

The Oracle Paths

- Chapter 866: 15 Codexes

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After giving asylum to Galadin and Spak, the last remaining independent natives had all joined a Player faction. There were hundreds of Players who had resurfaced along with Wyatt and Lost Divinities, but most had already been eradicated or were about to perish.

With Gerulf as a witness, Jake saw a Khinchod Player protect two other aliens of his kind by conjuring a seemingly indestructible water shield, but after dozens of blasts, the vaporized water stopped recondensing and the next explosion atomized the trio.

This, however, was not the fate of all the survivors. Not all of the surviving Players were from the superfactions, and some had relied not on luck but on their own strength to fight their way through.

One of them was a humanoid woman with long black hair, about two meters tall, with three 7-pupil orange eyes, the third eye located right in the middle of her forehead. She was naked but it was hard to feel any arousal at the sight of her because right now her skin had the appearance, color and texture of cracked ashen earth. At first, Jake thought that this was just the natural appearance of this alien female, but he changed his mind when he saw the state of her skin change after yet another explosion.

At that moment, its surface took on a chameleon-like quality, turning slightly black and covering itself with a crystalline sheen. The next blast flattened the alien female against one of the unmovable buildings, but no blood spurted out as if her body was no different than a crystalline gum. The heat and radiation, as well as the shockwave were neutralized by her strange morphing.

'Interesting.'

Another Player smirked, which was actually a small alien about Cekt's size with a morphology close to a gray flying squirrel, but doped with steroids. The rodent was closer to the creature from the movie Alien than it was to the Chipmunks with its membranous frill around its neck, slit pupils and rows of sharp fangs dripping with venom.

The alien was accompanied by a dozen rodent-like creatures and the venom shield they erected around them was different from the water shield formed by the Khinchod trio. When the blasts of antimatter collided with it, it was the blast that eroded, dissolving like human flesh in contact with acid.

This was the first time Jake had come across a biological venom capable of dissolving thermal, radioactive and kinetic energy. The venom even seemed to be getting stronger, building up steadily around the rodents, forming a larger and larger puddle as they continued to produce venom with their salivary glands.

If Jake could see these extraordinary Players, then so could Lost Divinities, Anti-Life and Vhoskaud. Psykow, who was still safe under his weird psychic shield, became impatient when he saw that none of these survivors seemed about to succumb to the explosions.

Despite the hatred and resentment that simmered between the Myrtharian Nerds and Lost Divinities neither took the initiative to engage in round three. Because of the unrelenting antimatter explosions, it was impossible anyway. The curtain of black clouds had completely encircled the Celestial City.

Still, that didn't stop Jake and Ael from eyeing each other coldly with a smile that wasn't a smile, both ultra-vigilant in case of a surprise attack. At this distance, Jake could use his crushing hand with a single thought, just as the Nullifyer could teleport in front of him and nullify his intelligence and memories.

In truth, it was very much like a gun duel between two cowboys with their revolvers. The first one to score a hit would win. If Jake slacked off for a moment, there would be no one left to keep the Lost Divinities leader at bay.

The explosions continued for a long time, well over an hour, drowning out the last hopes of the struggling independent Players. The cataclysmic battle between Neri and Vexa hadn't stopped either, and if nothing happened, it would last for days.

No, Jake could feel it! Vexa was not in a good spot. Without the interference of the black clouds and the antimatter explosions his opponent wouldn't have been his match, but the cube man was expending too much energy.

The other Players were all outstanding and they could feel it too. Everyone was preparing for the status quo to be broken after their fight.

Psykow was in no hurry and was willing to be patient until their battle was decided. He would have waited several days if he had to, but a twist that he had not foreseen obliged him to hasten his plans.

At the same time, all the survivors suddenly felt an imminent danger, the shadow of their own death hovering over their heads. A billow of black smoke began to descend from the sky like a mini tornado trying to connect the sky to the earth. But when it touched the ground, instead of generating a swirling gale, it spread its dark fog throughout the city like a smoke bomb.

'Fuck, Aurae really doesn't intend to let us fight the way we want to...' Jake smiled wryly as the stormy mist made contact with his skin.

The fog density was still low, but Jake could already tell that at this rate his skin would start to melt within ten minutes. That was with his Gold Stone Skin and given the fact that his body had some tolerance to lightning, radiation and heat. Other Players had already activated their Oracle Shields.

The group of flying squirrels whose venom had seemed so omnipotent a few minutes earlier were powerless against this black smoke, its lightning streaking through as if the acidic liquid were a superconductor. Thin wisps of smoke even oozed through, smoking the rodents inside the venom prison they had themselves created.

The female alien with three eyes capable of altering her appearance to suit the situation changed her look again, her skin turning ink black as if she were trying to blend in with the mass of clouds, but from her winces of pain it didn't seem to work very well.

"Jake, what do we do?!" Lucia shouted from inside the ice fortress, angrily clutching the hilt of her sword in search of an enemy.

There was nothing worse than sitting around helplessly while the situation got worse! Wyatt, Carmin, Galladin, Spak and the other Myrtharian Nerds sported the same worried expression. The fact that they had no solutions was driving them crazy.

"There are less than 10,000 of us in the Celestial City, the buildings that are meant for us should have opened their doors already." Asfrid thought aloud without keeping any of her confusion a secret. "I see only two possible explanations. Either it is perfectly normal and there is another condition to fulfill. Or, we are..."

"Over 10,000." Enya grimly completed.

The faces of the Players gathered around the two women fell as they heard their discussion. The second hypothesis was by far the most plausible!

After all, they themselves housed several Myrtharian Nerds in a Portable Fortress. Who knows if the other factions didn't also have such artifacts?

"Stop racking your brains, we have another problem." Jake and Gerulf grunted simultaneously from outside. One could hear the gravity of the situation in their voices alone.

Psykow had telepathically called Neri back, ending her duel with Vexa and the ongoing round of detonations. Vhoskaud had also regrouped with the pair.

At that moment, Jake saw them bring out of nowhere several identical items resembling small 20-sided translucent dice. Their surface was covered by a kind of multicolored

light grid and Jake could not fail to recognize what it was since one of these items was in his possession.

The Codex of Aurae!

One two, three, four, five... fourteen, fifteen! Together, Anti-Life and Vhoskaud had 15 out of 26 Codexes! The three Players brought the Gold Mana Artifacts together, fusing them one by one. Psykow, with Vhoskaud's approval, then began to alter the parameters of the clouds surrounding them, instructing the clouds not to target them.

At first, when there was only one Codex, the clouds continued to build up faster and faster around them, but with each successive merge the clouds began to slow down like insects stuck in honey.

When the 15 Codexes finished merging, a change occurred in the behavior of the black clouds. The three Players were still trapped in the dark mist, but unlike before, the stormy calamity seemed to ignore them as if it had been ordered to spare them.

Chapter 867: Merging of Codexes

"Not good." Lucia grumbled with a grimace. The other Myrtharian Nerds present didn't look very good either.

Vexa landed covered in blood in front of Jake a few seconds later and Jake teleported him temporarily inside the ice fortress to give him time to recover. The fortress was already beginning to break apart, black lightning permeating through it.

With time running out, Jake and Gerulf teleported inside to discuss what they had just seen with the others. When they reappeared, the first thing they saw was their companions crowding around the cube man panting like an ox.

"We have a problem." Jake said stoically.

"No shit!" Maeve huffed, her gaze riveted on the black lightning cracking the ice fortress enclosing them at a frightening rate.

"We need to find a way to reduce the number of enemies under 10,000 as soon as possible." Vexa declared after catching his breath, but most of his wounds were struggling to heal. His haggard, sweaty face spoke volumes about his condition.

Clearly, there was something special about Neri's attacks. Where he had been wounded, his flesh seemed to collapse in on itself as if a black hole was devouring him from the inside. But looking closely Jake detected nothing unusual.

"Ugh... Don't worry about me. It takes more than that to kill me." The cube man forced himself to smile, but he was definitely in pain.

"They were merging those translucent dice things earlier." Gerulf grumbled sheepishly. "Too bad we only have one."

Jake's and Vexa's eyes lit up at his well-timed remark.

"Are you thinking what I'm thinking?" The cube man coughed.

"How many Codexes do you have?" Jake asked directly. "Don't let me down. I'm sure a faction as illustrious and reputable as Mirror Vanguard has at least one or two."

"Ahem, I'm afraid I'll disappoint you." Vexa rolled his eyes as he scratched his ear. "I only have two, but Anti Life and Replicators only have 15 out of 26. Including yours, there are still 8 more. Even merging mine and yours won't give us any edge. Especially since I know for a fact that Demiurges had 4 last time I checked and their Ordeal is not set on Quanoth but far away in outer space.

Jake was disappointed, but he didn't show it.

"Let's merge these three already." He decreed decisively as he saw the ice around them cracking faster and faster.

He feared that Vexa would insist that he lend him his, but the cube man must have been aware of his dire circumstances, for he took out both of his own without hesitation.

"Hurry, we don't have much time."

Jake nodded gravely and immediately used his telekinesis to collide the three Codexes he was holding. Sparks flew as they made contact, but the fusion did not take place.

"Fuck! What am I supposed to do to make them merge?" He cursed as he stared at his failure.

At the same time, a black lightning bolt pierced the ice and Azeus stepped in. The lightning expert barbarian was instantly charred black, the lower half of his body turning to dust after he channeled the destructive energy into his legs. For the first time, he mobilized the Divinity lent by his former faction to regenerate his wounds, but black sparks continued to damage his body long after.

"Jake, I'm not going to be able to repeat this feat many times." Azeus sighed in a weak voice a few seconds later as he finished shaking off the remaining energy.

"I know." Jake darkened as he saw Azeus' sacrifice. Despite his distrust of the former Lost Divinity member, he had at least proven that he was dependable in hard times.

"Pour your blood on the three Codexes and connect your mind to the three artifacts." Vexa instructed him as he spoke hastily. "Focus on the idea of merging them so that you and these Codexes become one."

Jake didn't argue and immediately followed his instructions. He pricked his fingertip with his claw and Wyatt, who was standing next to him, nervously extracted the drop of blood without asking for his opinion and sprinkled it on the Codexes.

"Hmm? Those weird dice... I think I have something similar." Galadin, the SS-Rank Adventurer they had saved blurted out suddenly as he pulled a translucent dice from his pocket.

At the same time, someone crashed into their ice fortress. Asfrid squinted her eyes as she deployed her mental sense and said, "A female player is trying to get in. She also has a Codex."

Jake didn't even think for a second and ran an Oracle Scan. He immediately recognized the female alien capable of altering her physiology to suit her environment.

"Let her in."

Ruby disappeared, then reappeared right after with the naked woman. Right now, she was pitch black, her long hair waving and the surface of her skin looking like a concentrated mass of dark clouds streaked with black lightning. It was her adaptive response to the dark clouds but with the smell of burning flesh wafting from her body it did have its limits.

"Your Codex." Jake held out his hand with no explanation.

The female Player quickly read the atmosphere as she felt the threatening stares coming her way. She frowned, but did not flinch. With a flick of her wrist, she threw her Codex towards the other four merging Codexes.

Fortunately, she had not formed a true blood bond with the artifact and Jake's blood formed a connection between him and this Codex unimpeded.

The fusion finally took place and Jake could feel the difference immediately. This time he could distinctly feel that he was able to substantially influence the behavior of the black clouds raging around them. He was far from understanding Quanoth's physical laws, but on an instinctive level he was not totally powerless.

His eyes opened wide and he mentally commanded, 'Avoid that ice fortress.'

The result was not as spectacularly effective as Psykow's performance with his 15 Codexes, but the dense masses of black rolling clouds swirling around them slowed to a crawl, almost grinding to a halt. The black lightning demolishing the walls of eternal ice

protecting them became scarce, the remainder circulating through without damaging anything just like electricity flowing through a copper wire.

"Not bad." Jake smiled.

"Good job, Jake." Vexa congratulated him, his face visibly relaxing.

The other survivors present also breathed a sigh of relief.

"Wow! I thought we were screwed." Tim exclaimed as he wiped the sweat from his forehead.

"That should hold for a while, but not indefinitely." Alef, the old instructor from Ruby's team, spoke up for the first time. "The density of these clouds is still increasing. If we do nothing, the previous situation will happen again sooner or later."

He had a point.

"Mmm." Jake frowned as he stroked his chin thoughtfully.

At that moment, he and Ruby simultaneously glanced in the direction of Azeus who was nearly healed but pallid. The electricity constantly produced by the barbarian's body was now tinged with black as if it had slightly infused itself with that of the dark clouds.

"This might work." Jake said.

"Not much choice." Ruby nodded.

"Anyone here who can feed on lightning, step forward. Jake informed those present.
"We must harness the power of these dark clouds while they are still under our control.

The expressions of those concerned changed dramatically. A second later, Jake, Gerulf, Tim, Rogen, Azeus, Enya, Haynt, Lord Phenix, Jen (in Jake's guise), Ruby and the female alien appeared outside. All looked nervous but resolute.

"I have a feeling I'm going to regret this." Jen, his Mimic slave, shuddered involuntarily as Jake gently directed a cluster of black clouds and lightning toward the group.

"Enya, Rogen, Lord Phenix and Gerulf are you sure about this?" Jake hesitated with an uneasy tone.

"Lightning is just plasma at very high temperatures after all." Enya shook her head. "If I treat it like heat I can surely absorb it. Probably. Possibly. Hopefully..."

"I hope from the bottom of my heart you're right." Tim winced.

The only one who was fearless was Lord Phenix. He had absolute confidence in his immortality. Maybe too much so.

Conversely, Jake and the others were painfully aware that they were about to go through some serious shit. But that was the price they had to pay for a tiny chance of survival.

Chapter 868: Swallowing The Black Clouds

A cluster of black clouds finally converged on Jake and his comrades and a rumble of thunder echoed outside the ice fortress.

"AARRGH! Damn it! That hurt!" Lord Phenix's gobble echoed throughout the Celestial City as a bolt of black lightning incinerated him on the spot.

The turkey rose from the ashes a few seconds later, but was quickly charred again. The process repeated itself, but after each electrocution death Jake noticed that he would last a little longer before perishing again.

"Hmmpf." Gerulf gritted his fangs, a trickle of charred blood evaporating from between his lips.

Jake had already provided them with Grade 5 and 6 Aether and Aether Sun Cores, and the Kintharian was currently holding one in his right hand to support his regeneration. Ignoring his wounds, he swiped his mouth wide open and voraciously inhaled the electrified black mist around him.

Black lightning illuminated the giant's insides, fleetingly revealing his complete skeleton through transparency, but he held on, his Stone Skin covering his flesh and the mucous membranes of his digestive system to mitigate the damage.

Rogen, who had a similar constitution, did not fare so well. He could handle cold with ease, but his control of heat was indirect. He had not yet reached the level where his body could directly use it and his body craved the opposite.

The first inhalation of black cloud inflicted wounds as severe as Gerulf's, but his regeneration did not respond as vigorously. The problem was that Jake had never felt the need to create an Aether Cold Core. This made him realize that he would be wise to diversify his arsenal of Aether Cores in the future to meet the various needs of his subordinates.

'One more thing to add to my long list of things to work on before the next Ordeal.' Jake groaned as he in turn inhaled a huge black cloud.

Seeing that Gerulf hadn't given up yet, Rogen ignored his wounds, but Jake soon realized that at this rate he wouldn't last long. While his own body was being wracked by lightning, he used a Grade 6 Aether Core to cast a powerful Cold Spell in the direction of Rogen and Ruby and pulled them away from the rest of their group.

Rogen regained his footing and while Jake still couldn't tell if the Throsgenian was able to absorb the black lightning, he at least knew that he wasn't in mortal danger at the moment.

Haynt was doing just fine. His body was nothing but energy and now that the lightning wasn't so lethal, he could put it to good use.

Jake then glanced over at Enya and Tim and discovered that their situation was not as critical as he had feared. Enya hadn't lied when she said that lightning could be treated like heat.

Ever since Hakkrasha had modified her Fire Core so that she could convert Aether into Fire Mana, Enya had not been idle and had continued to improve this ability. It was now an elaborate form of Energy Conversion almost as advanced as Jake's and even though she was not an Aetherist she was not without resources.

The black lightning ravaged her body, causing massive wounds that charred her pristine skin, exposing the red flesh beneath. Her clothes didn't last long, but the combat suit underneath held up valiantly, corroding much more slowly.

When Jake thought the young woman had reached her limit her pupils lit up with a pinkish glow and her slender body erupted with a fierce burst of pink flames. Her wounds quickly recovered as the lightning continued to mingle with her Fire Core. Gradually, he could see it thickening and morphing, rapidly accumulating energy.

At the same time, Tim, who looked like he was about to pass out, was also hit by a blaze of pink flame and his injuries took a turn for the better. His Myrtharian Bloodline was the same as Jake's but it was only level 2.

More importantly, he was only a teenager. His pain tolerance was not as high. It was admirable that he volunteered to participate in this.

The ones who were most impressive were Shere Khan, Azeus, the alien woman and Ruby. Shere Khan was definitely a monster who was comfortable with all types of lightning. If he had faced those dark clouds before, he would have definitely been killed in seconds, but with the impact of the Codexes he could now express his full potential.

The black lightning flowed along his fur in a fluid manner, the tiger purring and shivering subconsciously as if he were receiving a massage. He had already returned to his normal size, a feline more massive than the largest terrestrial dinosaur basking in the middle of a dense pool of dark clouds.

Azeus who had been seriously injured a moment earlier finally showed his true abilities. After surviving the previous near death experience, something had changed in the nature of his own lightning and Jake immediately noticed that the black lightning produced by these clouds was no longer so hostile to him. And it wasn't just the result of the Codexes' influence.

His ability to make the power of those clouds his own was even more exaggerated than that of Shere Khan.

'As expected of a Lightning God on probation.'

The alien woman had already proven that she could survive in these clouds without any assistance. Now that the Codexes were largely neutralizing its destructiveness, she was like a fish in water. Black mist and lightning were quickly sucked into the pores of her skin, presumably without limit.

Then there was Ruby. She should have struggled as much as Rogen or even more, but that was without counting on her Digestor nature and her new Angel of Aurae Bloodline. Like Jake, her bloodline gave her Lightning Manipulation ability and even though it was at the most basic level, combined with the rest it allowed her to digest that lightning without too much trouble.

Out of the corner of his eye, Jake could see a shimmering armor of silver and gold chitin covering her body, gradually turning black as she devoured the lightning and the surrounding clouds.

Reassured about the condition of his friends, Jake was able to turn his attention to the clouds and the lightning in front of him and with a forceful breath he engulfed all the clouds within a dozen meters. Like Gerulf earlier, his body lit up from the inside due to the electrocution but his energy conversion was much more efficient. He was barely injured and proceeded to guide that lightning to his cells to temper them.

"It works."

He could already feel his body getting used to this lightning. The moment his body became able to produce it instinctively would be the moment he accomplished his mission. It was like a hidden reward for those who gathered enough Codexes.

Unfortunately, nothing was ever easy. A few minutes after they started, Jake noticed that the cloud density had already almost doubled. If that's all it was, it wouldn't be too bad, but alas, the lightning also began to damage not only their physical bodies but also their spirit bodies.

This was the main reason why these black clouds were so lethal without Codexes.

"Crap!"

His gaze turned in the direction of Rogen and Gerulf, those with the least mature mental faculties, and he found that the two giants were already groggy, their eyes glazed over. They were already on the verge of losing consciousness.

He immediately contacted Asfrid and the others hidden in the Ice Fortress and asked them to assist the two giants via their Spirit Shell.

"I'm on it."

Will and his dragon friends also joined in after receiving some extra Spirit Shells from Asfrid and lent them their spiritual energy. Gerulf and Rogen's psychological state stabilized, but soon Lord Phenix, Tim, and then Shere Khan all called for help.

Azeus was already drawing on the already small Divinity's energy reserve that his previous faction had entrusted to him, but he could still hold out for a while. Enya still showed no signs of mental fatigue, which came as a surprise to Jake. He didn't expect her mind to be so tough.

The alien woman was completely still, her body now as dark and cloudy as the mass of black clouds she kept devouring at the same dizzying speed. He was unable to tell if she was in pain.

He had to admit that she intrigued him. This female Player had not made any waves during this Ordeal and he had never heard of her before today. Yet it was clear that she was not inferior to the leaders of the super factions.

Chapter 869: Persistent Cockroaches

As Jake and the others continued to endure the tempering of their bodies by lightning, the situation in the Celestial City continued to deteriorate. A few hundred meters away from their party, hidden behind a building, the survivors of Lost Divinities were surviving as best they could.

Ael and Felphi had already activated their own abilities, but unfortunately they did not spare their allies. They had no choice but to split up. Ael was not one to sacrifice his comrades in vain, however, and he had provided them with precious Bronze and Silver Aether Artifacts for protection.

A sphere of nothingness had formed around Ael and Felphi, but Ashun, Dhamde, Deimos and Khag' Dagmai were nowhere in sight.

"The situation looks bad." Felphi lamented. "Two Codexes is not enough to play for time. Anti-Life and Vhoskaud have got us good. If we do nothing, Deimos and the others will perish."

She wasn't kidding. The Nosk god was the only one capable of converting this black lightning into energy with the long dendrites that served as his hair, but he was assisted by only two Codexes. Not fifteen, not five, but two. Rogen's and Lord Phenix's wounds were nothing compared to his own.

If he did not have a powerful Divinity in his possession he would already be dead. Yet his Divinity was gradually depleting despite the fact that, unlike Shamash, his link with it had not been severed.

Seeing the majestic Nosk collapse to the ground, momentarily losing consciousness, Ashun, Dhamde and Deimos looked grim. If the Nosk could not handle the lightning then their deaths were imminent.

Dhamde, the swordsman in kimono, drew his sword in a rage.

"If I have to die, I want to die in battle, sword in hand." He declared coldly.

"You and I are on the same page." Deimos chuckled as he grimly stroked his long golden spear.

The Spartan calmly put his helmet back on and silently communicated with his two leaders. A moment later, an evil laugh escaped his lips.

"Ael and Felphi seem to agree."

Ashun, the pretty goddess, displayed a disgruntled pout but inwardly she was extremely nervous. If she had known that this end of Ordeal would be so chaotic she would not have come.

"In that case, who should we target?"

"Ael will go on the attack first. You will know who to attack at that time. For now, he asks us to regroup. He will temporarily place us in his Gold Artifact, the Pantheon of the Gods to buy time."

"Seriously? He's willing to sacrifice his precious relic to save us?" Ashun's face beamed with joy. "I knew he was a good guy underneath that cold, indifferent facade!"

Deimos rolled his eyes, but the quartet immediately set off to regroup with Ael and Felphi. The Nullifier transferred them without a word inside his artifact and they were surprised to find Felphi inside as well. Seeing their confusion, she shrugged and explained,

"No need for everyone to waste their True Will. Ael will be very weakened so it will be up to us to carry the offensive on his signal."

"I see. Who will be our target?" Dhamde asked ominously.

"Mirror Vanguard and Neri."

On the side of Psykow, Neri and Vhoskaud the atmosphere was much more serene. With 15 Codexes they had nothing to worry about.

"They should be dead by now, right?" Neri giggled happily.

"Some cockroaches are unexpectedly persistent." Psykow replied apathetically.

"Don't underestimate them. Or you'll regret it. Don't say when it happens that I didn't warn you." Vhoskaud scornfully berated them, cracking his metal knuckles.

"Tsk. You robots lack a sense of humor." The black hole woman spat tauntingly.

"Does humor give me energy, make me stronger or allow me to survive longer?" The android retorted placidly. "No. Only the lower organic life forms give such importance to such a non-essential concept."

Neri laughed coldly.

"Ha-ha. Yeah, basically what I said. You're just a robot. Without your power chip you're no different than any other tin can."

"Shut up you two." Psykow suddenly barked. "We have a visitor."

A flying squirrel covered in acidic blood suddenly burst out of the mass of black clouds swirling around them and landed heavily at their feet with a miserable squeak. Two futuristic telescopes sprouted from the two electrified orbs serving as Vhoskaud's eyes, taking aim at the ailing squirrel alien.

"A squirrel? Shall I crush it to put it out of its misery?"

Hearing the android's words, the agonized alien's sparse hair bristled and a blast of acid generous enough to fill a small lake drowned the trio. Psykow's intangible shield fended off this wave of acid with ease, while it disappeared without a trace upon contact with Neri's skin.

On the other hand, it was Vhoskaud who suffered the most. His armor quickly corroded and he had to activate numerous energy shields in quick succession to stop the acid's progress.

"This acid can dissolve energy?" The robot wondered in an excited voice as he stared at the squirrel with a look of burning desire. From his tone, it was hard to believe that he had just been injured. "You'll make a fine specimen for my collection."

"Don't kill it." Psykow dampened his ardor. Addressing the alien he asked impassively, "What's your name?"

The bloodshot-eyed squirrel hesitated for a moment, then answered hatefully,

"Scrat."

"Scrat. I like your expression. If you want to survive, join my faction. It's your only chance."

The two aliens stared at each other coldly for a few seconds, the squirrel fully aware that it was probably one of those three Players who were responsible for all those antimatter explosions and the deaths of most of his fellow humans.

But only his survival mattered. The rest of the Mirror Universe could die for all he cared.

"I accept."

The alien's thirteen drop-shaped eyes crinkled slightly in satisfaction and he said,

"Then, welcome to Anti-Life."

Several dozen minutes later, the density of clouds had already far exceeded that of the original atmosphere. They were so condensed that their texture was becoming more and more like a wall.

Rogen, Tim, and Lord Phenix had reached their limits, but Gerulf had partially succeeded in his breakthrough. The black lightning was no longer as dangerous to him, but even so the damage to his Spirit Body had pushed him to the brink of fainting despite the support of Asfrid and the other Myrtharian Nerds.

Only Ruby, Azeus, the alien woman and Jake appeared to have truly mastered this lightning to a high enough standard to handle it so far. Haynt was holding his own, but that was only because his Spirit Body level was significantly higher than theirs.

'Weird. Gerulf is a Kintharian and Tim even has my bloodline. They shouldn't have ended up in this state.' Jake frowned as he channeled more black lightning in his own direction to relieve his friends. 'Is it that hard to assimilate such power?'

[... Hard to say.] Xi replied cautiously. [Tim's bloodline has a lower level than yours. Maybe that's the reason.]

Jake could sense, however, that she was not convinced by his own explanation. She, too, was puzzled.

'I thought it was normal to be able to easily incorporate new elements and materials because of my bloodline, but maybe I was wrong.'

The black lightning was hardly doing anything to him anymore. Not only did he have no trouble controlling it, he could even feel it feeding his Spirit Body and cells instead of damaging him. The danger he felt now was that his body and soul were slowly approaching overload. His digestion would soon not keep up.

'Anyway. I really benefited from those clouds. Thanks Auras for the gift.'

As a result of the contributions, from Jake, Ruby, Azeus, the alien woman and the others, the clouds had not moved any closer to the ice fortress, but with the density increasing rapidly they were losing ground, retreating step by step.

"I'm close to my limit." The alien woman suddenly declared in a sullen voice. "If you don't have a solution, we will die in the next few minutes. We must attack."

VRRRROOOO!

The group gasped at the whirring sound, their eyes widening in shock. The ground began to shake and the surrounding Mana flow became chaotic. Gerulf and the others were only alert, but Jake and Asfrid recognized the familiar sound and were well aware of what it was.

The Mana Storm! And it was coming... from everywhere!

Chapter 870: I Wanted To Cut His Head Off

Jake's expression changed at once as he realized what this meant. The Mana Storm had previously been circumscribing the planet, as the outer layer directly overlaying the black clouds. If they could hear the Mana Storm's fluctuations from all directions, it meant that Quanoth had already been completely devoured by it.

"We're doomed." Asfrid yelled out from inside the ice fortress.

The other Players may not have known what the Mana Storm was, but scanning their surroundings with their mental sense or an Oracle Scan told them all they needed to

know. Their faces turned pale as they detected the astronomical number of millions of different Mana signatures.

Anyone who was hit by this motley mass of energy would inevitably be sentenced to death. Even if they miraculously survived, they would certainly wish they had died instead.

Jake used an Oracle Scan again and realized that the Mana Storm was less than three kilometers away from them. At the speed it was approaching, the Celestial City would be hit in less than fifteen seconds.

With sweat dripping from his brow, Jake racked his brain for a solution, but none seemed satisfactory. He was convinced that 5 Codexes would not be enough to stop this Mana Storm.

Clenching his fists in frustration, he decisively opted for the only solution available to him. He didn't have time to force the alien woman to reveal her hypothetical trump cards.

"Fuck it." He cursed, summoning his Purgatory to full power.

He was not the only one to react in such a radical manner. Vexa teleported next to him, his wounds fully healed and a tiny palace of amethyst held in his palm: The Purple Hell.

The two men exchanged a short telepathic conversation and by tacit agreement made the smartest decision.

"Let's combine our artifacts." Vexa said grimly, "My Purple Hell has a higher rank than yours, but is not designed for combat. I will summon it first and you will summon your Purgatory inside. Even with 5 Codexes, I estimate we have no more than two minutes to end this Ordeal. If we exceed that time, it will be a victory for Anti-Life and Vhoskaud."

"In that case let's not waste time." Jake nodded.

The amethyst palace in Vexa's palm emitted a blinding flash of purple light, and a purple sky and a labyrinthine complex of buildings overlaid the Celestial City. Jake and the others recognized the training rooms and futuristic equipment they themselves had used extensively over the previous weeks.

The artifact had covered the entire Celestial City. Not surprisingly, they found Radur, Prysm and the other members of Mirror Vanguard inside, who immediately gathered in front of their leader. There were several hundred of them. In the blink of an eye, their numbers had increased more than tenfold.

"The fateful moment has come." Vexa declared plainly.

Prysm dimmed when she saw the dilapidated state of his armor. It wasn't easy to damage such great equipment.

"Did you get hurt?"

"Nothing I can't recover from." The cube man reassured her coolly.

As Jake activated his own Purgatory, he saw the purple sky become riddled with holes like a sheet of paper that had just been set on fire. The cube man twitched at the sight.

"We have less time than I thought. What on earth is this storm..." Vexa grumbled under his breath.

"You'll cry later." Jake snapped, releasing his own Bronze Artifact.

The ground became covered with lava, the purple skies with storm clouds, while the air became saturated with radiation, the heat in the air unbearable. The black clouds trapped inside caused damage to the landscape, but with no way to replenish itself, Jake and the others could handle it.

Using his full instantaneous perception of the Purgatory's interior, Jake blinked and then called out,

"Lost Divinity at 11, Anti-Life and Vhoskaud at 3. No other presumed survivors. Let me know your ideal battle environments."

Mirror Vanguard, the Myrtharian Nerds, Pureblood, Ruby's team, the two natives, and the alien woman unhesitatingly shared their ideal battle conditions, all appearing alongside her outside the ice fortress.

"Finally my turn to enter the scene." Lucia smiled broadly as she stroked the blood-hungry blade of her sword with her fingers.

She wasn't the only one in a hurry to fight. Leaving Jake and the others to protect them while they waited in silence had been excruciatingly torturous. When they hadn't yet decided who to target, Jake grunted,

"Lost Divinities is gone. They summoned a strange building that looked like an ancient temple littered with statues. The temple vanished right after."

"The Pantheon of the Gods." Radur snarled gloomily. "Inside they can use their Divinities at full power. This artifact is like an antenna that amplifies their connection to their main Divinity as well as all their believers. Incidentally, it can also be used as a means of transportation, a temporary fortress AND to make matters worse... concealment."

"They want to force us to attack first." Will commented matter-of-factly.

"They know we can't afford to wait." Enya agreed. "What do we do?"

Vexa thought silently for a few seconds, then sighed, "I know Ael well. There is no doubt that Anti-Life and the Mirror Vanguard are his target. He has the same goal as we do, to reduce the number of participants below 10,000. He may hold a grudge, but there aren't enough of you to change the course of the Ordeal even if we wipe you out."

"If we can't avoid the trap, let's make sure we choose which way we shall fall into it." Alef, the highest ranking member of Ruby's team, suddenly came forward. "Mirror Vanguard should attack Anti-Life. The rest of us will intercept Vhoskaud and his armies. Lost Divinities will probably ambush you when you're at your worst, but no matter what the scenario losses are inevitable."

"Why should we take all the risks?!" A Mirror Vanguard Player protested angrily as he grabbed the old officer by the throat. Others joined him in his protests right after.

"Let's fight." Vexa flatly ruled, leaving no room for argument. His subordinates, Radur and Prysm stared at him and he added, "Those who are slain will be compensated. We are Mirror Vanguard. We're not afraid of anything or anyone. Let's set an example."

Those who protested fell silent as the one strangling Alef loosened his grip. The instructor massaged his sore neck as he glared at the Player behind the choking, but he refrained from voicing his opinion again.

Turning to Jake, Vexa added, "You okay with that?"

"Yeah, but we should take some precautions..."

A second later, Mirror Vanguard broke away from their group and the sounds of explosions and clashes of metal weapons of all kinds echoed a few hundred meters away. With the exception of Jake, no one had a clear view of what was going on.

"The opponent that Vexa was fighting earlier directly came to meet him. Their confrontation has begun. Vexa has the advantage." He reported to his comrades. "Our turn."

As they also set off, an explosion of antimatter ripped through the black clouds from the battlefield of Vexa and the others. Jake winced as he discovered that one-fifth of the Mirror Vanguard Players had been taken out by that one blast. The rest had already activated their Oracle Shields.

Apparently she hadn't used all of her bugs before.

"Let's hurry!" Jake urged his companions as he felt a sense of urgency.

At the same time, thousands of orange cubes scattered through his Purgatory like a swarm of mosquitoes, covering the entire Celestial City. This was the plan they had decided on with Vexa so that they could move quickly through the battlefield to help each other.

"Only 90 seconds left."

Jake and those who could teleport appeared all around Vhoskaud and Psykow a split second later. Before any of them could even hit the drop-shaped alien, it vanished as if it had never been there.

"Damn it, where did it go?!" Drastan bellowed as his steel club smashed the ground at its former position.

With Vhoskaud's gigantic body impossible to ignore, all the other attackers pounced on him after his ally abandoned him.

"Psykow!!!" The android roared as he was bombarded by various spells at full power.

A blurred figure charged at him at lightning speed, a blinding spray of sparks formed an arc in the air and his huge right arm fell heavily to the ground. Lucia reappeared a few meters behind him, holding her sword in both hands.

"Tch! I wanted to cut his head off."

Chapter 871: Vhoskaud Vs Myrtarian Nerds

The robot remained impassive after losing its arm. A new articulated arm popped out of nowhere and connected to its empty shoulder. In the process, the components of its armor fell away one by one, its body changing structure to form a human-sized android whose surface looked like liquid lead.

A long blade vibrating at a very high frequency and covered with blue-black flame was brandished by one of his empty hands, emitting a shrill sound that made most of his opponents' eardrums explode. Concurrently barrels rattled from his shoulders, locking and opening fire on each target with surgical precision.

The shadow at the robot's feet was suddenly punctured by a dark blue laser as if the android had eyes in the back. Hephais' forehead, enshrouded in a haze of shadows that were about to burst forth to assassinate him, was blasted through and through. The Egean assassin beat a hasty retreat, sinking half unconscious into the puddle of shadow from which he had emerged.

Many other attackers suffered the same fate, but were not so lucky. Pictorus, the Myrmidian who could conjure anything with his brush was also killed before he could draw anything while standing at a distance. Hasta, the Myrmidian known for his ultra fast movement did not escape the enemy either. He was headshot while being as helpless as Svara and Hephais.

Jen, the Mimic, crashed to the ground, resuming the form of a badly damaged chest, its long tongue hanging out of its vessel.

Aisling, her mother Xaverie, and Maeve were killed in the same manner, but dispersed in black smoke before recondensing their bodies a split second later, their faces pale.

The tragic reality was that absolutely no one was able to avoid the barrage of fire. Vhoskaud's laser fire was as deadly as it was unstoppable. Whatever their speed, reflexes or fighting skills, they were like helpless babies in front of this counter-offensive.

Lucia, Gerulf, Rogen, Jake, Crunch, absolutely no one was able to dodge this counterattack.

Several Vampires from Pureblood were also riddled with holes before they could even get close to the android, with Arnold and Jett being blown to bits. Carmin was also targeted, but Wyatt stepped in angrily, erecting a wall of Blood Energy several meters thick.

The blood barrier was shattered in a single shot, punching a hole an inch in diameter in both Wyatt's and Carmin's foreheads. The only ones who miraculously escaped were Asfrid and the Eltarrians, who were already safe under their Oracle Shields. Their precognitive powers had saved them.

Those who survived either had exceptional regeneration abilities or were already on guard before the attack. Mufasa, Shere Khan, Crunch and Lord Phenix survived by virtue of their constitution and vitality, while Enya survived only by virtue of the fact that Haynt was in front of her at the time of the attack. The laser had been completely absorbed by his astral body, but his body had turned into an unstable mass of light energy after this feat.

The round of fire lasted only a split millionth of a second, but most of the attackers were already out of the fight. The battlefield seemingly froze in place due to the victims' stupor, but soon time resumed and the survivors resumed their offensive with renewed fury.

"GO TO HELL!" Gerulf roared as he compressed a huge ball of lava inside his maw, the hole between his two eyes having already closed.

Rogen responded in kind, long stalactites of eternal ice shooting up from the ground all around the android and converging viciously on him to tear him apart.

Vhoskaud sneered, slicing the stalactites horizontally with his blade, but at that moment a mixture of ice and metal suddenly condensed all around him with a precision and control far superior to Rogen's. His arm was immobilized and the stalactites came to a halt. His arm was immobilized and the stalactites collided with his armor. As he turned, he saw a beauty with long silver and golden hair smiling cutely at him.

At the same time, Gerulf's ultra-condensed lava orb shot out of his mouth, exploding at point-blank range on the immobilized android.

"Well play-"

BOOOM!

A metallic figure sprang from the firestorm, mercilessly chopping off the perpetrator's head. Gerulf barely managed to throw his head back, but his throat was cut deeply, his head hanging from his neck by a strip of flesh. Rogen's icy heart was pierced a millisecond later.

"Fuck! He's fast!"

Lucia exhaled nervously as she threw off her smoking helmet, thanking her lucky stars for investing in such equipment. This one could cheat death once, no matter what the cause.

She immediately wanted to jump up to reinforce Gerulf, but the muzzle of the barrels on Vhoskaud's shoulders lit up again. Without thinking, she and the other survivors activated their Oracle Shields and charged forward.

A huge bolt of lightning struck Vhoskaud, momentarily paralyzing his body like an EMP bomb. Azeus turned into a multicolored lightning bolt, seeping into the robot's circuits.

"I can't hold him for long! Attack now!" The barbarian's voice echoed from inside Vhoskaud.

The android's body shook imperceptibly, but immediately afterwards the lightning surrounding it began to weaken, while the heart serving as its battery converted Azeus' very existence into mechanical energy.

He did, however, give his allies the distraction they needed to return the favor. Aurum, the Myrmidian capable of enriching or impoverishing his allies and enemies in both the literal and metaphorical sense of the word, pressed both palms against the robot's chest, his skin suddenly withering as if he had aged centuries in one fell swoop.

"Midas Touch."

Vhoskaud's gleaming, seemingly indestructible armor decayed by several tiers, as if the most precious diamond had been demoted to a scrap of glass. The robot tore the Myrmidian's body in half with both hands and staggered backwards, its joints rattling with rust.

"What on earth is..." Vhoskaud bellowed in a robotic voice that was no longer devoid of emotion. "Okay, you provoked me."

Before he could make good on his threats, a blinding slash capable of slicing through even the Mana Storm came at him from behind, but a huge metal giant with an equally huge energy bulwark appeared behind him. Guns like the ones on his shoulders appeared by the thousands all around him, all kinds of weapons, shields and robots floating in the air to form an impenetrable mechanical tide.

Millions of Undeads poured onto the battlefield, most of them being directly obliterated by the dark clouds trapped in the Purple Hell and Purgatory. Even so, their numbers were staggering and their sacrifices consumed the surrounding black lightning, allowing the troops summoned after them to have more and more space to spread out.

At that very moment, Jake, who had been standing silently above the battlefield, grabbed the air before him and space distorted at Vhoskaud's location just as the android thought he was out of the woods. Jake envisioned an implosion, followed by the apparition of a spatial rift, but nothing happened.

He frowned. Scanning the enemy with his mental sense, it passed through it without detecting its presence. It was as if the robot was no longer there. The next round of attacks by his companions confirmed his suspicions.

Mufasa's claw reappeared behind Vhoskaud as if he had passed through a dimensional portal. Azeus, who was still in Vhoskaud's circuitry, could not escape and the lightning that constituted him continued to weaken until it died out completely.

"Impossible." Lucia cried out in shock as her sword loaded with True Will also went through it.

No matter what attacks were thrown at it, they were unable to penetrate this area.

"What kind of energy shield is that?!" Drastan growled as he frantically pounded the android to no avail.

In response, Vhoskaud, who had remained rather silent and impassive until now, gave an evil grin. The next moment, the tide of Undeads and robots swept over them, swallowing up the few dozen survivors.

Chapter 872: Too Late

"It's my Ultimate Shield." Vhoskaud broke out in laughter as his enemies crashed into the wall of machinery insulating him from the battlefield. "Inspired directly from Psykow's from Anti-Life. It was my countermeasure against that alien in the event of a betrayal, but it seems I was pressured to use it much sooner than expected against you. If we weren't stuck in this confined space, I would have fought you in person but I just need to keep you busy here."

That was the truth. He just needed to hold them off for a little less than 85 seconds. After that, the Mana Storm would ruthlessly select the winners.

"Psykow?" Jake muttered as he watched the drop-shaped alien through the mental projection of his Purgatory. "If Vhoskaud is wary of him, I do wonder what his abilities are."

The alien was not trying to hide, floating in the purple sky unafraid of the widening cracks within it. However, he was fast. Even with the virtual omniscience provided by the Purgatory, the intangible, elusive sphere was constantly teleporting from one end of Celestial City to the other at an extreme frequency.

Jake doubted he could catch such an opponent. All the super faction leaders had unique abilities. It was not only their basic attributes, but that their powers were often incomprehensible. Until he understood their abilities, he could not directly risk approaching them.

He had learned this lesson the hard way during his first defeat at the hands of the Nullifyer. That was why this time he had stayed back instead of attacking Vhoskaud with the others.

"I should have attacked from the beginning." Jake sighed as he realized that the android would now be much harder to kill now that he had used his trump cards.

This army of machines and Undeads was truly countless... Still, he did not participate in the fight, leaving his subordinates to test the waters.

From his position, he saw Kenway transform into a gigantic humanoid lion, then get buried by a horde of walking dead. The sounds of impact and roar echoed from his position, sending hundreds of Undeads flying.

The huge mammoth Dumbo who had joined the Myrtharian Nerds kept drawing water from an inexhaustible pond with his trunk to shoot water missiles at his enemies, but their numbers were so absurd that thousands of machines and Undeads were already

clinging to him, starting to devour him alive. If his fur wasn't even denser than steel, and his skin thicker than a tank's armor, he would have been shredded alive by now.

Lucia had come to her senses and given up her vendetta against Vhoskaud. Telepathically shouting orders to her teammates, she had managed to gather most of the scattered members into an unbreachable formation.

Sadly, in the meantime her new subordinate Temra, several Trolls of Drastan, as well as Ruby's teammates Raj and Melissa had been mauled alive.

"Shit! There are too many of them. We can't even move from our position." Wang Xiaoming snarled as he managed to generate a powerful Ki wave with a palm strike that blasted hundreds of robots in the distance.

Before he could complain again, one of the dragons protecting Will, who was struggling through the air with thousands of machines on his back, spat out a jet of uncontrolled flame as one of its membranous wings was torn off. Tens of thousands of Undeads were incinerated on the spot, but the stream of flame drifted right into Lucia's group.

"I shouldn't have gotten up this morning." Ryo and Craig said simultaneously as they dove to the side.

In contrast, Enya simply raised her hand and the flames were sucked in, strengthening her own aura. She then condensed another ball of crimson fire and fired straight at the wall of machinery protecting Vhoskaud.

BOOOOOM!

Pieces of scrap metal and molten steel flew in all directions, but new androids quickly filled the gap. Regardless, this served as the signal to escalate the fight.

The thousands of huge railguns and other futuristic weapons of destruction floating in tight formation around this wall suddenly opened fire and another dragon under Will's command sacrificed his life by throwing himself before them. His death was completely in vain, as hundreds of blue-black lasers tore through him as if his scales were no stronger than a sheet of paper.

Haynt took over, expanding his own energy body to encompass all enemy fire and his allies. A bright light radiated from his body, then he exploded, triggering his supernova mode.

"Don't make me regret my sacrifice." His voice echoed in their heads as Aisling couldn't help but shed a tear. She knew he wasn't really dead, but it was still a traumatic sight.

The supernova explosion did not affect his companions, the blast expanding outward. The entire Celestial City was hit by the blast of heat, momentarily reducing almost all the Undeads and machines swarming the battlefield to ash.

On the side of Mirror Vanguard and Neri, their battle had barely begun to take a turn for the worse when they were hit by Haynt's suicide blast.

"Damn it! We're their fucking allies! Antimatter explosions weren't enough, our own allies have to try to nuke us too." Radur fumed as he sealed all the vents in his armor and crossed his arms over his face to protect himself.

The other members of Mirror Vanguard activated their various defensive measures as well, but there were clearly fewer of them than there had been at the start of the fight. Several Players' corpses lay on the ground, rarely intact.

By comparison, Neri grinned jubilantly. A supernova meant nothing to her. She could swallow anything. Her body was an infinite abyss.

Vexa hurriedly assembled a huge Yellow Cube around his comrades to increase their survival rate, but caught a glimpse of the black hole woman's gloating gaze from the corner of his eye. The supernova blast hit her without causing any response from her. It was as if it were a light spring breeze.

In the midst of this surging heat and radiation, Neri pranced sensually over to Vexa, separated from him and the rest of Mirror Vanguard by a single Yellow Cube. She nonchalantly caressed the surface of the cube, dissolving it with a simple touch.

"Do you really think you have a chance of winning?" She teased, "In all this time, you still don't know what kind of person Psykow is?"

Vexa's eyebrows twitched, but he retorted impassively, "I don't know him well, but I know enough. And I'm sure Ael knows enough too."

"But even if you do know, can you really stop him?" She giggled as she leapt back to avoid the beam emitted by a Red Cube that appeared behind her. She could suck in anything, but that light could kill her if she wasn't careful.

Vexa stared at her coldly, not even trying to smile to keep up appearances. "We won't know if we don't try."

"Nice mindset." Neri applauded. "I hope you can hold onto it until the end. If you understand the nature of Psykow, you should know how... delusional it is. It's...already...too...late."

Vexa's eyes widened abruptly as he heard her final words. At that very moment, something unexpected, inconceivable happened inside the Yellow Cube.

Vexa spat blood and his Yellow Cube disintegrated as a result of his shock. When he looked down, he saw a long black stinger covered in his own blood sticking out of his chest. Turning to look for the culprit, he met Radur's icy, hateful gaze.

"I told you you didn't deserve to be the leader." His longtime friend declared with bloodshot eyes.

"RAAAAGGHH!" At the same time, Prysm screamed in rage, her eyes dripping with tears as she saw her lover get backstabbed before her very eyes.

"Prysm don't!" Vexa yelled.

Too late. Thousands of vines and brambles suddenly engulfed Radur, then a huge rafflesia flower closed in on him, chomping his whole head off.

The situation spiraled out of control less than a second later. Mirror Vanguard Players who had been friends for a long time and trusted each other began killing each other for all sorts of reasons. Some seemed to be motivated by real reasons and repressed emotions, while others seemed to be in the grip of horrible hallucinations.

The result was the same. Their advantage in numbers had become their greatest liability. Just as Vexa thought he was immune, he suddenly felt a dreadful presence in his own mind. His consciousness began to blur and his expression changed as he immediately locked himself inside a Green Cube.

A black hand shot through it a split second later, seizing Vexa by the throat.

"Did you already forget I was here? Neri said, tilting her head to the side like a psychopath.

Chapter 873: Anarchy

At the same time, on the side of Jake and the other Myrtharian Nerds a similar catastrophe occurred. Mufasa and Shere Khan ignored their targets and immediately went for each other's throats, oblivious to everything around them.

A giant lion and tiger weighing tens of tons crashing into each other at several times the speed of sound and smashing everything in their path was an apocalyptic scene for the collateral victims present. Hephais, who was in the way managed to blend into a shadow, but Aurum and Kenway who had already been wounded by Belakor and were facing a horde of Undeads were not so lucky.

Perhaps because he was basically a lion too, Mufasa had no mercy on Kenway and with one bite to the carotid artery ripped out his spine. The death was as gory as it was sudden. Thanks to his vitality, the powerful Alpha Werelion did not perish immediately, but it made him vulnerable to the horde of monsters already bearing down on him.

The expression on his face was one of incomprehension and anger as his head fell to the ground spilling blood everywhere.

Among the other surviving Aristocats, Bagheera and Thomas'O Malley salivated at Dumbo, suddenly seeing him as prey rather than an ally. Conversely, Lord Phenix lost his arrogance and experienced a mental regression, flying around the battlefield in a panic and gurgling.

But this was only the beginning. The cataclysmic chain reaction began with Rogen, then Gerulf. The first one suddenly lay down and a wave of ice spread around him, quickly sealing the giant in a huge iceberg. The air was so cold that both allies and enemies were severely affected. Two New Earth soldiers were frozen to death on the spot, while on the Pureblood side Wyatt also found himself momentarily trapped in the ice.

Gerulf closed his eyes and fell asleep on the spot as well, a mound of rock and lava quickly erupting from the earth to form the outline of a volcano. The temperature and radiation around him rose preposterously high without any consideration for his surroundings.

A Kintharian and a Throsgenian in their natural environment were slothful and solitary creatures, spending most of their time asleep while living or passively terraforming the planets on which they thrived to optimize their living environment.

However, the worst was to come when these two species came into contact. Thosgenians and Kintharians were like fire and water. Their ideal environments were completely incompatible.

As if possessed by a demon, the two naturally placid and not-so-smart giants turned into two divine calamities when their two domains touched. Rogen's silver eyes suddenly glowed, then shot a blinding laser of ice straight at Gerulf, who was frozen in place.

A bright hot light radiated from within the ice block and less than a second later the ice liquefied as geysers of lava erupted in all directions. The surrounding lava magically wrapped itself around Gerulf's arm and a titanic arm of lava several dozen meters long smashed Rogen's head into the distance.

A spherical ice shield as large as a tennis court stopped the huge fist, the clash causing a thick fog of steam to billow over the battlefield. Rogen then grabbed the disc-shaped shield with both hands and threw it at Gerulf like a Frisbee with all his might.

In the blink of an eye, the giant projectile broke the sound barrier, the friction forming a comet-like trail of dust, ice and hydrogen.

BANG!

Gerulf sliced the disc in half with the huge iridescent lava sword he had just summoned, then with a leap that split the earth in two he crossed the distance to his nemesis and impaled his heart.

Rogen and Gerulf were knocked hundreds of feet away, but when everyone thought Rogen was dead they discovered that he had stopped the blade with his own hand at the last moment and sheathed it in a gauntlet of eternal ice. After that, the other Myrtharian Nerds lost sight of them except for Jake, but the sounds of their clashing and roaring were no match for Neri's antimatter explosions.

Thankfully, if the other fighters were also affected, it manifested itself in the short term as a renewed ferocity against their enemies. As luck would have it, the enemy had a clear advantage in numbers. Whether they were lucid or not, they had an extremely low probability of running into their allies on the battlefield.

With the Aristocats and the two giants killing each other in their respective areas, their forces took a severe hit and the pressure of Vhoskaud's Undead and android army on them intensified significantly. Jake, who did not want to participate, had no choice but to use a certain feature of his Purgatory for the first time.

Defensive/Offensive Mode.

This function allowed him to use the Purgatory's database to generate various illusions of troops with real capabilities inside the artifact. His Third Ordeal and especially the Monster Game had already proven to him that the possibilities were quite vast. Jake didn't know what these illusions would be worth, but it was worth a try.

With a thought, he scanned the database for suitable troops and not knowing most of them, he trusted Hade, who was the original creator of the artifact. After finding a selection of Inquisitors in the database, presumably to train his son, Jake duplicated as many as he could.

All over the Purgatory, black-cloaked figures resembling the mighty Fluid Masters of his third Ordeal appeared like mirages, black lightsabers in hand.

The tide of battle immediately turned, but the Aether stored in his Aether Storage began to plummet. At this rate, he would run out of Aether in less than two minutes, but that was all he asked.

The tens of thousands of Inquisitors scared the crap out of his comrades, but when they realized they were on their side they breathed a sigh of genuine relief. Now, they could fight.

Hephais, who was practically garbed like them, became even more elusive, blending into the crowd like a cloud in a mist. The speed at which he killed his enemies increased drastically and more and more Undeads died under his blade.

Vhoskaud was unsettled by the emergence of all these mysterious troops that appeared like ghosts. With a single scan, he understood their nature, but his mood deteriorated just as quickly when he realized that he had no effective way to get rid of them.

At his level, the only solution was either to get out of the Purgatory or for the owner to run out of Aether. A more powerful Evolver could have destroyed the Purgatory directly or dissolved the illusions by dispersing, jamming the flow of Aether supporting their existence.

Regrettably, he was dealing with a Bronze Artifact intertwined within the Purple Hell, another Gold Artifact. The energy required to destroy such items would cause the artifact to collapse in on itself, which would probably kill them all.

Dejected, Vhoskaud had no choice but to dip further into his personal troop supply, consuming the huge army he had amassed over the centuries with alarming speed.

'This Jake is truly my nemesis. After this Ordeal, I want nothing more to do with him.'
The android cursed inside his shield.

Jake was beginning to get his hopes up, when about thirty seconds later, the situation escalated beyond repair. The illusions of Inquisitors he had spawned began to kill each other in turn. This time, the numbers advantage, while still in favor of the Undeads and machines, was no longer so overwhelming.

The surviving Myrtharian Nerds were also targeted. Thousands of Inquisitors targeting someone was a nightmare for anyone. Lord Phenix, who was flapping his wings in panic, was killed twice and if not for his phoenix-like ability to rise from the ashes, he would have perished for good. In the meantime, he made a good distraction.

Hephais, who had moved at high speed among them, was one of the few who still had his wits about him. But he was not spared either. After killing an Inquisitor by mistake for the first time, he suddenly gasped in midair, frozen by the telekinetic grip of thousands of Fluid Masters.

"What the h-"

He barely had time to summon a veil of shadow before thousands of lightsabers ripped through him like a pinprick. Blood spurted in all directions, and a groan of agony echoed

through the crowd. He slipped away into a pool of shadow in total silence, his condition unknown.

Chapter 874: Hopeless Situation

On the other side of Celestial City, nearby the battlefield occupied by Mirror Vanguard and Neri, an unseen building was biding its time.

The Lost Divinities Players who were patiently waiting inside the Pantheon of Gods for Ael to shout the signal to attack could not hear or see what was going on outside, but they could follow the video feed of what their leader was experiencing. As they witnessed the sudden mutiny of Mirror Vanguard, including Vexa getting his heart speared by Radur, they were suddenly caught off guard.

"What's going on out there?" Ashun stammered in disbelief.

Dhamde, Deimos and Khag' Dagmai frowned as they saw the broadcast. Felphi, who stood mutely with her arms crossed beside them, snickered in disdain, then explained,

"This is the work of Psykow. Ael had his reasons for hiding you inside the Pantheon of Gods. Here, Psykow's psychic powers cannot reach you. I am not immune to it either. Ael is probably holding on to his sanity as hard as he can right now. He can nullify his surface effects, but the alterations to his psyche deep down are much harder to counter."

The four Lost Divinities Players exchanged worried glances. Dhamde drew his sword a few inches, then sheathed it again with an uncertain look.

"Then should we still attack? At the rate they're killing each other, I wouldn't be surprised if they all perished before Ael gave the order."

"That was probably his plan all along." Deimos sighed in frustration.

Felphi did not respond immediately. Instead, her countenance darkened significantly with each passing second. There were only 40 seconds left before the Purple Hell was completely destroyed, but as the sky began to tear apart at an exponential rate, it was apparent that it would be shut down much sooner.

The same was true for their Pantheon of Gods. The others hadn't noticed, but Psykow had repeatedly scanned their position with his mental sense. This meant that for minute moments the artifact had ceased to perform its functions.

"Ael's plan hasn't changed. He just wanted you to stay lucid a little longer." She finally answered. "When the Pantheon of Gods becomes unstable, I will take the artifact from

Ael's hands before he loses control. I'll hold on as long as necessary. In an optimistic scenario, you could have eliminated any survivors in a short time to bring the Ordeal to a hasty end. We won't have that chance. When the Pantheon of Gods is deactivated, equip your Oracle Shields and try to survive. And above all... don't blame yourself if you do something wrong during that time.

"See you later and good luck."

Felphi suddenly vanished and the unstable Pantheon of Gods stabilized again. Outside, the Mana Storm had already begun to spill into the Purple Hell through the many gaps in the sky. As she appeared before the Nullifyer, she found him shaking like a leaf in a 20m diameter sphere of vacuum.

To get the artifact out of his hands, she had to use her disruption powers at full strength.

"Run." Ael mouthed in a haggard voice, his eyes bloodshot. "Psykow has hidden his game very well. If we don't kill him, we'll all lose. I'll deal with him personally."

Without another word, the alien teleported directly in front of Psykow, but found only a mirage of his enemy. The Anti-Life leader was constantly shifting his position on the battlefield, literally untouchable.

As long as he was conscious, Ael had no intention of giving up, and a cat-and-mouse game of high-frequency teleportation took place in Celestial City between him and Psykow.

At the same time, Felphi, who was hoping for a few seconds of respite, suddenly saw the purple sky disappear, leaving an ocean of black clouds and an even more apocalyptic Mana Storm.

BOOOM!

As soon as the false sky faded away with the Purple Hell's deactivation, Felphi immediately understood what had just transpired.

"Shit! Vexa lost control" She exclaimed, cursing him inwardly with every name under the sun.

Out of reflex, she ran her Oracle Scan but was shocked when she read the result. Vexa had not lost control. He was dead!

Earlier on the side of the Myrtharian Nerds.

The insubordination of Jake's conjured Inquisitor illusions had already raised the level of panic and chaos to unprecedented levels and Hephais' unknown condition after being ambushed by them didn't help matters.

Jake might have reacted differently if his psychological state had been normal, but alas, he was also infected with Psykow's mysterious psychic powers. At that moment, thinking he was doing the right thing, he made a mistake: he cancelled the illusions he had created.

This should have solved the problem in a flash, but it didn't. The numerical disadvantage of the remaining Myrtharian Nerds and Pureblood Players became even more overwhelming, but at the time it had another, even more disastrous consequence that Jake had not foreseen.

The clearing of the battlefield. The survivors' sight was momentarily cleared as those thousands of illusions dissipated and they could finally see what was going on around them. Then the unthinkable happened.

Enya, one of the few who still clung to her sanity along with the Eltarians, gave Jake a suspicious look filled with who knows what emotion, but it didn't take much more to trigger a catastrophe. Because this fleeting glance was caught by another person: Lucia.

The Myrmidian princess who was fighting like a tireless demoness against Vhoskaud and his infinite army suddenly turned away from the Undeads facing her, her pretty face turning livid with rage.

Jake watched transfixed as the Myrmidian princess blurred out of focus and crossed the distance between her and the Fire Mage in a flash. A blink earlier, Lucia was standing several dozen meters away from Enya and the next blink the tip of her sword was no more than an inch from her throat.

"What are you do-" The Fire Mage didn't have time to finish her sentence.

With his telekinesis, Jake, whose vision was beginning to cloud, pushed her body out of the path of Lucia's sword, but his intervention only made things worse.

Quivering with fury and as if possessed by hatred itself, Lucia heaved loudly, her firm chest rising and falling frantically because of her inability to calm herself. Her wrathful face froze into a mask of chilling indifference and turning slowly to Jake, streams of bitter tears flowed from her misty eyes and she said,

"So you chose her over me... I CAN'T lose. I won't allow it!"

An aura unlike any before erupted from the blonde princess' body, her golden eyes becoming brighter than suns as her hair began to float ghostly behind her producing enough light to turn night into day.

Despite his difficulty in keeping control of his Purgatory, Jake vaguely recognized the technique. It looked like his Warrior Trance Skill, but its power and abilities were in a whole different league. With such a power-up, Lucia truly had a chance to get her revenge, whatever it was.

Her sword rose above her head and with a lackadaisical swing brought it down like a thunderclap. The friction of her blade as it passed through the air created a hyper-pressurized blade of sharp air that sheared off all the Undeads and androids in its path.

Jake wanted to jump in again to save Enya, but at that moment an splitting headache wracked his skull, blurring his vision and knocking him to his knees. The Purgatory went out for a split second and the hitherto advantageous battle environment dissolved, revealing the strangely shaped buildings of the Purple Hell.

When his vision stabilized, he found no trace of Lucia and Enya, but a deep furrow in the ground stretching as far as the eye could see. His heart clenched with anguish at the sight, but as he searched for the two women with his mental sense, he found Enya safe with Asfrid. Lucia had already forgotten the reason for her previous attack, dedicating herself once again to slaughtering the enemies in front of her.

"I got it. Don't worry." The Nereid reassured him telepathically.

Jake breathed a sigh of relief as he received the message, but as if to belie her a towering pillar of scarlet flames suddenly rose to the sky. The Aetheric signature of half of the Eltarians suddenly disappeared and when he scanned in their direction, he found Asfrid on the verge of death, charred to the third degree by an insane Enya.

Chapter 875: So I Can Be This Strong

The Fire Mage was levitating like a wraith a few feet above the ground, shrouded in a blaze of roaring scarlet flames. From his position, Jake watched helplessly as his friend pointed her fiery hands hatefully at Asfrid on the brink of death.

Gritting his teeth, he tried to teleport to intercept the attack, but his consciousness flickered for a split second, followed by a searing pang of pain in his throat. When he opened his eyes again, his mental sense found only a sea of flames instead of Asfrid. Even her ashes were nowhere to be found.

He could have cared about where Enya had gone, but a flowery scent of vanilla mingled with the smell of his own blood assaulted his nostrils. Looking down, his chin bumped

against a mass of silky brown hair. Two delicate pale hands with red-painted nails were clawing tightly at his shoulders to hold him in place, while the lips of the woman they belonged to were sucking his blood as if they hadn't drunk in days.

Jake didn't need another look to recognize his assailant. His blood began to boil, black lightning and unspeakable radiation coursing through his veins, but unlike his previous experience with the previous Ordeal, Carmin didn't stop sucking.

He frowned. His blood was regenerating faster than she was draining it from his body, but he had no intention of letting her continue. With a forceful grab, he pulled her by the hair and yanked back hard. The sheer brutality of the move left Carmine's canines stuck in his throat, eliciting a pained yelp that instantly snapped her out of her trance.

Sadly, it only lasted a mere second. After exchanging a mortified and guilty look with him, Carmine's eyes turned blank and she tried to bite him again.

Seeing the crazed expression on the gorgeous vampire's face, Jake stopped hesitating and pushed her far up into the air with a palm strike to the plexus that squeezed the air out of her lungs, shattering her ribcage into hundreds of broken fragments, crushing the internal organs beneath.

"Sorry, Carmin, but I don't have time for this crap." He muttered grimly.

At that moment, his consciousness flickered again and for a moment the scenery of the Purple Hell faded from his vision, replaced by a deep, dark mist. As his mental clarity was at its lowest, Jake suddenly felt an ominous presence that made his hair stand on end.

"Who?! Show yourself!"

Silence answered him, but just as he stopped hoping for an answer and began to relax, that same presence surfaced from his own body. Before he could react, he saw his own Spirit Body split into two halves. Before his stunned face, a carbon copy of himself appeared before him.

A copy? Not exactly. Jake's eyes narrowed as he immediately identified several differences between himself and his clone.

First of all, their eyes were different. His clone's gaze was cold, hostile and inhuman, like a predator's gaze on its prey.

Second, his clone was aglow. Jake in his peak form. His body glowed with fire, his lava veins shining like a thousand suns, and his silver-gold hair fluttered beautifully behind him, highlighting his galactic eyes filled with ageless wisdom.

Jake felt subconsciously intimidated, wondering why his clone was so "big" and why he felt so insignificant in front of him. But then he realized that it wasn't his clone that was big, it was him that was shrinking.

Alarmed, he looked at his hands and noticed that they were both familiar and foreign to him. They were his hands. His hands before they received his Oracle Device.

Then he looked down at his arms and saw that the light from the lava veins iridescenting the surface of his skin was beginning to dim as his turmoil grew.

"What are you doin'-"

"Don't bother." His clone interrupted him. "I am you. And you are me. But that's over. From now on, I'm my own person. Thank you for giving me control of your body."

Jake's eyes suddenly widened as he realized what was happening. As his strength was being drained from him, he also felt some feelings and memories go out the window.

He finally knew why everyone seemed to be going crazy outside. Instantly regaining his composure, he snarled, "I won't let you. Be a good boy, and become part of me again like you're supposed to be."

Undeterred, he mobilized all his willpower and clashed head-on with his clone. His body tripled in size in the blink of an eye while his clone's shrank by about a third.

For a moment he found a glimmer of hope and attacked again. What he couldn't see was that using his own True Will against himself was tantamount to damaging his own soul to achieve his ends. For every bit of soul he regained, he was jeopardizing his future sanity.

After completely obliterating his clone, Jake briefly regained consciousness, but he was dripping with sweat and his expression was completely haggard. The sight that greeted him upon his return chilled his blood.

Wyatt's sword was buried in his heart and in the palm of his own hand he held the crushed skulls of Wyatt, Enya, Aisling, his mother, and some of the other Myrtharian Nerds and Pureblood Players he couldn't identify. While he was gone, he had transformed into the same giant as his clone and unleashed all the violent impulses hidden in the depths of his mind.

Not far from him lay the corpses of several dragons charged with protecting Will. Drastan and his Trolls were still killing each other, their insane regeneration having kept them alive until now. The few Eltarians still alive after Asfrid's execution were the only ones still lucid, but they were in dire straits, hunted to extinction by a horde of Undeads and androids.

The Purgatory had long since been deactivated.

As he scanned the area for survivors and to understand the extent of his sin, he realized that he was standing on top of a pile of scrap metal. The metal composing them had liquefied, sucked up by his bare feet as if they were a bottomless pit.

Thousands of tons of metal were siphoned into his body every second and any android daring to approach him would disintegrate as it came within a meter of him. Scanning the mountain of scrap metal below him with his Myrtharian sight, he met the gaze of a shivering Vhoskaud, still hidden under his shield.

In panic, the leader of Replicators was summoning endless amounts of androids to replenish his losses in hopes of overcoming Jake's appetite, but he was beginning to realize that this enemy's appetite likely had no limits.

"WHO ARE YOU?!" The android screamed in rage and incomprehension. This didn't match his information at all.

Jake was by far the most puzzled. He wasn't doing anything. However, he could confirm that it was indeed him who was gobbling up all that metal without any apparent effort.

"So I can be this strong..." He raised an incredulous eyebrow. It was a little hard to believe. His instinct was telling him that something was wrong.

At that moment, his pupils narrowed when at the bottom of the mountain of scrap he found the tattered corpse of Lucia. Surprisingly, although his heart ached a little, he didn't feel much and that confused him even more than everything that had transpired.

"Why am I so indifferent?" He muttered uneasily. "I feel... hungry."

Suppressing these dissonant emotions, he scanned Lucia's body with his mental sense and discovered that although she was indeed dead in any clinical sense, her Spirit Body had not yet perished. Like him, she had perhaps finally regained control of her body, but at what cost?

On the other hand, her physical wounds were clearly of his making, or that of another Kintharian. The titanic battle between Gerulf and Rogen was still going on, with both aliens displaying an inhuman tenacity.

As he wondered what to do, his vision blurred again and the misty scene reappeared. The presence he thought he had wiped out erupted once again from within him, even more formidable and invasive than the previous time, but now he was ready.

His Spirit Body emitted a peculiar, all-consuming aura, pulsing at a high frequency and a screeching wail echoed inside of him. The presence disappeared as quickly as it had appeared, leaving Jake's mind in a state of extreme confusion.

When he woke up, the scene of the purple sky fading away to reveal the Mana Storm flooding in with impunity welcomed him straight into hell.

"Vexa..." For his greatest shock, this time he was not only indifferent, he even felt an ounce of contempt.

His mental sense scanned the place where the cube man and his subordinates were supposed to be and without surprise he discovered that Vexa had indeed just been killed. Except that the murderer was not the one he imagined. He expected it to be the black hole woman or one of the Mirror Vanguards Players because of their proximity. Perhaps a Player from Lost Divinities in ambush.

But certainly not two Ruby's.

Chapter 876: We Must End The Ordeal Now

It was a situation that no one could have predicted, and yet, as Jake eyed the two Ruby's, he immediately understood what had happened. It was an unforeseen consequence of Psykow's psychic powers.

The first Ruby was the Ruby he imagined her to be after the Oracle had cured her chronic birth defects when she arrived on B842: snow-white long hair, frail, fair, but still paralyzed in the lower half of her body. Her pallor, her moist eyes wide open and her mouth gasping in terror conveyed the full extent of her inability to process what was happening, her guilt eroding her from within.

There was also tremendous confusion. Jake wasn't even sure she could remember her name under these conditions, her Spirit Body and Soul only a sliver of their original state. She was so weak, she could barely stand, most likely thanks to her Aether stats and the remnants of Bloodlines that had not been stolen by her clone.

Last but not least, both her eyes were a deep navy blue. Her right amethyst eye was gone.

This could have been good news, but after experiencing the essence of Psykow's powers himself, Jake knew that the price was unacceptable. Right now, it wasn't wrong to say that her clone was more Ruby than the original Ruby.

Just not the kind of Ruby he wanted to see again.

In place of the second Ruby stood a freakish creature as splendid, alien as it was terrifying. Humanoid in shape and with a distinctly feminine anatomy, she was currently more than ten meters tall, her steel-gray skin covered with a magnificent, streamlined chitin armor that hugged the contours of her body. Ten enormous gold and silver wings

had folded simultaneously in front of her, converging in one point like ten spears to impale their already dead victim: Vexa.

A burst of bluish light and matter was continuously expelled from her feathers and joints, blasting everything behind her while forever freezing whatever came in contact with these particles.

Her face, though flawless, was filled with malevolence, two amethyst eyes within which slumbered a golden and black lightning fire. Her lips were stretched into a carnivorous and sadistic grin, revealing a row of translucent fangs. Even from where Jake was standing he could hear the chilling throaty growl of a ferocious beast leaking from her vocal cords.

No doubt Ruby had taken the opportunity to sever her Digestor half, but the latter had not agreed to leave without taking her due. Maybe it wasn't even Ruby's original intention, but faced with the Digestor's overwhelming voracity and oppression inside her, she had no choice but to take this extreme step to secure a small chance of survival.

For the moment, the Digestor version of Ruby was completely disregarding her existence, too busy devouring the corpse of the cube man. Focusing his attention on him, Jake realized that Vexa wasn't actually 100% dead, but it was just as bad.

The ten harder-than-diamond wings spearing his chest were injecting an endless stream of various, frighteningly incompatible energies. Absolute cold mixed with lightning, holy light, radiation, and the innate destructive dark energy that all humanoid Digestors of this caliber awoke.

Vexa's body had already lost its humanoid form, taking on the appearance of a mass of shapeless multicolored cubes. The light emitted from these cubes alternated regularly between green, yellow, white, blue and black as if he were trying to heal himself, increase his defense and energy levels, protect his mind and amplify his bloodline, but it was a losing battle.

Just as Vhoskaud had fought Jake earlier, he was frantically summoning new cubes from who knows where to replace the ones devoured by Ruby's evil clone, but unlike the android he was losing a lot of energy for every cube that was lost. He didn't have an infinite amount of spare parts either.

While Vhoskaud suffered emotionally from the "financial" losses he incurred, Vexa was literally consuming himself, like a candle burning at both ends.

Even more horrifying, the aura of Ruby's clone was expanding at an alarming rate, its Aetheric signature becoming more complex and strange as time went on. Jake could already see colorful cube-like growths forming on the surface of her chitin.

At this realization, a cold sweat shivered down his spine.

Jake could not let this situation continue. And the few survivors who were still lucid had finally realized that too.

In the sky, Psykow, who was rejoicing in the deaths of his enemies while teleporting away from Ael and Felphi's relentless attacks, suddenly stopped.

"Hmm? What's going on here?" The drop-shaped alien showed signs of concern for the first time.

He knew his powers very well. This wasn't supposed to happen. His precognition powers already made him sense that this Digestor would be a danger to him if he let it devour Vexa at will.

At that moment Ael jumped in front of him and activated his nullification powers at full strength. The two Players fell to the ground, the Mana Storm pouring down on them as if a dam had just exploded.

Barely conscious, the Nullifyer summoned the last of his strength to condense some True Will and suppress the second personality threatening to overtake him at the helm of his own body, then punched forward.

"Absolute nullification."

"Ael stop!" Psykow shouted, this time choosing not to avoid the blow.

The Lost Divinities leader's nullification powers were not something one could effectively protect against. That's why he had repeatedly teleported away to avoid getting trapped in the Nullifyer's domain.

Psykow's previously unbreakable shield ceased to exist at that moment for a number of reasons. First of all, the Aether density in the bodies of both fighters dropped to a value dangerously close to zero, depriving them of any energy.

Their Aether, Body and Spirit stats suffered the same fate, followed by their consciousness, memories and everything that defined their existence. The paradox was that in doing so, Ael also forgot how to use his own powers, which in turn automatically nullified the spell.

This was where his True Will came into play. By allowing him to protect a single intent, he could postpone the interruption of the spell and even fight subconsciously for a while like a robot running a program.

BANG!

Ael's fist connected with Psykow's central eye smoothly and it instantly exploded, followed by the rest of his body like a balloon pierced by a needle.

"Oracle Heal." Psykow, in his spiritual state, promptly pulled one of his jokers before being repatriated to the Red Cube.

When he realized he couldn't dodge the attack, he had projected his consciousness out of his body. With his powers, all he had to do was look at where he wanted to project his mind to move there.

Defending himself with another Oracle Skill like the Oracle Shield was not an option because of the nullification that also applied to his bracelet. He could only rely on his mind and True Will to get out of this predicament and the simplest solution was to distance himself from Ael to preserve their mutual strengths.

Because of the circumstances, he had already deactivated his psychic magic and the survivors were quickly regaining their senses. The damage to their souls, however, was irreversible.

Ael looked around for his enemy, but his friend Felphi suddenly appeared in front of him, blocking his view. With a wave of her hand, she disrupted his next teleportation and forced him to look into her eyes.

"Ael, we have another more pressing problem than Psykow. Postpone your revenge until later. I have already reached a compromise with both him and Vhoskaud."

The Nullifier stared at her with a haggard look, but after a deep exhale clarity reappeared in his eyes. He scanned the Celestial City with his mental sense and realized what was happening. The Mana Storm above, an out-of-control Digestor Trojan below.

It wasn't enough to shake him, but when he saw Ruby's Aetheric signature he realized the gravity of the situation.

"Her Aether stats are now over 300,000? How is it even possible? Ael blinked stupidly.

That was the level of an intermediate Rank 10 Digestor! And not one of those monsters that failed to evolve, but an elite that could claim the title of Citizen. Unlike the other Players, as the leader of a super faction he knew a lot more about the nature and workings of Digestor societies.

"She devoured thousands of Undeads, part of her original human soul, Radur and an impressive amount of Oracle Cubes. Even for a Digestor Trojan that amount of energy should have left her bedridden for months, but it seems that her Angel of Aurae bloodline allowed her to significantly shorten the process by altering the underlying

mechanisms of her own digestion." Felphi explained succinctly, having silently watched the whole scene.

As the Mana Storm descended upon them, drowning them in an ocean of clashing energy, Felphi's voice echoed through the chaos,

"We must end the Ordeal now. And Psykow understands that too."

The tens of thousands of Anti-Life Players that Psykow had hidden in one of his Artifacts suddenly popped up out of nowhere all over the Celestial City. Their gleeful smiles at the thought of the Ordeal being over were brutally replaced by utter terror as the Mana Storm hit them in the face as a greeting.

To survive, Psykow could even sacrifice his own subordinates.

Chapter 877: That's Not Enough

"Wh-what's going on?! This wasn't supposed to play out like Raaagghhhh!!!"

One of Anti-Life's aliens was wiped out by the Mana Storm before he could activate his Oracle Shield. A few more caught by surprise were also obliterated on the spot, but Anti-Life wasn't a super faction for nothing. The other Players, despite their disbelief, deftly switched on their defenses, escaping instant death.

After a few dozen deaths, the number of survivors stabilized again, fatally delaying the end of the Ordeal.

"These vermin... They're truly useless." Psykow clicked his nonexistent tongue as he saw that his ploy had not worked. If two-thirds of them had perished, the Ordeal would have ended immediately.

But no matter how calculating and sociopathic he might be, a leader could not deliberately slaughter his subordinates. His initial plan to kill all his enemies having failed, he had no choice but to move forward with his plans.

Right! Once the other factions were eliminated, his plan had always been to let his subordinates face the Mana Storm in order to fairly select the winners. After all, there were over 25,000 Players under his command and there were only 10,000 spots in the Celestial City.

This sacrificial battle had always been bound to happen.

Unlike the other super factions, Psykow paid minimal attention to the hiring of his subordinates and could accept anyone as long as they had the inner drive to tear this

world apart. Not only were criminals welcome, but the number of psychopaths and other sickos who committed heinous crimes made up a significant percentage of the Players under his command.

As such, he had no empathy for his subordinates and could sacrifice them without remorse. Even a key Player like Neri was no exception if the situation called for it.

Of course, Jake and the other survivors were also suffering from the Mana Storm. With Psykow's psychic spell lifted, he no longer had to worry about his split personality disorder. Although his mental state was not normal, it was stable and that was enough.

Keeping the heads of Enya, Wyatt, Carmin and the other Myrtharian Nerds he had coldly murdered during his short-lived rampage, he tried to stabilize their state with a healing spell, then transferred them to his own personal Portable Fortress.

Thanks to the Digitalization, even in this state they could still be saved. This was hardly a surprise in Wyatt's case, as a Vampire Progenitor could even survive prolonged dismemberment, but Enya's survival was unexpected.

The heat that should have killed her had kept her wickedly alive, ravaging what was left of her body while stabilizing her wounds. However, even with the Myrtharian Body Passive, regrowing her entire body was no easy task. She was missing essential abilities.

For now, even if she survived she was effectively crippled. At least until the Ordeal ended.

"Sorry guys, I hope you won't hold it against me too much." Jake muttered as he teleported near Lucia's dying body to bring her to safety with the others.

Just then, before he could save anyone else, the Mana Storm slammed into the earth and he too was hit by the flood of energy. Bracing himself for the impact, he turned on his Gold Stone Skin at full power, wrapping himself in a powerful telekinetic force field to keep it from reaching him.

The intangible barrier shattered into nothing within a second.

"Oracle Shield." He deployed unfazed. In the end, despite his strength, he had only lasted a second longer than Anti-Life's cannon fodder before activating his own shield.

He had no way of knowing what was going on around him. His mental sense was breaking down at the slightest brush with the Mana Storm, aggravating his throbbing headache.

Jake began to count the seconds, or rather the milliseconds, hoping that the Mana Storm would be enough to interrupt Ruby's meal, but it was then that the lost and terrified face of her human half flashed in his mind.

Subconsciously, he teleported to where he expected to find her and found nothing but a pool of blood. Digestor Ruby was also nowhere in sight.

"Is she hurt?" He frowned, then shook his head as he realized she wasn't worth his concern.

Right now, he had his own problems to deal with as well.

SHRRIRRIIIIIIIII!

"Don't touch me, evil woman!"

The unmistakable shrill cry penetrated the Mana Storm's opacity, suddenly raising goosebumps. Digestor Ruby was still alive, and she was on the hunt for more prey to devour.

"And that voice..." Jake had a bad feeling as he recognized this one. "Rogen."

The giant Throsgenian sounded utterly terrified, which was almost as shocking as if he had suddenly become intelligent. As boorish and unrefined as both Gerulf and he were, they weren't afraid of anything.

He considered teleporting to his rescue for a split second, but a warning notification abruptly rang through his mind.

[Jake, your Oracle Shield is already about to overheat.] Xi anxiously informed him in as steady a voice as possible. [If you don't want it to be down for a long time, you'll have to turn it off preemptively.]

Jake reluctantly looked at the time that had passed since he had activated his Oracle Shield and a look of panic finally contorted his face despite his deranged mental state.

"How is that possible... It's only been 1.3 seconds!"

[Instead of getting emotional about the time elapsed, you should rather try to find a solution.] His Oracle AI gave him a sharp rebuke.

Jake immediately returned to reality.

"The Purgatory." He remembered.

This one had been shut down when he lost consciousness, but it was still functional. He quickly reestablished his connection to the artifact and fanned out the Purgatory to only about ten meters around him to maximize its density. Checking his Aether reserves, he grimly discovered that he had only 188B Aether points left. The short battle before had drained most of it.

To maximize his chances, he also went back to camp on the scrap mountain where Vhoskaud was holed up. The android had resorted to a strategy similar to his own, choosing to sacrifice its wealth to survive a few more seconds. As it turned out, Jake could also use Vhoskaud's wealth for the exact same purpose.

"Thank you Vhoskaud for your generosity. I'll make it up to you. Or maybe not." Jake snickered as he went back to wolfing down the mountain of steel.

"JAKE!" Vhoskaud was so furious that he summoned his Undead army again to get rid of him, but they crumbled as soon as they made contact with the Mana Storm. "FUCK!"

In the end, he was still a robot at heart and after realizing that no cheap solution would suffice to get rid of this greedy pest, the android accepted his fate with a sigh. He concentrated on renewing his lost parts, and stopped granting Jake, whom he already considered his nemesis, even a glance.

Jake sat cross-legged in silence atop the steel mountain and passively siphoned off its surface at a dizzying pace without understanding how he was doing it. It was the same kind of instinctive skill as breathing or eating. His body knew what to do.

The mini Purgatory he had deployed around him filled with lightning, lava, magical metals of all kinds and radiation, shaping a sphere of light as blinding as the sun around him. Ironically, Vhoskaud was the first to suffer.

While only the metal near Jake had previously liquefied, the heat and lava spewed from the Purgatory that wasn't immediately disintegrated by the Mana Storm then trickled down onto his mountain of scrap metal, causing the hapless Vhoskaud to overheat like a pressure cooker.

If he didn't have a foolproof shield like Psykow's, his circuits would most likely have melted. This only made him more resentful of Jake.

"I swear I'll make you pay for this." The android promised himself mentally, his joints clicking in frustration.

Although Jake would normally have been pleased with Vhoskaud's misfortunes that had been plaguing them all the way through the Ordeal, his face was about as grim as the android's.

SHHRRRII!

Digestor Ruby's screams had not ceased to blare, and neither had the Players' screams of agony. Every thought that crossed his mind coincided with the deaths of hundreds of people. He just prayed with all his heart that no Myrtharian Nerds were among them but it was unlikely.

[You lose 15B of Aether points per second. Xi notified him a beat later. [Your Purgatory must produce 700 tons of matter per second to nullify the Mana Storm, but the latter's density is also skyrocketing. According to my calculations, you'll run out of Aether in 7.3 seconds.]

Jake jumped to his feet. "That's not enough."

His wealth wasn't enough. He didn't have strong enough shoulders to bear this kind of reckless spending. His shrewd gaze drifted down to the mountain of scrap metal again.

"Sorry Vhoskaud, but I'm going to have to rely on your wealth a little more actively."

Chapter 878: Main Mission Completed

Using his metalmancer talents, Jake seized control of the liquefied steel beneath him and his body suddenly began to sink as if he had just fallen into a lake. Vhoskaud, who didn't expect Jake to handle his machines in this way, was caught off guard and didn't have time to reorganize his defenses.

BAM!

Jake landed heavily on his intangible shield, but due to its properties he passed through it, reappearing on the other side to the robot's utmost relief. However, although he did not charge back, he steadied his position a few feet from the spherical force field, becoming the android's unwanted roommate.

"Get the fuck off of me!" Vhoskaud ranted from inside his bubble.

"No." Jake shushed him with a sneering smirk. "I feel great and my parents always told me that a guest should always honor his host."

"I didn't invite you!"

"Oh?! Thanks by the way for inviting me here." Jake continued to spout nonsense, ignoring his whining. "I thought all necromancer robots were bad guys, but you're really nice. So much for appearances."

If the android had a body made of flesh and blood, his blood pressure would surely have shot up so high that his heart might well have exploded. In the end, all he could do was grind his knuckles to vent his pent-up rage.

Now that Jake was inside his machine formation, Vhoskaud had plenty of ways to tackle him. If he put his mind to it, he was 40% confident he could one-shot him.

If only that Mana Storm didn't restrict his movements. He was afraid that if he attacked Jake, he would go berserk and resort to a suicide attack.

The Ordeal was virtually over. He only had to survive a few more seconds and it wasn't worth taking such risks by sacrificing his precious ammunition for a short-lived victory.

"I hope I won't meet him in my next Ordeal..." The android sighed as he embraced the harsh reality.

Jake had no intention of pestering him either and the two Players, one human, the other android, waited in silence for the end of Ordeal notification to be issued. One second, two seconds, three seconds ticked by...

Digestor Ruby and her victims' screams grew scarcer and scarcer, until they stopped altogether. Could it be that everyone else was dead but them? This end of Ordeal was much more anticlimactic than he had imagined.

Seven or eight seconds later, even without using his mind sense Jake knew something was wrong when he saw Vhoskaud stand up grimly, his robotic face plastered with an expression that looked very much like human fear.

"What's going on?" Jake asked with a deep frown.

Vhoskaud was in no mood to answer him, but remembering that they were in this together he said gloomily, "The Ordeal should be over by now. With the exception of Psykow and Neri and a handful of elites, the Anti-Life Players shouldn't be able to survive more than a few seconds in this Mana Storm. I'm sacrificing 10 times as many machines per second as when the Mana Storm arrived, and the spells in it are starting to get more complex."

This was no lie. Jake could feel with his mind how eerie bolts of multicolored Mana were running through the network of machines surrounding them, causing a chain of reactions with random effects.

At one point, the metal making up the army of androids and machines suddenly turned into water, then into sand snakes before blowing up into a cloud of glittery butterflies.

Further on, the machines had abandoned their tight formation to kill each other as the metal in them vaporized, spawning a rain of acid. Nearby, the robots collapsed in on

themselves as if they had entered an invisible steamroller before shattering into particles that smelled like freshly cut hay.

This was the greatest danger of the Mana Storm: the unpredictability of the spells it housed. The very reason why, despite his toughness, Jake had never dared to touch it directly.

If he knew what he was dealing with, he could produce countermeasures, but in this case the problem was that he had no way of predicting what kind of spell would hit him.

"If you think they're dead, why isn't the Ordeal over?" Jake asked solemnly as he took in the gravity of their plight.

Vhoskaud sneered at his nemesis' courteous tone, but he wasn't in the mood to mock him either. His electronic chip and Jake's brain began to mull over possible explanations by tacit agreement, and they both came to the same conclusion a tenth of a second later.

"There are 10,000 buildings in this city. One for each of the victors." Jake recalled, his face lighting up.

"The Mana Storm will not disappear as long as this planet exists." Vhoskaud calmly echoed. "In that case, the role of these buildings is to protect us during the destruction of Quanoth. If we find the right building for us, we should be able to get in."

A gleam of smugness and gloating flashed in the android's eyes and awarding Jake a dismissive snort he vanished, teleported away. As he left, the mountain of discarded machinery collapsed, swallowed up in less than a third of a second by the Mana Storm.

"Tche, he could have at least walked me back to my building." Jake tsked as he teleported in turn to the location of his presumed building that he had memorized upon reaching the surface.

It wasn't hard because he could feel it calling to him in his mind, as if they were destined. Even if he couldn't see anything in the Mana Storm he would be able to find it as if he had his very own compass.

He had already turned on his Purgatory, but when he saw 7B Aether points go missing as soon as he activated it he couldn't help but insult Aurae with every name he could think of. This Ancient Designer really had no manners.

The building that appeared in front of him was a rectangular block of black metal with lava veins and black lightning that wasn't there before. The ground around it was lower than the rest, as if a gravitational field was squeezing it. Undoubtedly, it was his building.

The only hitch was that there was still no door.

"What am I supposed to do? Have faith and dive right in?" Jake winced as he knocked on the walls looking for a mechanism to no avail.

Losing patience, and refusing to waste any more Aether at the risk of damaging his Purgatory, Jake rammed his head down into the wall, praying that it would just open.

His instincts were right! Without even having to say "Open Sesame," he went through the wall as if it didn't exist. It was as simple as that.

At that very moment, he received a welcome notification from the Oracle System:

[Main Mission (completed): Find a way to board the Celestial City. If you fail, you will be left to suffer the Purge with the rest of the damned. Rating : Perfect]

"That's it? I fulfilled my main Ordeal objective just like that?" Jake blurted out, finding the end of this mission far too easy.

Then he mused a bit more earnestly about what he had just gone through and realized that this end of Ordeal was in fact anything but easy. He had come close to death many times and the slightest mistake would have been fatal. In fact, he had even been spared once by the Nullifier.

Besides, most of his subordinates had not managed to make it... Thinking of them, his face broke down as he realized something.

If there is a building for every victor, what will happen to the Players in my Portable Fortress?

Xi hurriedly answered in his head with a speculative tone,

[I have no way of backing up my words, but knowing Aurae and the Oracle's methods I'm willing to bet a ton of liquid alloy that they will be disqualified and their main mission will be considered a failure even if they do survive thanks to you.]

"Fuck." Jake facepalmed.

He had barely made it to safety and already had to leave the building.

"Xi, please show me the Celestial City map I captured earlier with my Oracle Scan." He demanded in a weary voice.

[Right away.]

Jake inspected the appearance of each of the ten thousand buildings and with Xi's help identified those that might match his friends'.

Currently, he had Lucia, Enya, Aisling, her mother, Carmin, Wyatt, and several other Myrtharian Nerds and Pureblood Vampires hidden in his Portable Fortress. Their condition was worrisome, but if he could still feel their spiritual fluctuations that meant there was still hope.

Just when he thought he was done, he sensed movement in Aisling's bloody crimson hair, or rather what was left of it. Having smashed her skull, her sleeping face had none of the glamour expected of a Succubus.

Two pairs of translucent pale blue wings popped up from the mass of hair, followed by a lovely tiny familiar head.

Chapter 879: Do What You Want

"Jeanie?" Jake blinked twice, unable to fathom how the weak fairy was still alive and unharmed to boot.

Scratching her head haggardly, the fairy froze when she heard his voice, a shudder of utter terror making her shake all over. Slowly turning her head toward the owner of that booming voice she swallowed loudly and stuttered,

"J-Jake?"

He could guess where the distant attitude and fear she felt towards him came from. He tried to smile as usual.

"You're safe as long as you stay here."

Even if she was disqualified from the Ordeal, she wasn't a Player in the first place. It was more the natives like Galadin and the other Drur that concerned him. They had no bracelets and he didn't know if they had found their building. If they died, it would be permanent.

Seeing that Jake was the one she remembered, Jenny immediately burst into tears and threw herself onto his face, blocking his breathing momentarily.

"Wuwuwuu! I thought I was dead, but it was just a nightmare. There was an evil monster that looked like you and everyone had lost their minds and were stupidly trying to attack it. I was so scared!"

Jake was so remorseful that she had to endure that, but he mostly picked up on something else.

"You say you had a nightmare? Were you one of the ones who lost your mind?" He inquired in all seriousness.

"No. I was just Jeanie. After Aisling tried to swat me with her fist I hid in her hair and made myself as inconspicuous as possible. I still thought I was going to die when the fist of the monster looking like you descended on me. I blacked out just after and when I woke up I was standing in front of you."

Jake remained silent after her story. From what she said, she should have died.

"Any good explanation for this miracle, Xi?"

[She's a native of this world, so her body is digitized, but she's also a Min Min, a spirit fairy made of Mana and Aether existing only to boost a specific attribute of the one who devours her. Intelligence in her case. If this is her strong point, it is not unlikely that she could keep her sanity and survive a purely physical attack. I even suspect that the Mana Storm is beneficial to her instead of harmful.]

Pondering over his Oracle AI's words, his curiosity won out and he decided to scan her. The result amazed him.

[Level: 92 (Digitized)]

[Species: Minmin (sub-fairies species)]

[Class: Intermediate Magic Appraiser (10% intelligence, perception and extrasensory perception per level)]

[HP: 7 (Regen: 1.155HP/day)]

[MP: 10000]

[Strength: 0.5]

[Agility: 6]

[Constitution: 0.7]

[Vitality: 5]

[Intelligence: 726100]

[Perception: 9.1]

[Extrasensory Perception: 3000]

[Luck: 0]

Water Mana Core lvl 10]

[Reference for an adult human jobless level 1: HP:10, stats: 1.]

Stunned, he couldn't help but mumble,

"What on earth..."

Jake remembered her previous status perfectly. She was only level 26 and her intelligence was only 3100. Her class had not changed and even assuming the ridiculous idea that she could have gone from level 26 to 92 in a few months her intelligence should have only quadrupled in the best case scenario.

Her current status was totally unthinkable. The most unsettling thing was that he hadn't noticed anything in all that time. Even at this very moment, by examining her with his mental sense he could not detect any difference. She still looked weak and unremarkable.

At least now he knew how she had managed to resist Psykow's spell.

'Xi, any theories?' Jake probed Xi's opinion again, this time with real expectations.

Unfortunately, his AI Oracle was as confused as he was.

[The Oracle System archives I have access to do not reveal this information about the Min Mins. I was wondering why their species was hunted to near extinction in the Mirror Universe. That could be the reason. It seems that under the right conditions, their growth becomes exponentially faster. If this property is found in the one who devours them... Then, they're priceless.]

Listening to Xi's hypothesis, a sudden surge of hunger burst forth from the depths of his mind, threatening to engulf his consciousness. A predatory, oppressive aura surged from his body, petrifying the terrified little fairy in place.

"J-Jake?"

Grabbing the air in front of him, he brought the paralyzed fairy to his mouth and opened his maw, revealing a row of translucent fangs. Jeanie immediately closed her eyes, unable to face what was to come.

[Jake!] Xi called out crisply in his head, snapping him out of his numbness.

Jake's eyes became clear again, and he put the frightened fairy down.

"I'm sorry, it won't happen again. It seems I wasn't able to completely thwart Psykow's magic."

Jeanie cautiously opened one eye and seeing that he was smiling again, she nervously laughed to hide her terror.

"HA, HA, HA, very funny. What a joke! For a second there I really thought you were going to eat me!"

"Jeanie..." Jake interrupted, staring at her solemnly.

"What?"

"Stay here. I still have to save the others."

The Min Min began to shudder again as she heard he was leaving. She didn't want to be left alone anymore. Clenching her small fists, she shouted,

"No! I'm coming!"

Before he could refuse she flew to the top of his head and sat on the front of it, grabbing two silver strands as if they were the reins of her mount to hold on to.

Jake briefly considered taking her down, but remembering that she had been given an Oracle Device and time was running out he decided to let her do as she pleased. If Xi's assumption proved wrong and the Mana Storm killed her in one fell swoop, she would be saved by the Oracle regardless.

"All right, do what you want." He relented with a defeated look on his face. "Don't come to regret it later."

"Hmm."

Jake couldn't see her expression, but at that moment a determined and slightly sad look clouded her face. She had made her decision.

"Let's go."

Taking a deep breath, he checked the Aether he had left and the buildings that might match his companions, then charged outside.

The Mana Storm hit him hard and his Oracle Shield instantly shattered.

"Water Spirit Shield." Jenny yelled.

Her body began to glow, illuminating Jake's silver-gold hair with a blue halo that spread to the rest of his body. The deluge of millions of different Mana streams smashed against this barrier and was immediately purified, converted into invigorating water.

This water condensed on the surface of Jake's skin, seeping through the pores of his skin. The mental exhaustion and fog that had prevented him from functioning since his soul was damaged was significantly relieved, his Spirit Body quickly recovering.

"What magic is this?" Jake was dumbstruck, but he knew this was not the time to ask questions.

In fact, it was a basic spell that any Advanced Water Mage could use, but somehow in Jeanie's hands this spell had become capable of negating, purifying, and absorbing the Mana Storm's energy to turn it into a psychic healing spell.

It wasn't unheard of, but it was the sheer extent of its effectiveness that was breathtaking. The Mana density currently packed into the Mana Storm was not something a native of this world could dispel with a simple cleansing spell, no matter how advanced.

Refocusing on his goal, Jake teleported in front of an ancient palace supported by tall white marble Corinthian columns and covered with a golden tiled roof. The word "Victory" was engraved on all the walls in countless languages, including Oraclean, and Jake understood that it was destined for Lucia.

Without hesitation, he dashed towards the doorless wall and when his palm was about to collide with it, he brought Lucia's body to the front. The passed out body of the Myrthidian princess went through it and he somehow knew that she was safe.

"Next."

With a few successive teleports, he phased in front of the other buildings on his list and managed to shift Enya, Aisling, her mother Xaverie, Wyatt, Carmin, and the other Myrtharian Nerds and Pureblood Players under his care into the dwelling that was meant for them.

The task took him no more than half a second with his current abilities.

"Shall we go inside?" Jeanie asked with a quaver in her worry-stricken voice.

Jake sensed something was wrong as he perceived her change in attitude. Perhaps he had overestimated this Water Spirit Shield, or maybe there were other dangers lurking outside. He immediately thought of Ruby.

"Not yet." He finally replied, remembering Gerulf, Rogen and the other Myrtharian Nerds still alive when the Mana Storm first descended.

If there was even the slightest chance that one of them could have weathered the Mana Storm while stuck outside, he needed to know for sure. His perseverance was rewarded faster than he expected. Teleporting to the battlefield of Gerulf and Rogen, he came upon two shapeless masses of matter and energy.

At first he thought the Mana Storm had begun to evolve, but a hoarse, distorted voice escaped from one of the two formless masses upon recognizing him.

"Jake."

Chapter 880: Doing Good Deeds

"Gerulf?"

In that case the other shapeless mass had to be Rogen. He had been wondering what would happen if he was hit directly by the Mana Storm and now he had his answer.

Death was not the worst possible outcome.

Because of the myriad of spells coexisting within the Mana Storm the effects on their victims were unpredictable. If they were hit, it was the end, but that end could take many forms.

In their current state, Gerulf and Rogen could no longer even be considered living beings. Even their Spirit Bodies and souls had gone through a change of form and nature and Gerulf uttering his name was just his last instincts trying to formulate a coherent thought before fading into oblivion.

Because his mental sense melted away as soon as it came in contact with the Mana Storm, Jake couldn't say for sure what was happening to them, but from what little he could see with his Myrtharian Eyes, the two giants had delayed their deaths by using a method similar to Vhoskaud and himself.

By producing lava, rock, metal, and ice through their Stone Skin, they had tried to encase themselves alive under a gigantic amount of matter to block the Mana Storm, but it had eventually reached them anyway. Their bodies were affected first, then their minds, but Jake had underestimated the resilience of their Aether Code.

A high-grade Bloodline couldn't be broken down so easily. The Aether making up their Runes was so dense and precisely intertwined that not even the Mana Storm could immediately corrupt it.

The same was true of their Soul, the Aether Soul Runes that made up their Soul were probably one of the trickiest things to alter since it was like rewriting a person's psychic

identity. Gerulf and Rogen were not the sharpest knives in the drawer, but they were the most stubborn people he had ever met.

Regardless, even these two giant louts were about to reach their limit. Psykow's spell had already severely damaged their souls and the Mana Storm was about to disperse and absorb what was left. Within a minute, their Aetheric and psychic signatures would become inseparable from that of the Mana Storm.

"I made it in time." Jake praised himself, wondering what would have happened if he hadn't found them.

Would the Oracle have pulled them back at the very last moment before their souls ceased to exist, or did it know ahead of time that Jake would save them and could therefore afford to let them suffer a little longer? He wished he had the answer.

"Okay, Gerulf and Rogen try to hold on a little longer." Jake said as he levitated around them, figuring out how he could shift them.

The first thing he had to do was separate them from the Mana Storm, but unfortunately none of his abilities, not even his telekinesis, could resist the Mana Storm for more than a thousandth of a second.

"Jeanie, do you think you can extend your Water Spirit Shield to Gerulf and Rogen?" Jake asked without much hope.

She hesitated, then said, "If you touch them it should be possible, but they are already part of the Mana Storm. Their Mana is extremely chaotic. If you touch them, my barrier will indeed extend to them, but then you will be affected by the Mana Storm."

Jake hesitated in turn, then made his decision. "Do it, please."

"Hmm."

Flying towards his two friends, he activated his Purgatory just below his feet to recreate his ideal environment and tap into an unlimited source of energy, then triggered his Gold Stone Skin to full power and his appearance quickly transformed into that of a ridiculously bloated and ungainly black steel golem. At this point, he looked more like a robot than Vhoskaud itself.

Inspired by the method Gerulf and Rogen had used to hold out until now, he wanted to use the metal produced by his body to offset the energy of the Mana Storm. Having seen how Vhoskaud's army and his two friends had ended up, he knew that this method had its limits, but his Bloodline's Grade was also higher than his friends'.

For some inexplicable reason, his interest in devouring and assimilating new things to enrich his Bloodline and his arsenal of abilities had gradually increased during this

Ordeal. First, there had been the magic metals such as Orichalcum or Adamantium, then the hydrogen from the sun, and then recently the black lightning from the dark clouds.

His recurring successes had boosted his confidence in his stomach, and while the black lightning had posed enormous risks to his companions, he was the one, along with Ruby, who had had the easiest time making this power his own.

And most of all... Lately he was always hungry. Hungry for new things and that was something that ordinary food could not satisfy.

And this hunger had dramatically increased after overcoming Psykow's magic. In his mind, there was only one thought that was rapidly growing louder and louder: "I want to know what this Mana Storm tastes like."

Both of his hands touched Gerulf and Rogen, or rather the meters thick hybrid metal covering them and the bluish halo enshrouding them immediately spread to the two shapeless masses of Mana and matter. Although he had expected it, the layers of steel he had produced to delay the Mana Storm crumbled or changed appearance instantly upon contact with the contradictory energies swirling within them.

The millions of hostile energy streams raging through the two giants' bodies made contact with his skin at once, and an untold pain swept through the affected area of his skin, spreading immediately to the rest of his body.

If he had to describe the pain, it must have been the pain Wolverine felt when molten Adamantium was injected into his skeleton, only a thousand times worse. It was the awful, agonizing sensation that some foreign force was taking over our own bodies, eroding our very existence from within at a staggering rate.

Unable to control these mana flows, he could only bring his mouth in front of one of them in an attempt to devour it. At some point, knowing that his time was running out, he teleported with the two giants, throwing them directly into their respective buildings, which fortunately resembled them.

At this point he might as well try to look for other survivors in the same condition as Gerulf and Rogen and while an inferno of pain was gradually building up inside his esophagus, then his stomach, he continued to teleport at full speed, finding several other survivors to his surprise.

The first was Hephais, whom he found unconscious and badly injured in a sea of shadows. The mass of darkness seemed to be effective against the Mana Storm, as if the Mana flows were lost within it instead of clashing directly with the latter.

The second survivor was the mysterious alien woman who had fought alongside them and who seemed to have the ability to adapt to any environment. As before with the black clouds, she did not immediately perish upon contact with the Mana Storm.

Her body changed shape and consistency rapidly, becoming a multi-colored Mana being flashing at a very high frequency before becoming as dark as a black hole, letting no light escape. She seemed to vacillate between these two states, but Jake could feel her struggle weakening. Her consciousness was already affected or she could have easily found the building that matched her all this time.

Jake hesitated to save her, realizing that they were complete strangers but having done nothing to harm them he decided to do the right thing and with Xi's help identified the building meant for her.

The third and final survivor he found was Drastan. The Troll Hunter regenerated over and over again, rebuilding his already unrecognizable body. His Aether Code had finally been affected and his regeneration was finally starting to falter. He only had a few seconds left. If Jake had found him two seconds later, he would have been gone.

After his third rescue, Jake still wanted to look for survivors, but the searing agony in his body prevented him from doing so. Crippled with pain, he fell to the ground on all fours in the middle of nowhere and his vision blurred.

"Jake!" Jeanie wailed in panic as she pulled on his hair to wake him up.

She was the only one that the Mana Storm left unaffected. If Jake could see her current Status, he would have seen that her level had reached 97 and her intelligence attribute had broken the million mark.

The bluish radiance pulsing from her small body deepened and the Water Spirit Shield enveloping her and Jake began to condense from a gaseous-liquid appearance to almost solid-like ice. Despite this, Jake did not immediately find the strength to get up.

Vaguely hearing the fairy's terrified screams as a distant echo, he snapped out of his daze a second later and grunted with a pounding headache, "I hear you. Stop yelling in my ears."

Chapter 881: Fuck You Oracle

His vision came back into focus and pooling what mental strength he had left, Jake wobbled to his feet with great difficulty. If anyone could see his insides right now, they would have diagnosed him as dead on borrowed time.

His stomach, instead of looking like a skin sack, now looked more like a sea urchin saturated with black light. Those needles were mutating and deteriorating the mucous membranes and organs nearby, transforming those cells from the inside out in a way that did not look like evolution.

Despite Jeanie's help, his digestion of the Mana Storm was failing. Jake knew his body better than anyone else and he knew it was in trouble.

It was no longer the time to worry about others. Charity always began with oneself. Giving others money you didn't have, compromising your health and your future for others was never a wise idea.

'If I forgot to save someone, sorry. I did my best.' Jake inwardly apologized without showing any sign of guilt. He didn't owe anyone anything.

The Mana Storm's conflicting energies finally flowed out of his digestive system and into his bloodstream. His lava veins were snuffed out, first changing color unceasingly, then turning black. The blood affected by this melting pot of spells irrigated his brain a split second later and his already awful headache reached unprecedented heights that he would not have dreamed possible even in his worst nightmares.

"AARRRRRRRGH!"

He thought he had seen it all, experienced it all after exposing his Spirit Body to the radiation of a star, but at that moment he realized he was still wet behind the ears. He was far from having experienced the pinnacle of suffering.

Jake hadn't even taken a step when he collapsed to the ground again.

"Jake!" Jeanie began to sob as she bit her lip, shaking with despair. She really didn't know what to do to help him.

With nothing else to do, she concentrated harder than she ever had in her entire pathetic life and doubled the power of her Water Spirit Shield again. Jake's symptoms were immediately alleviated, but the Mana Storm was not purged. Still, his mind regained some strength and as he vomited a gush of black blood he staggered to his feet once more.

While he still could, he bit his tongue until it bled and tried to teleport directly to his building. He failed miserably.

Amidst the general indifference, he crashed with Jeanie a few meters further than his previous position. Even his body was failing him. Like Gerulf and Rogen before him, he could barely feel his lower body. Looking down, he saw that his legs had begun to warp, their structure becoming more and more like the Mana Storm. His arms and torso were following the same path.

Only his brain, and more specifically the Aether Soul Core located under the glabella of his forehead, was stubbornly resisting, its spiritual energy condensed to the extreme to buy himself some time. It also meant that he was no longer able to muster any mental power, nor could he cast any Aether or Reiga Spells.

"If I can't teleport, I'll just walk." Jake gritted his teeth and after getting up a third time began to walk on his hands while he could still feel them.

Pushing hard against the ground with his forearms, he propelled himself a hundred meters or so forward, covering a good bit of the distance between him and his destination. On the third leap, his arms failed him, his bones giving way under his weight and turning into billowing light.

Rolling over onto his back, he lifted his upper torso with difficulty, took a sharp breath and exhaled with all his might. A blast of air rocketed him twenty meters away, then his lungs gave out. He was in so much pain that he couldn't even think straight.

If Xi hadn't taken the initiative at that moment, he would surely have died.

[Oracle Heal.] She said casually.

Indeed, he still had an Oracle Heal left! His body, 90% converted into Mana Storm, immediately returned to its original appearance, but the conflicting Mana currents inside him were not purged from his system.

Nonetheless, for Jake it was more than enough to change the game. The pain subsided to bearable levels, his soul regained its full integrity, his spiritual energy levels peaked, and his body regained its Olympic fitness.

On the surface, he was back to where he started, but his situation was in fact radically different. Before, he was already injured and exhausted, both physically and mentally, but now he was at full strength. The other crucial difference was that a tiny portion of the Mana Storm had indeed been digested and absorbed into his cells.

The matter produced with his Gold Stone Skin had also neutralized a significant amount. Thanks to Jeanie's Water Spirit Shield, the Mana Storm on the outside could not reach him. After his last rescue, he hadn't touched anyone directly and that meant that the Mana Storm's energy wreaking havoc on his body could only decrease.

Jeanie nearly fainted with happiness as she saw Jake heal instantly. It was probably the most miraculous case of instant healing she had ever witnessed. And it was coming from a fairy who grew up in a world where magic was part of their daily lives.

Rejuvenated, Jake tried to teleport again, but this time he was caught off guard when nothing happened.

"Hmm? What's going on now?" He frowned.

"Cough cough."

Hearing Jeanie cough at the top of her lungs, he reached out with one hand and brought her down to his face. The tiny Min Min glowed a million times brighter than an LED light, but with his acute vision he noticed her pallor right away along with the clammy sweat dripping from her entire body.

"You should have told me if maintaining that healing barrier was wearing you out." Jake smiled wryly. "I wouldn't have tried to save everyone."

She shook her head vehemently.

"It's not that. The Mana Storm has become... heavy." The fairy gasped for breath.

Jake immediately focused on his own sensations and realized she was telling the truth. He hadn't considered this because his basic strength was almost 110,000 times that of a normal human. In contrast, Jeanie's was only 0.5 the last time he checked. That was half the strength of a full-grown man despite being over level 90.

As the Mana Storm grew in power, its density also increased. Ironically, Jeanie had no trouble resisting its baleful energies, but its "weight" was capable of crushing her.

It didn't account for his failure to teleport, though.

[The Mana Storm saturated the air with so much energy that space has become unstable.] Xi suggested gloomily. [I advise you to hurry back to your building before spatial rifts start popping up everywhere. When that happens, the planet Quanoth will cease to exist for good.]

"How much time do I have?"

[A few seconds at most.]

He covered Jeanie sitting in his palm with his other hand to relieve her of her burden and then broke into a sprint toward his building. Now that he knew Jeanie was so frail, he was careful not to accelerate too sharply. She seemed to be able to withstand sudden bursts of acceleration despite her small body, but the last thing he wanted was for her barrier to inadvertently go off or his life would be in danger.

A building loomed in front of him and Jake breathed out in relief, his tension easing just a little. Without slowing down, he ran straight into the wall and then,

BAM!

He slammed into the indestructible steel wall. The rebound threw him violently backwards and he ricocheted on the ground several times before stabilizing his fall. Dazed, he congratulated himself for having such a solid head.

If this was the Jake of his third Ordeal his skull might have exploded like an overripe fruit if he had hit it at that speed. Minerva's barrier that he had collided with while flying at top speed still appeared from time to time in his nightmares.

Disoriented, Jake jumped to his feet and looked carefully at the building in front of him. He immediately noticed that he had a problem. A huge problem.

This was the wrong building.

"Silver-gray walls, ice-blue veins streaking its surface, black lightning, some weird light and other kinds of energies I can't quite identify..." Jake calmly listed. As he listed the characteristics of this building, his expression darkened, becoming more and more sinister.

No matter how he looked at it, this building was unmistakably that of...

[Ruby.] Xi answered in his place.

A foreboding feeling suddenly chilled his blood. It was soon confirmed when he received a notification from the Oracle System:

[Special Ordeal Mission: Prevent Ruby's Digestor half from entering her building. Failure will result in -1000 points in your final Ordeal Rating and a demotion of 2 Oracle Ranks.]

At the same time, he felt a hot breath at the back of his neck. He immediately understood what had just happened.

"FUCK YOU, ORACLE!"

Chapter 882: Fighting With His Own Body

Of course, that was just in his head. The urgency of the situation did not give him the chance to swear at the Oracle as he wished.

Swish!

Unable to teleport because of the Mana Storm's obstruction, he dove forward and landed on his hands, twirling around to face his enemy. A silver blurred monster swooped down on him and since Jeanie was clasped in both of his hands, he had no choice but to duck the first assault.

Having no better idea, he swerved a series of murderous blows while steadily backing away, and then tossed the little fairy into its mouth.

"Don't panic, I just need to free my hands and this is the only place the Mana Storm's pressure can't reach you." He quickly reassured her.

Then, he tried to summon his God Slayer Broadword and catching the weapon in his hand, he slashed forth without looking to stop another attack.

CLANG!

His blade met the black venom oozing stinger terminating Ruby's long chitin covered tail and with a wrist spin he deflected the projectile before slamming into his opponent's guard. He lunged forward, and his elbow connected with the plexus of the humanoid Digestor, releasing a thunderclap.

The hungry creature's glistening chitin breastplate caved in and her figure arched into a C as she was blasted away at the speed of an artillery shell. Before he could follow up with his next move, Ruby sprang back at him, merging with the Mana Storm to transform into an apocalyptic Mana Comet.

Jake's hair stood on end and he instinctively sidestepped, then grabbed the outstretched wrist of the creature that had tried to grab his throat and threw it over his head without letting go. Repeating the move, she smashed savagely into the ground several times, the Mana Storm's churning energies cushioning her fall.

All of a sudden, Jake let go of her wrist, narrowly dodging the chitin quills that had just sprung from it. The monster's tail lashed out like a whip, splitting the air at such ludicrous speed that the Mana Storm momentarily scattered in its path. A Mana Storm Blade slammed into his barely raised sword, chipping it, and Ruby's tail followed.

Gasp!

The air in his lungs emptied and his body was catapulted away. The thick layer of steel he had produced with his Gold Stone Skin to withstand the blow had been sliced through like butter. His Myrtharian Armor which had already been damaged by the Mana Storm was also ruptured.

Jeanie's Water Spirit Shield held up, buckling like a rubber band, but Jake could sense that it would not hold for long. Just now it had nearly broken. This barrier was not meant to stop physical attacks but to purify Mana and heal the mind.

"Jeanie, are you okay? Jake asked telepathically to inquire about her condition.

"Hmm. It's dark and damp, but I can move normally." The fairy's soft voice echoed from inside his mouth.

Because she was keeping her Water Spirit Shield Spell on, the inside of Jake's mouth was radiating a dazzling blue as if he had swallowed a headlight.

Against all odds, Ruby didn't push her advantage and Jake finally had a chance to check his sword. His prized Advanced Aether Artifact looked like crap, its blade looking like a deformed branch after being used as firewood for a chimney fire for several hours.

[Avoid using your Space Storage in the future. You were lucky this time.] Xi warns him a little too late.

The space was unstable because of the Mana Storm, so his Space Storage was also inaccessible. He could open it, but Xi warned him that it would destabilize the space around him. Besides the risk of damaging whatever he brought out, there was no guarantee that the desired item would appear anywhere near him.

Summoning his sword as intended in his hand, Jake had indeed been lucky. Fortunately, he was already wearing his armor, but considering its condition it was as if he was naked. All the passive bonuses provided by his gear were gone and he couldn't activate their active skills either.

Right now, his broadsword was just crude steel, not even sharpened. Except for its hardness, a butter knife would have been more effective.

He tried to cast his many abilities to figure out what he could use to fight Ruby, but whether it was fire, lava, plasma, rock, steel, lightning, or his telekinesis, nothing seemed to survive the Mana Storm for longer than a split second.

"Geez, that means I'm going to have to fight with my own body." He clicked his tongue with displeasure. He was confident in his physical abilities, but he doubted it would be enough to defeat Ruby's Digestor half in its current state.

He couldn't use his Oracle Scan, but on the last hit the monster had surpassed him in strength and speed. The only reason he was doing so well was that thanks to Psykow's magic the Digestor's soul was also severely damaged, impairing its cognitive abilities. After all, Ruby's soul had been torn in two. Even if it had given her Digestor half the opportunity to break free, it couldn't have been done without breaking some eggs.

With his intellect and martial skills he could somewhat match the monster in hand-to-hand combat, but for how long?

At that moment, his face froze.

"Why is the Oracle picking on me like this?" He grumbled in a foul mood.

Before, the Oracle had already crossed the line by instructing him to protect that ungrateful Ruby who had tried to kill him several times, but now he was even being punished if he failed to prevent her Digestor half from entering her fated building.

His gaze was riveted on the building the Digestor coveted, which he could no longer see because of the increasing density of the Mana Storm. He racked his brain to ascertain the Oracle's intentions and immediately came to the only possible conclusion.

If saving Ruby was still the Oracle's priority, then her human half was most likely already safe inside its building. By keeping the other Digestor half out, the goal was to prevent the monster from reaching her. Aside from the mystery of how a Ruby stripped of all her powers and a badly damaged soul had managed to reach her building in the throes of a Mana Storm, Jake could smell blatant external interference from the Oracle or Aurae.

"Are Trojan Digestors that important?" He muttered inwardly. Something essential was eluding him.

Jake wanted to dwell on the matter further as he enjoyed his respite, but an urgent reminder from Xi compelled him to voluntarily seek action.

[The Digestor has stopped attacking you because you're not its target. If you don't come back now, it will enter its building and it will be over.]

"Fuck!" He cursed through his gritted teeth as he pushed the ground with his feet to propel himself, spawning a shockwave in his wake.

The distance was crossed in a blink and his fist collided with Ruby's right temple as her hand probed the wall of the building for a door.

SHRRRRRIIIII!

Seeing the monster disappear hissing madly into the Mana Storm, Jake couldn't help but utter, "Thank God that Digestor isn't thinking clearly."

Not only did the creature seem incapable of using its own abilities, but if it had simply run into the wall, his Special Mission would have been a resounding failure.

As he waited for the monster to return, refusing to believe that a mere punch could defeat it, the Mana Storm prevented him from sensing that its Aetheric signature was rapidly increasing. Slowly, but surely, Ruby's Digestor half was preparing for its evolution to Rank 11.

[The Digestor is in no condition to consciously use Ruby's powers, but her racial instincts are still there.] Xi warned him in a clearly concerned tone. [She's mutating fast. Earlier she was already able to use the Mana Storm to assist her attacks, and it seems to have no effect on her.]

His Oracle AI's observation reminded him at that moment that he too was in the middle of digesting the Mana Storm. Checking the state of his organs, he frowned.

"I still can't digest it."

The countless strands of conflicting Mana energies continued to stagnate in his blood and cells, sparking a fierce battle between perpetual destruction, mutation, and regeneration that his body was clearly losing despite the fact that he was back to optimal condition.

One look at his body and Jake could already predict when he would lose control of his legs. Given the speed of his thoughts, that time might seem very long, but in reality it was only a second or two. All of the frantic rescues Jake had accomplished earlier had taken place in an exceedingly short period of time.

Just as he was beginning to hope that Digestor Ruby wouldn't come back, the pesky Mana Storm preventing him from seeing beyond the tip of his nose suddenly flooded back, converging on a certain location in front of him. The abrupt decrease in Mana Storm density caught him off guard, but far from being pleased, Xi's ominous words made him despair.

[Her mutation has begun.]

Chapter 883.1: Who Is The Real Monster (part 1)

Jake immediately threw up his guard, sensing an approaching attack. The Mana Storm suddenly condensed into a huge claw that slammed into him. He dodged with a backward somersault, but the mass of Mana he was swimming in gathered into vines and bound his arms and legs, suspending him in the air.

Jeanie's conjured Water Spirit Shield began to glitter and sparkle brightly as she tried to purify all that Mana as quickly as possible, but meanwhile Jake was effectively immobilized.

Contracting all his muscles as hard as he could to wriggle free, his biceps swelled, large blackish veins crawling across his skin. His legs in particular were already beginning to lose feeling under the influence of the Mana Storm poisoning them from within.

Sadly, the harder he tried to free himself, the more the Mana Storm kept coalescing on him, strengthening his bonds and straining Jeanie's barrier. With their wits about them, both Jake and Xi instantly predicted how this would play out and how long it would take.

"No! I will not allow myself to be trapped alive like this!" Jake snarled.

On impulse, a burst of black lightning streaked out from his body, poking holes in the Water Spirit Shield. The black lightning he had learned from devouring the dark clouds preceding the Mana Storm did not dissipate as quickly as the ordinary lightning he had tested earlier.

The condensed Mana binding him and suspending him in the air didn't give way to the black lightning, but the tremendous influx of destructive energy did momentarily destabilize the space in that area. Jake's eyes widened and he suddenly glimpsed a solution.

Grabbing the air in front of him, he condensed his True Will and gripped the whole space around himself. Aside from nearly imploding by mistake, he managed to mimic the insulating properties of Psykow's psychic shield with moderate success.

This one feat consumed 75% of his Spirit Body's energy, most of which immediately vaporized upon contact with the Mana Storm. His previously optimal mental condition deteriorated sharply and he found himself in dire straits once again.

As he kept clenching his fist to maintain the Grabbing Spell, he wiggled it to move the bubble in which he had insulated himself towards Ruby's presumed direction. A spinning vacuum sphere burst through the air like a shooting star and slammed into its rapidly mutating target like a meteor.

SHRRRIII!

Digestor Ruby, who had been standing prostrate on all fours, her wings outstretched and her mouth wide open to siphon off the Mana Storm, plowed hard into the ground, spitting out a spray of silvery blood that managed to freeze the Mana unfortunate enough to come into contact with it.

Having almost exhausted his True Will, Jake used what was left to draw Words of Power on his body with his telekinesis, more precisely on his digestive organs. Runes like "Perfect Digestion," "Instant Assimilation," "Making Mine Own the Strength of My Food," and other such periphrases expressing the same notion were stacked on top of each other, sapping what little Soul Power and Spirit Power he had left.

[Don't forget the Codexes in your possession.] Xi reminded him to make sure they had their best shot.

Jake equipped the five fused Codexes in his left hand and attempted to control the Mana Storm's behavior with them. The result was disappointing, because if there was a difference, it wasn't enough to affect the game.

'At least we tried.' He sighed bitterly.

The Grabbing Spell dissipated and the bubble melted away. Jake's consciousness also blurred and his ability to think quickly deteriorated. However, he had no intention of removing the Runes from his body.

'Now it's just a bet between who will collapse first between my mind and my body.' Jake lampooned as he let his fighting instincts take over.

His last coherent thought faded and he went into reflex mode, even allowing Xi to take control of his body if necessary. It was the kind of unspoken cooperation that only he and his Oracle AI could achieve.

Digestor Ruby glared at him, but received his fist in the face. Instead of dodging his second fist, she opened her mouth and tried to gobble it up. Jake pulled back at the last moment and brought his elbow down on her skull, smashing her head into the ground.

Xi, who was in charge, noticed that every time Ruby was stunned, the Mana Storm around them returned to its original formless state. Jake, who had begun to claw at her, closed his fists again and focused exclusively on her face, nailing her head deep into the ground.

SHRRRIII!

Ruby's tail snapped up behind Jake, who was beating her pretty face like a maniac, straddling her chest. It reared back and its sting took Jake's neck as its target.

His sense of danger alerted him at the last moment and tilting his head to the right he narrowly dodged the deadly attack. In one motion, he sliced Ruby's tail with his claws, but only managed to chip away at her chitin. Having failed, he dropped his Codexes and, with his free left hand, grabbed her tail before it could retract.

Disregarding Ruby's face, he stomped on the fearsome appendage to lock it in place, then pulled hard on it with both arms. Ruby's venomous tail was violently torn off, releasing sprays of silver blood.

Jake seemed to have the upper hand physically, but only Xi knew how critical the situation was. To gain that slight advantage, she had been manipulating his Aether flows and other physical amplification abilities like Bloodline Ignition, Aether Conversion, and her Myrtharian Warrior Trance with utmost precision.

If it was true that Jake was able to deliver enough strength to rip her tail off, it was because he was attacking intelligently by focusing on the enemy's weak joints while focusing most of his Strength Aether into the limbs needed for the actual attack.

Because the Mana Storm was still rampaging through Jake's body, Xi knew that even relying on the Liquid Alloy network she would soon no longer be able to manually

activate his abilities nor tap into his Aether and Reiga Core at the risk of damaging the Oracle Device itself.

SHRRRIIIII!

Jake swung his head back to dodge a clawed beheading, then pummeled her with his punches again. With surgical efficiency, he dislocated each of the creature's joints, occasionally releasing it to avoid the jutting quills of its chitin.

The only hitch was that although Jake was no longer thinking, Xi could see that Ruby was not fully focused on their fight. Despite the constant pounding, her mouth and pores were wide open and they couldn't stop all that mana from flowing into her body. But most importantly, it didn't take a genius to notice that none of their blows were doing any significant and lasting damage to her.

The tail that had been torn off earlier had long since grown back, and the chitin that cracked at the beginning with each of his punches wasn't even cracking anymore. Xi could foresee their resounding defeat.

As if to sound the final death knell, Jake lost control of his legs a few seconds later. The poison that was the Mana Storm had finally got the better of his lower half. Like a djinn popping out of a lamp, his legs scattered in Mana smoke and his torso lost its balance, tipping forward.

Perhaps because the pain had restored some semblance of sanity to the Digestor, she did not miss this opportunity sent by the providence. Before Jake could regain his balance, Ruby's supersonic claw tore a huge hole between his eyes, blasting the top third of his skull and much of his brain.

[Jake!]

"Jake!"

Jeanie and Xi shouted his name at the same time. With no central nervous system and his spiritual energy depleted, Jake stopped moving and was slapped away by the monster's tail.

If it had been before, the Digestor would have focused on her mutation again, but the beating Jake had just inflicted on her had awakened her instinct for self preservation. The creature opened its mouth and began to produce strange echolocations. Less than a second later, three high-pitched shrieks echoed back from three different locations.

Shrrii, shrriii, shrriii!

Jake crashed a kilometer away into an unfriendly sea of Mana, not knowing where he was. Absurd as it was, Xi had saved him by enabling his Purgatory. Before it was

irreversibly damaged, she used the reprieve to summon several Aether Sun Cores and Healing Aether Cores that Jake had recently created from his Space Storage.

The favorable environment of the Purgatory had only lasted half a second, but it was more than enough to regenerate Jake's brain, though not his mental faculties, let alone rid him of his pain.

As the Mana Storm took over his body, the pain had returned and Jake was now unresponsive. Xi also felt her control over his body weaken.

[Jake, hang in there! Do not leave me to face this alone!]

At that moment, the Mana Storm compressed around them, growing new vines even denser and thicker than the previous ones. Jake was instantly pinned down.

Just as Xi thought the situation couldn't get any worse, three winged humanoid figures emerged from the Mana Storm. She recognized them at a glance.

[The Schwazen Virtues!]

Chapter 884.2: Who Is The Real Monster? (Part 2)

They were none other than the three Virtues chasing Vexa and Radur who had fled after the death of the two other Virtues in charge of protecting the Schwazen capital. Mirror Vanguard had been unable to find them despite the active collaboration of Caphriel and the Schwazens loyal to Aurae.

Xi never expected to meet them here, in the eye of the storm.

[How did they get here undetected?] She wondered, all sorts of unanswered questions bubbling up in her mind. [Could they have been lurking until now by moving through the Mana Storm?]

It was unlikely, but after witnessing Digestor Ruby's adaptive abilities firsthand, she didn't find it so hard to believe. These Corrupted Virtues could definitely adapt to the Mana Storm if given enough time. If they knew from the start what its nature and composition was, then it was entirely possible for them to prepare in advance.

Maybe it was part of their plan from the beginning. If the other Digestor Trojans had not been culled from the Ordeal, the situation would probably have been much worse.

"Shrrriiii! Isn't that the Player who killed our brother?" The leftmost Virtue whispered in a shrill, inhuman voice that had nothing to do with their past angelic grace.

"It's definitely him." The one in the middle answered in a more normal voice, staring at Jake with a look of malice and cruelty, "His companions also killed Mahanaim. Too bad, the ones still alive are already out of reach..."

"Argue all you want, but the smell of him makes my mouth water. I'll take a bite first."

[Jake, we've got a big problem.] Xi shouted into the latter's head to get him to refocus to no avail.

Apart from tensing his muscles, squirming and flailing around like a shackled beast, he was no longer capable of any intelligent action. Not that he had any better options. His Bloodlines abilities and Spells were all but useless here.

Without giving Xi time to catch her breath, the last Virtue to speak waved its hand in front of him and one of the Mana vines binding Jake forced his right arm to unfold. The angelic creature flapped its wings once, raising a tornado of wind, and the next moment its eight wings covered in a black halo slashed the same spot: the insertion of his shoulder.

A spray of blood spurted into the air and his severed right arm was caught in mid-air by a blurred figure. When it stopped a few feet behind him, the Virtue that attacked him reappeared with his arm in its mouth. Grabbing the arm in his mouth with both hands, he pulled hard on it while clenching his teeth, tearing off a hearty piece of flesh.

"Ahhhw, so delicious." The winged monster savored with an ecstatic expression of delight.

Not wanting to be outdone, the other two Virtues pounced on him at the same time and soon after Jake was deprived of his left arm and right leg, his partially Mana-saturated blood dissipating into the Mana Storm.

[Jake!]

"Jake!"

Xi and Jeanie shouted his name in an attempt to stir him up, but in his state Jake was unable to perceive such insignificant pain. The pain that the Mana Storm flowing through his veins inflicted on him was a million times worse.

Xi used all of her computing power and searched all the records in the Oracle System for a solution, wondering why Aurae hadn't intervened. This was typically an extreme situation that required his intervention!

[Fuck! Why don't any of his Ordeals end properly!] Xi swore angrily as Jake did under an overwhelming sense of injustice, clearly influenced by their prolonged mental cohabitation.

Jake's soul and Spirit Body were in his Aether Soul Core, but the Mana Storm had already reached his brain. If the Oracle didn't bring him back now, he could very well die for good.

Crunch, crunch...

As Xi racked her brain, Jeanie could hear the three Virtues greedily devouring their snacks, commenting on each bite as if it were an exceptional gourmet meal.

"This meat is really succulent. The quality of this Aether, the richness of this Aether Code is truly otherworldly." The first Virtue to have attacked was also the most locaceous and took a malicious pleasure in stirring the knife in the wound of his victims.

The second Virtue was more calm and civilized, but totally agreed with him. "After devouring this Player I should be able to awaken several new abilities while significantly increasing my survivability and defensive capabilities."

"I want his telekinesis and his ability to control gravity." The third angel chimed in, chewing mechanically.

Seconds later, they finished their first snack and postponed their digestion until later to devour Jake before the Mana Storm melted his precious Aether Code beyond repair.

The first Virtue's clawed hands abruptly speared Jake's skull from behind, coming out the other side through the middle of his forehead holding a crystalline light bead in his finger tips.

"I just want that bead this time. I'll leave the rest to you." The creature called dibs on his Aether Soul Core, instinctively understanding that it was the most valuable thing there was.

The other two monsters were not stupid and immediately grasped his intention.

"Too bad, I wanted it too. Why don't you eat his brain instead to assimilate his memories?" The second Virtue offered in a creepy voice.

"Take it easy. I'll eat the pearl and because I'm a generous person I'll leave you his Aether Core and the other unidentified Energy Core he hides in his Dantian." The third smacked them away with his wings while spewing bullshit.

The surprise attack sliced through the first Virtue's fingers, causing him to drop the Aether Soul Core between his fingers, but just as his assailant was about to gobble it down with a snap of his jaw, a ball of blue light shot out of Jake's mouth and caught the bead in midair. As he focused his gaze on the speck of light, a tiny winged figure appeared in his line of sight.

"Shrriiii!!! Who do you think you are to come between me and my meal?" The angel hissed ominously.

Trembling with terror, Jeanie summoned her courage and shouted, "I will not let you eat his soul!"

Clutching the Aether Soul Core to her chest, a resolute and sad expression hardened her features and as she left a river of tears in her wake she shot straight into the still half-open mouth of a lethargic Jake. Stripped of his soul and his brain wracked by the Mana Storm, he was a pile of flesh with the IQ of an oyster.

Understanding Jeanie's intentions, a mixture of horror and hope swept over Xi. [Don't do that.]

But her mind yelled, "Do it!"

Jeanie passed through Jake's esophagus of her own accord and splashed herself and the Aether Soul Core into his stomach. What would happen if a Min Min and a soul ended up being digested by that same soul's body? Xi could only guess.

Xi had no choice but to take control of Jake's body and risk damaging the circuitry of his Oracle Device to redirect all available Aether and Reiga into his digestive system, sacrificing the rest of his body. His brain was already compromised anyway.

At the same time, hidden in Jake's cells, a grayish mass gloated. It had already been at work for a while, but nothing had happened the way it wanted. Sensing that the decisive moment had come, it retracted from Jake's cells and charged towards his stomach.

As the last of the grayish filaments escaped his cells, more black filaments sprang from their cores, wrapping themselves around the moving filaments. The captured gray filaments began to vibrate, emitting a "Shrrii" so faint that no one could hear it, and then they were quickly dragged by the black filaments into the cells they had just "escaped".

BOOOM!

Jake's stomach emitted a blinding flash of light and a shockwave so loud that it alerted the three bickering Virtues, but also Digestor Ruby. The monster woman momentarily stopped absorbing the Mana Storm, her predatory instincts suddenly urging her to flee.

At the same time, above them, millions of kilometers above, a titanic metallic face of cosmic proportions froze. Its six eyes, brighter than six suns, flashed imperceptibly and a crack opened at the bottom of its face, opening a chasm several hundred thousand kilometers long.

A smile. A smile that would give you the chills.

Chapter 885.3: Who Is The Monster? (part 3)

The Water Spirit Shield that Jeanie had been sustaining was abruptly extinguished, and the Mana Storm that was being kept outside of it rushed in, burying Jake inside. His body collapsed on the spot, merging with the Mana Storm.

"No! My food!" The Virtue who had nearly gotten the Aether Soul Core howled in rage and darted to where he had been standing a split second earlier and tried to grab a handful of chaotic Mana to no avail. The mass of Mana was as elusive as gas.

"Is he dead?" The quietest angelic creature of the three suddenly asked, a dreadful pang of foreboding chilling his blood for the first time in his life. His appetite seemed to be history.

"Who cares?" The third Virtue snorted. "Our meal is gone. And so is my next evolution. I should just digest what I alr-"

The Mana Storm suddenly condensed around its body, huge spikes of Mana shooting through it as if it had been thrown into an iron maiden. A huge hand composed of millions of separate Mana coalesced just above and slammed into the monster with the sheer destructive power of a 100 kiloton nuclear warhead.

The other two Virtues petrified like two mice in front of a cat, but not because their companion had just been flattened. Above this hand, a wrist, a forearm, a shoulder, and then a gigantic body materialized in the sky, gluttonously siphoning off astronomical quantities of Mana, without distinction of origin or quality.

As the chaotic Mana titan finished taking shape, four enormous translucent, blue-electric wings reminiscent of the fairy wings of a dragonfly or a butterfly unfolded behind its back: Fairy wings. Jeanie's Wings.

The bluish halo that had previously covered Jake's body resurfaced, but this time the light was so blinding and the spell so powerful that the Mana Storm was being cleansed before their eyes at a dizzying speed as if an old, dusty carpet had been washed clean with high pressure water.

An orb of crystalline light thousands of times brighter resumed its place between the titan's eyes, then scattered again, this time for good. His Aether Soul Core would not return.

The giant hand that had smashed one Virtue slowly rose up again, then with the same inhuman speed fell on the other two Virtues, crushing all their bones and organs but also their Spirit Bodies. As the Mana Storm around them was siphoned off by the

colossal entity, a phenomenon occurred that Jake had not paid attention to for a long time.

Several supremely pure Aether and Soul filaments appeared above the two corpses. There was white, red, orange, yellow... but also black. It seems that his Oracle Device had not automatically activated its Aether Compression functionality to absorb and purify this Aether. His Aether and Soul Tribute bloodline ability had not been triggered either!

The first angelic creature to be attacked, who was unexpectedly still alive after the casual slap of this Mana giant, stared traumatized at the bloody pulp and strands of Aether and souls remaining from its two brethren and swallowed loudly.

"How did the situation get so out of hand so quickly?

The corrupted Schwazen then concentrated all his energy in his eyes in an attempt to peer into the chaotic darkness of the Mana Storm making up this terrifying entity. Peeling off layer after layer of Mana as if it were an onion with utmost concentration, the fiendish creature's face dropped as his eyes fell upon another body inside the titan.

A body identical to Jake's, but subtly different was gradually rebuilding itself. The regeneration speed was not incredible for elite Schwazens like them, and even Jake's was comparable. That wasn't what had agitated the monster.

Around this body that was now nothing more than a stomach and a long small intestine suspended in the air, there were dozens, hundreds of Grade 4, 5 and 6 Aether Sun Cores and Aether Cores burning away. Whether it was the conflicting energies of the Mana Storm or the Aether contained in these Cores, it was being sucked in with the voracious appetite of a black hole.

Such energy was continuously sucked into this stomach every second, but then why was this new body regenerating so slowly? Just thinking about it, the arrogant Virtue who had never known fear felt the overwhelming urge to run away from here, so much so that it was almost painful.

Ignoring its mysteriously unhealing wounds, the impaled angelic creature condensed a ring of sharp black light around its throat, and decisively sliced its head off. The head rolled to the ground, continuing to bleed, and the Virtue shrieked in frustration. It couldn't even flee.

Seconds and minutes passed, but Digestor Ruby did not appear. She, too, had chosen to focus on her own evolution, sensing that this was her only chance for survival. If she tried to run now, her instincts were screaming at her that she would never outrun this thing. She, a Rank 10 noble Digestor had become the prey.

An indeterminate amount of time later, but no more than ten minutes, Jake painfully regained consciousness. He felt strange. Weirdly good, but different. The first thing that struck him was the mental silence, and then the silence itself.

His heart was not beating, he was not breathing and his blood was not circulating in his veins. He didn't feel the need.

After enjoying this moment of fullness, his intellect suddenly returned and the feeling of peace was suddenly replaced by a devastating rush of panic and anxiety. He realized what this could mean and mentally yelled,

'Xi, where are you?!'

"I'm here, don't shout." Xi's voice echoed in a faint, unnatural voice in his head. "But... you might notice that our situation is a tad... different."

Jake didn't react immediately. He had just realized where this incredibly relaxing sense of silence came from. It wasn't Xi's silence, but something else much more burdensome.

"Where's my bracelet?" He wondered with confusion.

Not only could he no longer detect his Oracle Device, but the liquid alloy forming an intricate network of microscopic circuits in his body was also nowhere in sight. There was no trace of it.

The Aether Soul Core under his glabella was also gone. His Soul, Spirit Body and physical body were strangely intertwined, forming a curious resonance that made it almost impossible to separate them. It looked like Digitization, but it was completely different.

If he really had to say what it reminded him of... The image of a Digestor flashed immediately in his mind.

'Right. It feels like a Digestor.' He realized with a serene calm that even he was having trouble understanding.

Jake finally opened his eyes. The Celestial City appeared in his field of vision, the Mana Storm not within sight. The city and its indestructible buildings were intact, true to their reputation.

Squinting, his galactic eyes, clear as moonlight and filled with an ocean of darkness, shone and he faintly perceived the presence of the Mana Storm 1200 kilometers away.

He was alone.

His naked body stood about two meters tall and was ridiculously good-looking and proportioned. His messy ink-black hair fluttered ghostly in a non-existent breeze. His flawless skin was devilishly diaphanous and glistening, but if someone studied him under a microscope they could have made out tiny scales of silvery chitin assembled in tight formation.

To this already flattering and inhuman physique four translucent fairy wings of many shades of blue were attached to his back, as well as a steady halo of bluish light radiating continuously from his entire body. His wings were not "cute" at all. Their sharp, streamlined shape made them both majestic and intimidating. They were natural weapons.

With a single thought, he deployed his mental sense, but a psychic wave identical to an Oracle Scan swept through space over a thousand kilometers in radius before colliding with the Mana Storm. This wave should have dissipated on contact, but strangely enough it sped up, growing in intensity after colliding with the Mana.

The psychic wave spread rapidly at the speed of light over several million kilometers, mapping the entire solar system and it was only in a certain direction where it collided with a gigantic and impenetrable spiritual barrier that it finally dispersed.

Aurae.

Their eyes met and a dead silence settled.

"What happened here while I was unconscious?" Jake muttered with growing bewilderment as he gazed at the desolate scene around him.

When Jake asked himself the question, he finally noticed his claws covered in dried silver blood and a flood of memories suddenly surged in his mind.

His body convulsed on the floor, shock quickly decomposing his face as he discovered the incredible truth.

Chapter 886.4: Who Is The Monster? (part 4)

A rush of memories and emotions that were not his own flooded into his mind and for a moment he forgot who he was.

He saw a tiny baby Schwazen hatching from an egg of light in first person as if he were that same infant. He was filled with wonder as it spread its wings for the first time, and then felt the burning ambition and hatred that drove it to seek more and more power when it accidentally learned that the purpose of its existence was to oversee this iteration of Quanoth, and then to perish with it.

The scenes and emotions that flashed through his mind became darker and crueller. The gradual descent from being an innocent and selfless angel to a feared and respected Corrupted Virtue flashed through his mind and the mass of memories and experiences added to his own.

Jake had only lived 25 years and this monstrous amount of information, almost 1,000 years of memories, nearly made him forget who he was. As he tried to hold on to his identity so that his personality would not be rewritten by this Virtue's, he experienced the Virtue's death as if it were his own.

Twenty seconds earlier...

The body of the human inside the gigantic Mana Storm titan completed its reconstruction. The lonely head of the only one of the three Virtues still alive widened its eyes in terror as a primal, predatory spiritual pressure swept across the battlefield.

The human slowly opened his eyes, an ocean of silver and darkness swirling inside them. Somehow, the human detected the angel's fear, because he cast a disparaging look at him. It was the kind of gaze that the emperor of a powerful empire might have when looking at an ant.

Well, not exactly... The emperor wouldn't eat the ant with such a vengeance.

No sooner had their eyes met than the landscape blurred around the Virtue as if he were in the cockpit of a ship entering hyperspace mode. The next moment, he entered a dark cavity filled with translucent fangs and everything went black. His head was forced by a tongue movement into a wet pipe before landing in an extremely narrow chamber.

The temperature and local brightness suddenly jumped thousands of times in a flash, exceeding the temperature and radiation level of a star's core, and the Virtue finally understood where it was.

That was its last memory. The excruciating pain of feeling its own DNA, the Aether and Aether Soul Code defining its very existence, breaking down under the pressure of an insane digesting power.

When Jake thought it was over, memories of another Virtue flooded into his mind in waves. In the same way, he relived the life of the Schwazen angel from its very first second of life to its thundering death. His own heart nearly stopped when it was smashed into oblivions by that huge hand of Mana.

The memories were not continuous like those of the previous Virtue. He only experienced bits and pieces of it that amounted to 5 or 10% of the angelic creature's total memories, but it was enough to send his mind into a turmoil from which he could not escape.

Jake learned the reason at the very end. After being smashed by that huge hand, this was not the end. The Aether filaments containing what was left of the corrupted Schwazen's soul had floated over his remains and time had elapsed silently.

Although the Virtue could already be considered dead in its state, and was totally deprived of its sensory abilities, such strong soul fragments could still passively register information. Notably, that of their own demise.

Jake could not see anything, but the excruciating pain of when these Aether and Soul Fragments were digested was impossible to mistake.

Next came the memories of the third and final Virtue present. Its life journey differed from the other two, but the ending was much the same. Its Aether and Soul filaments ended up in his stomach and were thoroughly digested.

After these three successive waves of memories, Jake could hardly remember his own name and the translucent wings on his back were spontaneously changing shape in an attempt to replicate the four pairs of silver and gold wings of the Schwazen Virtues he had become so familiar with.

The chitin scales forming his skin were frantically trying to replicate the exquisite armor those angels wore in life and if Jake had been able to inspect the result he would have found that it was a clever mix between his Gold Stone Skin and the Digestors' chitin creation.

"Jake, focus." Xi's voice echoed loudly in his mind, snapping him out of his slumber.

Another avalanche of memories rushed through his mind, encapsulating a much shorter but more relatable life: his own.

It was the only way Xi could bring him back to himself.

It was a good idea, but the three Virtues' memories were not the only ones he had devoured...

A surge of even more shocking memories was in store for him with a cruel surprise.

A three or four year old girl was bored in her wheelchair. A deep contempt for her feeble body and a seething hatred for this Aetherless barren world that prevented her from thriving overwhelmed her mind, triggering a fit of spasms...

The memory ended half a second later, when another much warmer presence banished her to the shadows.

A young girl of 6 or 7 years old was sitting in a wheelchair wearing a virtual reality headset with a smile on her face. Suddenly, someone gently poked her cheek to tell her to turn off her headset and the smile disappeared, replaced by a snarl of an enraged beast.

The hand in question reflexively withdrew, but not before losing half of her finger... When the girl took off her helmet, she was totally normal and when she saw her aunt's bloody finger she started to cry.

A young teenager of 12 or 13 years old looked at herself in a mirror, facing her own ugliness. Her right eye pulsed with a vibrant amethyst glow. When someone knocked on her bedroom door, an overwhelming killing intent spread throughout the room, coupled with a ravenous hunger.

Before an accident could happen, another presence as annoying as ever took over and forced her to become a spectator of her own life again.

A flash of white light plunged the Earth into a stupor, momentarily blinding all its inhabitants. When the teenager regained her sight, she looked out her window and saw a huge silver metallic sphere floating in the sky. Mysterious futuristic blue lines of light roamed over its smooth and polished surface.

The blue lines of light quickly thickened, becoming brighter and brighter. After what seemed to be an eternity, something sprang out. Millions of bat-sized silver spheres gushed out, spreading out fast toward the ground.

Toward her.

The window shattered, and as the disabled young woman covered her face to protect herself from the shards, her amethyst eye gleamed, a jubilant grin stretching her lips.

Her time had come.

Jake saw his own face behind the counter of the VR center where he once worked. His smile and friendliness sounded somewhat fake...

The disabled woman felt a strong urge to kill him on the spot, but no sooner had this intention crossed her mind than her unwanted "co-pilot" took the wheel of her own life.

These memories, which were not his own, flashed by faster and faster. At first they were far apart and rather blurred, but the closer they were to the present moment the more they predominated, pure hunger and murderous rage suffusing her whole being.

Except at the end. When Jake reached her very last memory, all that was left was fear and a strange sense of resignation.

Digestor Ruby had completed her evolution. Her soul was almost healed and she had regained most of her mental faculties. So she knew how powerful she was.

She was now a Rank 11 Digestor. Her average Aether stats peaked at about 800,000. Her body and mind were in perfect symbiosis and she had complete control over every one of her abilities.

She should have been invincible in this Ordeal. The Mirror Universe would become her hunting ground and she would continue to grow unimpeded.

This was what should have happened. As soon as she sensed the presence of the monstrosity that Jake had become, her Digestor instincts screamed at her that their battle for supremacy that had not yet been fought was already over.

There could only be one Apex Predator in this Ordeal, and it wasn't her.

Four fairy wings in multiple shades of blue flapped in front of her, and a familiar handsome face topped with black-hair opened his mouth. An orb of black light condensed in his open mouth and Ruby felt her consciousness stretch, then break apart as the rest of her body was sucked inside.

'So that's how it feels to be devoured by me...'

That was her last thought. Jake's mouth snapped shut and her consciousness faded, becoming part of her predator's.

Chapter 887: The Divine Academy

Jake stopped convulsing and slowly stood up, lifeless. His eye turned amethyst purple for a fleeting second before a burst of black and silver light shot out of his pupil and returned it to its normal color.

Xi replayed the movie of his own life in Jake's mind like a mantra, gradually stabilizing his psyche. When he was back to himself, she stopped on her own but continued to watch him with uneasiness.

"I'm fine." Jake reassured her in a hoarse voice.

It wasn't a lie. He was certainly different from before in so many ways that he wasn't the same person at all, but he hadn't forgotten what really mattered to him.

As the sole victor in this final battle, he felt wonderful. Seeing that there was nothing left but nothingness around Celestial City - the only proof that the planet Quanoth had ever existed - Jake felt a guilty satisfaction, close to exhilaration, but he could still tell the difference between an abnormal emotion and what morality dictated he should do.

He was hungry. A compelling hunger that was very different from the one he could feel before. It wasn't that he wanted to devour everything in his path, but rather that he wanted to taste everything. He had this instinct to expand a genetic and Aetheric database to which he had subconsciously gained access. It was a very difficult feeling to define.

Just as he was about to turn his attention to his Status, he remembered that he still didn't know where his bracelet had gone. Xi's thoughts kept surfacing from his own mind, as if their minds were one and the same.

"If our minds weren't so intimately connected thanks to the help of Xion's will fragment, I don't know what would have happened." She admitted in a gentle voice. "I really thought I was going to disappear earlier, but strangely enough I haven't. I still feel your presence. I still feel the presence of your Oracle Device, but in a more diffuse way. Something has definitely changed. For example..."

"For example?"

"I'll show you later." She murmured, suddenly silent, her attitude highly suspicious.

Jake was about to grill her more earnestly when the Celestial City began to shake, a deafening thrusting sound making him forget his previous intention. The energy shield that insulated the grandiose complex of castles, palaces and high towers that made up the Divine Academy expanded without warning at the speed of sound.

Jake was not afraid and crossed his arms with the firm intention of not moving, but-

BANG!

He was slammed away, thrown back like a tree leaf hitting a high-speed train. He suffered no damage, but at this rate, he would be driven out of Celestial City. Understanding Aurae's intention, he teleported in front of his assigned building and calmly went inside.

Between now and the last time he had visited it, the interior had changed drastically. Gone were the lava and radiation, the walls were black, rivers of liquid silver running down the walls. The interior of the room was filled with a dark liquid in which strange particles of light and blue-black lightning coexisted peacefully.

As he came into contact with the liquid, Jake immediately felt incredibly good, the chitin scales forming his skin tingling with happiness. He wanted to study this unique energy source in more detail when an elderly voice echoed loudly throughout the Celestial City as if through a loudspeaker.

"Ahem... congratulations to the 578 final winners of this Ordeal... You... truly didn't have to fight so hard. You will be allies from the next Ordeal, so I hope you can let bygones be bygones. This is my humble request..."

The introductory congratulations from this unknown speaker were different from what Jake imagined. There was a tone of reproach and obvious displeasure in his voice. He could almost guess at whom these criticisms were directed. Namely, Psykow, Neri, Vhoskaud and Digestor Ruby. Well, only Psykow, Neri and Vhoskaud now.

At the same time, Jake sensed a surge of information in his mind. He couldn't pinpoint its origin, but the data packet was easily intercepted by his mental sense. Somehow, the Oracle System was still able to contact him.

[Special Ordeal Mission (completed): Prevent Ruby's Digestor half from entering her building. Failure will result in -1000 points in your final Ordeal Rating and a demotion of 2 Oracle Ranks. Rating: ???]

Jake's gaze lingered on the ??? of the rating and all sorts of thoughts came to mind. Had he failed the mission or had he succeeded beyond all expectations? He would only know for sure when he returned from the Ordeal.

Meanwhile, the unknown speaker carried on with his introductory speech,

"You are free to end the Ordeal and collect your rewards at any time from now on. Those who wish to do so, may visit the Divine Academy and stay to study with free access to all our facilities for one year. The buildings you have so valiantly earned belong to you and can be taken away. As the Divine Academy principal, I, Grigori

Tyrastus, Rank 4 Oracle Overseer, Oracle High-Duke and Rank 20 Oracle Lieutenant General strongly encourage you to attend tomorrow's debriefing in room 207 of the Divine Academy on the second floor. Critical information for your next Ordeal will be presented. For those of you who are in a hurry to end the Ordeal, don't forget to visit the Aurae Stele near the Academy fountain to select a new Soul Class. After you've made it this far, you should have some new options... Also don't forget to..."

For someone wanting to cut his welcome speech short, this principal was unusually talkative once he got started. It sounded like someone was threatening him, and he was now doing everything he could to convince them to stay on Quanoth a little longer by praising the qualities and services of the precious Divine Academy for which he was responsible.

And indeed, when it was free, this Divine Academy was indeed a great opportunity to become stronger and to enrich one's knowledge. Unfortunately, not everything was.

Jake already knew enough about this Divine Academy thanks to the "lucky" Ulfar, who had the nerve to pop up right inside it at the very beginning of the Ordeal. The King of Beskyr had complained so many times in their Faction Chat that all the Myrtharian Nerds still alive could take a stroll with their eyes closed in this maze of towers.

In this Divine Academy, everything, even eating, sleeping and attending class required contribution points. If a student's or Player's point count dropped to zero, they were immediately expelled from the school. In the case of Players lucky enough to appear there without going through a rigorous selection process, expulsion was tantamount to failing their Main Mission.

The Oracle was fair and would not let these lucky Players off the hook. In desperation, 100 million Aether points could be exchanged for 1 contribution point.

This Grigori Tyrastus was clearly trying to extort their Aether. Especially now that the winners had spent all their Aether points to survive all those fierce battles.

"... Aurae has finished dispelling the Mana Storm and any companions you may have hidden... in outer space are free to join you here and can also access the services of my academy as long as they belong to the faction of one of the finalists. Another thing... Because of the actions of a certain Player, the sun of this solar system has been destroyed. It will be dark for the duration of your stay here until Aurae deigns to make another one. That will be all for today. On that note..."

Silence returned and Jake wore an indifferent expression, though a slightly proud smirk curled up his lips. It was really over this time. Aurae had no more bad surprises in store for them.

Jake was tempted to stay in his building for a year, but concerned for his companions he went out of his own free will before he got demotivated. He could feel that his sense

of empathy was not quite what it used to be. He worried about them out of a sense of responsibility and habit, but inwardly his heart was a tranquil ocean.

As he left his building, a dark sky, thankfully brightened by many stars, greeted him. Aurae had indeed not replaced the missing sun. The Divine Academy's energy shield now extended to the entire Celestial City, but with his mental sense Jake found that it now functioned as a filter. Authorized people could enter or leave at will.

Chapter 888: Aftermath of Psykow's Psychic Magic

At the same time, the walls of several nearby buildings rippled and several figures emerged with different expressions.

Walking out of a structure reminiscent of a futuristic bunker, Jake recognized his archenemy, and loathsome Vhoskaud. From a building darker than the sunless sky, Neri sauntered out with a sensual wiggle brimming with sex appeal. Psykow levitated out of its skyscraper, its thirteen unblinking eyes betraying neither guilt nor satisfaction after all that had happened.

Almost two hundred Anti-Life Players surfaced from their respective buildings one after the other with varying degrees of injury. A whopping 188 to be exact. Most of them looked upset, if not downright angry. They didn't appreciate being thrown into the lion's den without being warned by their leader.

Ael, Felphi, Deimos, Ashun, Dhamde and Khag' Dagmai, the only remaining members of the Lost Divinities, came out of their buildings a few seconds later, their dejected faces reflecting their dissatisfaction with their performance. Ael greeted Jake with a nod, then ignored him completely, seeming not to care about his physical changes.

All of the Mirror Vanguard Players had perished.

Jake was beginning to think that none of the Myrtharian Nerds other than those he had saved had survived, but suddenly he recognized Will and Jinlong, the dragon elder protecting him. The merchant's eyes lit up when he recognized his friend and ran to him.

"I knew you would survive!" The man exclaimed, giving him a bear hug. Though, very quickly he let go and sized him up. "Your appearance has changed again... What happened?"

"To be honest, I'm not sure." Jake admitted honestly. "Nothing too serious I hope."

Will stared at him thoughtfully, but didn't pursue the matter. What he kept to himself was that he was clearheaded when Jake had blacked out under the influence of Psykow's

psychic magic. He knew that it was none other than his leader who had killed many of his subordinates.

Well, to be exact, they had killed each other. Jake was just the strongest of them. That was his privilege. Even when he fell into the enemy's trap he could still blast through, trampling over any obstacle in his path. Tragically, at the cost of a few collateral victims...

"How did you survive?" Jake asked nonetheless on his own initiative. He hadn't lost his critical thinking skills. "Even I lost control so I wonder how you did it. Is your Soul Strength that high?"

"If only..." Will sighed ruefully. "As a Dragon Soulspeaker and Dragon Rider, my mind and Charizard's are intimately connected. You see the emerald crystal in the middle of my forehead? That's Charizard. When Psykow's spell hit me, my soul started to split, but Charizard who defends my sea of consciousness incinerated it, then devoured it before it could harm me further. My soul is currently severely injured, but Charizard who has a copy of my memories is busy regenerating the soul part I lost."

"It's convenient." Jake acknowledged. Now that he and Xi had an even closer spiritual connection they could perhaps also resort to such tricks. "So you're the only survivor among those I didn't save?"

Will was relieved to hear that Jake had regained his sanity before the end and saved more Myrtharian Nerds. Pondering quickly, he said,

"I believe the SS-Rank Adventurer native who joined us for a while survived. Galadin, I believe? Of Ruby's teammates, Craig and Wang Xiaoming kept their sanity. I saw Craig knock out his Japanese friend, Ryo, so he may have survived too. Immyr, Hade's dragon was also alive the last time I saw him, but he seemed determined to avenge his master..."

Jake and Will simultaneously turned to the Lost Divinities group and faced the obvious. Ael and Felphi were fine, but Immyr was nowhere in sight.

Suddenly, Jinlong, who was standing next to Will cleared his throat and coughed, "You made it sound like you saved people. Not to sound offensive... Where are they?"

Inwardly, he hoped that other dragons had survived. Although they had been given a bracelet in a hurry, it was too recent for them to normalize the idea that death wasn't necessarily the end.

"Erm..." Jake realized they had a bit of a problem. "They were all badly injured, some had even practically merged with the Mana Storm. If the building didn't stop their transformation or stabilize their injuries, they might have been shipped back to the Red Cube. And we can't enter another Player's building... We can only pray and wait."

"Not necessarily." The alien woman Jake had rescued walked toward them.

Now that she wasn't using her adaptive powers to adjust to the Mana Storm, she had enough restraint to not wander around naked. She had hastily put on a white bodysuit, her pale skin highlighting her long black hair and her glowing 7-pupil orange eyes. Her third eye shone brighter than the other two, giving the same vibe as the emerald shard adorning Will's forehead.

"By the way, thanks for saving me. I'm Ryne." She bowed low in gratitude although her expression and pitch were still very cold.

"You're welcome. Please to meet you, Ryne. What did you mean by not necessarily?" Jake perked up.

"Now that the Ordeal is almost over, I suspect the Players' intent prevails. If they consider you their ally, the building may allow you access."

'That's very plausible.' Xi chimed in his head.

No sooner said than done. Their group walked towards Lucia's ancient palace-like building and as they tried to knock, their fist went through the wall.

"Whew, your guess was right." Will rejoiced as he entered first.

Jake followed and they stumbled upon Lucia's body lying on the floor. The interior of the building was filled with a magical aura that seemed to contain some sort of concept, but it had no inherent healing properties. The immense amount of energy that this aura contained, however, was enough to stabilize the princess' condition. Her soul was no longer deteriorating.

"This Psykow's magic is truly disgusting." Ryne growled with a trace of fury in his voice.

"Do you know what this is about?" Jake asked, surprised that she was so knowledgeable.

"Anti-Life tried to recruit me during my Second Ordeal so I made inquiries. Psykow is a Dhox, a void alien species born from a scientific experiment that went awry. These aliens were working on a biological weapon capable of destroying civilizations without being blamed for it. As you can see, they succeeded. Unfortunately, the success was too great for their own good and it caused their downfall. Psykow is a proud specimen of this. His psychic powers are almost impossible to avoid or counter, one can only neutralize their effects. Like a virus, it manifests all sorts of mental disorders in the minds of its victims. It can take the form of a multiple personality disorder that turns against the original soul, but also other equally harmful forms such as schizophrenia, psychopathy, paranoia, borderline disorder, bipolarity, psychotic neurosis and so forth... Of course, with symptoms thousands of times more severe than those of the psychiatric

disorders I just mentioned. If a Dhox uses this kind of magic sparingly, one may not realize for several months or years that one is affected by such a spell. By the time you realize it, it is already too late. You're no longer the same person. We were lucky that Psykow was in such a hurry to end it. The only flaw with Dhoxs is that their main ability is an area of effect ability and it has no conventional cure. If he had used it earlier in the Ordeal, the inhabitants and Players of Quanoth would have killed each other much sooner, but it would also have affected his key subordinates like Neri."

That made Jake realize that if Xi hadn't used his last Oracle Heal to negate the damage of the Mana Storm, his mind wouldn't have been able to recover either. Though, he couldn't tell if his soul was in a better state now with everything that had happened to him.

"So, how should we proceed to heal Lucia? Will refocused the conversation on the very reason they were here.

"I don't know." Ryne shook her head. "I've been using my own abilities to deal with the symptoms, but they only apply to me."

Jake and Will exchanged a look but didn't ask her what her powers were. Looking for a way to help Lucia, Jake began to examine her injuries more closely and suddenly became aware of a certain detail.

Chapter 889: Green Cube?

Her skin... It was the same skin of the princess he had met during his first Ordeal. Her wavy hair was of a Venetian blond with golden streaks as when they first met, but it was not an unusual color in this vast universe.

Thinking of something, he suddenly opened one of her eyes with two fingers and an amber iris flashed. Then, Jake turned to Will and gave him a thorough examination.

"You no longer have the Myrtharian Body." He stated, struck by the realization.

Will froze, but after looking at his hands and closing his eyes to explore his own sensations, he confirmed with concern,

"The Myrtharian Body Passive is indeed gone. The Faction Skill involved still exists, but it is vacant. The leader, that is you, is supposed to select a new one."

Jake mulled over what this might imply and came to a possible conclusion. He was no longer considered a Myrtharian by the Oracle System and the Myrtharian Body naturally no longer existed. In that case, did calling themselves the Myrtharian Nerds still make sense?

"I will deal with this matter later." He finally replied after the shock of the discovery had passed.

In the meantime, it would make it harder for his comrades to recover as it impacted their Vitality and Constitution. He still had to try something.

Not having regained access to his Status, he could only intuitively feel his new abilities and after a short pause he pressed his palm against Lucia's heart. An overwhelming impulse of hunger urged him to devour what was left of her body and soul, but he immediately pushed this improper thought from his mind.

'I want to heal her, not eat her.' He repeated as if to convince himself.

At this thought, the chitin scales covering his skin began to glow with a tantalizing emerald glow, then began to multiply exponentially. It looked like the Gold Stone Skin, but soon the excreted chitin diverged from his first expectations by coating Lucia's unconscious body.

In the blink of an eye, Lucia was sealed in an emerald chitin sarcophagus. The excretion of chitin did not stop there and growth continued to build up on the sarcophagus, quickly unifying into a perfect Green Cube.

With a thought, the arm trapped inside the Cube emitted a terrifying amount of spiritual energy with the intent to heal his friend and a blinding green light burst through the room.

After a few minutes, Jake withdrew his arm from the emerald chitin cube and said, "She will heal. Let her sleep, she'll join us when she feels better."

Will had joined them late, but Ryne who was well informed about super factions jokingly said, "This ability... Is it Ancient Designer Aas' Cube Magic? I thought only Vexa was capable of that in this Ordeal..."

Jake squinted his eyes. That was what he thought too. Putting together all the information he had, he came up with a certain hypothesis.

'Digestor Ruby devoured Vexa and you... devoured Ruby.' Xi summarized. 'It seems that the perks of devouring Ruby also extend to her prey. We can infer that she had finished digesting Vexa's Aetheric material by the time you defeated her.'

Jake was becoming increasingly confused. How powerful was he to so easily devour a Digestor that had completed its evolution after devouring Vexa and who knows how many other Players?

And more importantly, what about the abilities of these other victims. Had he assimilated them as well?

As this thought crossed his mind, a flash of understanding struck him. Lines of Aether Code and DNA flashed before his eyes at a breathtaking rate and the shocking thing was that he understood it all. There was a huge genetic and Aetheric database somewhere in his mind and he could access it with a single thought.

To do what? He wasn't sure yet, but it sounded suspiciously like a Digestor talent. What exactly had he become? He was starting to get scared.

'Genetic, spiritual and Aetheric recombination.' Xi clarified solemnly in his head. "The fundamental ability of Digestors that allows them to evolve unrestrictedly by selecting the abilities they want to keep, then recombining them to create a superior bloodline. I'm afraid, you didn't come out of that fight unscathed either. For the moment, let's try not to rush to any conclusions until we know more. If you had become a real Digestor, the Oracle or Aerae would surely have taken action.'

'Assuming they took action on Ruby and the other Digestor Trojans. Did you get that impression?' Jake retorted dryly.

Xi remained silent. "How do you feel?"

"For now, great." Jake shrugged, knowing she was just asking him to defuse the tension. With their minds connected, she obviously knew everything he was feeling.

The telepathic conversation between Jake and his Oracle AI lasted only an infinitesimal amount of time, but Ryne and Will noticed the barely perceptible pause in his movements.

The alien woman was staring at him uncannily and by the way she didn't blink Jake could tell that she too was engaged in an animated conversation with her Oracle AI. A conversation in which he was probably the central topic.

"Let's go heal the others." Jake decreed as he left the building without waiting for them. Ryne, Will and Jinlong exchanged knowing looks, then walked after him.

Moving on to the buildings of the other Players he had saved, Jake failed in most cases to use the same technique to heal Enya, Aisling, Hephais, Xaverie, Aurum, Hasta, Carmine, Wyatt, and his other victims from when he was possessed by the Psykow spell. Only their physical injuries were not an issue.

Their souls were severely damaged and unlike Lucia, not all of them had found parries to the Dhox's psychic magic. Aisling and Xaverie were natives with a Spirit Body level above 80, but the same could not be said of Enya and the other Myrtharian Nerds. Their spirits could not be saved, not even with a Green Cube.

Hephais was the only exception. When Jake and the others entered he was already awake. He had used his Shadows to isolate himself from Psykow's psychic magic as

soon as he sensed something was wrong. He hadn't been completely unaffected, but he was stable.

Getting back to the other Myrtharian Nerds, Jake still didn't clearly understand his new powers, but currently Enya's mind was separated into 816 parts, each with its own personality. If he used the power of the Green Cube to help her mind heal, these soul fragments would all simultaneously grow stronger, leading to a situation similar to the one that led to the splitting of the two Rubies. Except that here, there was only one soul to begin with. Splitting her soul into 816 parts would be like killing the original Enya, each soul fragment probably so amnesiac and difunctional that it was too cruel to let them exist.

"Should I just choose one and let it devour the other ones?" He muttered in a low voice, stroking his chin.

"Choose who?" Will asked out of curiosity as he listened off to the side.

"It may work, but this woman's personality may have been devoured by her alternate personality." Ryne added her two cents. "In which case, choosing the wrong fragment would be like giving the reins to an Enya you don't want to meet. The real Enya as you know her could disappear forever. Are you sure you want to take that risk?"

Jake's face turned gloomy as he heard her warnings. He temporarily gave up trying to heal her. Apparently there was still a big difference between his Green Cube and the Oracle Heal from his bracelet.

This last mental note made him come up with another idea and he asked Will to touch Enya's bracelet with his own and check if she still had an Oracle Heal left.

"She's already used it." The merchant grimaced.

"At least I tried. Let's go check on the others."

They had no better luck with the other Myrtharian Nerds, but Aurum brought them some hope.

Not only did he have an Oracle Heal left, but the Myrmidian had used his Midas Touch on his own bracelet before he lost consciousness. As if he knew his friends would need it to save him later.

His power of wealth was extremely mysterious and miraculous, but its effects were the real deal. When Will connected his bracelet to his, he couldn't help but gasp in disbelief.

Chapter 890: Excuse Me?

"Will?"

"Oh, erm... It says his Oracle Heal is level 5. Level 2 (+3) to be exact." Will stuttered, struggling to recover from his dumbfoundedness. "Wait, I'm sending you what I see."

"Just read me what it says." Jake sighed, unable to explain to him why he couldn't access his bracelet. It might have worked, as with the earlier Oracle System notification, but he'd rather not have to explain himself.

The merchant found nothing suspicious in his request and read aloud, "The owner of the Oracle Device will have his injuries, regardless of severity, treated instantly. Range: 100 meters of radius. Allies within the range of the Oracle Heal and designated by the owner of the Oracle Device are also healed. Number of uses: 5 times per Ordeal. Outside Ordeals: the Aether Cost is 100 times that of the Green Cube. Remaining uses: 1/5."

Jake and Ryne were speechless. Aurum had planned it well. This countermeasure was perfect, as if he had foreseen his own demise.

The Myrmidian's Midas Touch was not all-powerful. Although it could raise the theoretical wealth of everything around it, it required a lot of energy and was temporary. Furthermore, the "enriched" item would be "impoverished" in the same way when its upgrade ended. It worked a bit like the Beskyrian curse of misfortune.

To produce wealth permanently, which Aurum was actually capable of, he had to accumulate a fictitious energy which he simply called "Wealth". This abstract concept encompassed his physical and mental health, his Aether points or any kind of currency in his possession, his properties, his powers and so on...

His Midas Magic allowed him to easily transfer wealth from one object to another and it was through these equivalent exchanges that Aurum avoided tapping into his own "Wealth". To upgrade his Oracle Heal, even temporarily by three levels, he had to pay a high price. It was a measure of last resort.

"Thank you Aurum. The faction will do what it takes to compensate you and even reward you for your sacrifice." Jake vowed aloud.

With this Oracle Heal, they no longer needed to look for a costly solution. Without it, their next resort would have been the Divine Academy. Jake was sure that the Divine Academy had the power to heal them, but the cost would certainly have been outrageous...

Thanks to Aurum, all was well that ended well. Their group then proceeded to carry the other Myrtharian Nerds as well as Wyatt and Carmin into Aurum's building, including Gerulf and Rogen whose condition was of much greater concern. His building produced

that "wealth" energy so compatible with the Myrmidian and that was the reason his Oracle Heal had not yet been downgraded to its original level.

"Okay, you can start Will." Jake gave him the green light.

The Dragon Soulspeaker nodded and decisively assumed control of Aurum's bracelet and activated the Oracle Heal. A wave of emerald green light spread through the room, flashing their retinas, and then everything returned to normal. Jake and the others wondered if the Oracle Heal had failed, but soon after everyone opened their eyes.

"What happened?" Carmin groaned as she drowsily rubbed her eyes. "And why am I so thirsty?" She complained, moistening her parched lips.

Wyatt was calmer, but as he stared at Jake's chest he remembered the sword he'd stuck in it in an act of self-defense. He stiffened and looking around for a weapon, he condensed a blood blade and stepped between Jake and Carmin, holding up his new sword in a defensive stance.

"Stay away!"

Jake and Will exchanged a glance. The Vampire Progenitor was obviously still a bit confused.

"Wyatt, what are you doing?" Carmine grew impatient as she squeezed his arm to get him to lower his weapon.

"Don't you remember? You drank his blood! If I hadn't saved you you'd be dead!"

A lvl 5 Oracle Heal had apparently not only healed their wounds, it had also recovered their memories. Jake also remembered what he had done while possessed by his second personality and was extremely embarrassed. The image of their heads being crushed in his hand was still a vivid memory in his mind.

"Neither you nor I were in our normal state. So let's just forget about it, okay?" Jake offered with a contrived smile, but from their frightened mouse-like behavior when faced with a big cat he knew it wouldn't be so easy.

Enya's face, which hadn't said a word, suddenly became flooded with tears, guilt drilling a painful hole in her heart. This alerted everyone.

"Enya, what's wrong?" Aisling patted her back, trying to comfort her, but she didn't know what to do to help her.

At least aside from charming a few enemies and stripping in front of Jake and the Undead army she and her mother hadn't done anything too shameful for Succubi. That Jake had shattered her body with a punch had been a blessing in disguise...

Still... As she remembered what she had done, her face temperature spiked and if she didn't have perfect control over her blood capillaries, she would definitely be beet red at this point.

"You killed Asfrid, I almost killed you all." Jake stated gravely as he forced her to meet his gaze. "Are you blaming me? Are you afraid of me?"

The Fire Mage opened her mouth, but as she crossed Jake's gaze her eyes widened with dread and a tinge of enmity. It took all her willpower to suppress those unwanted emotions. Jake obviously noticed this surge of fear and resentment.

"I guess so... Forget what I just said." He apologized, looking away. Just now he had been staring at her throat, and he had been tempted to tear it out of her with a single snap of his teeth to taste her flesh.

Something soft and squishy pressed against his back and tender but strong arms clamped tightly like a vice around his chest. That fragrance and those tanned hands he would recognize even with his eyes closed.

"I will never be afraid of you." Lucia's voice echoed against his back. Something has changed, right? It's okay, you're still the Jake who worries about us or you wouldn't have saved us."

Jake wanted to break free just now, but he gave up when he heard her voice. Right! He may not have been the same, but as long as he remembered what was important to him that was all that mattered.

"Thank you, Lucia." He squeezed her hand to let her know that she didn't have to worry anymore. Then turning to Enya, he took her in his arms, pushing her head against his chest and said, "You have every right to feel guilty or afraid of me. This Ordeal has proven to us that even with the best of intentions, we can still hurt the ones we love. In the future, please keep this mistrust and pessimism so that this situation does not happen again. I also give you permission to keep an eye on me in the event my behavior changes."

Enya lifted her chin to study his face and nodded as she wiped away her tears. "The truth is, I was thinking about what would have happened if Esya had not been eliminated. Maybe she would have died by my own hands. I wouldn't have been able to endure it."

"There is only one real culprit. Psykow." Ryne abruptly stated, ruining their reunion drama.

"Hmm? Who is this woman again? She's still with us?" Xaverie snorted condescendingly as she slipped on a new dress in front of everyone without any sense of modesty.

The others had dressed in a flash as soon as the Oracle Heal had ended. With their Agility, it was almost like a magic trick.

" This is Ryne." Will took over the introductions. "Anti-Life tried to recruit her so she knows a lot about Psykow. For those of you who don't already know, it's Anti-Life's leader who's behind the spell that made you all go crazy."

"You?" Hephais raised an eyebrow.

"Oh, yes, you. I wasn't affected." Will beamed smugly, which earned him a slew of glares.

"Gerulf, Rogen and Drastan, how are you feeling?" Jake then turned his attention to the two giants. They were the ones who had practically merged with the Mana Storm.

The first two were true to themselves. With the same phlegm as usual, they asked in sync, "Who won the fight?"

"Excuse me?"

"Who won the fight between me and Gerulf?" Rogen clarified with a hopeful look.