this time to consolidate your position before your superiors arrive. ]

## **Chapter 1032: All Crushed To Death**

The thirty-six hours flew by, and exactly thirty-six hours after the ill-fated appearance — or rather demise — of the Rank 2 Privates, a fresh wave of Players debuted in this new realm.

Rank 3 Players, 1st Class Private! Every one of them was a bundle of nerves, anxiously awaiting the lethal dangers that were now a part of their fate, having been unwillingly thrust into a war that was none of their business. But the harsh reality was unbiased, and so...

They too met their doom!

Not a single Rank 3 Player from the two Mirror Universes emerged alive. Soon after, about two thousand souls roamed the battlefield, even before a real battle could commence.

For those who landed in the Duskwight Lands, most were ensnared by the commanding Soulmanagers and Spirit Enchanters nearby. However, a few with a keen survival instinct managed to slip away before these demons descended upon them.

What the natives termed as wandering souls were essentially what the Players knew as Spirit Bodies, although often in a damaged state. In this form, fleeing was a breeze.

Freed from gravity and possessing greater speed than when alive, they could glide underground and pass through any obstacle in their path. The cleverest among them even masqueraded as aimless wandering souls, albeit not without its risks.

On the Lustra Plains, the situation was grimmer. Spirit Body or not, there was no escaping the resurrection spells of the Lifemancers. Everyone, without exception, was ruthlessly interrogated to the point of ruining their revival.

Resurrection spells weren't easily cast, though. They required extensive knowledge, mastery from the caster, and a generous portion of Lumyst Water, Lustra Plains' most valuable resource. Only the most skilled Lifemancers could resurrect the dead, and it came at a high cost.

Their willingness to pay this price was solely due to the limited number of Players to resurrect. If the number of invaders surged, they'd have to forgo this interrogation tactic.

And that's precisely what transpired. Thirty-six hours later, marking seventy-two hours since the onset of the Fifth Ordeal, the third wave of Rank 4 Players emerged.

This batch, comprising over fifty thousand Players from each side, arrived under the radar. Yet their end was a spectacular display.

For once again, they too were... crushed to death!

The onset of this Ordeal was horrifying. The number of Player souls in the Duskwight Lands that escaped the Soulmanagers kept increasing. Their quality was starkly different from the previous waves.

Being a Rank 4 Corporal was a clear delineation. It meant one of two things: Either these Gamers had completed the Main Missions of their initial four Ordeals with a minimum rating, or they made up the missing points by defeating Digestors on B842.

Either way, they weren't entirely inept and were aware of the risks. They knew they were gambling with death, but took the chance regardless.

Some had meticulously prepared for every possibility, including extreme gravity and even an Ordeal at the ocean's depths. But what they couldn't have anticipated was that upon arriving in this hostile world, their Oracle Space Storages would be sealed off!

All their careful preparations had been rendered useless, and with that, their hopes for survival dashed.

At that moment, a Player on the Lustra Plains was being chased by a group of Radiant Mages. The demise of his physical body went unnoticed, thanks to the unlikely timing of a pee break.

His consciousness awakening to the new surroundings, he found himself mid-relief, quite exposed. The next moment, he was a mere smear, flattened by his own weight.

Before he could even process the events, another Light Warrior who'd ventured into the bushes for, well, bigger business, noticed his ghostly silhouette and freaked out, screaming at the top of his lungs. Next thing, a squad of Radiant Mages was hot on his heels.

It was his first astral flight, and he marveled at his speed. But a quick glance behind sent shivers down his spine; the Radiant Mages were almost upon him.

'Damnit! How are they so fast without relying on Aether in this gravity? If I had my Speed Surge Spell, I'd have shaken them off by now...'He was internally frantic, but outwardly, he could only keep his anguish buried deep within.

Ever since arriving in Twyluxia, his life had turned into a nightmare. Heck, he was technically just a fleeing ghost, and he couldn't even lament in peace.

Going over what his AI updated him with, his expression darkened. As his pursuers relentlessly closed in, he wore a bitter grimace.

'The Aether density of 5,000 units isn't a lie; otherwise, no life could thrive here. The catch is that it's untouchable, as if an unseen law denies us its use. I can't even sense it, but I know it hasn't vanished. And then there's this unbearable gravity!'

Upon hearing the exact figure from his AI, he was flabbergasted. 40 000 times Earth's gravity! Of course, he wasn't from Earth; it was just a figure of speech.

No wonder he got crushed before even taking his first breath on Twyluxia. Suddenly, a gust brushed past him. He whipped his head around, eyes widening in horror as a luminous fist from one of the Radiant Mages slammed into his face.

As his consciousness teetered on the brink of obliteration, the mystery of the vanishing Aether was finally unveiled when the wind from the oncoming fist grazed his skin before the actual blow.

"The Aether... it doesn't vanish. It's absorbed... by matter."

BOOM!

Throughout the battlefield, countless Rank 3 and Rank 4 Players from both factions reached the same conclusions, but those from the Dusknight Lands fared a bit better. Especially those who had fallen near the Lumyst River.

The spectral aura emanating from the waters flowing from the Underworld Cascade was like a soothing tonic to the Spirit Bodies of these freshly defeated Players. As they drew near, their once-stagnant Spirit Body level began to rise again.

Upon discovering this boon, these fortunate Rank 3 and Rank 4 Gamers almost broke down, overwhelmed by emotion. They had another shot at redemption!

Days blurred together, and intense battles between the Dusknight Lands and Lustra Plains truly began. The first wave of combatants consisted of cannon fodder from both sides, inexperienced peasants and militiamen often drafted against their will.

Even in these minor clashes involving just the initial waves of inconsequential draftees, the sheer scale of assets and personnel was staggering, with billions of troops on each side, painting the ground red.

Had these Rank 2, Rank 3, and Rank 4 Gamers survived the crushing gravity of this new world, they'd logically have been part of these early skirmishes, scoring potential heroics before the heavy artillery of each Mirror Universe overshadowed them, relegating them to mere extras.

After the Rank 4 Players, the Rank 5, Rank 6, and Rank 7 Gamers took their turn in the war. Alas, each was flattened by the world's gravity before they could achieve anything noteworthy.

Some lasted minutes, others hours. But all, without exception, met their end—either suffocating under the pressure bearing down on their lungs or their hearts failing, unable to pump blood to their brains. Each became wandering souls, with no other way to stay in the game.

As for those from the Lustra Plains, although unable to harness the spectral aura of the Underworld Cascade, they began scheming in the shadows, biding their time. Their renewed vigor would come when their gravity-enduring allies entered the fray.

At long last, after a grueling twelve days, the largest wave yet, with over three million Eighth Rank Gamers from each side, appeared. And this time, a good number of them... survived.

## **Chapter 1033: Dive Into Your First Battle**

Despite this first positive news, the death toll from the Ordeal was staggering. In just twelve days, over a million Players had experienced physical demise at least once on both sides. Approximately a quarter of them had been utterly vanquished, their consciousnesses either obliterated by the Soulsearch or permanently extinguished post-confession.

Among those seized by the Soulmanagers and Lifemancers, very few had managed to talk their way out of their predicament. With their Space Storage sealed and their powers bound, any justification would come across as deceit.

Yet, that didn't mean escape was impossible. As long as they wore their bracelets and had their Oracle Paths, Players were never truly cornered. As long as higher-ranked Players didn't intervene with their foresight, they could trust their Oracle's guidance.

Just as three million Rank 8 Players materialized, the Myrtharian Nerds made their debut. Among all members, they were the lowest-ranked of the faction, having performed most lacklusterly.

However, this didn't imply weakness. The mere existence of their Cosmic D Starfeyrves Passive and the low-grade Energy Body they had self-funded hinted at their variance from the general Evolver populace.

In a hastily erected camp at the boundary between the Duskwight Lands and Lustra Plains, a young woman's eyes snapped open. Her first sight: a tent of beast hide and belongings of fellow warriors.

She was a breathtaking vision, slender and lithe, with just the right touch of femininity to capture hearts. Like many Myrtharian Nerds, her ethnicity and origins had faded in importance. After being blessed with the Cosmic D Starfeyrves Body, her skin took on a translucent pallor, her eyes a dance of black and silver with fleeting hints of blue, and her hair a silken cascade of darkness.

What she retained from her younger days was her medium-length hair, slightly above the shoulders, and an expression blending kindness with innocence. Yet, compared to her past self, her face now lacked its naive carefreeness, replaced by a deeply focused seriousness.

This was none other than Lily Wilderth, the cherished daughter of Daniel Wilderth, and the object of Tim Paradis's affections.

Upon her arrival in the Mirror Universe years ago, she was but a child. But after the loss of her mother to the Digestors, surviving her accelerated maturation during her first Ordeal, participating in the next three, and aging another four years, she was on the brink of turning eighteen.



Yet, like many Evolvers, she'd long stopped counting days until birthdays. Survival was all that mattered.

Her only insecurity? Her embarrassingly low Rank 8 of First Sergeant. Not only did it make her one of the least ranked in her faction, but she'd already reached Rank 8 before her fourth Ordeal. She'd simply failed to secure the necessary 200 rating points for her promotion.

The Ordeal on Quanoth had been exceedingly tough, especially toward the end. Like many of her comrades, she hadn't passed the surprise test posed by Lost Divinities but had since labored relentlessly to awaken her True Will. She didn't want to burden her father or teammates, nor did she want to be seen as a delicate flower in need of protection.

The moment Lily's eyes opened, before coherent thought formed, a crushing weight pressed upon her, threatening to squash her like a bug. Immediately, her muscles tensed, veins bulged, her heart raced, and despite the ominous creaking from her bones, she held her ground.

Yet, she felt she wouldn't withstand such immense pressure for long. The gravitational force even hindered her ability to speak, breathe, or move. While her life wasn't in immediate danger, if she remained paralyzed, complications would soon pile up. The first challenge? Explaining her crippling paralysis and vulnerability to the fellow soldiers sharing her tent.

Her first instinct was to cast a Reinforcement Spell on herself. Yet, her eyes went wide in shock as she realized the Aether, even the essence supposed to be generated by her own body, was unresponsive. Her Mana Core was equally uncooperative. It felt as if invisible chains had shackled her thoughts, trapping her consciousness within her skull.

"Damn! I'm screwed."

But just as she felt vulnerable, exposed for any native barbarian sharing her shelter to notice her odd state, the adaptive power of her Cosmic D Starfeyrves Body kicked in.

Anchored in her Vitality attribute, her skeleton reformed on-the-fly to counteract the gravity, her bones taking on a crystalline sheen, hard as diamond. They became like water-filled rubber balloons: somewhat pliable but damn hard to pop.

Her muscles, organs, lungs, and circulatory system, which seemed lagging, surged forward. When she scanned her stats, not only did her Body Strength and Constitution skyrocket, but every cell in her was restructuring for peak efficiency. Once the transformation halted, her stats were still climbing, albeit slower than on planet B842, which roused her suspicions.

Her muscles, even her skin, had now adapted to the planet's heightened gravity. Her delicate appearance faded, her figure now echoing the Underworld Barbarians native to this region.

When she finally felt up to moving, albeit with some difficulty, she peered out of the tent. After a quick scan of the various armored, mismatched Underworld Barbarians bustling around her, her skin tone, hair, and the shape of her ears, lips, and nose adjusted. She even grew a few inches, her bones subtly stretching.

Now, she was the spitting image of a native Underworld Barbarian female. Her camouflage was so on point that distinguishing her from the natives had become near impossible. Even her aura had shifted.

"This Cosmic D Starfeyrves Body rocks. Our leader truly hit the jackpot," Lily mused inwardly, struggling to mask the envy on her face. "Still, it was faster than I thought. Maybe it has something to do with what happens to Aether in this world."

In contrast, her own bloodline, the Light Fairy, seemed rather vanilla, granting her just a decent affinity with Mana and a knack for Light and Healing Magic. It didn't even make the cut for a Grade 6 Bloodline.

Tim had recently persuaded her to accept his Blood Essence. But with the shutdown of the Yellow Cubes, she couldn't locate a skilled Aetherist to handle the bloodline transfer.

Maybe her cousin, Jake could undertake the gene-splicing procedure if she had the luck to bump into him on the battlefield. For now, all she could do was lay low and strive to survive.

Her face creased with worry as she spotted thousands of daunting soldiers shouting in an unfamiliar tongue. She glanced at her Main Mission, which seemed a tad less daunting than Jake's, and muttered anxiously,

"I've got a feeling this Ordeal's beginning is not going to be a walk in the park."

Not only was the mission prompt sorely lacking details about this world-plane, but their cover identities felt shakier than ever. The usual starter kit — language, appearance, backstory, and sometimes even the local bloodline — was glaringly absent this round.

Then, she received the notification that many Players before her had eagerly awaited, and her eyes sparkled with anticipation.

[ Rank 9 Players will join the war in 36 hours. We recommend that you use this time to consolidate your position before your superiors arrive. ]

"Wait, the strongest Player here is the same rank as me?" She marveled, newfound confidence flooding in. "No time to dawdle. I need to find missions to boost my rating,

pronto. I also need a plan to rendezvous with the others when they appear. Surely, I can't be the only Myrtharian Nerd dropped into this mess."

Like countless other Rank 8 Players in the same boat, she decided to capitalize on the 36-hour window. However, she didn't immediately join the other soldiers.

First, she had to lay low in her tent, eavesdropping on the cacophony of conversations outside to quickly catch up on the tongue barrier.

Unfortunately for her, the blare of a horn sounded mere minutes later. Suddenly, the camp transformed from a place of casual chatter into a whirlwind of urgency. The previously relaxed atmosphere turned solemn and tense. Moments later, soldiers burst out of their tents, lining up in full battle gear. With a heavy heart and no other option, Lily reluctantly followed in stride.

A man, clearly a higher-up, started barking orders in an alien, authoritative tone. The next minute, the armored horde began their march, seemingly towards an inevitable doom.

Lily, like many other Players still grappling with the language, had no choice but to move with the tide, trying to piece together what was happening. Thankfully, a beacon of clarity from the Oracle System chimed in,

[Side Mission n°1: Dive into your first battle and make your mark with an epic debut.]

No data found.