

The Oracle Paths

Chapter 891: The Second Aurum

Jake blinked dumbfoundedly three times as he considered how to answer the question, then realized he didn't have to lie.

"Tie game. You were both this close to merging with the Mana Storm when I found you." He confessed sincerely, simultaneously giving them a sympathetic pat on the shoulder.

The two giants deflated with dejection, their eyes staring down at their feet in disappointment. The members present could also hear Rogen muttering under his breath, "Next time I'll win."

Everyone burst out laughing and Jake couldn't help but look at them with amusement. The best thing about these two silly brutes was that they were so focused on their own duel that they hadn't hurt any of their comrades.

Despite their uselessness in the final battle, their obsessive rivalry had probably saved the lives of a few Myrtharian Nerds. If Gerulf and Rogen had really gone on a rampage on the battlefield, no one could predict what the consequences would have been for them and the enemy.

"What do we do now?" Wyatt asked awkwardly. His performance just now and during the final battle had shown him how lacking he was.

Aside from Carmin, he didn't know if any of the other Players in his faction had survived. After this Ordeal he would go into seclusion to undergo intensive training.

Everyone looked at each other with a shrug before turning to Jake. He deliberated for a second and then suggested, "Let's check for any other survivors I may not know about. I also want to know how Craig and the others from New Earth are doing."

What he kept to himself was that he wanted to know what had happened to Ruby's human half and how she had reached the building intended for her in the first place. No one had any objections with his proposal and they all left Aurum's building together.

"Hey, guys, aren't you even going to thank me? It's because of my Oracle Heal that you're all alive!" The Myrmidian cried out in outrage as he watched them leave, disregarding his existence.

They stood still and turned to Jake. Seeing his abashed expression, they realized that it wasn't their leader who had saved them.

Especially since the poor Aurum had traded in his fancy battle suit for some rusty armor that looked like it would crumble at the first whiff of wind. The other Myrtharian Nerds had a good understanding of his abilities and immediately understood what that meant.

"He speaks the truth." Jake swiftly apologized. "Without his Oracle Heal, saving you would not have been so simple and straightforward."

He then addressed Aurum directly and said, "I promised that I would compensate you for your sacrifice. Not only will I compensate you for the riches you lost to produce this lvl5 Oracle Heal, but I will also make sure you reap some profit from it."

Beaming, Aurum hurried to stop him with a contented smile. "No, no, no. No need, boss. As long as the faction compensates me, that's enough. In the first place, I kept this Oracle Heal to save myself. If it weren't for you, I wouldn't have been able to use it alone. Besides... by saving you this way I believe the Oracle will give me a special Ordeal reward."

Well, that wasn't untrue. Jake had not considered this aspect. Aurum's selfless act had indeed saved his comrades while ensuring his own survival. If the Oracle System's logic applied, he would be graciously rewarded for this outstanding feat.

Over time, if there was one thing Jake had learned, it was that the Oracle valued survival above all else. Even if a Player accomplished legendary feats during an Ordeal, if he perished on a mission then he would be heavily punished. This was because from the Fifth Ordeal on, the punishment would be much more irreversible and absolute: death.

Upon learning how much of Aurum's "wealth" he had sacrificed to produce this Oracle Heal, the other Myrtharian Nerds present felt guilty and were quick to thank him, promising to also compensate him in the future when their finances permitted.

It was a little embarrassing, but right now they were at the poorest point in their lives. Their artifacts and equipment were destroyed or damaged, they had spent almost all their Aether Points to power their Oracle Shields, and they had to save what little they had left to repair or replace what they had damaged or lost.

Jake was in an even more troublesome situation. He still couldn't access his Oracle Device and therefore had no way to generate the proverbial Aether Points usually used as universal transaction currency by all bracelet holders.

'You can condense Aether Crystals if necessary,' Xi advised in his head for lack of a better idea. 'I have a gut feeling you'll be surprised...'

Jake could guess what she was referring to as he focused on his extrasensory perception. When he turned on his Aether Vision, the physical world faded out and he saw himself in the center of an Aether vortex that was only a few inches across but so

bright that no star could compare. The amount of Aether he was siphoning off every second inside the Celestial City was just insane!

It only took him a quick glance to calculate that this absorption capacity far surpassed that of a Grade 6 Aether Core. Normally, the ambient Aether density would have dropped rapidly, to the point of destabilizing the space and causing rifts to appear.

But surprisingly, the Aether density of the Celestial City remained constant. Jake wondered if this city-ship was special, or if Aurae had taken steps to make this possible now that the Ordeal was almost complete.

'This absorption speed...' Jake frowned in intense concentration and growing perplexity.

'It looks like your Grade 10 Aether Core.' Xi confirmed his hunch. 'The Space Storage in your Oracle Device must have been digested along with the rest. However, such an Aether Core would have to generate a vortex of gigantic diameter and the Aether density your body would have to withstand would be such that you wouldn't be able to withstand it for more than a few millionths of a second. It's very puzzling. It's as if...'

'As if the Aether came from somewhere else and was stored directly somewhere in my cells.' Jake finished her sentence with a look of genuine shock. The Aether was not drawn from the atmosphere of Quanoth, but directly from another, much more abundant and inexhaustible source.

The original Aether Source hypothesized by many Aetherists or something much more sinister? He needed to know.

He then tested mindfully drawing in the Aether around him and found that he was still able to do so, except that the syphon effect was coming from every part of his body, not from a specific Aether Core. He could also mobilize Reiga, Mana, Fluid or Aether with a single thought with the same spontaneity as if he had been born with the ability.

"Jake? Aren't you coming with us?" Lucia stopped as she saw him frozen in place with a blank stare. The blue-black gleam flashing in his pupils rose and fell in radiance intermittently, giving him a baleful aura.

"Jake?" She repeated, tugging on his arm gently.

When her hand touched his body, her Aether stats dropped sharply and the Aether Core she was concealing in her dantian nearly leapt out of her belly and right into Jake's body. If she hadn't immediately let go and fallen to the ground, all of her energy would have been siphoned off in a second or two.

Jake's gaze focused on the young woman and he realized what he had done when he saw her pale face and her clothes drenched in cold sweat.

"Are you okay?" He asked concernedly as he helped her to her feet.

"I-I'm fine." She tried to reassure him, but Jake could see that she wasn't. Her Aether stats had dropped by 30% permanently by that one physical contact.

"You're not fine." Jake calmly contradicted her.

Suddenly spurred on by some impulse, he took her hand and the Aether he had devoured was returned to her in full with a generous surplus. Her Aether Stats were even 1 or 2% higher than before.

"H-how did you do that?" She stammered with utmost bewilderment.

"I'm not sure." Jake answered honestly.

No matter how he probed his body with his mental sense, he could find no trace of Aether or Reiga Core. However, he could tell that the fusion between his body, his Spirit Body, and his soul was much more profound than with the Digitization.

He thought it was just that, but it appeared that every cell in his body had also become its own Reiga and Aether reactor and transmitter. It was as if his Grade 10 Aether Core and Reiga Core had been infused into his body and soul. His digestive system was no longer limited to the traditional oral route and his entire being could now display a voracious appetite. The good news was that he could also make himself "throw up".

"Oh?! My Oracle AI said I regained 6 billion Aether Points when you touched me the second time." Lucia exclaimed with delight.

Jake's eyes widened to the brim at the news. It would seem that his ability to make money hadn't weakened while digesting his Oracle Device. It had just reached new heights.

Chapter 892: The Time For Petty Bickering Is Over

It's getting more and more mysterious,' Xi commented with an uneasy look on her face. There was one other thing she had discovered before he woke up that she still hadn't shown him.

Her attention was drawn to a space beyond time and space in Jake's sea of consciousness and a tiny speck of light was slowly swirling in this condensate of spiritual energy. Upon closer inspection of this light, it looked like a glowing sapphire egg.

Jeanie.

Jake couldn't look inside his own soul, but Xi had no such limitation. This egg had appeared as soon as the Minmin was sacrificed. That meant that in addition to Xi, Jake's mind now had a second roommate. Except that their spirit link seemed to be of a very different nature. She hadn't told him because she was afraid of disappointing him if this egg ended up dying or giving birth to something else.

One would have to wait for the fairy to awaken before drawing any definite conclusions. However, it wasn't this thing that Xi had discovered that was tormenting her to the point of rendering her voiceless. She had a feeling that the Minmin had the answer to this riddle.

"You didn't have to give me all those Aether Points. I know you must not have many left either." Lucia suddenly wrapped her arms around his neck and gave him a kiss on the cheek before he could react. Before he could push her away, she had already disentangled herself from him and was skipping merrily towards their companions outside having noticed nothing.

Jake was stunned. He was speechless. He hadn't meant to do that. He had just released a tiny bit of Aether to return what he had accidentally stolen from her.

Curious, he relaxed the pores of his cells and emitted another burst of Aether. He simultaneously scanned the building with his mental sense and the feedback allowed him to estimate that he had roughly released the equivalent of 15 billion Aether points.

"That's crazy." He blurted out in a daze.

'I think we can confirm that your body now has the capabilities of a Grade 10 Aether Core.' Xi sighed with emotion. I just don't understand why the Aether density of this city doesn't drop in your presence. Where is all this energy you're producing coming from?'

Jake was speechless. Closing his eyes, he could feel that his cells and soul were drawing in an astronomical amount of purified Aether from somewhere, but he couldn't pinpoint its location. It was as if his cells were magically gorging themselves with energy, creating energy out of nothing.

"Could it have something to do with me devouring Ruby?" He suggested, thinking that was the only thing that had recently happened that could explain all these anomalies. "Xi, have any Digestors ever shown this kind of ability?"

'... They have.' She confirmed with a shaky voice. 'The Digestors consume our Mirror Universe's Aether and corrupt it before spitting it out, but if that's all there was to it, we'd have a way to deal with them. The Ancient Designers are more than capable of conjuring up large areas devoid of Aether. This was one of the first strategies that was devised to starve out the Digestors and prevent them from spawning. It did work to some extent, but it only slowed their growth. After a period of time, new Digestors also began to spawn again in these energy-drained areas. Since then, it has been concluded

that the Digestors could tap into an Aether source from outside the Mirror Universe that we are not able to intercept or even detect.'

"You think I'm getting this Aether from the same source they are?" Jake was not pleased with this explanation. "So that would make me a Digestor like the rest of them."

'That's why my job is to keep a close eye on you as usual. Whatever happens, we'll get through this new ordeal together.' Xi said with conviction.

"I hope you're right." He did not dare to deny this.

Once he had calmed down, he left Aurum's building and joined the others. Meanwhile, what was left of the Mana Storm had been completely purged of Quanoth's atmosphere. They could finally watch the stars at their leisure. Although the sun was gone, it wasn't completely dark.

After taking a few steps outside, Jake and his group heard a metallic clattering sound approaching them. Turning, they saw a human-sized android wearing a simple black hooded mantle.

"Vhoskaud?" Jake recognized him at once.

For a moment he was tempted to kill him, but he gave up, remembering that the Ordeal was more or less over.

"Congratulations, Jake. I can see that your gains from the last battle are not small. Psykow must be feeling anxious now." The robot complimented him casually, as if he felt no resentment or hatred toward him.

"What do you want from me?" Jake didn't entertain him and cut to the chase.

"I wanted to apologize for everything that happened in that Ordeal." Vhoskaud stated solemnly. "It wasn't personal. If in the future we participate in a future Ordeal together we will be on the same side, so I prefer to wipe the slate clean."

The Myrtharian Nerds, and Lucia in particular, didn't look too thrilled with the idea, but they were rational. The android was an unrepentant villain, but more importantly he was a mad scientist. As long as their mutual interests did not conflict in the future, collaboration was not impossible.

They doubted, though, that they would ever get to like him. It should not be forgotten that Replicators' goal was to multiply and spread all over the Mirror Universe in an unrestricted manner. For what purpose? Well, probably nothing good.

"We'll see in the future." Jake finally nodded in a neutral tone. "However, I hope we won't be working together anytime soon."

For once, a genuine smile stretched the necromancer android's lips. " So do I."

He never wanted to meet this madman again. Vhoskaud greeted them one last time, then vanished before them. He had chosen to leave the Ordeal right away. Unlike them, he had spent several hundred years on Quanoth plotting his plans to little avail, so he was in a hurry to leave.

Just when they thought they were finally at peace, more unwanted guests appeared before them: the Lost Divinities survivors.

"I didn't think so many of you would survive." Ael chuckled as he stopped a few steps in front of them. "Congratulations are in order."

This was the first time they had the opportunity to observe Lost Divinities' leader up close and personal. His equipment had not survived the last battle either, and he was wearing a pair of shorts with holes in them and an ordinary black shirt. His pale blue skin and darker stripes were obvious to everyone and with his black hair in a mess he was rather handsome with a rather androgynous physique.

On the other hand, Felphi, the alien of the same species who walked beside him was much more feminine and voluptuous. She smiled innocently at them with her big sapphire eyes sparkling with curiosity. However, Jake and the others had not forgotten that these two were directly responsible for the death of Hade and so many others.

"Are you coming to congratulate us with the same intention as Vhoskaud?" Lucia crossed her arms with a dismissive look.

Ael smiled. "Maybe I am. Only fools don't change their minds. What's a few disagreements in a minor Ordeal like this one worth when we'll be fighting together for perhaps several thousand years. In case you haven't noticed with this Ordeal, there have been far too many accidents for it to be a coincidence. I don't know when they will officially announce it, maybe tomorrow at the Divine Academy briefing, but the Mirror Universe is in dire straits. The time for petty bickering is over."

As he said this, he stared emphatically at Jake as if he had a singularly fascinating specimen before him to study and added, "It's going to sound like Vhoskaud, but I admit I underestimated you. What I'm really wondering is if Aurae and the Oracle underestimated you too, or if everything that happened in that Ordeal was part of their plans."

Felphi gave them a teasing wink and then the two blue aliens vanished into thin air like Vhoskaud earlier. They had finished what they had to do here. Dhamde and Khag' Dagmai disappeared right after, leaving only Deimos and Ashun behind.

"Too bad we couldn't fight each other." The Spartan God declared as he extended a handshake to him. "If the opportunity arises I am free for friendly spars if any of you are

interested in exchanging pointers. I will be there during the one-year stay granted by the Divine Academy. If you want to meet me you know where to find me."

Since they each had an assigned building it was indeed easy. Jake stopped hesitating and shook his hand. Deimos' grip intensified by leaps and bounds as if he wanted to crush his bones, but Jake's face remained totally impassive. It was as if a newborn baby was trying to crush a diamond with his tender fist.

Chapter 893: Meeting of Enemies

Deimos' eyes twitched a couple of times and when they let go of each other's hand, the Spartan strode away without turning back. That left only Ashun, who grabbed Jake's freed hand with both hands and shook it energetically.

"Hey, handsome. Can I have your autograph?" The beauty fluttered her eyelashes as she made eyes at him, her breasts threatening to burst out of her dress with every move since her cleavage was so over the top.

While Jake and the others had no doubt that Ael and Felphi had damaged all their gear in the final battle, with this demoness they had a big doubt. And more importantly, this outgoing personality was not to everyone's liking.

By tacit agreement, Lucia, Enya and Aisling surrounded her. Wyatt also noticed uneasily that Carmin had also made a move. If she had been just a little bit faster, she would have acted with the trio.

The Myrmidian princess stepped between Jake and the fiery goddess to separate them, while the other two women grabbed Ashun firmly by the shoulders to keep her in place.

"Let go of me! I just want to get to know him a little better!" The goddess ranted as she threw a fit in front of everyone.

At that very moment, Enya let go of her, blushing, but Aisling snorted instead. She dispelled Ashun's Charm Spell and instead of gripping her shoulder gently, she dug her fingers into the hollow of her collarbone, pressing a nerve and eliciting a cry of pain.

"If you want us to tolerate your presence, first start acting like a human being." The Vampire-Succubus retorted with an annoyed scowl. "Look around you."

All the Myrtharian Nerds present, male or female, but also Deimos who hadn't gone far away, were glaring at her with a mixture of anger, humiliation and infatuation. The only exception was Ryne, Will and Jake whose mental abilities had recently shot through the roof. He couldn't feel anything.

Feeling all those hostile stares lock onto her, Ashun threw her hands up in surrender and hurriedly apologized, "Okay, okay, I was wrong. I won't do it again, fufu. We didn't really introduce ourselves. My Divinity has to do with Love, Seduction, Sexuality, but also Chivalry, and Adventure to a lesser extent. It's normal for me to behave like this, okay? Otherwise, I won't be the goddess that I am."

"Who asked?" Lucia rolled her eyes. "Just go look for love and adventure somewhere else. Look, Vhoskaud seemed to be single. He left the Ordeal, but I'm sure if you disappear now you have a chance to run into him outside the Red Cube."

Ashun was stumped by her rebuttal. Was she really advising her to go hit on a robot? A psychopathic necromancer like Vhoskaud? She'd rather die!

"Cough, anyway." The Love Goddess cleared her throat to diffuse her displeasure. "Like Deimos I will be at the Divine Academy for the one-year duration. I want to know my future allies and networking has always been my forte. Don't dismiss me too quickly. I am the kind of deity whose Divinity will never lack loyal believers or energy as long as love exists in this world. Did you really think that's all I can do? My real Divinity is stored away on my Floating Island. From the next Ordeal, I'll play seriously, so don't judge me too quickly. Besides, knowing a goddess like me has its advantages. I can even give you a helping hand in your relationships if you ask me nicely. Not a bad deal, right?"

The attitude of most of the people present changed dramatically. Lucia's icy façade melted instantly and a sly smile lit up her face. Taking Ashun's hand, she cheerfully declared, "I'll come see you often."

"Don't listen to her. She's a vixen." Aisling and her mother Xaverie both scolded her at the same time.

Ashun winked demurely at them, sticking out her tongue snidely. Alas, not discreetly enough. Unless it was intentional. With a fed-up face, Enya conjured a scarlet fireball in her hand and brought it close to the young woman's face.

"Final warning." She pronounced coldly.

When the goddess was about to promise to behave, a teardrop-shaped alien with thirteen eyes floated up to them, interrupting their conversation. Recognizing the intruder, everyone frowned, including Ashun.

"Psykow." She spat in an icy voice. "You've pulled a fast one on us this time. This will be reported to our higher-ups and don't think it won't have consequences in our next cooperations. An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. The fate of the Mirror Universe may be at stake, but I can tell you with absolute confidence that I, Ashun, shall never be your ally if we cross paths in a future Ordeal. If you and your faction want to be alone so badly, be prepared to face the consequences."

The Anti-Life leader gave her a disinterested glance, then turned to Jake.

"I knew it was possible to separate the two Digestor and human halves of a Digestor Trojan with my powers." He calmly confessed, taking everyone by surprise. "The rampage of this Ruby was part of my prediction. Neither Aurae nor the Oracle stopped me so I assumed it was allowed. What I didn't foresee was what happened next. I didn't predict that this Digestor had amassed so much energy. Its human half was keeping it on a much tighter leash than I had imagined."

The alien paused, then disclosed, "I saw it all. I didn't go into my building like the others when the Mana Storm swept through. The Mana Storm is dangerous for the other Players, but not for me. Though...not for you now either."

Jake's eyes narrowed in warning as he listened to Psykow's admission.

"Say what you have to say." He coldly beckoned him to continue. "I doubt you've come to talk to me to pour out your heart."

The alien cackled with his odd dolphin-like cry. "Indeed, that is not why I came. I wanted to heal your allies to make it up to you, but it seems you've already found a solution. I will go to Vexa later to apologize, although in my opinion you will owe him some explanations as well."

At that moment, his thirteen eyes roamed over his stomach and Jake understood what he hinted at.

"Don't worry, I'll apologize when the time comes." He retorted with poise, while trying not to let on that he was affected. In truth he was very apprehensive about his next encounter with the cube man.

He had thought that like Tootega and Ostrexora in his third Ordeal who had been devoured by Nylreg that being digested by a Digestor Trojan was the final end, but apparently Vexa was an exception to that rule. Reading his facial expression, Psykow elaborated,

"Every cubic cell in Vexa is like a copy of his soul. As long as he has energy to spare he can create as many interconnected clones and copies of himself as he wants. All his clones know what happened to him as if they had personally experienced it in real time. In some ways, Vexa never died, but on the other hand you can consider the death of this clone as an individual entity as final."

This clarified a lot of questionable points for everyone. More than Vexa, he also feared the vengeance of his companion Prysm.

'Did Ruby devour her too?' He suddenly worried as he combed through the genetic and Aetheric database stored in his mind.

If Vexa was alive and Prysm wasn't, this would be even worse! Fortunately, a floral scent suddenly wafted up to their nostrils and the flower woman materialized before them in a swirl of cherry blossom petals.

"You thought I was dead? I wanted to, but Vexa didn't give me a choice." She let out a bitter, resentful laugh at herself. "Ruby was too busy devouring others to care about a flower generator like me." Shooting Psykow an angry look, she added, "If that crazy Neri hadn't targeted me so relentlessly, Vexa wouldn't have needed to split his attention between Ruby and me and he wouldn't have been ambushed so easily."

"Are you talking about me?" A burst of clear laughter rang out above them.

Looking up, they recognized the black hole woman as the infamous Neri who had caused so much damage and carnage with her antimatter bombs. She was actually playing with one of those bugs in her hand as if it were a stress ball.

Prysm and Neri's gazes clashed, but when things looked like they were about to escalate, the sky warped kilometers above them and dozens of huge spaceships shot out of the wormhole.

These ships were grand and flashy, their external armor entirely painted with gold and silver. If Jake and his friends wondered who their owners were, how could Psykow, Prysm and Ashun not recognize them.

"Demiurges." Ashun sighed. "The great winners of this Ordeal."

Chapter 894: Demiurges

"Why do you say that?" Aisling raised a quizzical eyebrow.

"Because it's true." The Love Goddess spread her arms matter-of-factly. "Of the 578 winners of this Ordeal, 443 Players are from Demiurges. Replicators fared well since Vhoskaud was their only participant, but he lost many androids and his army of Undead accumulated over centuries was partially decimated. Psykow wanted to save up to 10,000 Players from his faction, but in the end he could only save a few hundred. It's just sad, though I don't feel any compassion for that drop-dolphin bastard. Your faction, the Myrtharian Nerds can also be considered as the big winner since nobody expected you to survive until the end in the first place. And therefore, the big losers are undoubtedly Lost Divinities and Mirror Vanguard with Prysm as the only survivor. Damn it... It sounds even more dispiriting now that I bring it up."

"Still, 443 Players isn't much for a super faction." Will joined the conversation. "They must have suffered significant losses during this Ordeal."

"They only had 450 participants for this Ordeal." Ashun revealed with a crooked smile.

"Fuck..." Will and the other Myrtharian Nerds hearing her answer had the same reaction of spite.

"What do you know about Demiurges?" Jake took the opportunity to question Ashun. "All I know is that they are considered creative deities, but I don't know how they differ from Lost Divinities Players."

The young woman put her index finger to her lips and tilted her head to the side, pretending to ponder and said,

"We are not the same. Lost Divinities recruits potential deities and gods whose existence or power is based on their followers' faith, or rather belief. While some Demiurges Players are qualified to join us, we do not limit ourselves to creator gods. Conversely, Demiurges does not recruit only deities, although they are often considered as such. The only requirement for recruitment is to have proven one's ability or potential to create a world. Behind the Demiurges faction is the Ancient Designer Ghishaam. Not much is known about him, but he is involved in the creation of new Seed Worlds and plays a more prominent role in the design of advanced Ordeals. He takes very few risks and is highly respected by the other Ancient Designers. Why, I'm not sure, but there are rumors. His few descendants all have the same quirks. They roam the Mirror Universe alone, casually participating in Ordeals by helping those who capture their interest as if they had nothing better to do. They quickly grow stronger and always seem to know what to do to solve a problem."

Enya put on a weird expression. It reminded her of someone. In her second Ordeal, she had met an alien named Hakkrasha. He had easily concocted a potion that allowed her Fire Core to convert the surrounding Aether into Fire Mana.

If she remembered correctly the species listed in the trial rankings... He was a Jakam. In later research, she had learned that this species was classified as a kind of "Djinn."

Jake also remembered this alien well, but not for the same reasons, so he didn't make the connection. He remembered this Hakkrasha mostly because he was with himself and Ekaion, a Zhorion, one of the three final winners of their Second Ordeal.

"What else?" Jake encouraged Ashun to share more anecdotes. "Do they have a specific ambition or goal beyond bringing together Players with similar abilities?"

She hesitated briefly, then said, "They are like Mirror Vanguard loyal to the Mirror Universe. While Mirror Vanguard is dedicated to protecting the Mirror Universe from outside enemies and rivals, Demiurges is more about expanding the Mirror Universe and ensuring that the interior of the Mirror Universe continues to thrive. Over the past few millennia, the burden on their shoulders has only grown heavier. Their mission in

this Ordeal was probably to close rifts opened by the Digestors or to create a new Quanoth for the next participants while dealing with all sorts of threats."

"Ouch. Sounds tough, meow." Crunch meowed as he landed in front of them with Lord Phenix perched on his shoulder.

Jake pursed his lips disapprovingly, staring at them with his fists on his hips. "You're still alive? Why are we only meeting you now?"

"Master! I was badly injured! I really thought that Mana Storm was going to be the death of me." The huge black cat began to wail, its squashed face still looking as dumb and bewildered as ever.

Over his shoulder, Lord Phenix nodded vigorously and repeated everything Crunch said like a parrot to be pitied too. Soon Jake felt a surge of killing intent arise in him that had nothing to do with whether or not he had become a Digestor.

He heard heavy thumping and saw Mufasa and Shere Khan walking with their heads down in shame. There were no other survivors of the Aristocats.

"Sorry, Jake." Mufasa apologized with a crestfallen look. "If I hadn't let my unhealthy competitiveness with Shere Khan override my good sense, I could have protected the others. I am not worthy to be their Alpha."

"Don't say that." The giant tiger shook his head. "I have my share of responsibility too. In the end, we're still animals. The irony is that it was Crunch who brought us to our buildings before the Mana Storm turned us."

Jake looked at his cat as if seeing it for the first time.

"You were clear-headed?"

Crunch nonchalantly licked his testicles before answering to everyone's dismay, then meowed, "Didn't you know I was already nuts? In the Aristocats, Mufasa always joked privately that there were 27 of us when there were only 16. Do you know why? Because I have at least 11 different personalities. We are legion in my head. What could a common psychic spell do? It can't create any more mental disorders than I already have."

Jake was speechless as he saw his cat's cocky smirk. "And you're proud?"

"Absolutely." Crunch replied cheerfully.

At least Jake now knew he hadn't been hallucinating. His cat had indeed been nuts all along. Who knows what kind of thoughts were racing through his furry little head?

"What about the turkey? How did it survive?" Gerulf grunted tactlessly.

"LORD PHENIX! It's Lord Phenix!" The bird bellowed angrily. "And I survived by doing what a phoenix does best. I perished and used the energy from the last antimatter explosion to rise from the ashes as an egg. It doesn't seem like it at first glance but a Phenix egg is almost impenetrable. Not even the Mana Storm could erode my shell in such a short time. Crunch found me and deposited my egg in my building."

They would have chatted longer, but suddenly pillars of light shot down from the golden ships hovering in the sky toward the ground, and after a brilliant flash of light, 443 Players of various races appeared at the entrance to the Divine Academy.

Each of them had an incredible aura, comparable at least to that of Deimos. Several dozen of them even had an Aetheric signature greater than that of Psykow and Neri. Before Jake's mutation, perhaps only Ael and Felphi had an aura that could compare to theirs if one included their Divinities in the equation. Vhoskaud in his titanic incarnation could also compete with them.

However, those comparisons were in the past. Jake's current aura was unfathomable. The Demiurge Players who had just landed were quick to notice.

"Who is that?" A humanoid female alien whose body seemed to be made of a mixture of turquoise water and white lightning squinted her eyes in their direction. The ends of her long dress, feet and hands all seemed to evaporate into a fine electrified mist.

A bare-chested alien with overly muscular pale purple skin with tentacles and antennae instead of hair also looked in the same direction and banged his four fists together.

"I want to fight him." He declared as he licked his lips with a battle-crazed glint in his eye.

"I forbid you, Nazaan." A humanoid alien with an appearance as regal as it was frightening levitated before them like a ghost.

His skin and armor was pitch black like Neri, but a network of veins and patterns reminiscent of yellow lightning ran across the surface of his body. These luminous lines converged on his eyes, which unlike the rest of his body were like two dazzling blazes. Finally, the outline of his legs blurred to form a black flaming smoke. His features were obscured by this black smoke and only a long red scarf wrapped around his waist as a belt brought a touch of color and style to this alien.

"Ah, leader, you're here too, hehe..."

Nazaan's thirst for battle deflated like a punctured balloon after the newcomer's command. Like a little child who has just been caught red-handed by his father while

stealing candy, his eyes became shy and he started to grumble all sorts of unconvincing excuses.

Without waiting for the brawling alien to finish his apology, the leader of the Demiurges flew straight into the Divine Academy without giving Jake a second glance. Two other Players took off as he did, and Enya's eyes widened as she recognized a familiar bronze figure,

"Hakkrasha!"

Chapter 895: That's Him

"No, it's not him." Jake refuted flatly. "Look closely. This alien is a little taller, his bronze skin is paler and his horns are somewhat shorter and darker than Hakkrasha's."

Enya pulled herself together as she took notice of these discrepancies as well. Although she hadn't met him in two Ordeals and his appearance may have changed she quickly realized that their backs were too different. Their waist to shoulder ratio was too dissimilar. Hakkrasha was a bit shorter, standing about 3 meters tall at the time, but his build was at least 30% wider.

"Oh... I think you're right." She sighed in disappointment. "My bad, I got excited about nothing."

Will also remembered Hakkrasha and said leisurely, "If I'm not mistaken, this is the second Jakam I've met in four Ordeals. This one looks strong too."

At the mention of the word Jakam or perhaps the name Hakkrasha, the alien bearing his resemblance stopped in midair and abruptly teleported in front of them, much to the surprise of his leader and the other Player flying alongside them.

"You met Hakkrasha?" The alien asked aggressively in a guttural voice.

Gerulf, Rogen and Drastan didn't like his attitude and stepped to the front of their party to glare at him from their respective 7-8 meter heights. Far from being deterred, the bronze alien suddenly swelled to a colossus of over 25 meters tall in a heartbeat, forcing them to look up to keep meeting his gaze.

Unluckily for the brazen trio, they had not mastered any Gigantic spells and had to swallow their pride with a grudging look. The Jakam voiced no sadistic satisfaction or gloating over this symbolic victory, just plain indifference. He just wanted an answer to his question.

Nonetheless, Jake couldn't let any stranger from another faction humiliate his friends. With his hands in his pockets, he released a psychic force field that enveloped the giant bronze alien, completely isolating him from the crowd and leaving only him and Jake inside.

The Jakam obviously felt this vast spiritual presence causing the Aether to stagnate around him and narrowed his eyes at Jake.

"What's the meaning of this?"

With undaunted coolness, matching the alien's indifference, Jake slowly looked up and met his gaze.

"I just want to spare my allies."

Before the Demiurges Player could retort anything, the Aether stagnating inside that force field shot at the speed of light toward Jake's body. If that was all, the Jakam would not have been shaken, but he also felt a horrifying tugging force forcibly extracting energy from his cells and Cores.

This Player was not ordinary and did not panic. He in turn deployed his massive will and spiritual power and tried to counteract this siphon-like force sucking out the energy from his cells.

The other Demiurge Players who were watching from afar, including their leader, were totally confident in their comrade's abilities, but suddenly their faces grew grave as the stalemate was broken in a split second.

Inside the psychic bubble created by Jake, the Aether density dropped dangerously close to zero in barely a second and a half, and then the Jakam burst into a roar, contracting all of his muscles in a tremendous effort of concentration as if his life were at stake.

A golden sphere of light covered with symbols, images and inscriptions expanded around his body, briefly disrupting the Aether drain, but it only lasted a few seconds. Soon the golden barrier began to crack, then like the nearby Aether before it its light particles shot toward Jake and disappeared inside his body without a trace.

In the next millisecond, the Jakam's Aether stats dropped by over 99% and his most valuable Aether Core was downgraded from Grade 7 to 4. It could have ended there, but inside the psychic force field, the air suddenly distorted over the alien.

The exhausted Jakam suddenly felt an overwhelming spiritual and gravitational pressure slam him to the ground, threatening to reduce his body and soul to a helpless molecular mess.

'How?!' That was what the alien wanted to ask, but because of the dip in his Aether stats he failed to realize that it wasn't the gravity field that was powerful, but his body that had become weak.

"Jake, stop. He was just asking us a question." Enya anxiously shook his arm.

He showed no reaction and continued to increase the pressure on the alien. His four beautiful fairy wings in various shades of blue glittered hypnotically behind his back while the ocean of darkness in his eyes gave off an eerie silver gleam. His face was as icy and apathetic as that of an apex predator before its prey. Beyond the will to kill, there was also the will to devour its victim. This was not at all a healthy feud between players of opposite factions trying to intimidate each other.

More pragmatic, Will gave Lucia a nod and she got the message.

"Sorry Jake." She murmured in an inaudible voice, then fearlessly entered the force field erected by him.

Lucia finally understood what the unfortunate Jakam was going through. Even though she had mentally prepared herself for it because she had lived a similar experience a few minutes earlier, she still hadn't found a way to resist it.

She collapsed immediately despite all her determination and tenacity. Just by this fact, one could see how special this Demiurge Player was for not being dead yet.

Every time it looked like he was about to perish, a stream of energy would gush forth from an unknown source to keep the fight going. However, the longer the fight went on, the more Jake amped up his draining speed, as if siphoning off all that energy had finally whetted his appetite.

"...Jake."

Lucia's and Xi's voices rang out simultaneously, one real, the other in his head. Jake snapped out of his murderous trance and realized what was happening. He was about to spare the Jakam and Lucia caught in the crossfire, but at that moment an intruder broke through his psychic barrier and stepped inside.

The Aether density rose sharply and Jake felt that siphoning off the surrounding Aether was no longer as easy. He was still able to do it, but it would take a lot more effort. He soon felt a tremendous sense of dislike for this newcomer who had just deprived him of a meal.

"That's enough." The leader of Demiurges declared in a booming voice that reverberated in their eardrums as he spread the black gas obscuring his appearance.

Jake saw a myriad of stars inside and although he was only a few feet away from the alien, he experienced the uncanny sensation that thousands of kilometers separated them. This illusion lasted only a moment and with a snort he retracted his spiritual presence into his own body.

The tortured Jakam did not recover right away. He remained amorphous for a long time, and it was only after his leader touched him with his finger that he regained his color, his Aether stats and Cores restoring themselves in no time. It was a rather miraculous ability.

How powerful was this Demiurges leader compared to Ael and Psykow? The alien was also shocked by Jake's performance. Such a level was far above that of a Fourth Ordeal Player. Many Sixth and Seventh Ordeal Players were weaker than this.

"I thought I was the only Player in this Ordeal to be of an Intersystem Class, but it seems I was wrong." The Demiurges leader admitted as he stared at him with genuine curiosity in his blazing eyes. "I understand better why Aurae and the Oracle sent us on our missions so far away from here. They didn't want us to cross paths too soon. Funnily enough, that means the other four superfactions were meant as your stepping stones. How cruel..."

Deimos, Ashun, Neri and the others who were secretly listening to their conversation became livid with anger and shame as they caught the alien's condescension. Seen from this perspective... everything he had just said was absolutely true. They had all become Jake's stepping stones. It was so preposterous it was laughable.

The alien noticed that his Jakam partner had just woken up and motioned to Jake and the other Myrtharian Nerds, "Please answer his question so we can leave. I have things to do."

Admirably, the Jakam still displayed the same calm and indifference despite the beating he had just taken, unlike the rancorous and vindictive scowl of Gerulf and Rogen who were itching to fight again to clear their names. On this point, once again one could note their differences in temperament.

"I just want to know if you know Hakkrasha and where and when you met him." He repeated in a placid voice, suppressing a yawn. "If you run into him, tell him that Bhomuro would like to hear from him."

After what had happened, Lucia and Enya thought it best to make sure that Jake and this Bhomuro avoided interacting with each other in the future. So it was Enya and Will who took it upon themselves to share what they knew. Upon learning that they had met him during their Second Ordeal, his interest dropped sharply.

The Jakam asked a few more questions, but upon learning that this Hakkrasha spent his time sleeping even during the Ordeal a faint smile stretched his bronze face,

"That's him."

Chapter 896: You Were So Badass Just Now

Having received the answers to his questions, the Jakam named Bhomuro headed off quietly toward the Divine Academy, joining his leader and his other comrade who had preceded them. The rest of Demiurges passed through the front gate shortly thereafter.

When things settled down, Will turned to Jake and joked, "What was that technique? That guy looked so strong and he could only die helplessly without you moving a finger."

Given the inquisitive looks of the other Myrtharian Nerds, Wyatt, Carmin and Ashun, he wasn't the only one dying to know the answer. Alas, Jake was bound to disappoint them.

Because he didn't know either. He was beginning to realize how crippled and blind one felt when one no longer had an Oracle Device to assess and track one's own progress and changes.

'Xi, we need to fix this problem asap.' Jake telepathically reminded his Oracle AI.

'Don't worry.' She reassured him gently. 'Earlier, when you spread your mental sense, the psychic wave that was released performed like an Oracle Scan. You digested your bracelet and all the alloy liquid inside, but its functions did not just vanish. What I'm about to tell you may sound like nonsense, but I think you have become your own Oracle Device. Or at least you have the knowledge of this technology somewhere inside you.'

Jake immediately thought of the genetic and Aetheric database in his mind. Focusing his mental sense on his fingertip, he tried to exert influence on his former Gold Stone Skin Skill and managed after several lonely seconds of effort to produce a droplet of liquid alloy.

He felt slightly nauseous after this accomplishment, but his cells quickly resonated, drawing in an astronomical amount of Aether from an undefined source. His nausea subsided within seconds, but the drop of liquid alloy was still there.

"Ooohh... You're getting more and more fascinating." Ashun clapped as she covetously eyed the droplet of metal. Despite her exuberance, the glint in her pretty ocean-blue eyes hid unspeakable wonder.

"Is that what I think it is?" Wyatt asked more circumspectly.

"It is." Jake confirmed calmly, his gaze still fixated on the drop he had just oozed from his fingertip. Not offering any explanation, he reabsorbed it back into his body.

'Here's another source of income for me and my faction,' he thought inwardly.

For Jake, this ability was unexpected but it was in the end a mere extension of his Gold Stone Skin whose possibilities had only grown richer during the Ordeal. He was not overly impressed. But for Ashun and Deimos, who had secretly witnessed the scene, it was even more shocking than finding a Digestor willing to help people.

In fact, Deimos even considered ending his Ordeal prematurely to inform Ael and Felphi. This Jake had become so ridiculously powerful in such a short time that he was hardly recognizable. Liquid alloy...

To normal Players and Evolvers it was a precious metal like any other, but those who knew how it was made knew that there were many secrets involved in its development. If it were so easy to replicate, all the superfactions would have long since found a way to mass produce it.

It was only after repeating to himself that time passed much more slowly on the outside that he convinced himself that staying here for a few more months would make no difference. Jake wouldn't just vanish into thin air either.

The other person who stood still and silent with all sorts of complicated thoughts running through her mind was Ryne, the woman with the outrageous adaptive powers who had fought with them. Having been one of her Second Ordeal victors herself, she at least knew the crucial ingredient that went into the formulation of the liquid alloy: the crystallized Spirit Body of powerful deceased Evolvers.

And that was only one of the key ingredients. She knew for a fact that there were at least two more.

'Should I ask to join his faction?' She had vowed never to join another faction, but she was beginning to doubt her past resolutions.

Ultimately, she shook her head to quash the temptation and sullenly frowned. 'No. I don't want to be tied down anymore. However, I must remain on good terms with them in case I am required to collaborate with them in a future Ordeal.'

Having made her decision, she returned to her normal demeanor after that and socialized in a relaxed manner with the Myrtharian Nerds engaging in conversation with her.

Now that Demiurges were gone, Jake scanned the Celestial City with his mental sense and frowned when he found no trace of Psykow and the other Anti-Life Players. It wasn't until he explored his immediate surroundings that he discovered Neri hadn't left.

"Psykow has left the Ordeal? Why are you still here?" Prysm questioned in a voice so chilling that one could almost smell how much she wanted to gut her.

Neri rolled her eyes and looked away without hiding any of her deep contempt for the flower woman. "I don't talk with losers."

"Answer the question." Jake ordered without raising his voice, but to those present it was as if an immortal emperor had just given an order straight to one of his subjects. His overbearing aura was so suffocating that they could only obey.

The black hole woman was evidently not fond of this humiliating impulse awakening in her a devious feeling of insecurity and inferiority that she was not familiar with. Subconsciously, she crushed the antimatter bug she had been rolling around between her two fingers in a mechanical way.

B-----

No explosion ensued. Like a damp squib, the tremendous energy that should have been released by the explosion was sucked into Jake's mouth with a single inhale, as if it were a high-powered vacuum cleaner. More disturbing, even the shockwave had been neutralized.

The sheer amount of radiation and heat temporarily illuminated his insides, then nothing. Neri was tempted to call up another insect and try again, but one listless look from Jake dissuaded her.

"All right, you're scary. I'll give you that." She spread her arms in defeat. Changing the subject, she uttered, "I'll also be staying at the Divine Academy for a year. Although I am part of Anti-Life, I have my own goals. Don't lump me in with Psykow and the others. See you later."

As she walked away, she waved her hand at them without looking back and blurted out to Prysm, "Of course, if you want to get revenge or blow off steam you are free to visit me. I'll crush you anytime."

The flower woman clenched her fists in rage but in the end swallowed back her lust for revenge. This black hole woman was indeed unfathomable. At no time during their confrontation had Mirror Vanguard succeeded in putting her in real difficulty. Even Vexa had to admit that in a fair duel he couldn't necessarily guarantee victory.

With Neri, Ashun and Prysm gone, the Myrtharian Nerds gathered excitedly around Jake.

"Boss, you were so badass just now." Aurum enthused with stars in his eyes. "I'm getting more and more confident in your ability to pay me back."

Jake's lips twitched.

"Yeah, and I can tell your head is still screwed on straight, as well." He tsked equivocally.

" Always."

"Did something happen after we entered our buildings?" Will asked more seriously. Jake's power-up was a good thing for them, but wasn't the change a little too radical?

"Something did happen." Jake admitted honestly. "However, I don't know yet if it's a good or bad thing. Time will tell."

"Very well. I trust you no matter what." The merchant coolly exclaimed.

"Me too." Lucia smiled. "Whatever happens, Gerulf and I will always be on your side. Right, Gerulf?"

Being called out, the Kintharian scratched his head uneasily and grumbled, "Gerulf always on your side. But I'm sad. I'm too weak to be your mentor. The days when I was the champion of Heliodas and you were a probationary gladiator in Cassius' ludus seem long gone."

"Sorry, not sorry." Jake smirked. "I don't regret those days. Back then, I was just an insignificant human who survived thanks to all sorts of miracles, including your and Lucia's protection."

Hephais, Enya and the others were stunned by this anecdote. They knew that Lucia, Gerulf and him had met during his first Ordeal but they didn't know all the details although the topic had been discussed several times in the past.

"True..." Lucia sighed, her face clouding with sadness. "If you were as powerful then as you are now, my sister and Cassius would probably still be alive."

"Nothing is less certain." Will firmly disagreed with her. "Don't forget who's pulling the strings. Myrmid was clearly an amazing Evolver, but he was reduced to food supplies for a bunch of Digestor Brain-Eaters. If today's Jake had stepped in, maybe he would have been targeted too."

There was a sudden silence.

"Speaking of Digestors, I still have to check on the status of one of them." Jake announced grimly.

It was time to check on Ruby's other half.

Chapter 897: Looking Forward To Working With You Boss

Jake and his group were taken aback to find the survivors of New Earth gathered in front of Ruby's building. Its exterior had changed somewhat from before. This one looked... more ordinary, so to speak.

The building was a plain cube with white walls. If it wasn't for the few luminous grooves and the widespread coldness emitted by the walls, one could have doubted that it was meant for one of the Ordeal's champions. Even the aura radiating from it was quite tame, as if it were a mere house for a regular human.

"You came too?" Craig nodded as he recognized them.

In addition to the chubby young Aetherist, there was also his friend Ryo, his instructor and vice squad captain Wang Xiaoming, and Melissa, a lovely brunette still wearing her New Earth Special Forces combat gear, or at least what little was left of it. The others had to swap theirs for other clothes because all their equipment had been severely damaged.

"Wow, is this all that survived from New Earth?" Will blurted out with a fawning look on his face. "I think next time you should select your members more carefully."

Craig and Ryo shared a look and sighed in unison. Martial arts master Wang Xiaoming displayed a wry smile, patting himself on the back that their captain Alef had perished before hearing those cruel words.

"If I may say so, you don't have that many survivors either." Melissa retorted with a sardonic edge.

"Touché." Carmin giggled as she covered her mouth.

"Still more than you." Lord Phenix crooned, giving her a lofty look.

The young woman flinched but refrained from escalating things further. Jake saved her from further embarrassment by addressing the issue directly.

"What is Ruby's situation?" He asked calmly. "She won't let you in?"

"No..." Craig grimaced bitterly. "Thanks to the Oracle Path, we know she's still inside, but she's not responding."

"Hmm..." Jake was at a loss for words, too. After a moment, he said, "Let me try."

If the Oracle was treating Ruby like his Soulmate, there had to be a more concrete reason than a vague notion of love at first sight. Which, as it turned out, had never happened... He could barely tolerate her existence after all the crap she'd pulled on him. Though now... They were even.

"Sure." Craig saw no harm in letting him have a go. They'd been stuck outside his building for ten minutes.

"Wait for me here." Jake informed his comrades as he walked toward the white wall.

He was still wondering how he was going to do it, but as he tried to check the solidity of the wall in front of him, his hand went through it. Craig, Ryo and Melissa's eyes widened in disbelief.

"It's open?!" They exclaimed with delight as they ran to the wall.

BAM!

They slammed pitifully into the white wall, the resulting crack reminiscent of a coconut being thrown against a windshield. Jake was so stunned that he waved his hand through the wall a second time to make sure it wasn't a fluke.

After massaging his aching forehead, Craig groaned, "It looks like she doesn't want us to come in... I wonder what we did. If you can Jake, apologize for us."

"Okay..."

Taking a short breath, Jake lifted his chin and with a steely look entered the building. The interior was much the same as the exterior, but two people were inside. One standing, the other lying down. Upon recognizing, the standing person, his expression underwent a dramatic change.

"You... What are you doing here?" He asked alertly.

He had good reason to react this way. The woman was a pale beauty with gray skin and long golden hair. She was dressed in a golden armor dress that matched her hair and carried in her right hand a long golden spear with several bells under its spearhead. The most striking feature, however, was the eight golden wings folded behind her back.

He had met this Schwazen woman in the past.

"Why couldn't I be here?" Caphriel smiled, but her face didn't look so innocent anymore.

Not with what Jake could now perceive of her. She was... like him.

"You were corrupted? No, you were a Digestor in the first place too." Jake reasoned aloud as he stared at her with increasing enmity.

She shrugged.

"That's how we Digestors operate. The Corrupt and the regular Digestors make a lot of commotion and noise, but it allows those with better self-control like me to survive and work in the shadows."

Jake was getting more and more confused. That meant she'd been faking it since they first met and that even her imprisonment by the other Corrupt Virtues was staged. However, it made the current situation even more implausible.

"I don't understand." He confessed. "Why ruin your cover now and not before? What do you get out of telling me all this. You could have just saved Ruby's human half and kept the truth to yourself."

"First of all, because you are now able to recognize what I really am, but more simply because it was an order from Aurae. The Mirror Universe rejects Digestors like we reject you, but that doesn't mean we can't coexist under certain circumstances, but I digress... I'm a Digestor Trojan, like Ruby. Aurae created me like all the other Schwazen Angels from Quanoth. He obviously noticed my unique nature from the beginning. Although I instinctively hate the Mirror Universe and everything in it, thanks to Aurae's efforts I can still sort things out. So I am what one might consider a double agent. This time by saving Ruby's human half, I have done both Aurae and my Digestors superiors a favor. Two birds with one stone."

Jake was increasingly puzzled.

"So, what happens to you now that you've accomplished your mission?" He then asked.

She tenderly stroked the sleeping Ruby's silky white hair and gave him a look of mischief, "I will become a Player under Aurae's orders. My Digestor higher-up's orders are also along those lines."

"Aurae and the Oracle are willing to take such risks?" Jake had a hard time swallowing that.

"Of course not. But what else can they do but kill me right now and lose their double agent? If they used a spell or technology to brainwash or enslave me, the Digestors would find out and vice versa. It's a risky bet for both sides, but unlike the Mirror Universe, the Digestors don't fear my betrayal. My mere existence is beneficial to them, because I spread Corruption around by the mere act of breathing. For Aurae and the Oracle, it is not so easy. The risk of me betraying them or having betrayed them is great, but there are too few double agents like me for them to give up that chance, even if it backfires. You have to understand that for every Digestor Trojan like me, there are

several million born every second in the Mirror Universe. All of them without exception, including me, will eventually become true Digestors. It will just take more or less time and it is on this short window of lucidity that the Oracle is banking. There are other reasons, but sadly I don't know much more about them than you do."

Jake remained silent for a while, digesting all these revelations, then remarked, "That still doesn't explain why you're telling me all this, let alone why you're still here. You don't have to wait for Ruby to wake up."

She looked at him as if he were an idiot and laughed to herself. At his growing annoyance and bafflement, she finally calmed down and disclosed, "If you don't know yet, you will soon."

Jake felt a trap coming on. Surely the Oracle or Aurae weren't planning to ask him to recruit her into the Myrtharian Nerds to keep an eye on her? Although... Given how well she got along with Hade there was at least one who would be happy to take on that task.

"You're not an idiot." Caphriel smiled as she noticed that he had figured it out.

She walked toward the exit and as she passed by him, she gently patted his shoulder and whispered in his ear with a hot breath, "Looking forward to working with you, boss."

When Jake turned around, the angel had disappeared. He then turned his attention to the sleeping Ruby and was finally able to focus on the other thing that was bothering him. Unlike Caphriel he could tell that she was no longer a Digestor, but then why did he have that same feeling of closeness? That feeling was not there before.

When Jake wondered where this strange sensation came from, Ruby suddenly opened her eyes. Their eyes met.

At that moment, he instantly realized from her blank stare why she hadn't allowed Craig and the others to enter. She simply didn't remember them.

But from the way her eyes bulged with terror when she saw him, she remembered him.