

The Oracle Paths

Chapter 901: Falling On Flat Ground

A sharp glint burst from his pupils, and a vortex of silver-black light began to swirl within. Just by his intent, his cells and mind had entered a new state, strengthening their resonance and shifting into some kind of hypnotic vibratory state. The Aether his body was continually drawing from an unknown source was drained even faster and his already high Aether Stats he could only approximate skyrocketed under his Aether Conversion ability.

He poured all of this excess Aether into his muscles, which would normally cause the Aether Stats in the rest of his body to decline. They didn't. As he channeled his Strength and Constitution Aether into his arms, their attributes shot through the roof, but they didn't drop in the rest of his body. The Aether he was drawing in and generating every second had already made up for the deficit.

His arms began to glow with an endless reddish aura that even an ordinary human without Aether Vision could see. Strength in its purest form.

His height did not change and his muscles did not bulk up either. However, even without an Oracle Status any onlooker could have been able to tell that his body mass was increasing rapidly. The ground cast in an unknown metal had already begun to cave in under his feet.

Jake hesitated to proceed any further. There were still many ways to increase his strength: Words of Power, Reiga Spells, Bloodline Ignition, Telekinesis, Gravity Field... He had plenty of choices.

"It should be enough..." He muttered with slight doubt as he moved his hands closer to the two giant door wings.

SHLAK!

He hadn't even touched it with his fingertips when the two doors slid open as if by magic, letting out a cogging roar. The strong gust of wind ruffled his hair, but other than that he was fine.

When he wondered if it was a bug or if someone had manually opened the door for him, the principal's voice he had heard earlier rang out in his mind.

"Ahem... The door has been opened for you and your four companions." Grigori Tyrastus announced in a voice fraught with reproach. "You may enter without fear...It will not close on you, I swear it on my honor as Rank 4 Oracle Overseer."

Jake felt slight regret and frustration at being denied this chance to test his strength but he was a man with manners. After a short pause to digest the information, he thanked the powerful Evolver and motioned for Tim and the other three Beskyrians to follow him.

In his office, a child-sized humanoid alien with two cute snail antennae for ears, tapped a few buttons while staring at a camera screen that showed Jake and his friends walking through the door locked in the open position. An irritated sneer stretched the face of the alien and he tsked in bad mood,

"Tche! As if I'd let a moron with that much strength open that door with his bare hands. The last time some dumbass Player did it half the Academy ended up being repaired for six months and 2800 disciples died."

To calm himself he reached for his mug filled with a still warm frothy beverage and took a sip that he kept in his mouth while closing his eyes. You could see his cheeks swelling and jiggling alternately as if he was swilling it in his mouth to better appreciate all its flavors.

Of course, Jake was only a Fourth Ordeal Player. The consequences wouldn't have been as far-reaching, but one could never be too careful. This Intersystem Class Player had the ability to cause heavy damage to the campus infrastructure regardless.

The alien then contacted somebody with his Oracle Device and the hologram of a metallic face with six eyes brighter than six suns rose above his desk.

"What is it, little Grigori?" A metallic, bone-shattering, nightmare-inducing grating voice echoed through the room, cracking the walls even though they were forged from the same supposedly indestructible alloy as the rest of Celestial City.

The alien, who was also the school's principal, grimaced ruefully as he inspected the damage, but didn't dare blame the person behind the hologram for anything. Instead, a forced but honestly slavish smile crept across his face as smooth and plump as that of a toddler.

"Venerable Designer Aurae, I opened the door for this Jake as you asked. May I ask why his Oracle Device is disabled?"

To cover his curiosity, he took another sip of his drink, again keeping the liquid in his mouth out of habit.

"He ate it." Auae replied candidly.

"Pfffft!!!" All the drink in his mouth squirted onto the hologram, making it sizzle intermittently.

Seeing the Ancient Designer's stoic face, Grigori's heart felt cold and he apologized in a shaky, obsequious voice, "Sorry... It won't happen again."

"It's okay. It's just a hologram, not my body." Auae replied robotically.

The Ancient Designer's benevolence chilled his blood even more than if it had raised his voice. Grigori knew that the giant android's last sentence was not a way to play down the incident, but words to be taken literally: If this was my real face, you'd be dead.

After recovering from his fear, Aura's previous answer finally reached his neurons and his expression changed.

"For real?" He blurted out.

"For real." Auae was as tight-lipped as ever. "Treat him like any other Player. No favoritism. Same with Hazzom."

"Okay..." Grigori was used to this kind of instruction.

In over 126,000 years in this position he had never favored one of the victors, nor even one of his own students. It was all for the great purpose. His only role was to oversee this Divine Academy and monitor these victors from behind his screen.

"Another thing." Auae said suddenly, which startled the alien in her seat.

"Yes?"

"Later today, he will be visiting my Stele to receive his final Soul Class. Because of his somewhat special circumstances, this one might not work out properly. Several spiritual signatures of the level of an Ancient Designer, including myself, will be descending into the Stele in a few moments to modify it. Don't panic."

Grigori almost shat his pants when he heard the news. He had just evaporated enough sweat in a millisecond to fill an Olympic-sized swimming pool.

"Y-you what? M-more Ancient Designers here?" He stammered with the face of someone about to cry.

"Anyway. Keep up the good work." The transmission ended and Auae's apathetic holographic face disappeared with those words, leaving Grigori on the verge of a nervous breakdown.

Slumping down in his seat, he chugged the contents of his mug dry and threw his cup against the wall.

"Fuck... I want to quit."

Once inside the Academy, Jake and his four left-behind quickly caught up with the others who were delighted to meet up with them so quickly.

"How did you get in?" Lucia whispered as she leaned close to his ear. Seeing that he didn't answer immediately, she nudged his ribs and chuckled, "Come on tell me the truth. Did you manage to open it with your bare hands? I wanted to try earlier, but it opened too quickly."

"Gerulf wanted to try too." The giant, who had been listening to their conversation uninvited, spread his arms as if he were tearing open an imaginary curtain.

"Even if you failed, I certainly would have succeeded." Rogen boasted pretentiously as he pointed to his own face with his thumb.

Faced with the insistent looks from Lucia and the other Myrtharian Nerds, Jake didn't have the heart to maintain the suspense any longer and sighed, "The principal opened the door for us before I could try..."

Lucia's interest waned instantly.

Bam!

"Aouch!" Tim's pained groan rang out behind his back.

Somehow, he had managed to trip over a perfectly smooth floor by hooking his own legs. He had just performed the legendary falling on flat ground.

When Jake and the other witnesses of the scene were tempted to laugh, it was the turn of Trea, Skorgeld, and then Fo to fall flat on the ground one after the other. Because of their curse, the safe floor of the Academy had become even more perilous than the surface of a frozen lake in early spring. The slightest misstep and they'd end up face down on the ground.

Even crawling or lying on their backs was not without risk. Skorgeld specifically tried the second method, refusing to move until his curse was gone, but that was the moment the heavy steel chandelier hanging above his head broke loose and fell on him.

A permanent student of the Academy had immediately run up, sweating like a pig, to apologize profusely. He was in charge of the cleaning and maintenance of the hall this

semester and according to him such a mishap had never happened since his admission in the school.

When they finally managed to appease the student who was afraid of being accused of negligence, a loud burst of laughter echoed across the hall. Turning in the direction of the noise, they saw a svelte, handsome man with medium-length, clean-shaven gray hair. His pupils were slit and his irises were a bright orange.

"Dad!" Skorgeld nearly burst into tears.

Yep. The man before them was Ulfar. The King of Beskyr.

The only Myrtharian Nerds who had made it into the Divine Academy in the first minute of their Fourth Ordeal.

Chapter 902: When Luck Is Not Enough

The luckiest man in Myrtharian Nerds waved at them from the top of a broad staircase and walked dignifiedly towards them, hands in pockets. The panicked student who was still muttering apologies trembled at the sight of the new arrival and began to wish he had stayed in bed this morning.

At that moment, he remembered the word the chandelier victim had just yelled, and his face turned pale.

"U-Ulfar, I can assure you that's not what you think. I checked the condition of the chandelier this morning, and it was in perfect condition."

"I know, I know." The King of Beskyr rolled his eyes, patting the student's shoulder. "Don't worry, they won't say anything. Right, son?"

Skorgeld just let out a deep sigh. He never intended to press charges against anyone. The only culprit was his bad luck. After assuring the maintenance student multiple times that they wouldn't say anything, they finally managed to get rid of him.

Once the anxious student was gone, Ulfar exclaimed, "I'm glad to see you guys again. This Divine Academy without you has been a real hell."

"Don't tell me you're responsible for cleaning or maintaining some of the rooms, like this student?" Lucia teased him with a mocking look.

The warrior's radiant face darkened thunderously upon receiving the princess's question. With a grunt, he grudgingly admitted, "At first, yes. Taking care of the

maintenance of a hall like this can earn us one or two Contribution Points per day. It's not much, but we had to start somewhere."

One Contribution Point could be exchanged for 100 million Aether points. So even though it seemed small, it was actually an impressive amount for ordinary players. Too bad all the remaining winners were extraordinary players.

If it were the Jake from the beginning of the Ordeal, he could earn 10 Contribution Points a day just by sitting still, thanks to the passive Aether production of his bracelet and Purgatory. If it were the Jake of now... One point could probably be earned every one or two seconds... Maybe less. Actually, he had no idea.

"How many Contribution Points do you usually earn per task? And what do you spend them on?" Will inquired with a very scholarly expression.

Ulfar pretended to think and then said, "Most manual chores like this earn between one and four points per day, but we can choose as many as we want depending on availability and provided we do our job correctly. In case of any incident, we can lose up to 100 times the Contribution Points we could have earned."

"Ah, that explains the panic of that student," Skorgeld growled, lying crosswise on the floor. "I should have extorted a point or two from him in exchange for my silence."

"Hehe, you're a chip off the old block, but forget about it," Ulfar flicked his forehead, chuckling. "The principal is a Rank 4 Oracle Overseer. If the failure is malicious in origin, Grigori will certainly find out. Even an intangible resource like luck won't fool his senses. Another solitary player named Viscardi who arrived on the same day as me wanted to use something called Karma to get one of the students responsible for the Contribution Store to give up his position. For your information, it's one of the most prestigious jobs at the Academy. In addition to getting 10 Contribution Points a day by just standing behind a counter, it allows you to interact with all sorts of students and teachers in a position of power. Only ancient students who have long proven themselves and gained Grigori's trust can fulfill this function.

"The process was extremely convoluted. Viscardi was kind and considerate to this student for weeks, offering all kinds of gifts, then politely asked him to let him take over his position. The student obviously refused. The next day, he made a serious registry mistake and was fired from his job. Viscardi thought his chance had finally come, but the next day, the student was reinstated in his position, and Viscardi was nowhere to be found. Later, I learned that he had been penalized with a 1000 Contribution Points penalty, which is equivalent to a 100 billion Aether points fine. He didn't have enough to pay the penalty, so he was expelled from the school. I don't know what happened to him after that, but since he's not among the winners, we can conclude that he probably died on Quanoth at some point."

Jake and Will, for whom the term Karma was not unfamiliar, couldn't help but feel sorry for poor Viscardi. He had spent weeks making all kinds of useless efforts, including offering expensive gifts, to make his victim indebted to him, only to have it backfire on him. Apparently, this kind of esoteric concept was not a very reliable power. Or maybe Grigori was just on a level beyond their reach.

"So, if I understand correctly, Father, if I had tried to extort him, I probably would have succeeded, but the next day I would have paid the price, and he would have been compensated. Is that right?" Skorgeld summarized, turning his head left and right to make sure no other chandelier was about to fall on him.

"That's right," Ulfar smiled. Turning to Will, he explained with the vacant look of a traumatized man, "Regarding your question about the use of these Contribution Points, they serve for everything. By default, we receive ten Contribution Points on the day of our arrival. That's 1 billion Aether points. This amount is enough to dazzle most Players without a faction, but not those of this school. For each day of schooling at the Divine Academy, one point is debited. For each meal in the cafeteria, between one and five points are also debited depending on the chosen menu. Sleeping in a dormitory with other students debits one point per night, but it can go up to ten points if you want your own suite. Finally, attending classes, fortunately not mandatory, costs 1 to 10,000 points depending on the lesson chosen. Other school facilities also cost points such as the Cultivation Rooms, the Contribution Store, etc..."

Jake and the others suddenly gave him a sympathetic look. He must have suffered alone here. Still, no one pitied him.

If the most prestigious task at the school rewarded only 10 Contribution Points per day, no wonder a player like Viscardi was willing to stoop to any lows to get it. Otherwise, who knew how many halls and corridors they would have to clean every day just to earn enough points not to be expelled.

Ulfar could guess what they were thinking and he clarified with a little laugh, "There are three other ways to get points that are much more reliable. Betting, especially through fights in the campus arena, moving up the school ranking, and deals between students. As long as the rules of the Divine Academy are not violated, anything goes. I thought I could make it big like Viscardi by relying on bets and my luck, but it almost backfired on me too. Let me tell you something. Except for the Divine Academy natives who have been around for ages, all the players who arrived like me have extraordinary esoteric powers. Luck, destiny, karma, clairvoyance, divination, hyper instinct and so on... I was also almost expelled from the first day when I found out at my own expense. Fortunately, I had gambled conservatively."

Blank silence.

Jake commented, "In that case, I guess we're lucky that the Divine Academy facilities are free for the Ordeal winners. On the other hand, we've earned it..."

Ulfar could only agree with him. "That goes for students like me too. We also had our missions and goals to fulfill. Since we weren't expelled we too can use the facilities of the Divine Academy as we please for a year. After that, the natives will be able to stay as students under the previous conditions or they can become Players like us and join a planet in the Mirror Universe."

"After spending so much time in this school, you must know the place like the back of your hand, am I right?" Ashun gave him a charming wink as she clasped his hands.

The King of Beskyr suddenly blushed and withdrew his hands as if he had just touched a hot plate.

"W-who is this?" Ulfar growled alertly. He was definitely not fond of the stirring and irrational flustering he had just experienced.

"Ashun." Will laughed. "A member of Lost Divinities. Our enemy. However, you can answer her. For now, we are no longer at war."

Ulfar had been following their conversations in the Faction Chat and nodded with an enlightened look. "Hmmp, I see. To answer the question, yes I know the Divine Academy inside and out. Now that it's all free... Yes, there's a place I can take you to."

An excited expression lit up his face. He had been wanting to go there for a long time but was short on points.

"The Stele."

Chapter 903: The Harem Lord

"The Stele?" Jake and the other Myrtharian Nerds stared at him without showing any semblance of excitement.

If this was the same Prophetic Stele they had visited during the Ordeal, then it was definitely an amazing place they should definitely revisit. However, it had never bothered them too much.

Simply because until now, touching a Stele had always been free and Steles were not rare on the continent. In fact, they were everywhere, in every town and village and even in the wildest and most reclusive parts of the Wilderness.

"Yes the Stele of Aurae near the fountain!" Ulfar beamed as he looked at them with a big grin. "You may not know what it is, but it's an incredible monument that grants a Soul Class. It can significantly boost your stats based on your Spirit Body level while giving you new abilities in the process. It really blows your mind, doesn't it?"

Lucia, Enya, Will, and Hephais judged him with their eyes as if he were a dimwit. Ryne, who was new to the group, didn't dare offend him and modestly cleared her throat to remind the lucky warrior,

"Far be it from me to disappoint you, but there are, or rather were millions of Steles scattered all over Quanoth. Unrestricted access and... free."

A breeze blew during the silence, giving Ulfar an overwhelming feeling of loneliness. His despondent face was a shadow of its former self, his joy long gone.

"Free?"

"Hmm." The other Myrtharian Nerds and even Wyatt, Carmin, Ashun and Ryne nodded in unison as they all looked at him with pity.

The King of Beskyr froze in place with his mouth agape for a moment, then exploded with rage,

"By the balls of Beskyr! Are you fucking kidding me?! Do you have any idea how many Contribution Points I had to collect to be able to touch that damn Stele?! I'll tell you! 100 points! 100 ! That's 10 billion Aether points. And that was only the first time! The second time, it cost me 1,000! A thousand, damn it!"

Ulfar's voice broke and his eyes welled up with tears in front of his flabbergasted audience. Seeing such an old and hardened chap having an existential crisis in front of them was not pleasant at all. If anything, it made them uneasy, making them want to get the hell out of here.

"Dad... Are you okay?" Skorgeld coyly tried to talk to his father but all he garnered was a pissed-off glare from his father.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

Jake and the others looked at each other looking for someone to blame, but the truth was that it was nobody's fault. They had mentioned their Soul Classes in the Faction Chat. Or at least some of the Players liked to chat and catch up on each other's accomplishments and adventures. Most, like Jake, preferred to lurk in the shadow, always online but hardly ever showing up.

Since touching the Stele was free and easy, no Player had ever mentioned this fact for the simple reason that it was something normal for them. They had never conceived the idea that it might not be the case everywhere.

Ulfar wasn't born yesterday either. When he saw their constipated expressions he realized that he could only blame his bad luck. Such irony...

"A-anyway. It's free now. Do you want to head over there with me?" The King of Beskyr dried his tears and forced himself to return to his usual cheerfulness, but no one was fooled.

"Ah, Ulfar, there you are! We couldn't find you." A soft female voice rang out from the top of the stairs the King of Beskyr had come down.

Looking in the direction of the voice, Jake and the others caught sight of two beautiful brunette twins who combined sensuality and cuteness but weren't overly vulgar. As soon as they saw Ulfar, they charged at him and threw themselves into his arms.

An elated glint flickered behind Ashun's pupils, who gleefully applauded their arrival while hopping in place.

"True love! This is beautiful!" She exclaimed, clasping her hands together near her heart as if she was deeply moved by this reunion scene.

" ... "

In contrast, Jake and the others winced as if they had just swallowed a fly. Yeah... For a minute, they had almost believed that Ulfar had spent a tough year participating in a cruel and humiliating survival game, sacrificing his happiness and pride for some Contribution Points.

Yet, it seemed that despite all the hardships he had to go through, it didn't stop him from fooling around and chasing skirts. He had even hooked up with two gorgeous twins that any man with two functional eyes would have rated 10 out of 10 in a heartbeat.

"Eleonore and Valia are looking for you too." One of the twins pinched Ulfar's cheek with a vengeful pout, while the other sister scolded him relentlessly while remaining snuggled up against his chest.

Jake and the others, now filler characters, listened with an increasingly gloomy face to the trio's admonitions and lovesick cooing and soon learned that these two lovely twins were not the only victims of the King of Beskyr. He had game and his harem included a good dozen students, including 4 female Players who had arrived at the same time as him.

"Impressive..." Will secretly gave a thumbs up.

As for the women present, with the exception of Ashun who had hearts in her eyes, they were secretly dreaming of thrashing him.

After several long minutes of hugs, smooches and sweet talk that would make the most hardcore rom-com drama aficionados throw up, Ulfar finally deigned to put an end to this outpouring of affection and made the introductions.

These two twins were named Nyx and Eris respectively and were, like Ulfar, Players who had arrived at the Divine Academy on the same day as him.

They were vague about their abilities, but with their permission, Ulfar revealed that their current Soul Classes were Fate Bender and Providence Controller. Their powers seemed to be related to the concept of destiny.

Jake saw them in a whole new light as he learned what they were capable of. Without that kind of mysterious ability of the same caliber as Ulfar's it was almost impossible to make it straight into the Divine Academy.

And the good news was that they were factionless! Well done, Ulfar! Jake was even prepared to encourage him to seduce even more female players waiting to meet their prince charming.

At that moment, the Don Juan in question was suddenly overcome by a foreboding feeling. He didn't know why, but he had a strange nagging thought that hard days were ahead. A Beskryan's instincts could not be underestimated.

'Impossible. I just finished my Ordeal.' The King shook his head and pushed that sense of impending danger back into a corner of his head.

"Whenever you want to take us to the Stele." Will reminded him politely once the introductions were over.

Ulfar remembered why he was there and without wasting any more time led his friends to the notorious Stele that had cost him so many Contribution Points. The Divine Academy was much larger and more maze-like than what the outside view would suggest. According to the twins there was space magic at work.

They meandered through more than five kilometers of corridors, stairways and halls of all kinds before finally arriving at a vast open-air patio with a fake sky. Here, lush, fairy-tale-like gardens grew in perfect harmony and all sorts of aliens could be seen chatting, studying or picnicking in small groups.

In the center of the patio was a massive blue marble fountain depicting a fratricidal battle between two celestial beings of an unknown alien species. One of them looked a bit like Aurae, the other one had two more eyes.

A few meters in front of the fountain stood the Prophetic Stele they were used to.

"The legendary fight between Aurae and his hypothetical brother." Ulfar explained as he saw them gawking at the fountain's statues. He too had reacted the same way when he first saw them.

"His brother?" Jake raised a questioning eyebrow. Wasn't Aurae some kind of android?

"Actually, nobody knows." Ulfar admitted. "Maybe they're from the same model series, or maybe one is the prototype of the other. Or maybe beings like Aurae were much more common at one time and after a long war he ended up being the ultimate survivor. I think that unless we reach their level and ask him directly it will be difficult to get to the bottom of this."

For once, Jake agreed with him. The weak were doomed to remain in the dark. Only by moving forward and striving to improve themselves could they tear away the veil of ignorance that kept them from contemplating the truth.

"Let's touch that Steele, shall we?" Jake smiled determinedly. Even without his Oracle System he was confident in his ability to choose the Soul Class that best suited him.

If it was truly impossible, he could leave it to fate. Ulfar, Nyx and Eris had used such powers to get here before them and so in a way it was proof to him that such concepts could exist in a concrete form. He just had to hope that his would live up to his expectations.

Chapter 904: Seeking Humiliation

"Who wants to go first?" Ulfar offered as a good host. He was eager to change his Soul Class but after waiting for so many months he could bear to wait a few more minutes.

Tim immediately raised his hand. "Me!"

The other Myrtharian Nerds, including those from Pureblood and Ashun saw no problem with this.

It was the privilege of being the only child/teenager in their faction. If the conclusion of this Ordeal had been more optimistic, he could have shared this moment of favoritism with Lily, his sweetheart.

In retrospect, this Ordeal had not been kind to the Lilys. Carmine's little sister with the same name had also been eliminated prematurely, well before the final battle. As such, by the sole fact that Tim was the only child to have survived to the very end he could boast of being the first in his category.

Antsy but also a little apprehensive, the teenager walked stiffly over to the Steele and nervously put his hand on it. A second later, he withdrew it with a big smile. It would seem that he had gotten something good.

"Satisfied?" Enya ruffled his hair.

"Hmm." Tim nodded vigorously. "I got the Tier 6 Soul Class Lucky Star. It allows me to control the power of lucky stars, using them to boost my own abilities or weaken my enemies. They can also create small explosions of luck, causing unpredictable events to happen around them."

Jake and the others could hardly hide their surprise. This Soul Class looked pretty powerful...

"Lucky Star..." Jake repeated with a thoughtful look. "Could it be derived from your ability as a Myrtharian and Beskyrian to manipulate luck, heat and radiation? Or does it refer to a more metaphorical accomplishment or trait?"

"Well, I have a feeling that Tim has always been a sort of lucky mascot for us." Will joked as he in turn ruffled the teen's hair. "As long as he's alive, there's still hope for this Ordeal."

The other Myrtharian Nerds nodded in agreement. Tim truly was their lucky star.

"Who's next?" Ulfar then returned the conversation to the main topic.

Because Tim had gotten such a good Soul Class related to luck, the other three Beskyrians couldn't resist and jostled to be next. After three rounds of rock paper scissors, Trea went first, followed by Fo and Skorgeld. It appeared that Ulfar's son had not inherited his father's outrageous luck.

They took turns touching the Stele and all seemed pleased with the Soul Class they had achieved. At least it seemed that their curse had not affected their available options.

Jake had no intention of asking his companions what Soul Class they had obtained if they wanted to keep the secret to themselves, but not everyone in his faction had the same qualms. Crunch and Lord Phenix immediately began pestering them to spill the beans. The trio did not resist for long in the face of the perseverance of the two agitators.

Skorgeld confessed in less than a minute that he had obtained the Soul Class of Battleaxe Gambler, a mysterious class that allowed him to bet on the outcome of any battle-related event and, if successful, obtain all sorts of advantages. On the other hand, if he was wrong he could find himself weakened. It was the kind of ability that was harmless at the beginning of a fight, but several successful predictions could have an unpredictable snowball effect. Of course, there were all sorts of limitations and risks involved.

Trea, who was a gifted archer, was unsurprisingly awarded a Soul Class related to this field: Lucky-Eyed Bowmaster. It was a Soul Class blessed with the luck of the stars like Tim and could make shots that seem almost impossible to the naked eye. They were adept at using the light of the stars, their innate luck and intuition to guide their arrows

and strike their targets with unerring precision and lethality. Their eyes were also blessed with the gift of foresight and could see the paths of their arrows before they release them.

Fo's Soul Class that specialized in the creation and use of talismans sounded much less badass, but it was also Tier 6: Lucksmith. It was a Soul Class that crafted talismans and other lucky objects from scratch, imbuing them with powerful magic that can bring good fortune to their owner. It was the kind of auxiliary Soul Class that every ambitious faction needed.

Upon hearing the four Soul Classes that his son and his friends had obtained, Ulfar couldn't hold back any longer and touched the Stele without asking. A second later he withdrew his hand and laughed like a psychopath who had just won the lottery.

No matter how hard Crunch and Lord Phenix tried to coax him into talking, he remained as mute as a grave. From this, one could see the difference in temperament between a king and his subjects. Ulfar was indeed reliable. Jake wouldn't have to worry about Ulfar spilling all the secrets of their faction if he was to be captured by their enemies.

Privately, however, he informed Jake, Will and Lucia of his abilities. This was because these three people were involved in all the decisions and strategies concerning the Myrtharian Nerds. If he was too vague, it could not only harm the faction, but also his own people.

His new Soul Class was Luck Monarch. It was a Soul Class that embodied the concept of luck and royalty. They were believed to have a natural affinity for good fortune and the power to influence the luck of those around them. They were often seen as leaders among their people, ruling with a benevolent hand and ensuring that their subjects were well taken care of.

Luck Monarchs were known for their impeccable sense of timing, making decisions and taking actions at precisely the right moment to maximize their chances of success. They were also skilled in the art of divination, using their magical abilities to predict the future and plan accordingly.

As members of the royal family, Luck Monarchs were often born into positions of power and privilege, but they were also expected to uphold a certain level of responsibility and honor. They were trained from a young age in the ways of diplomacy and politics, and they often acted as ambassadors between their kingdom and other nations.

In battle, Luck Monarchs were feared for their ability to turn the tide of a fight with a single stroke of luck. They were also skilled fighters in their own right, wielding weapons and magic with equal ease. They were often accompanied by a retinue of loyal followers, who believe that their good luck will rub off on them.

Overall, a Luck Monarch was a powerful and charismatic figure, capable of leading their people to prosperity and victory through the power of luck and royal authority. And most importantly, it was a Tier 8 Soul Class.

The Stele therefore placed this Soul Class above that of Aetherist or Archon. Of course, Ulfar did not reveal all this. He only mentioned superficially what his abilities were and Jake, Will and Lucia were content with his explanations.

Then it was Hephais' turn, and he only revealed the name of his new Soul Class to Jake telepathically, earning the wrath of Crunch and his turkey sidekick. His Soul Class was Abyssal Nightwalker, and that was as powerful as it sounded.

Even without knowing his Tier, the mere fact that Hephais' appearance was immediately shrouded in black flames, revealing only a pair of glowing red eyes spoke volumes about its potential.

The rest of the Myrtharian Nerds and Pureblood then touched the Stele one after the other, each obtaining a powerful Soul Class that was supposed to accompany them for a long time. Perhaps permanently.

Everyone managed to secure at least one Tier 5 or 6 Soul Class. Several of them managed to acquire Soul Classes of Tier 7 or even better. Since they were not all from the same faction, they obviously could not tell each other everything. However, even if they kept the Tier of their Soul Class to themselves, the name of their Soul Class was usually more than enough to estimate their power.

For example...

"Hey Gerulf, what did you get as a Soul Class?" Rogen asked in a thunderous voice full of bad intentions. He clearly wanted everyone to hear their conversation. "For the record, I got the Cosmic Frost Titan Soul Class, of Tier 7. If you don't dare to answer, that's okay I can understand you being embarrassed after hearing mine..."

And here it was... A new daily episode of their rivalry was about to begin. The duel to the death in the Celestial City had apparently not been enough for them. It was called seeking death in broad daylight.

Except this time, only Rogen was seeking humiliation.

" ... " Gerulf scratched his head, staring at him as if he was an utter moron, then blurted out with an even more booming voice, "Sunforged Juggernaut. Tier 8."

Radio silence. Rogen stood petrified, then his cheeks puffed out as if he were holding back from bursting into tears and making a scene. Suddenly, he rushed wordlessly toward the Stele and tried to touch it again, but it was too late.

A rejection notice popped up in his head:

[You have recently changed Soul Class and your soul has just undergone heavy alterations. Your soul is unstable and changing your Soul Class again could cause irreversible damage to your mind. Please wait 268 hours, 36 minutes and 16 seconds before trying again]

Then Rogen began to bawl his eyes out in front of the stunned crowd.

Chapter 905: Maintenance

Then it was Lucia, Carmin and Wyatt's turn to choose a different Soul Class. Since Wyatt and Carmin were not of the same faction, they did not owe them any confession. Therefore, although Carmin was dying to share hers, she was forced to keep her mouth shut after receiving a telepathic warning from the Vampire Progenitor.

Because Lucia was one of the Myrtharian Nerds' sub-leaders, like Ulfar she could not openly reveal her Soul Classes to anyone. Nevertheless, like the King of Beskyr she communicated what her Soul Class was to Jake and her trusted friends, including Ulfar, Gerulf, and Rogen, with whom she had fought for over two years before joining B42.

"My Soul Class is called Divine Princess of Victory."

When Jake heard the name of her Soul Class he had to hold back from breaking into a fit of laughter. The name was so cliché, but it suited her so well. The good news was that it was another Tier 8 Soul Class.

Not long ago he thought it was practically impossible to awaken a Soul Class of Tier 8 or higher. After all, in Tier 7 he only knew the Soul Classes of Aetherist and Archon. Aetherist was the dream class for any future Aetherist and Aetherist was considered the most versatile and reputable profession in the Mirror Universe.

It seemed hard to top and yet his subordinates had one after another attained Soul Classes of Tier 6 or higher.

'That's because you were missing a piece of the picture,' Xi explained in his head.

"What do you mean?" Jake mentally argued with his Oracle AI, his interest piqued.

'First, let's recap what you already know. Quanoth natives change, upgrade or get a new Soul Class every 20 Spirit Body levels. Why do you think this is so?'

Jake naturally came up with an answer. There was only one possible answer.

'Because their Spirit Power, Soul Power and Soul Strength are now sufficient.' He tentatively said.

'Bingo.' Xi exclaimed. 'It means that the Tier is not necessarily representative of a Soul Class' power. Take for example a Tier 6 Soul Class like Aetherist. The soul of a Tier 1 human might be too weak to withstand the alterations the Stele must make to bestow such a Soul Class. This is why the Stele applies some kind of nerf to the Soul Classes of natives and low-level players. For example in your case, your current Soul Class is Beginner Rune Aetherist, which I estimate to be between tier 3 and 4. The soul of an ordinary level 1 native wouldn't be able to handle it. He or she would surely go crazy and their mind would become unstable. On the other hand, a Soul Class like Beginner Puncher can be awakened by almost anyone. Its Tier is what one might call Tier 0.

'However, while a default Tier 6 Soul Class like Aetherist has much greater awakening requirements and versatility, that doesn't mean that a Soul Class like Puncher is doomed to remain at Tier 1. If there really was a boxing freak capable of living for that sole purpose, his Puncher Soul Class would sooner or later rise through the ranks, mutating little by little with his new experiences and accomplishments. A Grandmaster Puncher can compete with other Tier 3 Soul Class. In practice, it's even more powerful. This hyperspecialization exponentially increases the probability of awakening a related True Will-based move.'

As Jake listened to Xi's explanation, Lucia simultaneously told him how her new Soul Class worked. Meanwhile, the remaining Aristocats had also begun lining up to touch the Stele. Crunch and Lord Phenix had finally stopped pestering the other Players to spout the name of their new Soul Class.

After understanding Lucia's Soul Class in-depth, plus Xi's insights, Jake finally figured out how a Tier 8 Soul Class could be awakened and how they theoretically outperformed lower Tier Soul Classes.

What all the high Tier Soul Classes had in common was that they often had complex names, but the name encompassed both simplicity and complexity. They also reflected the life experience of those who unlocked them.

Divine Princess of Victory fitted Lucia like a glove, but as it stood its actual Tier was probably only 4 or 5. Even if she met the requirements for such a Soul Class, that didn't mean her soul could handle it.

Taking this logic to the extreme, Jake even went so far as to speculate that the ultimate Soul Class an individual could awaken would simply have their first name. But the Oracle System would of course never use an Evolver's first name to name a Soul Class.

Using the example of the Tier 1 Soul Class of Puncher, Xi theorized that Tier 8 Soul Classes derived from it could have overly pompous and arrogant sounding monikers

like "Ironfist Annihilator", "Ultimate Fist Emperor", "Apocalypse Fistbringer", "Divine Fist Guardian" and so on.

Indeed... Soul Classes like that sounded much more terrifying than a timid Tier 6 Aetherist.

A few minutes later, everyone except Jake, Ashun and Ryne had obtained or changed their Soul Classes. The Aristocats were more mature and careful than they normally appeared because they kept the details of their Soul Classes to themselves. They would report privately to Jake and Will later.

The only Soul Class Jake should have been able to know immediately was that of his cat Crunch because they were bound by a Pet Contract. Alas, because he couldn't access his bracelet's interface, he had to stay in the dark for the time being.

Ashun took all her time to change her Soul Class, sashaying sensually to the Stele to give all her male audience a chance to admire her curves. If Jake hadn't grabbed Lucia by the collar she probably would have chopped her head off from behind during the second of unawareness the goddess touched the Stele.

Ashun was playful and prankish, but in the end they were not of the same faction. No matter how friendly and teasing she was, she kept the secret of her new Soul Class to herself.

Then it was Ryne's turn, who silently proceeded to change her Soul Class with a poker face. Being factionless for the time being, nobody forced her to reveal anything and she didn't open up either. She probably needed more time to trust them.

"Looks like there's only me left..." Jake smiled as he calmly approached the Stele before the burning stares of his companions.

He gracefully and relaxedly touched the Stele. Nothing happened.

" ... "

He touched the Stele again. Still nothing.

" ... "

A vein began to throb on his forehead and his lip twitched. Now he was in a bad mood.

When he was about to try for the third time, his mental sense picked up a stream of encrypted energy at a certain frequency and using his abnormal brain power he managed to decipher its message.

[The Stele is now in maintenance. Please try again later in 156 minutes and 17 seconds]

" ... " Jake clenched his fists until his knuckles were white. Was this Stele messing with him?

The other Myrtharian Nerds were also puzzled, but hearing his reason no one doubted it. It was a huge coincidence, but it was just bad luck. Some, like Crunch and Lord Phenix, could not help but gloat mockingly.

He had wanted to be last. So he had no one to blame but himself.

Jake was thinking the same thing and stifling a sigh he waved at them, "Don't wait for me. Go about your business. I'll stay here. I have some things to check on."

Lucia offered to stay with him, but he insisted that it wasn't necessary. He really had things to do. When everyone had finally left, including Ashun and Ryne, Jake leaned back against the Stele and closed his eyes.

'Xi, you said I devoured my own bracelet and should have retained its abilities?' Jake asked gravely.

'If your new abilities are related to Digestors, then yes. Probably...' Xi confirmed in a serious tone.

'Let's try to check it out, then.' Jake scrunched up his face with determination.

Diving into the depths of his mind, he scanned each cell with his mental sense to better understand the changes in his body and gradually entered a deep state of meditation. So deep in fact that he had never experienced anything like it before.

Soon, countless lines of Aether Code and combinations of organic molecules flashed before his eyes and the most shocking thing was that he felt he understood everything. With a thought, he could recombine all kinds of nucleotides with all sorts of Aether Symbols and even change the epigenetic expression of his own DNA. This mental space was like an experimental laboratory, except that he could easily reproduce these results in reality.

Suddenly, his attention was drawn to a certain combination of atoms and molecules arranged in a certain structure in his mind. As if he had just zoomed in on it, the tiny strands of light intertwining it grew thousands of times larger, unfolding into a long, almost endless string of Aether Runes.

Got it!

Jake abruptly opened his eyes. He knew how to get his Oracle Device back

Chapter 906: New Oracle Device

He had two ways to proceed. The first was a matter of formality and in theory, would require little effort. The second method was the more intuitive and the one he strongly favored but would require additional effort.

The first method for acquiring a new Oracle Device could be easily deduced by any Player of his level: All he had to do was ask another Player for help.

Just as Jake had provided Jeanie, Aisling and so many other natives with a bracelet, he could also ask another Player for help in contacting the Oracle System and helping him set up a new Oracle Device in his name. All he had to do was provide the liquid alloy, which was a piece of cake for him.

There was one catch to this method, though. Xi's consciousness had merged with his own soul, so technically she could no longer be considered an Oracle AI. If he set up a new bracelet, he would also receive a new Oracle AI in the process. Which would be completely loyal and transparent to the Oracle System.

Jake wasn't ready to give up his little secrets. Even if the Oracle hadn't given him too many reasons to hate it, it had given him enough to be distrusted. All those Ruby-related missions were proof of that.

The second method was very similar except that instead of going through another Player's bracelet he would use his own liquid alloy to recreate a new bracelet free of any external influence. If successful, this had only advantages, but until then there were a few obstacles to overcome.

The first was that the technology behind the Oracle Devices was so preposterously advanced that Jake had no chance of unraveling all its mysteries with his current intelligence and perception, even if he spent the next thousand years working on it. The first obstacle was therefore the hardware.

The second obstacle was then quite logically the software. Or in other words: the Oracle System. Even if Jake could somehow replicate an equivalent of the Oracle System, it would be worthless if he could not link it up to the real Oracle System that spanned the Mirror Universe.

The final hurdle was to reintroduce Xi as his official Oracle AI. The worst case scenario would be for them to overcome the previous two obstacles and then have a new Oracle AI downloaded into his brand new "empty" bracelet.

These were the three major obstacles that caused Jake not to recreate his bracelet and the same reason Xi was unable to suggest a solution. None of these issues were easy to solve.

At least not until he gained access to all the information stored somewhere in his mind. For there was at least one thing he was sure of now, and that was that he had indeed inherited some traits typically belonging to Digestors.

The most well-known ability of the Digestors, which was practically their trademark, was their ability to change the shape and properties of their chitin. With each rank advancement, this ability would be greatly enhanced until Rank 4, when the Digestors chose their evolutionary path. From that point on, this ability could weaken until it became a dormant gene, or it could continue to strengthen without limit and become an even more fearsome and versatile talent.

Humanoid Digestors were undoubtedly in the second category. Their ability to morph their chitin to produce equipment, growths, projectiles, or wings was pretty solid.

Jake had inherited this ability. And it wasn't until he became aware of it that he realized how extraordinary it was in his hands. With his Gold Stone Skin, his ability to produce various materials was naturally not limited to chitin.

And better yet, it was completely instinctive. Like breathing or drinking.

A few minutes earlier Jake was wondering how to make a bracelet, now he realized that for him it was just as easy as pie. Focusing on his right wrist, he calmly activated the cells located there and ordered them to ooze out a little liquid alloy. The process went smoothly and after producing the equivalent of a liter that made his forearm swell slightly he stopped.

Jake then wished, rather than visualized, the bracelet he wanted to create and an Oracle Device almost identical to the one before condensed around his wrist. This one was black, with silver veins.

Scanning his masterpiece with his mind, Jake could tell how complex the structure of the bracelet he had just created was and it made him heave a sigh of relief. He had probably succeeded.

Now he had to deal with the software problem. Again, this turned out to be much simpler than expected. As soon as the thought of adding the Oracle System to his brand new Oracle Device crossed his mind, the familiar mental interface he thought he would never see again popped up before his eyes.

'So easy!' Jake's eyes filled with wonder, like a child who has just received his Christmas presents in advance.

'This confirms my theory.' Xi didn't share the same joy. 'You became your own Oracle Device when you devoured it. To tell you the truth, I don't think you need the bracelet. It's just that your brain and soul are not yet developed enough to simulate your own Oracle System.'

Jake had clearly witnessed how his simple probes with his mental sense behaved like super-powered Oracle Scans. So he couldn't deny it and just nodded. However, it made him think of something else,

"Besides the link to the Oracle System, the Oracle Devices' computing power comes from their liquid alloy, right?" He reasoned aloud with a thoughtful face. "Since I've ingested almost 60 tons of liquid alloy it shouldn't be the computing power I lack."

Xi did not answer immediately. She seriously contemplated his suggestion. Finally, she sighed and said,

'If your body really does have a structured network of liquid alloy connecting each of its cells then that would explain a lot... However, while I think it's an idea worth exploring and your body really does have the potential of an Oracle Device, I also think it's best to continue to use an external bracelet to connect with the Oracle System. Think of it as a convenience but also as a safety measure. If for some reason the Oracle System tries to target us via the bracelet you will be able to get rid of it easily. It would be more troublesome if it hacked directly into your brain.'

Seen like that... Being an augmented cyber-human didn't only have its perks. It also exposed him to other risks.

Therefore, Jake decided to stick to the original plan. Even though he theoretically had the latent powers of an Oracle Device, he would continue to play in easy mode for a while longer.

The only thing left was the third obstacle. Xi had to be reintroduced as an Oracle AI. This time he had nothing else to do, she took care of everything.

Their souls were semi-fused, so what Jake knew, she knew. With his help, she easily moved back into the new bracelet, then after being recognized as its Oracle AI she took control of all the available liquid alloy and recreated the microscopic metal network in Jake's body.

With his new senses, Jake felt his body rapidly becoming saturated with metal as Xi used the liquid alloy his cells were producing to develop its three-dimensional architecture. He thought he would soon be exhausted, but it wasn't until he had produced just over 60 tons of liquid alloy that the backlash hit him hard.

He discovered that for every additional microgram of liquid alloy produced by his cells, his spiritual energy would melt away by 20%, and a splitting headache would ravage his consciousness. As soon as Xi realized this, she stopped.

[I'm sorry, I was a little too absorbed in my task, haha.] She apologized awkwardly.

Jake clutched his head for a few seconds, wincing, then his facial muscles relaxed, his face regaining its usual stillness. The headache was gone.

[Your speed of recovery is just remarkable...] Xi commented speechlessly. At that moment, as if she had just finished reading something, her mood changed dramatically. [On second thought... It's not surprising...]

Another elite Player would have ended up bedridden for months or years after damaging their consciousness like this. A slightly more ordinary Player would have ended up senile. But not Jake.

Instead of reprimanding Xi for this senseless torture session, Jake grinned with an overexcited expression. Far from being resentful, he was burning with anticipation. The last sentence of his Oracle AI had erased his last misgivings.

Now that Jake had no obstacles preventing him from finding out how extraordinary he had become, he could not hold back any longer.

"Oracle Status!"

Jake expected the result to be amazing, but when he saw his Status for real he felt uncomfortable. He was no longer a Myrtharian.

[Spirit Body level: 50>73]

[Species: Cosmic D Starfeyrves]

[Physique: Cosmic D Starfeyrves Body lvl1]

[Height: 7.86>2.00 meters]

[Weight: 18689kg> 78658kg]

[Soul Class: Rune Aetherist]

[Strength: 75 208]

[Agility: 123 956]

[Constitution: 262 000]

[Vitality: 198 000]

[Intelligence: 1 200 000]

[Perception: 160 000]

[Extrasensory Perception: 85000]

[Luck: 350]

[Aether Stats: 12386>128 900]

[Energy: Grade 10]

[Reference for an average, adult Fourth Ordeal Player: Stats= 1 point.]

Even for someone as shameless as he was... Wasn't he a little too strong? It seemed unfair to the other players.

Chapter 907.1: Cosmic D Starfeyrves Bloodline(part 1)

By far the most shocking change was regarding his species. After his appearance changed so drastically and the Myrtharian Body Passive disappeared from the Myrtharian Nerds' Faction Skill list, he expected the changes to be pretty substantial on that side, but not so much that the name would sound so alien and foreign to the ear.

And what the hell was that D in the middle of the species name? Didn't Cosmic Starfeyrves sound awkward enough?

He didn't really mean it. Xi and Jake immediately came to the conclusion that it simply referred to the D in Digestor. What else could it mean? It just seemed that the Oracle System needed to censor itself for some reason.

As for his body, his height had really decreased this time. This was not the result of a Miniaturization or Body Compression Skill. The implications of this were not to be underestimated.

Especially combined with the more than 4-fold increase in his pre-mutation weight. Right now, his body was so dense and compact that not a single ore from Quanoth was able to scratch his skin, or rather his chitin scales.

After skimming over the rest of his new Status, his gaze roamed a second time over his stats, leaving him puzzled. Some of his stats, like his Strength had dropped, while others like his Intelligence had been multiplied by a factor of over 20.

At first glance, it looked like his physical strength had decreased, but the reference point of his stats had changed again. This was no longer a level 1 jobless human adult native of Quanoth but an average Fourth Ordeal Player.

Seeing this, Jake didn't know whether to laugh or cry. What the hell did "average" Fourth Ordeal Player mean? If he didn't know what the average Fourth Ordeal Player was worth, what was the point of this new metric? And more importantly, had he even asked for it? The Oracle System seemed to arbitrarily decide such details without asking the main person.

"Xi, is it possible to find out more about the average level of a Fourth Ordeal Player?" Jake asked his Oracle AI, hoping that the Oracle System would not make it difficult for him.

[Mmm... Let me see...] Xi replied, beginning to comb through the Archives at her disposal. Now that her connection to the Oracle System was restored, she could consult them freely again.

After a few seconds, she sent him a packet of data. Opening it, Jake understood why the reference system had changed. It was normal. After the fourth Ordeal, the Oracle would use the current Ordeal's Players to compare the participants. Because he had "completed" the Main Mission of his Fourth Ordeal, the Oracle System treated him as a Player who had graduated from his tutorial, even though he had not yet left the world of the current Ordeal.

"Still, an average Fourth Ordeal Player is just too weak." Jake was speechless after reading the data transmitted by Xi.

Using the old stats system that Jake used in his early days, the average Fourth Ordeal Player had average Aether Stats of only 227, and stats (Body Stats*Soul Class Coefficient* Spirit Body level) of 96, which was 9.6 times higher than that of an adult human from Earth.

Considering that a Tier 1 Soul Class combined with a lvl 10 Spirit Body was enough to double or triple one or several Body Stats, it was really not much. This meant that not only did the average Fourth-Ordeal Player have a body quality barely above that of an Earth Athlete, but their Aether Stats were well below the minimum Aether density (1000) of the current Ordeal. Their Spirit Body was also subpar.

This made Jake realize that the Ordeal on Quanoth they had just experienced was not at all representative of what the average Player was going through. Jake and his companions had long since surpassed the norm and it was completely pointless to compare themselves to these cannon fodder.

"Xi, adjust my stats using a Fifth Ordeal Player as a reference." He ordered calmly.

[No problem. Wait a minute... It's done.]

Jake inspected his Status again, but found that his stats were still high even after he changed the reference. The average Fifth-Ordeal Player had stats 5.6 times higher than a Fourth-Ordeal Player and Aether stats of 5238 points.

The difference between a non-lethal tutorial Ordeal and a life-threatening Ordeal was clearly visible. The average Fourth-Ordeal Player didn't care if his Aether stats were lower than the Aether density of the current Ordeal because he knew it wouldn't penalize him.

In contrast, the average Fifth-Ordeal Player had Aether stats that were higher than the Aether density of a Fifth-Ordeal World. Furthermore, their stats were at least 5 times higher while the average Fourth-Ordeal Player's body was only 2-3 times stronger than a First-Ordeal Player's.

"Use a Sixth-Ordeal Player as a reference." Jake asked next, his curiosity having gotten the better of him. He wanted to know where his authority ended.

[I can't.] Xi's negative answer disappointed him very much.

He stood silent for a minute to think, and then after some thought attempted another, more specific request,

"In that case, use a Fourth-Ordeal Player in the top 0.01% of Quanoth as your reference."

This was the conclusion Jake had just come to. In an Ordeal, there were usually several million participants. More than 9.8 million in Quanoth alone, which only had elite Players.

Using the top 0.01% as a benchmark, he only had to worry about 1000 players. It made things a lot easier.

[Right away.] Xi confirmed that this was possible.

This time Jake saw a noticeable drop in his own adjusted stats. Unsurprisingly, a Player in the top 0.01% was nothing like the average Player. Looking at his own Ordeal, minutes before the final battle began there were still tens of thousands of survivors. The number of winners being 578, the top 0.01% could be considered the elite of the elite.

[Spirit Body level: 50>73]

[Species: Cosmic D Starfeyrves]

[Physique: Cosmic D Starfeyrves Body lvl1]

[Height: 2.00 meters]

[Weight: 18689kg> 78658kg]

[Soul Class: Rune Aetherist]

[Strength: 376.04]

[Agility: 619.78]

[Constitution: 1 310]

[Vitality: 990]

[Intelligence: 6 000]

[Perception: 800]

[Extrasensory Perception: 425]

[Luck: 1.75]

[Aether Stats: 128 900]

[Energy: Grade 10]

[Reference for a top 0.01% Fourth Ordeal Player: Stats= 1 point. Aether stats=5,289 points, Spirit Body level= 43]

Now Jake found his status much more readable. His interest was piqued and he immediately tried to request an even more elitist benchmark such as the top 0.0001% or 0.00001% but was met with failure.

[Authorization denied.] Xi announced. [Your Oracle Rank is insufficient.]

Jake thought about what she had just said and realized that it made sense. In Lost Divinities alone, there were quite a few Players with an Oracle Rank higher than his. If he could get information about them through this indirect means, wouldn't that be a form of cheating?

Anyway, his curiosity was sated. Now he wanted to know about his new bloodline. The report about it left him breathless.

[Grade ??? Cosmic D Starfeyrvs Bloodline: Level 1]

[Cosmic D Starfeyrves Body lvl1: A highly morphable body combining multiple bloodlines and able to adapt to any environment. Your digestive abilities allow you to digest anything in a short time and store all genetic and energetic information about the objects consumed. Your cells can now passively store, purify and absorb anything with sufficient time and together possess the drawing power of a Grade 10 Energy Core. Even without doing anything, the body will continue to grow stronger without limit]

[Cosmic D Starfeyrves Spirit Body lvl1: The Spirit Body can absorb any type of energy and as the physical body this ability equals that of a Grade 10 Energy Core. As a result, any spiritual injury recovers almost instantly as long as this ability is not compromised. Without doing anything, the Spirit Body continuously strengthens (currently 123 times stronger than that of a normal human).]

[Cosmic D Starveyrves Soul lvl1: Very strong Energy, Cosmic, Life and Space Attribute. Able to feed on any Energy to continuously strengthen and regenerate.]

[Bloodline Skills:]

[Accelerated Cosmic D Starfeyrves Growth lvl1: As soon as the body finds itself in a situation where it must adapt, its growth rate increases markedly. The effect doubles with each level]

[Self-Encoding: There are no longer any limits to the Aether Stats, as the Aether is constantly being compressed to make room. However, the cost in Aether required to increase stats will quickly become exponential. Using the Aether encoded by the Oracle Device to increase the Aether stats is no longer recommended if the Encoding level doesn't match]

[Energy and Soul Tribute: A defeated enemy will surrender all his energy and soul to the bloodline holder]

[Cosmic D Starfeyrves Trance lvl1: The stronger the desire to adapt, defeat an enemy, the stronger the body, mind and abilities of a Cosmic D Starfeyrves become once this ability is activated]

Chapter 908.2: Cosmic D Starfeyrves Bloodline(Part 2)

[Cosmic Sight lvl1: No energy flow escapes your sharp vision. With just a glance, you can assess the weaknesses, strengths, attributes, abilities, and affinities of your enemies. Your vision is endowed with a slight precognitive talent derived from your cognitive power, allowing you to foresee your opponents' future movements with a fraction of a second's advance notice (variable). Your eyes are no longer a weak point and can withstand physical, energetic, or spiritual constraints of all kinds, making them

as valuable as an Aether Artefact. With each additional level, you can obtain more information and channel more energy.]

[Cosmic Chitin Scales lvl1: The body can withstand high temperatures and radiation, including high pressure and friction. The scales can transform into any state desired, and their thickness and number can be adjusted to create different appendages or weapons. Your imagination is your only limit.]

[Cosmic Manipulation lvl1: You have some influence over the cosmos, allowing you to manipulate the fundamental forces, matter, and energy naturally produced by it. This talent is still in its infancy, and to perfect it, exposure to and repeated consumption of various energies and celestial bodies in the Mirror Universe or from elsewhere is required.]

[Cosmic Resistance lvl1: Your body has a certain tolerance for all forces, matter, and energy originating from the cosmos. In the case of a fundamental force like gravity, for example, your body will experience a reduced gravitational force, no matter where you are.]

[Energy Manipulation lvl1: You have a certain affinity and influence over any type of energy, allowing you to perceive, analyze, control, absorb, and utilize all energies, including those you have never encountered before. However, caution is advised when dealing with unknown energies.]

[Energy Resistance lvl1: Your body has a certain resistance to all types of energy. An immediate application that results from this is that your body can withstand a higher Aether density than other Evolvers and for longer periods before your cells become damaged.]

[Life Manipulation lvl1: You have a certain influence over life, allowing you to intuitively modify all sorts of vital parameters, mechanisms, and functions, ranging from the genetic and epigenetic expression of your DNA to the concept of Life Energy, a more abstract but just as concrete way of quantifying vitality or lifespan.]

[Space Manipulation lvl1: You have a certain influence over space and void, forming a synergy with your cosmic affinity that similarly grants you some influence over the void of space.]

[Cosmic Fairy Force lvl1: A superior form of telekinesis with both passive and active forms that can be used in two ways. The first way relies on a resonance effect with the physical body, providing default telekinetic force proportional to the available energy, but its effectiveness decreases with distance. In its passive form, the body is constantly protected by an invisible force field that sticks to the skin and can repel all physical or spiritual threats. The second way relies on the Spirit Body, and its range is limited only by the caster's mental sense. Its effectiveness also does not decrease with distance.]

[Artifact Incarnation/Phantasm lvl1: By digesting all of these artifacts, you have become one yourself. In theory, your body possesses all the abilities of the artifacts you have ingested, but attempting to embody them all at once could inflict constraints on your body that it is not able to withstand. At level 1, your limit is that of a Bronze Artifact, but it may vary in practice depending on your constitution and vitality. The second ability "Phantasm" allows you to recreate a tangible illusion of these artifacts, limited only by the energy you infuse into them.]

[Spirit Dimension lvl1: A place located in your sea of consciousness, in the depths of your soul, where you can store your fairy spirits and raise new ones. Its size and performance are currently limited, but it can be expanded as your affinity for space and spiritual energy increases. (Number of fairy spirits currently in the dimension: 1)]

[Cosmic Fairy Hatchery lvl1: Your sea of consciousness can cultivate a fairy egg by drawing on your spiritual energy after a certain amount of time. Upon hatching, a fairy spirit that is completely loyal to you will be born, which may or may not become one of your Familiars.]

[Familiars lvl1: By creating a body for your fairy spirits from your own genome, you can summon and control a large number of familiars. If necessary, you can recall these spirits to your Spirit Dimension at any time and reabsorb their bodies to restore your energy or biomass.]

[Spirit of Revenge: After a defeat, and if the host's will has not wavered, the bloodline will be greatly stimulated.]

As Jake finished reading, he remained silent for a long time. There were so many things that shook him and raised all sorts of questions.

First, the name of his bloodline. While the "D" in Digestor was more or less explained, it was still unclear where the word Starfeyrves came from and what it meant. The words "Star" and "Fey" were rather obvious, and it shocked him as much as it saddened him to see that Jeanie's sacrifice had had such an impact on his evolution. Almost as much as devouring Ruby.

On the side of his body and mind, his attributes and affinities had completely changed or rather, expanded to much broader concepts. Jake now knew what the Grade 10 Energy in his Status meant, leaving him with complicated emotions.

He had truly digested his Grade 10 Aether Core, but it had not disappeared. On the contrary, it had fused with his body and mind.

In theory, the Aether density in the immediate vicinity of a Grade 10 Aether Core should have been so absurdly high (around 10 billion) that he should have died instantly disintegrated. And yet, he was fine and his Aether stats were only slightly over 100,000.

However, this realization led him to another surprising discovery. His Aether stats capped at 128,000 or so, but that was not his true limit. It was just the Aether density that his body could currently withstand without taking damage.

In other words... He had the theoretical energy to raise his Aether stats to over 10 billion points, all at Grade 10. However, his body and mind were just too weak to support it.

On the other hand, it meant that his body and mind, already extremely robust compared to other Evolvers of his level, were his only limitations. If he found a way to strengthen them, his Aether stats would skyrocket.

Luckily, a high concentration of Aether could also stimulate his body and mind to adapt. And it just so happened that his new bloodline was an expert in adaptation. He had hit the jackpot!

As for his abilities, Jake then noticed in disbelief that he no longer had any weaknesses. Cosmic Manipulation and Resistance encompassed all his previous affinities and many more, while Space and Life Manipulation complemented them to make him even more versatile.

The Life Attribute was undoubtedly an ability of Digestor Ruby, while the Space Attribute had probably appeared when he devoured his and Ruby's Oracle Devices... Since he had assimilated his Grade 10 Aether Core, he could conclude that everything contained in his Space Storage had not escaped his stomach either...

At that moment, Jake should have melted into tears and fallen into depression after losing his Purgatory, equipment, and all his possessions. And he had been on the verge of doing so for a split second until he stumbled upon the ability Artefact Incarnation/Phantasm.

Since then, he felt like he was in a dream. Apparently, he had not only acquired the properties of his Oracle Device but also those of all his Artefacts, including his Purgatory! The possibilities were just unimaginable, and he was burning with the desire to try out his new power.

If Xi hadn't insisted and reminded him that it was neither the right time nor the right place, he would have definitely summoned his Purgatory in the gardens of the Divine Academy.

However, it wasn't until he reached the end of the text, particularly when his eyes landed on the Spirit Dimension ability, that he was truly troubled. He had yet to visit this Spirit Dimension located in the depths of his consciousness, nor had he ever used his new Cosmic Fairy Hatchery ability. And yet, his status said that it already housed a spirit?

Recalling Xi's previous words about wanting to show him something when they were alone, Jake immediately made the connection. This fairy spirit could only be Jeanie. Or at least he fervently hoped so.

"Is it Jeanie?" He asked his Oracle AI in a hesitant voice.

It wasn't out of attachment. He and Jeanie had known each other for too short a time. However, his guilt and gratitude for her sacrifice weighed heavily on him.

"It is very likely, but I cannot confirm it with certainty at this time," Xi responded cautiously.

Jake wanted to question further, but as he reread the description of his Familiars ability, his eyes suddenly widened with realization. At that moment, he completely forgot his concerns for Jeanie.

He had finally understood what Xi wanted to show him and why she seemed so urgent.

Chapter 909: Purgatory 2.0

"This thing you wanted to show me earlier is..."

Jake's lips parted to voice his question, but Xi silenced him with a hushed tone. "Don't say it! I still need to verify that it's actually possible," she cautioned.

Having connected the dots between his newfound abilities – Life Manipulation, Cosmic Manipulation, Familiars, and Artefact Incarnation – Jake realized what Xi intended to do. It was emotionally overwhelming for him, but paradoxically, he was also quite confident in the feasibility of her plan.

Xi wanted to create a body that would belong to her, and even though it would be generated from Jake's cells, he could easily recombine his own DNA and shape-shift with relative ease. This meant that his Familiars' bodies didn't have to resemble him; they could choose an appearance and body that suited them.

Although Jake had yet to experiment with his skills as a biologist, he knew deep down that it was possible. After all, who but he could claim to know for sure what he was capable of?

Xi, with their spirits forming one or almost one, had an understanding of his abilities as good, if not better than he did. However, the question mark remained regarding his Digestor abilities. He asked her immediately to clarify his doubts.

"Xi, can you access the genetic and Aetheric database that I see when I go into deep meditation?"

[If you're talking about that Digestor ability that allows you to combine and modify different bloodlines for your next evolution... No. I cannot,] Xi admitted regretfully without beating around the bush.

Jake nodded. "I see..."

Xi didn't want to rush things, and with good reason. Jake's Oracle Status didn't mention the strange database somewhere in his mind, and even with their close connection, she couldn't access it either.

This could only mean one thing: his Digestor abilities remained a mystery to the Oracle and the rest of the Mirror Universe. This kind of all-encompassing interference was so advanced that it even deceived the Oracle AI, which was closely linked to his mind. Jake couldn't fathom how a bloodline from a mere Fourth-Ordeal Player, whatever his grade, could accomplish such a feat.

Jake had a gnawing suspicion that an entity or force greater than that of the Oracle was hiding behind this mystery. It also implied that the description of his Bloodline was incomplete. The Oracle System only had a superficial understanding of his abilities, but it was already enough for his Bloodline to be bestowed with the Grade ???.

To get more answers, Jake planned to seek the help of his master, Cekt Mogusar, as soon as he returned from his Ordeal. As for Xi's wish... Jake intended to do his best to fulfill it. But not now.

Just imagining how his companions and the academy students would react to seeing him playing God with his biomass in a public garden was embarrassing enough to make him cringe.

"Let's try it out when things are calm." Jake finally promised in a low voice.

[Hmm!]

Over the next two hours, Jake set out to explore and test his new abilities. Of course, in the most discreet and low-profile manner possible. His goal was not to blow up the Divine Academy.

He first tested his Cosmic Manipulation ability. In the palm of his raised hand, a small orb of yellow-orange plasma floated a few centimeters above his palm. Around it, several billiard-sized spheres with irregular surfaces revolved more or less quickly around this fiery orb, forming a familiar image.

It looked like a miniature representation of the solar system, except that there was only one star and three tiny planets here. The similarity only held up from a distance. Once one studied this star and planets up close, they would quickly realize that they were only pale copies of their astronomical version.

While this fake sun was rather convincing, these fake "planets" were to Earth what the Moon was: They were plain and lacked nuance.

Firstly, they had no water, and their composition was certainly diverse, but not at all credible. Indeed, Jake could only spontaneously create what he had already eaten, although he no longer had all these limitations.

The ironic consequence was that he could probably easily create a planet composed exclusively of Adamantium and Orichalcum, but if someone asked him to design an exoplanet conducive to the development of life...

Let's just say that if the Oracle entrusted him with the creation of B43, there would be no need to wait for the Digestors to finish off its future inhabitants. To survive, except perhaps for those gifted alien races, they would have no choice but to hide forever in an Oracle Shelter.

After a brief moment of amusement, Jake let go with a disgruntled twitch of his lip. In the coming months, he wouldn't have to worry about what to train for.

Jake then tested his Artifact Incarnation ability. It turned out to be more intuitive than he had initially thought. Currently, it was set to Oracle Device mode by default, hence its mental probes resembling Oracle Scans. Therefore, the first thing he tried was to change this default artifact.

He thought of his Purgatory, and suddenly, a vast dimension with landscapes precisely as he imagined them appeared in his mind. All sorts of features were at his disposal, but no mental interface was there to assist him. He had to rely on his instincts to control everything.

However, that had its advantages too. A red light flashed in Jake's silver-black eyes, and a five-meter diameter domain spread around him, covering the nearby gardens and momentarily making the Stele and the fountain disappear behind him. In this space, Jake was like a god. He could control every parameter, from the environment to the temperature, to the vegetation to the life forms, and even technology.

In that respect, his Purgatory was the same. What had changed was the difficulty of using it.

Before, to use it, Jake would have to carefully count his Aether points. The Purgatory produced 1 billion Aether points per day but squandered many more every minute when deployed at full power.

The situation was completely different now. His Space Storage and all his possessions had been liquidated, but while he had never been so poor, he was short of everything except Aether.

Jake didn't dare deploy his Purgatory at full power here for fear of incurring the wrath of Principal Grigori, a genuine Rank 4 Oracle Overseer. Nevertheless, he had this feeling that even if he encompassed the entire Celestial City in his domain, he would be able to maintain the illusion of his Purgatory forever.

It was, by far, his most overpowered ability!

Jake then tested other Artifact Incarnations, such as the Codex of Aurae, which was supposed to be a Gold Aether Artifact, but he felt an excruciating pain in his bones when he tried to give his body its properties. His body was too weak, so he then tried to summon each Artifact through a Phantasm.

This time, a multi-faceted crystalline dice was displayed in his right hand. The illusion was lifelike. Likewise, with another thought he managed to conjure up his Purgatory in his left hand, and then his God Slayer Broadsword in his right hand without much effort. He even managed to don his entire Myrtharian Adamantium Armor Set.

On the visual aspect, it was extremely cool. It reminded him of those anime characters who could summon magical weapons and armor with a single thought.

As Jake played with his new powers, an uncomfortable shiver suddenly ran down his spine, making his hair stand on end. He jerked his head up, his eyes wide open, but soon he relaxed his vigilance. The strange feeling of danger had already disappeared and it had been so short-lived that he began to wonder if he was becoming paranoid.

As Jake returned to his experiments with a boyish grin, several Ancient Designer-level spiritual presences had sneaked into the Stele he was leaning against and jointly begun to alter it with frightening speed and efficiency.

If Jake had caught them in the act, he probably would have felt the same way as a prehistoric man seeing a giant spaceship flying overhead. It was that kind of trauma.

Moments later, he felt that sense of danger again when those monstrous presences left the Stele once their maintenance work was done. Jake didn't believe in coincidences and this time he swung around and stared at the Stele, his sword brandished and his Purgatory ready to be deployed.

He stood still for several minutes until he realized that there was no one there but him. The murmurs of other students finally made him feel ashamed despite his thick skin and he gave up. It didn't matter if he was hallucinating or not... The point was that they were gone.

Time ticked by and soon Jake noticed before he knew it that the maintenance of the Stele had already been completed several minutes ago. At that moment, his eyes fluttered with excitement and he jumped to his feet impatiently.

Fearless, he placed his hand on the Stele and closed his eyes. It was time to choose a new Soul Class.

Chapter 910: Making A Choice Has Never Been So Difficult

Jake's memory of the bone-chilling cold that had initially seized him when he first touched one of the Steles had become a distant memory. Though he still felt the cold, he no longer feared it. After absorbing Digestor Ruby, he could even draw energy from it, as absurd as that might seem.

The next moment, his consciousness was sucked into the Stele before he could even process what was happening to him. Having experienced this twice before, Jake didn't panic and allowed himself to be taken.

The irresistible force pulling at his soul disappeared almost as quickly as it had appeared, and he knew his mind had arrived at its destination. Here, in this place where the very fabric of reality seemed to be in flux, Jake's consciousness was but a single ember in an ocean of darkness.

He felt like a woodlouse in a microwave. If the owner of the device decided to press the button, his soul would have no chance of escaping.

But amidst the darkness, there was a glimmer of light. Billions of specks of light populated this void, forming a network of interconnecting filaments that shimmered like a galaxy of constellations. It was as if the very essence of Jake's soul had been projected onto the canvas of this alien landscape.

Compared to the last time, the number of dots and bright filaments had increased exponentially, but they were also much darker. That was why Jake had thought he was plunged into darkness when his consciousness had been forcibly brought here.

Strangely, there were also places in this dark void that were truly empty, forming a discontinuity with the rest of the network of light. Either these sections of his soul were unexploited, waiting for their time like the space on an empty hard drive, or the specks and bright filaments at these locations were a little too dark for his own good.

If his instinct was correct, these were parts of his soul related to his Digestor nature, and neither the Oracle nor a powerful Ancient Designer like Aurae could peer into their secrets.

Why was he so sure? Because when he scanned these empty areas with his mental senses, he detected their existence. This apparent void was not emptier than the seemingly luminous places.

When Jake scanned these other bright areas, he similarly detected a second invisible network intertwined with the first, forming an inseparable duo like light and its shadow. His entire Soul was "corrupted."

As he fell deep in thought, a long stream of information was suddenly downloaded into his brain. Like the two previous times, it was neither images nor text, but he could understand their content.

[List of available Soul Classes:]

[Tier 1: Sprinter, Swimmer, Flyer, Puncher, Kicker, Headbutter, Screamer, Grunter, Eater, etc...]

[Tier 2: Carpenter, Warden, Miner, Farmer, Hunter, Technician, Ranger, Acrobat, Barkeeper, Herbalist, Torturer, Tamer, Psychologist, Actor, Astronomist, Moneylender, Butcher, Tailor, Tanner, Brawler, Engineer, Mechanist, etc...]

[Tier 3: Gladiator, Blacksmith, Barbarian, Swordsman, Marksman, Assassin, Spy, Monster Hunter, Pyrotechnician, Enslaver, Artist, Soul Torturer, Fire Mage, Light Mage, Earth Mage, Spirit Mage, Lightning Mage, Slayer, Destroyer, Mentalist, Illusionist, Gearmaster, Technomancer, etc...]

[Tier 4: Body Enhancer, Designer, Alchemist, Berserker, Terraformer, , Survivor, Geneticist, Savior, Survivor, Hero, Challenger, Inventor, Master of Arms, Monster Slayer, Clone Slayer, Mage, Beast Master, Curse Breaker, Lightning Shaman, Cosmic Mage, Chaos Mage, Luckbringer Battlemage, Mystic Gambler, Hybrid, Transhuman, Metamorph, etc...]

[Tier 5: Spellcaster, Rune Engraver, Warmage, Elementalist, Clone Slayer, Arcanist, Ruler, Sunlord, Paragon, Chameleon, Ordeal Player, Myrtharian, Myrmidian, Kintharian, Eltarian, Fortune Hunter, Charmcaster, Lucky Berserker, Starry Wanderer, Starlight Sentinel, Astrolancer, Cosmic Pyromancer, Gene Master, Molten Thunderlord, Hexslinger, Lucky Enchanter, Metamorphic Master, Cosmic Mutant, Cosmic Voyager, Gravity Bender, Void Master, Biomancer, Xenomorph, Force Bender, Arcane Machinist, Technomage Smith etc...]

[Tier 6: Harbinger of Chaos, Plot Armor Wearer, Ordeal Ace, Immortal, Sower of Chaos, Daemonifier, Rune Warrior, Rune Master, Knowledge Thirster, Unperishable Soul, Lucky Star, Lucksmith, Starforged Champion, Genetic Paragon, Evolutionary, Chimera, Adaptive Metamorph, Elemental Fusionist, Void Diver, Dimensional Shifter, Cosmic Sage, Cosmic Engineer, Sun God, Flux Master, Cosmic Weaponsmith, Celestial Armorer, etc...]

[Tier 7: Aetherist, Archon, Frost Titan, Solar Titan, Fortune's Favored, Fatebreaker, Starcaller, Stellar Summoner, Omnigenic, Star Devourer, Nova Master, Lifereaper, Evolver, Black Lightning Thunder God, Mana Storm Devourer, System Ace, Energy Syphon, Cosmic Dynamo, Artisan of the Divine etc...]

[Tier 8: Intersystem Ace, Starforged Juggernaut, Starweaver, Star Conqueror, Starborn, Protean, Energy God, Cosmic God, Celestial Cyborg Architect, Cosmic Mechanotron Designer, Apex Predator, Energy Nexus, ect...]

[Tier 9: Transcendent, Cosmic Metamutant, Ascendant, Aetherborn, Infinite Channeler]

[Tier 10 : Hyperion, Awakened, Everflow Aethermancer.]

Jake's consciousness was engulfed by an avalanche of data, automatically translated into a massive list of Soul Classes of varying tiers. The list was endless. Even after several minutes of reading, he still hadn't finished reading all of the Soul Classes at his disposal.

Soul Classes from Tier 1 to 5 counted in the tens of millions, most of them having names with very similar meanings like Fire Mage, Pyromancer, Fire Wizard, Fire Sorcerer, Fireweaver, and so many other variations.

Not so long ago, Jake believed that a Tier 5 Soul Class was something incredible, but now he was just numb as he scrolled through this never-ending list.

Starting from Tier 6, the number of Soul Classes decreased sharply, but the number of options still remained stupidly high. While he believed at the time that it couldn't get any cooler than Harbinger of Chaos or Unperishable Soul, he now had to admit that it was just his own lack of imagination. The Oracle System was clearly not as limited as he was.

Seeing some of these Soul Class names, Jake couldn't even identify with certainty what the conditions were for them to appear on this list. For some like Sun God, he didn't need to rack his brain too much. It was probably because he had devoured Shamash's Divinity, another Sun Deity.

At Tier 7, the list of options decreased even more, but the number of choices still remained very high, encompassing or pushing to the extreme one or more of his abilities.

Some of these sounded like enhanced versions of lower-tier Soul Classes, such as Omnigenic, which outperformed Genetic Paragon. However, a mere Tier 4 Geneticist could already in theory freely modify an individual's genes with enough means and time. A Genetic Paragon seemed incredibly mysterious, and for a Soul Class like Omnigenic to appear, there must have been a major gap between the two.

From this Tier onwards, all the Soul Classes listed, even those with cringe-worthy and difficult-to-pronounce names like Magma-Fueled Thundergod, could not be underestimated. Because even these Soul Classes with long and pedantic names were in the same list as a Soul Class like Star Devourer. In the case of the latter, Jake knew exactly how this choice had appeared on this list.

At Tier 8, the number of options was almost divided by three, but the list still offered several dozen. Gerulf's Sunforged Juggernaut was included in it, but a higher-end version named Starforged Juggernaut was also offered among the first on the list.

The one at the top of the list, "Intersystem Ace," was probably related to the Tier 7 System Ace and the Tier 6 Ordeal Ace, but how? He could only make assumptions.

These Starweavers, Starborns, and Star Conquerors all sounded extremely powerful, but he had a hard time determining how they differed from each other. The same went for Celestial Cyborg Architect and Cosmic Mechanotron Designer.

Bloody hell! What on earth was a fucking mechanotron?

Conversely, Jake wasn't even surprised to see Energy Nexus or Energy God appear on the list. Yeah... he had become a frigging generator.

[Don't complain.] Xi couldn't help but laugh, trying to console him. [I think a lot of Players would love to have the same "problems" as you.]

"Same problems your sister!" Jake retorted aggressively before quickly backtracking and apologizing. "Ahem, sorry."

[Hehe, it's okay.] Xi chuckled again.

When Jake finally reached Tier 9 and 10, both he and his Oracle AI stopped fooling around and got serious. There were only 5 and 3 choices left in these two respective lists, but their name alone was enough to convey how extraordinary they were.

Just to put it into perspective, a Soul Class like Aetherist was two to three Tiers below the offerings of these two lists.

"Terrifying..." Jake muttered heavily.

Transcendent... Cosmic Metamutant... Ascendant... Aetherborn... Infinite Channeler... Jake had a feeling that whichever Soul Class he chose from this list he couldn't go wrong.

However, he had already subconsciously crossed Aetherborn Soul Class off the list of choices he was wavering between. Why? Because the only creatures he knew of that were spontaneously born of Aether were Digestors.

Perhaps it was a mistake on his part since the Oracle had no problem putting it forward, but deep down Jake preferred to avoid reinforcing a trait related to this alien invader.

After a long pause spent mulling over the five Tier 9 options, Jake finally zeroed in on the three Tier 10 Soul Classes. Hyperion... Awakened... And Everflow Aethermancer...

The list was short, but making a choice had never been so difficult.

SHRRRRRKRRRKRRR!

As Jake was about to discuss his options with Xi, the list of Soul Classes on display in his mind suddenly blurred like a jammed TV.

A deafening buzz shook his soul, throwing his consciousness into chaos. The filaments and light dots coursing through his Soul projection faded away as if the power had been switched off and a new, much shorter Soul Class list entered his mind, replacing the old one.

[Tier ???: ???]

Chapter 911: If You Cant Pull Out The Sword, Take The Stone.

A few minutes later, Jake withdrew his hand from the Stele, wearing a hideous grin as if he had inadvertently swallowed a fly. He was still in shock from what had just happened. He could feel that this Soul Class had been forced upon him even after he refused.

"I won't accept it!" He punched the Stele in an unprecedented state of rage and hatred, generating a deafening sysmic shockwave that blew away all the trees and students peacefully picnicking in the gardens.

Only the fountain and the Stele remained intact. But far from relieving him, this only fueled his intense anger and predatory instincts. To make matters worse, he received a notification of the same ilk as the one he had received a few hours earlier, only much worse:

[The Stele has been pushed beyond the performance threshold for which it was programmed. Pending further maintenance, the Stele will remain out of service.]

" ... "

This time, the Stele didn't even bother to inform him how long he would have to wait. It was basically the equivalent of "We're closed, bugger off if you're not happy."

Jake certainly wasn't happy, but he had no intention of going anywhere else. He was going to make his point right here and now.

"All right. You want to play it that way? No worries. You mess with me, you find me!" Jake muttered ominously, spurred on by a sudden impulse. "I'm going to eat you!"

A gentle breeze wafted by, punctuating an awkward silence. The students present and the "Stele" all stared intently at him, eyeballing him dubiously. Yeah! Jake could have sworn the Stele was taunting him too, but it was obviously only in his head.

Flushed with anger, Jake glared at the inquisitive students who were eyeing him like some sort of curious animal escaped from the zoo and at that moment a burst of killing intent erupted forth from his body, acting like a cold shower on the nose witnesses. Their clothes soaked with cold sweat, these Players and natives immediately looked away and went back to their previous activities, the whole thing accompanied by nervous chuckles.

This Player claiming he wanted to eat the Stele was just too terrifying! At that moment, they were even willing to take his word for it. They would let him try it first before laughing, just to be sure they hadn't provoked the wrong person.

If one doesn't seek death, they wouldn't die. Those who had resided in the highly secure environment of the Divine Academy for a long time had just been reminded of this truth the hard way.

In fact, deep down they were even more fired up at the prospect of his success. Other students had tried to steal the Stele before, and Principal Grigori's punishment had been as swift as it was brutal. Would this daunting Player fare better than those other would-be thieves? Nothing was less certain...

Undeterred, Jake opened his mouth wide, then as he approached the Stele he realized he had a bit of a problem. His mouth was clearly too small to swallow such a "rock". Crunching it piece by piece was also out of the question. He didn't know what exceptional material this Stele had been carved from, but at his current level it could be considered indestructible.

Yet, when Jake closed his teeth on it, contracting his jaw muscles with all his might, his teeth gritted but did not break. Between his teeth and the Stele it was a draw. Or maybe his jaw muscles weren't strong enough to subject his canines to loads they couldn't handle.

Jake considered channeling a massive amount of Strength and Constitution Aether into his teeth and facial muscles to attempt a second round, but after a fleeting hesitation he gave up. He had the nasty feeling that strength alone would not be enough to destroy this artifact.

After all, it was an object created by Aurae.

"But my mouth is indeed too small..." Jake frowned.

It was indeed easier when he was still a Myrtharian. Although he could take on a human appearance before, his actual size was that of a seven or eight-meter giant. Even more so with Bloodline Ignition.

[Your body is no longer miniaturized like before, but your Stafeyrves Body is described as highly morphable]. Xi added her two cents when she sensed his bad mood and helplessness.

Jake wanted to get back at the Stele, but had no way to vent his foul mood. However, after hearing his Oracle AI's reminder, he steeled himself and then began to inspect his body meticulously.

He closed his eyes and began to listen to the "breathing" of his cells, trying to reach out to them mentally. An undecipherable feedback answered him, an echo of his own will, and the atomic bonds linking his cells suddenly loosened up.

More and more space formed between them, and the existing cells began to rapidly synthesize all sorts of proteins and nucleotides. The cells whirled and their nuclei emitted a bright white light as if a nuclear reactor had just been ignited, delivering a continuous stream of energy.

In an infinitesimal time scale of a microsecond, these cells began to divide like in a time-lapse movie and the upper half of his body began to swell like a balloon while his legs remained the same size, giving him a comically grotesque appearance.

In the blink of an eye, his torso was as tall and wide as a ten-story building, while the diameter of his skull exceeded that of a basketball court. The huge-headed Jake laid his small-car-sized eyes on the "tiny" Stele at his feet and a vengeful grin contorted his face.

"Thanks for the meal."

His fingers wrapped around the Stele like a hand around a sword hilt, then Jake pulled hard with his arm to pull it off the ground. The Stele didn't move one iota, continuing to taunt him. It was as if the ground was magnetized and the Stele and the floor were glued together.

The students watching the scene with bated breath had learned their lesson and didn't dare laugh at him. Who knew if this madman had any more tricks up his sleeve?

Good thing they did. Jake had not said his last word.

"If I can't get you off the ground, I'll just eat the ground with it." Jake sneered.

What narrow-minded moron had said that Escalibur had to be extracted from its rock to be taken away? All one had to do was take both the rock and the holy sword with them!

The jaws of the onlookers dropped to the ground as they beheld the disproportionate giant spooning up the Stele and the several-meter-thick metal base that anchored it. A magical formation bound the Stele to the garden floor, but it was nowhere near as strong.

"STOP THIS!" Grigori's outraged voice exploded from somewhere in the Academy, shaking the ground and imploding the eardrums of half the students.

Jake smirked. "Too late."

Like a peanut, Jake gulped down the Stele and its base and swallowed hard.

Gulp!

"YOU DARE!" The furious principal teleported in front of him, but it was too late.

When Grigori in a panic managed to make him spit out the contents of his stomach a split second later, only a few acid-eaten slabs rolled on the floor.

"Where is it? WHERE IS THE STELE, DAMN IT!"

In anger, the child-sized alien with cute antenna ears slapped Jake's giant head with such force that it smashed into the ground, uprooting the few half-dead trees that still stood. At this point, only the fountain featuring Aurae and the other fellow was still intact.

Foreseeing a disaster, Grigori peeked inside his throat, going as far as to enter it, but he didn't go any further down. Pale as a sheet, the alien had already determined that he would not get his Stele back. As he wondered how to explain this to his superior - an uncompromising Ancient Designer named Aurae - a mental message rang in his head,

" Drop the matter. The Stele will be replaced shortly. At my expense."

The little alien's face, until then on the verge of collapse, miraculously brightened up upon hearing these words, regaining some color.

"Really?! No problem." Grigori exulted. "In that case, I want the Stele A7 model, the limited edition one made jointly by Aas, Grishaam and you seven million years ago."

"...Don't push your luck..."

The little alien was seized by a shiver of cold sweat and immediately mellowed into an apology. After having licked Aural's boots for several minutes, bombarding him with compliments, each more original than the last and not repeated even once, the exhausted Ancient Designer snarled,

"Fine. The A7 model it is. Don't call me. I'll call you."

With a big, delighted smile, a far cry from his despondency of the moment before, Grigori ended the telepathic communication and looked for his "benefactor" to thank him.

"Where did he go?" He barked coldly at the students still present, who were still transfixed in awe.

"... He left a while ago."

" ... "

Chapter 912: My Soul Class Is...

A few seconds earlier, in another wing of the Divine Academy, a thunderous roar shattered the calm.

"STOP THIS!" Principal Grigori's enraged cry reverberated through the halls, startling the Myrtharian Nerds who were listening attentively to Ulfar's explanation about the Cultivation Rooms on their floor. The King of Beskyr remained silent with tight lips. The interruption of his guided tour had put a damper on his good mood.

Lucia's heart clenched with an unexplainable intuition as the furious cry reached her ears. Like many other Players and students, she tried to use her mental sense to locate the source of the outburst, but the academy's walls were impervious to her spiritual energy. In any case, it would have been useless. Less than half a second later, another equally enraged cry, tinged with panic, echoed from a completely different direction.

"YOU DARE!"

This time, even without using their mental sense, all the Players and students scattered throughout the academy turned their heads in unison towards the same location: the inner gardens where the Stele and the fountain were located.

"What is happening now, damn it?" Ulfar tsked, annoyed that someone was stealing his thunder.

Nyx, the twin with the Fate Bender Soul Class, made a confused moue with a finger on her lips and said, "Is another fool trying to steal the Stele again?"

It wasn't the first time such an incident had occurred, and Grigori had reacted promptly and overbearingly on each occasion. Still, why did she have the feeling that this time the principal's reaction was somewhat different? He seemed... nervous?

If Nyx could perceive it, her twin sister Eris and Ulfar, who had spent months in the Divine Academy, could also feel that something was amiss. There was no smoke without fire.

"Let's go see what's happening," the King of Beskyr suggested, but before he could finish his sentence, he felt an invisible wave of mental energy coursing through his body and penetrating the walls.

This energy was of a much higher quality, but also much faster and more elusive. The walls of the Academy couldn't stop it.

"An Oracle Scan?" Ulfar understood.

At the same time, dozens of Oracle Scans swept through the Divine Academy, emitted by curious Players who weren't afraid to spend a few million Aether points. When the King of Beskyr turned to search for who had launched the Oracle Scan on their side, his eyes fell on Lucia's distressed expression.

"It's Jake," She sighed, her golden eyebrows furrowed with worry enhancing her natural charm. "He managed to devour the Stele."

The other Myrtharian Nerds, Wyatt, and Carmin facepalmed with uncanny synchronicity. As for Ryne and Ashun, the two guests, their mouths opened wide. They were speechless.

"All right... As expected from our leader," Will grumbled, rubbing his temples to relieve an imminent headache, his face fatigued from exhaustion.

"Boss is still boss," Rogen chuckled joyfully, having already forgotten his dismay after discovering that Gerul had obtained a Soul Class of a higher Tier than his own.

"What do we do? Do we join him or wait here?" Wyatt asked neutrally, raising an eyebrow.

He wanted to finish exploring the academy and its facilities to resume his training as soon as possible. Jake's exploits and the emergence of all these powerful rivals had put pressure on him. His desire to become stronger quickly had never been more urgent.

Lucia wanted to answer him when suddenly all the Myrtharian Nerds received a telepathic message from Jake. A real telepathic message via his mental sense, not a message in the Faction Chat or a remote communication via their bracelets.

At that moment, all the Myrtharian Nerds changed their expressions. Their mental sense couldn't penetrate a single wall, but their leader had no trouble reaching them with his? What kind of absurdity was this?

If Wyatt, Carmin, Ryne, and Ashun didn't know at first whose mental sense it was, they immediately understood upon seeing the solemn expressions of the Myrtharian Nerds. This dealt another blow to the Vampire Progenitor's ego, and his resolve to intensify his training in the near future skyrocketed, becoming unshakable.

"How strong has he become?" Tim muttered under his breath.

That was what everyone wanted to know.

"What did he say?" Carmin asked out of curiosity.

"No need to wait for him," Hephais responded flatly, popping the bubble gum in his mouth. The gum splattered on his face, ruining his aura of brooding bad boy.

"He went back to his building due to a situation. He'll meet us tomorrow at the academy's briefing about our next Ordeal," Will clarified for the four Players who were not part of their faction.

When the merchant mentioned the word "situation," none of them had any doubts about what it was referring to. This emergency clearly had to do with the famous Stele that Jake had just devoured.

"As expected from our leader..." Crunch repeated in a perfect imitation of Will's weary voice.

"..."

"He devoured the Stele and Grigori failed to retrieve it in time? Interesting," Hazzom, the unfathomable leader of Demiurges who had earlier saved his subordinate Bhomuro from Jake's clutches, began to smile.

He had used only his mental sense to understand what was happening.

"..."

It was a rare event that sent a shiver of fear through his companions. The last time it had happened, he had set out to conquer a new Digestor Dungeon without asking for their opinion. The losses had been severe, even for an elitist super faction like theirs.

As expected, the minds of these Intersystem class Players could not be apprehended in the same way as their humble, ordinary Player counterparts.

"He devoured the Stele?" Neri displayed a mischievous smile upon hearing the juicy gossip from the mouths of other students in the midst of a heated conversation.

Just imagining all the headaches and sleepless nights that this Jake would inflict upon Psykow, her unscrupulous superior, put her in a wonderfully good mood. Skipping with her hands in her pockets in an unladylike manner, her sinister laughter echoed through the halls, terrifying passing students.

Jake had indeed returned to his building as soon as Grigori had been distracted by Aurae. On the one hand, because the building was supposed to be inviolable, granting access only to its owner and authorized people. And on the other hand, he actually needed peace and quiet to study the consequences of digesting such a Stele inside his body.

At last, he also wanted to know what kind of unidentified Soul Class had been forcibly imposed upon him. It was not a matter to be taken lightly. A Soul Class altered an individual's soul deeply, personality included.

He couldn't simply accept his fate in resignation. He had to understand his exact situation in order to adjust his behavior and future plans.

Jake and Xi had already discussed how they were going to identify a Soul Class that had all of its information replaced with ????. Because yes, it wasn't just the name that was a mystery. The skills and their descriptions were unfortunately replaced with ??? as well. It was the kind of hot potato he would gladly do without.

"It won't do." Jake naturally refused to accept his fate. He was going to identify that Soul Class one way or another.

His first thought was to assume that Aurae or the Oracle was behind this trickery, but after calming down, another hypothesis began to emerge in his mind. Anything that the Oracle Device failed to appraise could only be related to the Digestors. Otherwise, his bracelet would have sent him notifications like:

[Please increase your Oracle Rank to access the content of this information.]

Or:

[For reasons that your level of authority does not allow you to know, the specifics of the Soul Class imposed on you by xxx cannot be disclosed to you. Please take note of this message.]

However, just because he may have become a Digestor didn't mean he had to accept everything.

"If I can't scan you with a bracelet connected to the Oracle System, what if I scan you using my own body through Artefact Incarnation?" He snarled grimly.

This was the plan he had decided on with Xi. With a single thought, he switched the choice of Artifact Incarnation currently set on Purgatory to the original Oracle Device. Now each of his mental probes once again had the power of an Oracle Scan.

However, in this form, his body was no longer tied to the Oracle System. But that didn't matter. He didn't need it. He would use his own senses and cognitive power to process these data.

"Oracle Status." Jake declared in a husky voice.

His Spirit Body momentarily recoiled upon itself, dangerously compressing and releasing a spiritual shockwave that spread inward until colliding and reverberating back. Jake's eyes shone like moonlight as he received the complex feedback.

His brain and soul calculated and interpreted the signal composed of billions of data for several long seconds, then Jake opened his mouth and began to pronounce word by word, his forehead furrowed in concentration:

"My... Soul... Class... Is..."

Chapter 913: What Other Choice Could There Be?

At that moment, in the principal's office, Grigori was over the moon after receiving Auae's promise that the stolen Stele would be replaced by the limited edition A7 model. Humming happily, he brewed himself a cup of his favorite spiritual tea and slumped onto his innocent-looking chair, placing his feet leisurely on his desk, one short leg resting atop the other.

With eyes squinted in delight, Grigori savored a sip of the piping-hot beverage, relishing all of its flavors. Just as he thought he could enjoy this moment of peace and pleasure for a while longer, the giant hologram of Auae's head with its six blazing eyes appeared above his desk.

"Pffff-GULP! Cough, cough, cough..."

Half of his sip was forcefully sprayed out of his nose like a whale's blowhole, while the other half was swallowed down the wrong way, triggering a miserable fit of coughing. Due to the position of his feet, the toes of the little alien accidentally poked the lower two eyes of the Ancient Designer. Luckily for Grigori, it was only a hologram.

"..." Aurae.

A few seconds later, Grigori finally regained his composure, which, if he were an ordinary alien, would have very likely caused him to die of sudden cardiac arrest. It was only then that he noticed the position of his feet piercing through the lower eyes of his boss, and his eyes widened like saucers.

'Fuck... I'm dead.' That was the thought that crossed his mind at that moment.

Then, his well-honed survival instinct kicked in, and he swiftly and agilely prostrated himself before Aurae, beginning another round of bootlicking, a tactic that he had mastered to perfection. After a few minutes, Aurae was so fed up with his subordinates' honeyed compliments that even someone like him from a biomechanical race known for its lack of emotion began to grit his teeth in exasperation.

"Cough... Enough," Aurae put an end to his subordinate's demonstration of loyalty and got straight to the point. "I'm contacting you again because I forgot to ask you earlier which Soul Class Jake chose. Since the Stele was modified by several Ancient Designers, I no longer have exclusive rights to it. That's also why I wasn't particularly angry earlier."

Grigori, still deep in his role as a fearful servant, raised his head abruptly in confusion.

"Even an Ancient Designer like you can't access the record of what happened in that Stele?" He couldn't help but exclaim with disbelief.

The real question he wanted to ask was why Aurae, like him, had not monitored that moment live with his mental sense. Had someone or something prevented him from doing so?

"...That's why I'm asking you," Aura replied impatiently, with a hint of hostility.

Grigori's heart felt cold, and he stifled his seeking-death tendencies, returning to his role as an unthinking subordinate. After gathering his thoughts, he continued,

"To be frank, I'm rather impressed and a bit jealous. At first, I wondered why the Stele needed to be modified by several Ancient Designers, but after seeing the list of Soul Classes that appeared to him, everything became clear."

"How many Tiers?" Aurae asked succinctly.

"From Tier 1 to 10," Grigori replied gravely. "There were even three options listed at Tier 10. Especially this Soul Class of Everflow Aethermancer. It was the first time I had seen it. Awakened and Hyperion, I've heard of them, but I've never met anyone who possessed them, and the archives of the Oracle System are extremely vague about them."

Grigori wanted to continue prattling on when he felt the atmosphere dangerously chill around him. The holographic head of Aurae above his desk was just that, a projection, but why, at this moment, did he feel an overwhelming murderous aura condensing around him?

"Ahem... Did I say something I shouldn't have?" The childish alien swallowed with difficulty, his mouth suddenly horribly dry.

Holding his breath, he waited with bated breath for the robotic Ancient Designer to deign to answer him. A long minute later, Aurae's angry, booming voice questioned, resonating in the room,

"Wasn't there any other choice? Like a Tier 11? Or another Tier 10 Soul Class?"

Grigori blinked stupidly in response.

'Other choices? Damn it, what other choices do you want? Three Tier 10 Soul Classes are not enough for you?' The childish alien felt deeply wounded in his pride as he unjustly suffered his boss's anger.

Seeing that Grigori really didn't know anything, Aurae became solemn.

"Was there really no other choice?"

"Not that I know of. What other choice could there be?"

Aurae didn't immediately respond and sighed. His sigh seemed to contain all the vicissitudes and weariness of the universe. In an aged voice, he spoke,

"The Soul Class we had specially arranged for him. Mirror Universe's Ch-"

"Aetherdream Inceptor." Jake finished reciting.

After speaking these words, he displayed a strange expression. This name... was not bad? At least it didn't sound like a Soul Class name reserved solely for Digestors.

But what did it mean? Aetherdream... Dream Aether? It was possibly the same thing or at least their meanings were close. One referred to a place or a state, the other to an energy?

Inceptor was already more vague. In the legal field, an inceptor was a person who starts or establishes something, like a contract, for example.

In aviation, an inceptor could be a device or system that allows an airplane to follow a precise flight path based on data provided by the autopilot.

In the context of science-fiction, an "inceptor" could refer to a character who initiates a groundbreaking idea or concept that leads to significant technological advancements. However, Jake couldn't shake the feeling that this term had nothing to do with any of that. It was an instinctual feeling that came from deep within him.

Unable to find an answer, Jake continued to process the rest of the data with his enhanced intelligence. He wondered if he could speed up the process by regaining control of the liquid alloy he had bound to his official bracelet, but he wasn't in a rush. With his Grade 10 Energy, he wasn't going to run out of energy anytime soon.

Hours passed, and the next morning Jake woke up with a pensive expression. He shared a silent moment with Xi, both of them unsure about the new Soul Class. It wasn't necessarily a bad one, but they didn't understand how it related to Jake.

What was even more concerning was that the skills associated with his previous hybrid Rune Aetherist Soul Class had disappeared.

[Soul Class: Beginner Aetherdream Inceptor: 100% All attributes per Spirit Body level.]

[Related Soul Class Skills:]

[Lucid Aetherdreamer: Those who possess this ability are known to be able to perceive the Dream Aetheric currents and channels that flow through the cosmos, and to tap into this energy to augment their physical and mental abilities beyond human limits. You are no longer subject to any illusions and can see reality clearly.]

[Aetherdream Traveler: Allows the user to access the Aetherdream through their Dream Aether powers. In addition to being able to travel and communicate in the Aetherdream, ignoring all notions of distance, the user can also travel to and visit the dreams of others.]

[Aetherdream World: Allows the user to create dream constructs that can manifest in the real world, and even create new dreams that they can control. This power can be described as the manipulation of reality through the manipulation of the Dream Aether. The user can create illusions and bend reality to their will, making them a formidable opponent in battle. As the user can also enter the dreams of others and manipulate

them from within, they can extract information or implant suggestions, potentially causing psychological damage.]

[Aetherdream Inception: A dream often hides another. An Aetherdream Inceptor can discern these dissonances and turn them to their advantage.]

In addition to the usual description of his abilities, there was also a small disclaimer at the end of his Soul Class:

[The use of Aetherdream Inceptor powers requires significant mental and emotional control, as the boundaries between reality and dreams can become blurred. Mishandling of these powers can lead to mental instability and even madness.]

This Soul Class... Did not displease him. It was unexpected, but not disappointing. The term Dream Aether was not the first time he had heard it. In fact, he had heard of it for a very long time and it was no secret.

His problem was quite different: How did this Soul Class deserve all these ??? so much that it was forced upon him? What made it stand out above other Tier 10 options like the illustrious Awakened and powerful Everflow Aethermancer?

The question gnawed at him, like a persistent itch that refused to be scratched. He couldn't shake the feeling that there was more to this than met the eye. Was there a hidden agenda at play, or some deeper purpose he had yet to uncover?

One thing was for certain: he would need to tread carefully with this newfound power, lest he risk being consumed by the dreamlike haze it promised.

Chapter 914: Aetherdream

After identifying his new Soul Class, it was time for Jake to delve into the implications that came with it. Several skills from his previous Rune Aetherist Soul Class had disappeared, and he needed to determine how Aetherdream Inceptor would affect his combat ability and personality.

"How do you feel?" Xi asked cautiously, her voice filled with concern.

Jake furrowed his brow, but after focusing on his true feelings and perceptions for a moment, he still felt the same. Even the Dream Aether he was supposed to be able to perceive as a Lucid Aetherdreamer was undetectable.

Unless Aether and Dream Aether were the same thing? He had once heard that the full name of Aether was actually Dream Aether. If that was the case, then his new and previous Soul Classes had more in common than one might initially think.

However, his affinity for Aether was not the only skill that had disappeared.

"Xi, show me a code, a text, or scripture in an unknown alien civilization's language that I can decipher," Jake requested.

"Right away," Xi complied, projecting a mental image of an ancient stone tablet covered in mysterious circular hieroglyphs from an unknown civilization.

Jake's pupils dilated, a silver glow illuminating his black eyes, but a fraction of a second later, he shook his head.

"I can crack this text, but it's only because of my high intelligence," Jake lamented bitterly. "It has nothing to do with my previous Deciphering/Coding skill."

"You may no longer possess that skill when it comes to ordinary languages, but your new Soul Class has even more mysterious abilities," Xi consoled him. "I have a feeling that if you really try, even a completely unknown language without any objective clues or weaknesses won't resist you for long."

As she spoke, she was referring specifically to his ability to bend reality to his will, as well as to tap into the Dream Aether currents to amplify his physical and mental abilities and see through any illusions.

With their minds linked, Jake didn't need to hear her reasoning to understand what she meant. Indeed, all he had to do was to test his new abilities.

Soul Class abilities were ingrained in his soul. They were even more instinctive than breathing or the urge to eat or drink. Merely knowing of their existence was enough for Jake to attempt to use them successfully. Even in ignorance, he would sooner or later accidentally use his new powers, much like a baby's first cry at birth.

Lucid Aetherdreamer touched on his Aether affinity and a very special state of lucidity that allowed him to see the world as it truly was. Following this simple logic, Jake simply focused on what he saw in front of him, assuming that this vision was incorrect, truncated, or outright false.

As soon as Jake decided to see beyond the surface, to dig deeper and perceive the underlying reality, his vision subtly changed. At first glance, everything seemed identical, but from his extrasensory perception, many things had radically changed to the point that he blinked dumbstruck several times before getting used to this new reality.

To make a simple analogy, he felt like a blind insect that had just regained its sight only to discover that it was, in fact, entangled in a gigantic spider's web.

There were indeed all kinds of Aether and Mana currents that most Evolvers could currently perceive with the Aether Vision of their bracelet or other innate abilities such as his previous Myrtharian Sight.

However, under the influence of Lucid Aetherdreamer, it was as if this surface veil had been torn to reveal another even more dazzling veil just below it. This tableau was much more disturbing because in this mode of vision, there was no longer just Aether or rather Dream Aether.

If someone had asked him an hour earlier whether his body was real or an illusion, Jake would have assuredly answered that it was real. But now? He felt like nothing more than a very dense mass of vapor.

It was the kind of existential crisis that was hard to explain to an ordinary human, but if one had to give an explanation, the best analogy was between matter and energy. At a microscopic level, both were the same thing in a different form.

Even without going that far, the same kind of similarity existed at the molecular scale. The proportion and type of atoms in a pig were roughly the same as those in a human body. Graphite and diamond had exactly the same atomic composition.

But there was a difference between knowing it and "living" it. Jake had now stepped into the other side.

As shocking as this vision was, the surprise did not end there. In this almost clairvoyant state of lucidity, Jake could discern many other things. For example, every movement, every thought he had caused ripples in the Aether fabric that composed all things.

Billions of Aether runes and symbols would emerge and disappear continuously, flowing in these currents to who knows where. More shocking still, there were many levels of entanglement.

Until now, Jake had always believed that the ultimate Aetherist would be the one who could perceive and draw the smallest Aether runes, the cryptic Grade 15 or beyond Aether Code that even the Ancient Designers could not fathom. Now, he realized that in addition to the infinitely small, another universe lay hidden in the infinitely large.

All around him, he could see runes within runes, an Aether Code within another. This infinite cycle repeated itself endlessly, and changes in a single micro rune caused disturbances in the entire chain of macro runes and symbols in which it was embedded.

Jake tried to trace these entanglements of Aether Runes, but eventually gave up, realizing that the Celestial City was enveloped by a giant, extremely complex Aether Symbol, itself just a tiny fraction of an Aether Rune thousands of times larger, which he could not even perceive in its entirety.

At that moment, he had an epiphany and finally understood why Aetherdream Inceptor was a Soul Class made for him. Aetherdream Inception was precisely the awesome ability to peer into the endless intricacies of the world around him.

If he pushed the reasoning to the extreme, maybe the Mirror Universe was just the product of a vast rune, a mere mass of Dream Aether that believed itself to be different from the rest. Since every movement and thought manifested in Aether Runes and Aether Symbols, triggering a massive butterfly effect that spread throughout all the Dream Aether, Jake could already conclude that in a sense they were all made of data.

The Aetherdream. This was the term used to describe the deeper reality in which they existed without realizing it. With his fertile imagination, countless wild theories, if not downright nightmarish, began to bud in his mind, and he had to take a deep breath to calm his fizzing brain.

If he wasn't careful, Jake could actually go mad. Suddenly feeling mentally exhausted, he turned off the Lucid Dreamer mode. Regaining normal vision brought him an immense feeling of relief, to the point of almost doubting what he had just experienced.

What was real, what was fake? These two realities seemed equally tangible, but Jake now knew that what he was looking at was only a very superficial facade.

Still... During those brief seconds when Jake had been able to experience the Aetherdream, or at least what he believed to be the Aetherdream, his sharpened senses had noticed something.

Even though his intelligence and perception were far from sufficient to accurately distinguish all these Dream Aether Runes of different sizes, he was sensitive enough to perceive most of the micro-current disturbances and, to some extent, sort them out.

His Oracle Device and his soul, for example, were connected by two different invisible filaments to something far away from him, and all the Players present in the Divine Academy were also connected to that same thing.

On instinct, Jake had immediately identified them as the Oracle System and the method used by the Oracle to bring them back to the Red Cube when they were killed or disqualified during their Ordeal. If their existence could be reduced to a mass of Dream Aether and Runes, it could explain a lot.

Similarly, Jake realized at that moment how the Oracle System could transmit data from one end of the universe to the other in real-time without suffering any latency. Like him, the Oracle used the Aetherdream, this infinitely complex web of Aether connecting all things and of which all things were a part.

At that moment, Jake was suddenly inspired and switched back to Lucid Dreamer mode. Seeing himself as a simple mass of Dream Aether, he dispersed his data into one of the currents nearby and wished to reappear far away from here.

With a mere blink of an eye, his body had solidified somewhere in the cosmos. Using his bracelet to determine his location, Jake found himself lost amidst an asteroid belt roughly 18 billion kilometers away from the Celestial City.

Switching back to Lucid Aetherdreamer mode, he focused on his desired destination. With a snap of his fingers, Jake was back in his building.

He had just completed his first trip through the Aetherdream.

Chapter 915: Second Meeting

As Jake was at the height of his motivation, ready to test his new Aetherdream World ability, someone tried to communicate with him through his bracelet. With a dissatisfied lip twitch, he begrudgingly accepted the call.

"Will? What is it? If it's not urgent, call me back later," He spoke in a tone filled with a hint of reproach.

The merchant on the other end of the line cringed, dumbfounded. "What did I do wrong this time?"

"Why are you calling me?" Jake grumbled again impatiently.

Remembering why he had contacted his friend in the first place, Will quickly mentioned, "Remember the debriefing in room 207 that Grigori strongly encouraged us to attend? It's about to start. The room is full, but we saved you a seat. Hurry if you want to come."

Jake thought a bit and recalled that the academy principal had indeed mentioned such a debriefing. It was supposed to reveal crucial information about their next Ordeal. As the Fifth Ordeal was the first one where they could actually die, he absolutely had to attend.

His annoyance dissipating, Jake said flatly, "I'm on my way."

The silver glow in his pupils intensified once again and his vision changed. With a step forward, he entered the Aetherdream, and his body dispersed into a stream of data and energy in the form of Dream Aether.

The Divine Academy had been forged from an extremely rare material, then reinforced and enhanced by all sorts of futuristic technologies, formations, and enchantments.

However, in the face of a Lucid Aetherdreamer, most of these defensive measures were full of flaws.

Only the principal's tower where Grigori resided was impenetrable. Probably because he had personally modified it while the Divine Academy was one of the many artifact duplicates that Aurae had mass-manufactured for its countless Quanoth iterations.

In truth, even if there were no gaps in the academy's defenses, Jake was not completely powerless if he chose to use brute force. As long as the Aether Runes and Symbols were not compressed beyond Grade 2 or 3, he could easily interfere. Even when the runes and symbols were too small for him to see clearly, his Aetherdream Traveler ability seemed capable of bypassing them.

Almost simultaneously, Jake appeared as silently as a ghost on the empty seat between Lucia and Will, almost giving them a heart attack. Lucia even drew her sword out of reflex.

"..."

The merchant sighed and closed his eyes, letting the back of his head rest against the backrest to calm his racing heart. Lucia was more outgoing and exclaimed while sheathing her sword,

"By Myrmid... That was creepy."

"Sorry. I was testing a new ability." Jake apologized with a small chuckle devoid of any guilt.

Hephais, who was more observant, asked directly, "How did you teleport straight into the Divine Academy? Even when I try to move through shadows, something prevents me. It's like I'm diving into tar."

Jake wanted to give him a detailed answer, but it would take far too long. Furthermore, he didn't know exactly how his Soul Class ability worked. He had just taken his first steps.

"It's just a skill from my new Soul Class." He finally explained, staying as vague and succinct as possible. "It allows me to teleport anywhere without any distance limit."

Ryne, Ashun, and Wyatt, who sat in the row above them, were eavesdropping on their conversation and couldn't help but blurt out,

"Seriously?!"

"What kind of distance are we talking about?" Carmin asked passionately, much to Wyatt's chagrin.

Jake turned to them with a confused look, finally realizing how packed the room was. It resembled the typical amphitheater-style lecture hall found in most universities, but it was massive, with plush seats that extended beyond the ground level.

Circular platforms floated in the air, taking up every available space without wasting an inch. Like the senate out of a certain globally renowned science fiction series, these platforms were occupied by groups of Players and natives of different races and origins.

Jake and several Myrtharian Nerds were hovering on one of these platforms, 12 meters above the ground, while Wyatt, Carmin, Ryne, Ashun, and Seren were on another platform floating one meter above and behind them. Further away, Jake could see larger creatures like the Aristocats, Immyr, and Jinrong in their black and gold dragon forms.

To accommodate such massive beasts in this lecture hall, their platforms seemed to have been enchanted with complex formations that compressed the space, forcing those standing on them to be smaller. Or perhaps, the inside space had been expanded? Jake couldn't say for sure.

"To answer your question, I just experimented with it a moment ago and managed to teleport 18 billion kilometers away. Not too impressive," Jake said, shrugging with faux disappointment.

'Not impressive my ass...' Wyatt and the other Myrtharian Nerds nearby had to make a huge effort to hold back from insulting him.

Eighteen billion kilometers? That ability was even more useful than their Oracle Teleport lvl1. Even Ryne's Oracle Teleport lvl4, a must-have for a factionless Player, was greatly inferior.

As they wanted to ask him more about this ability, an alien who looked like a human, about 2.40 meters tall, entered the room with an atypical gait. He was hopping around, slapping the inside of his ankles together with each step. He didn't seem to care about them.

Jake and the other Players in the room were intrigued by the clacking sounds and looked up to gaze at their presumed instructor's arrival. When Jake, Will, and several other Players, including Hazzom (the Demiurges leader), laid their eyes on him, their eyes almost popped out of their sockets.

They had met him before. For Jake and Will, he had even been their first encounter with an alien, if one ignored their near-death experiences with Digestors.

"Aslael!" Someone shouted, dumbstruck.

After the first cry, others also uttered his name with a delayed reaction. Apparently, several dozen Players in the room had already met him.

His appearance had changed little.

The humanoid alien still looked inhuman. Well, Jake realized he had to adjust his way of thinking. If the Jake of the past had met his present self, perhaps he would have thought the same thing.

Aslael's hair was still silvery, as were his eyes. A white-blue incandescent light still pulsed from his silvery eyes. His golden skin was iridescent with an array of white light representing a pattern similar to the integrated circuit of a computer.

His ears were pointed like those of fictional elves, and he still wore one of those clownish king outfits, except it was no longer silver but candy red: a puffy epaulet stitch, half-long trousers, moccasins, and a pair of mismatched tights.

His style was still clownish, but as during their first meeting, no one was brave enough to dare make fun of him. That would be seeking death.

Reveling in his grand entrance, the now-red jester smacked his lips and greeted them with his customary curtsy, practiced countless times.

"Greetings, my friends. My name is Aslael, but around here the Players call me the Instructor," he introduced himself in a twangy voice that Jake found horribly unpleasant.

Even his introductory sentence had not changed... He had to repeat the same spiel every time he taught new Players, whether it was their first or tenth time meeting him.

Taking the time to sweep the room with his gaze, the mischievous alien narrowed his eyes as he recognized several familiar faces. 'Hmmm... This guy is still alive. Her too.'

At that moment, Jake felt an unpleasant sensation of being spied on against his will, as if his soul had been laid bare. He shuddered involuntarily, and from the corner of his eye he saw that Ruby, as well as the leader of Demiurges and some other Players, seemed to be experiencing the same symptoms.

The feeling of being watched against his will disappeared as quickly as it had come, and Aslael clapped his hands to get their attention.

"Alright, I don't have time to waste and neither do you, so I'll get straight to the point," The alien declared in a rushed tone. Then, with an afflicted grimace, he suddenly lost his cool. "Fuck...I still have 2816 Divine Academies to visit before the end of the morning. Oracle, Auras?! Hey, I need a break, okay?! Even if you try to stop me, I'm taking a week off. What are you gonna do then, huh? Ha! That shut you up, didn't it?"

The other Players in the room remained silent.

Realizing that his behavior was inappropriate, Aslael cleared his throat and muttered more dignifiedly, "Cough, where was I... Oh yes, the briefing for your Fifth Ordeal."

His expression suddenly became extremely serious, his clownish demeanor replaced by a most ominous spiritual pressure. In a tone devoid of emotion, he slowly declared, "The first thing you need to know is that for the majority of you, this ordeal will be your tomb."

Chapter 916: Debriefing

A blasé and indifferent silence was the only reaction Aslael received after this enthusiastic declaration of ill omen.

"..."

Unsatisfied, he suppressed a twitch of his eyebrow and dropped another bombshell,

"The average death rate compiled over the last thousand years of 5th Ordeals is approximately 99.8%."

This time, in addition to the silence, several Players blatantly yawned. With the exception of perhaps a few natives who had only known the reassuring walls of the Divine Academy, the other spectators had absolute confidence in their ability to survive anything that fate would throw their way.

"What a disappointment..." Aslael grieved inwardly. That's why he preferred teaching ignorant newbies.

Indeed, for a moment he had almost forgotten that these Players were not just anyone. They were the ultimate victors of Quanoth, a Fourth Ordeal that brought together the elite of an entire System.

A death rate of 99.8% did not worry them at all. Simply because this figure was calculated over all participants in the Fifth Ordeals.

If this statistic were calculated on a sample of exceptional Players like his current audience, the result would certainly be much more optimistic. These Players, resistant to intimidation, knew this perfectly well.

Naturally, Aslael was an experienced Instructor. Even if his audience's reaction was a bit lukewarm, it took much more to discourage him. Adapting his demeanor, a sardonic smile distorted his uncommon face.

"This information doesn't surprise you much and I understand that," He said calmly, maintaining his thin knowing smile. "After all, most of you have a pretty special background, and this information is not exactly a secret. Even if the Oracle tried to conceal it, you could easily count how many participants come back alive from their Fifth Ordeal to compile this statistic yourself."

Several Players nodded in agreement. Jake himself had already heard this information. That was why he wanted to be much stricter and more selective when choosing the Myrtharian Nerds who would participate with him in his next Ordeal.

Will was also aware, but even though his Oracle Device could theoretically record everything, he still began to write everything down on a notepad, even though his intelligence was supposed to be more than enough to remember a few phrases forever. This earned him several eye rolls from his peers, notably Enya who was sitting on the seat to his right.

Failing to elicit any reaction from his audience, Aslael stopped wasting their time and began to formally instruct them, revealing information that their previous status as Fourth-Ordeal contestants did not allow them to access.

"You already know that the death rate is abysmally high, but you don't know why," the Instructor resumed his lecture in a monotone voice, his enthusiasm buried under his audience's indifference. "Let me explain it to you.

"Starting from your next Ordeal, you should be aware that you will formally graduate from your beginner status. The first four Ordeals are like a demo, a long four-step tutorial intended to prepare you for the real challenges that await you. It's also an opportunity for you to learn more about yourselves, but it's also proof of the Oracle's sincerity. To make you participate in these deadly Ordeals, we could conscript you by force or dangle only the enticing rewards and promises of power and wealth associated with them. But the high-ranking officials of the Mirror Universe did not do so. On this point, even if some of the Oracle's practices are questionable, you cannot doubt its transparency."

Despite his reservations about the Oracle System, Jake could only nod in agreement. An entity as all-powerful as the Oracle could indeed decide their future with a snap of its fingers if it so desired.

"... So now, let me explain to you what will really change starting from the Fifth Ordeal, besides the fact that you will now skydive without a 'parachute'." Aslael's eyes narrowed at this moment, becoming as cold as a serpent's. Counting on his fingers, he apathetically enumerated, "The first thing that will change is that your status as a Player will take on a whole new dimension. Until now, the Ordeals in which you participated took place in the Mirror Universe and were organized directly by the Oracle System or another entity native and loyal to it. As here on Quanoth, the Ordeal can be created or

under the jurisdiction of an Ancient Designer, but most of the time a simple Oracle Sovereign or Governor suffices.

"From the Fifth Ordeal, that will no longer be the case. For those who have managed to live with blinders on until now, the Mirror Universe is not the only macro-universe in the cosmos, and it is constantly competing with other Mirror Universes for space or Aether. These Mirror Universes, in some respects, have the same instincts as any living being. They want to grow and above all, they do not want to disappear. The Oracle, for many, would be the manifestation of a form of sentience of the Mirror Universe, although the truth is much more complicated and a mystery that few people are qualified to hear."

"Anyway, let's move on. As luck would have it, these other Mirror Universes also have their own versions of the Oracle. They might have a different name, but essentially, their functions are the same. The crucial point here is that each of these Mirror Universes has its own Aetheric signature, and everything that comes into existence is marked by it, like an indelible barcode. It's like an Aetheric ID card that each of us possesses, guaranteeing our loyalty and affiliation to our Mirror Universe. Under normal circumstances, you cannot betray either the Oracle or your Mirror Universe, but I digress.

"The point of all this is that you are like cells in a huge body. You are the equivalent of an immune system for our Mirror Universe and the Oracle."

Aslael paused and, this time, a genuinely proud and satisfied smile appeared on his face as he surveyed the crowd. These crestfallen and flabbergasted expressions were exactly what he wanted to see! Gloating, he added, "Hahaha! That's right! You're just some fucking white blood cell. Those who refuse to fight are worth even less than that. At best, you're inert connective tissue!"

The Players had already regained their initial composure, and he only elicited thoughtful frowns from them. It was really difficult to rattle these hardened veterans.

"Cough...Anyway. Some Aetherists claim that at a certain point in time, these Mirror Universes were growing peacefully by absorbing infinite Dream Aether until their borders collided. This Aetheric signature that we possess within us instinctively allows us to recognize and reject what comes from another Mirror Universe. To continue the immune system metaphor, anything that comes from a different Mirror Universe than our own will be instinctively perceived by each of us as a foreign body, an antigen to be eradicated."

All the Players present in the room frowned at this moment. This instinctive revulsion and hostility...wasn't that what Digestors felt towards them? Conversely, although they all hated Digestors, it was not some kind of inexplicable deep-seated hatred.

Jake tried to remember what he had felt when he had encountered his first Digestor, and the image of a partially translucent gray mouse dragging a stray cat in the darkness flashed in his mind. He immediately felt a chill.

What he had felt the first time he saw a Digestor was a terrible primal fear triggered by his survival instinct. At the time, it seemed normal given his surprise, but in hindsight, it was a typical fight-or-flight reaction. When he had encountered that Rank 0 Digestor again, he had fought it to the death without hesitation.

"No, it's different," Jake shook his head. He was certain that no strange force influenced his behavior when encountering a Digestor.

Even if it did exist, it was only a disgust or a diffuse animosity. Not the kind of instinct that would foolishly push someone to put their life on the line to exterminate these aliens under any common sense.

Aslael chuckled sadistically as he contemplated their troubled expressions.

"I can guess what's bothering you, and you're right," He confirmed their fears. "Digestors are something that the Mirror Universe considers a threat. But while living beings from another Mirror Universe are just considered foreign bodies or antigens, Digestors are closer to a virus or parasite that no vaccine or medication can purge.

"This is true for our Mirror Universe... and it's true for others. I don't know how many Mirror Universes exist, but the six Mirror Universes with which our borders are in contact are also infested with Digestors. These creatures corrupt and devour our Mirror Universes, and no one knows why or where they come from. Perhaps they were there from the beginning.

"No Mirror Universe wants to disappear or be corrupted. If these Mirror Universes let their white blood cells fight without surveillance, due to their forces being of equal size, none of them would be able to come out on top. The Digestors would take advantage of the situation to fish in troubled waters with even less restraint, and in the end, all these Mirror Universes would be devoured or corrupted over the very long term.

"There is only one thing that can really buy time for these Mirror Universes against these Digestor parasites: more and more Aether and increasing the Grade of their Aetheric signature until it surpasses the Grade of the Aether Code at the origin of the Corruption."

Chapter 917: Checkmate

Jake became pensive upon hearing these words. That they had within them an Aether Code that intrinsically differentiated them from Digestors and other Mirror Universes

was not surprising. If the Corruption of Digestors could not be purged by the Oracle, it was because the compression level of its Aether Code, or in other words, its Grade, was unfortunately higher than that of the inhabitants of the Mirror Universe.

His master Cekt had once mentioned that a Wilderth, the creature with the most powerful bloodline recorded, namely Grade 17, was supposedly capable of resisting this influence, but that did not mean it was unaffected.

And then it was one thing to increase the Grade of an individual's bloodline, but it was a whole different ball game to increase the Grade of the Aetheric signature of the entire Mirror Universe.

How did the Oracle plan to accomplish this feat by throwing them into these incredibly deadly Ordeals? He had a vague idea, considering his Aetherist knowledge, but that was not the case for all the Players present in this room.

Aslael could recognize with a single glance those who were lost by his revelations and he set out to explain in a way that everyone could understand,

"I know that not everyone among you is destined to become an Aetherist, but for your own good, I invite you to at least memorize the contents of the Novice Aether Manipulation Manual. Exceptionally, I will give you a quick summary. Unclaimed Dream Aether is an infinite resource, but that doesn't mean it is automatically available to us or to the Mirror Universe. For the Aether density of a world to grow without any external intervention, there must be life, or more precisely, spirituality. The complete name of Dream Aether should give you a clue, but it is our minds that attract Aether from the infinite void to the worlds in which we reside. Thus, the more Evolvers with strong souls and life force in the Mirror Universe, the more it thrives. Numbers make strength, and to increase the Aether density of a world, increasing the overall strength of a large population, even just a little bit, is enough to provoke profound changes in a world's ability to produce Aether.

"Until now, I don't think I'm telling you anything new. What you probably don't know, however, is that the more powerful a Player and their soul are, the easier Aether enters our world and the Mirror Universe. But it's not a simple matter of addition, it's an exponential matter. An Evolver with a Spirit Body level three levels above another Evolver may not be much stronger in single combat, but its mere existence allows the Mirror Universe to take in 10 to 20 times more Aether than the other Evolver with only three levels less. And I'm only talking about Spirit Body here. Soul strength, abilities, bloodlines, life force, everything has an impact.

"To sum up the situation in one word: experts. The Mirror Universe and the Oracle only need to produce one invincible expert to turn the tide. The Ordeals that pit multiple Mirror Universes against each other are not just a smart and calculated way for the Oracles to bet energy or territory, but also a way to regulate the battles so that their proteges have a fair chance of survival. This means one thing: the Oracle doesn't care

about sacrificing millions of stepping stones in each Ordeal. Even if the death rate is 99.9999%, as long as it gives birth to one invincible Evolver, it's worth it. By coincidence, it turns out that to become more powerful, a Player has every interest in raising the Grade of their bloodline as high as possible. I'll spare you the explanation, but this is also how the Mirror Universe could one day overcome Corruption and evolve."

Aslael paused to gauge his audience, but at this point, everyone was extremely calm. What he had just told them actually contained very little new information. At least, nothing that gifted Players like them couldn't have guessed.

However, it was one thing to have guessed it and another to receive confirmation from the mouth of an Oracle Instructor. Interpreted differently, his words literally meant "These Ordeals only exist to find and train THE right person."

Everyone else was just cannon fodder, sacrificial stepping stones, catalysts to pave the way for the designated chosen one. Deciding to strike while the iron was hot, Aslael finally attacked the real reason for his visit.

"Usually, you are left in complete ignorance of your next Ordeal, but the Fifth is an exception." He recited solemnly in a professorial tone that didn't suit him at all. "So I will tell you what I am authorized to reveal. The Fifth Ordeal always proceeds in the same way: Players from one Mirror Universe against another. The two Oracles put up territory, Aether or Artifacts and the winner takes all. The method of confrontation chosen is always the same: a straightforward, bloody and brutal frontal war. The chosen world and setting may vary, but the way the Ordeal proceeds is always the same. The Ordeal only ends when one of the two sides has been completely exterminated or beaten into retreat."

Aslael had been as succinct and neutral as possible, but most of the Players felt a knot form in their stomach. It explained the ridiculously high death rate. Still, even so, wasn't the death rate too high?

Aslael nodded, "As some of you have correctly guessed, over the last thousand years our Mirror Universe has lost over 90% of these wars, and this has recently become more pronounced in the last few centuries. In other words, the quality of our Fifth-Ordeal Players has consistently regressed."

"Which brings me to the main mission of your Fifth Ordeal. In addition to your individual main mission, you will also receive a global main mission. Often, these two missions will be closely connected. The global main mission is always the same: win the war. Its failure will almost always lead to your death, and even if you survive, the price to pay will often be worse than death in most cases."

Sensing the pessimism of his audience, Aslael smiled and nuanced his previous statement,

"Despite this, do not despair. If we only take into account the Ordeals that our Mirror Universe has won, the death rate drops to 72%. It's still very high, but your chances of survival become much more reasonable."

All the Players in the room were speechless. 72%? That was less than one survivor for every three participants, even in the most favorable scenario. How much had the Players in previous Fifth Ordeals struggled to snatch victory from the jaws of defeat?

Once again, Aslael could easily read their thoughts and clarified their doubts,

"The particularly high death rate has to do with one of the rules established in these Ordeals to make the confrontation fair. You are well aware that Quanoth only gathers outstanding Players and their factions. Any one of you, placed in a normal Fourth Ordeal, would have steamrolled over all your opponents without too much difficulty. What would be the point? And how would that be fair to the other participants?

"There is a scenario that the Oracles fear more than anything in these Ordeals, and that is that a single all-powerful Player from the opposing camp massacres all their Players on his own due to his overwhelming strength. For this reason, rules have been established. They were supposed to be fair, but they have recently become a disadvantage for us. This rule is actually a rule of participant distribution: Each Player camp has exactly the same number of Players.

"Wait, I'm not finished!" The instructor raised his hand as he saw them frowning. "Each camp has exactly the same number of Players for each Oracle Rank. What does that mean? In simple terms, it means that if one camp has a Rank 17 Oracle Colonel, then the other camp of Players will have one too. This ensures that the forces of each Mirror Universe are balanced. At least it should be.

"Recently, many smart alecks have used all sorts of methods to artificially and quickly increase their Oracle Ranks. Others have climbed the ranks honestly, but their power has not followed suit as quickly. The consequence is that our Ace Players with the highest Oracle Ranks cannot keep up with their equivalent in the opposing camp. They even get killed, which often...leads to the immediate loss of the war and the death of their entire camp."

This time, even simple-minded individuals like Gerulf and Rogen could vaguely understand the reason, and they all leaned forward in their seats, their gazes intense. Jake had recently realized this phenomenon while giving orders to his subordinates. Alas, because his rank was lower than that of the higher-ups in Lost Divinity it had backfired and his friends had all been ambushed.

Aslael immediately confirmed their suspicions,

"You guessed correctly. Managing the Oracle Rank is the key element of this Fifth Ordeal. When a high-ranking Player gives an order to lower-ranked Players, they are

covered by the Oracle Rank of that Player as long as they strictly follow the order given. The opposing Players become unable to calculate an Oracle Path concerning them unless they possess an Oracle Rank higher than the one who gave the order in the first place."

It was exactly what Jake and the other Players in the room feared.

"In other words," Aslael concluded with a grim expression, "if the highest-ranked Player of one camp gets killed, and the one from the opposing camp is still alive... then it's checkmate."

Chapter 918: See You In A Year

The deathly silence in the conference room was entirely predictable. Every time Aslael had repeated this speech, his audience had been struck by the same solemn muteness. There had never been any exceptions, and today would be no different.

"Any questions?" The Instructor asked mockingly, still wearing that same faintly provocative smirk.

The alien's condescending tone caused their hearts to rend, but there was nothing these Players could do to put him in his place. As arrogant as they were, all it took was one glance at the aura of this monster to understand that it would be suicide.

After a moment, a Player calmly raised their hand. When Aslael and the crowd of "students" gave their attention to Will, he readjusted the position of his glasses on his nose (which had served only a cosmetic role for some time) and spoke up very seriously.

"Earlier, you mentioned that the death rate was 99.8%. However, a little later, you claimed that by counting only the victories, this death rate dropped to 72%. You also said that we have lost more than 90% of the Fifth Ordeals over the past 1,000 years."

"That's correct." Aslael acquiesced with a playful glint in his silver eyes.

He already knew what this brainy Player was going to ask him. After all, even an ordinary human with middle-school or even elementary-level math knowledge could spot what was wrong. And indeed, as expected, Will asked him precisely the question he had predicted.

"If I base myself on these figures, then by doing a quick mental calculation, I come to the result that we have in fact won only about 0.71% of our Fifth Ordeals." Will explained calmly before pausing and saying, "Should I conclude that you lied

deliberately, or do over 90% of defeats and 99.29% of defeats mean the same thing to you?"

Aslael chuckled but feeling no guilt, he replied promptly, his obvious good mood plastered on his face.

"You'll note that I technically didn't lie." The Instructor protested at first, rolling his eyes. "More than 90% of defeats and 99.29% of defeats don't invalidate each other. However, now that the syntactic aspect has been clarified, I must honestly answer the point you just raised. There are indeed things to say about it.

"You see, I was quite honest earlier. Our Mirror Universe has indeed performed disgracefully over the past 1000 years, but not to the extent of winning less than one Fifth Ordeal out of 100. If that were the case, I dare not imagine the Oracle's wrath that would have befallen us, lowly officials of His Cosmic Holiness. Since you want the exact numbers, our defeat rate is only around 93.6%."

"Then where do the other deaths that inflate these numbers come from?" Another Player interjected impolitely.

Aslael remained unperturbed and shrugged, "Can't you guess? Haven't you yourselves recruited many natives on Quanoth to swell your ranks?"

When the Instructor reminded them of this detail, those who had actually used their excess liquid alloy to recruit natives finally saw through these numbers.

"Exactly." Aslael did not mock them and confirmed blankly. "This war you will not fight alone. It remains an Ordeal after all. If the two Oracles were just throwing one army of Players against another, we wouldn't need an Ordeal for that. They could just teleport you to one of the borders of the Mirror Universe where our borders intersect, and you could have fought to your heart's content without any restrictions.

"Simply put, just like here in Quanoth or all your previous Ordeals, you will join an Ordeal World with its own history, its own people, and its own laws. Even though the way this Ordeal unfolds is more straightforward, it is still an Ordeal. You can influence the course of events and seek your own opportunities as you wish. No one will stop you. The only difference is that for the purposes of this Ordeal, the two Oracles will ensure that you join the camps of two nations at war with each other. You will be but a grain of sand in a desert compared to these two nations. The Ordeal rules defined by the two Oracles will make it so that you cannot easily decide the outcome of this war, no matter your power compared to other participants. In this context, you will naturally be free to recruit all the natives who capture your attention. What better way to forge strong friendships than in a deadly war and with brave brothers in arms? I almost envy you... The memories of my fifth Ordeal are so distant..."

A few moments later, Jake and the other Players left Room 203 with their heads filled with thoughts and concerns. After answering their questions, Aslael made no effort to conclude his lecture. Without bidding farewell or good luck, he simply teleported silently, leaving no trace.

Hadn't the Instructor complained that he was in a rush and still had 2816 Divine Academies to visit before the end of the morning? Seen in this light, the Instructor was indeed pitiful and deserving of their sympathy.

Once outside the academy grounds, Jake and his friends returned to their respective Buildings. Before parting ways, they stared at each other broodingly, their worried eyes often returning to their leader as if hoping for a speech or reassuring words from him. In the case of the Myrtharian Nerds, it was obviously Jake who bore that responsibility, but in the case of Pureblood... it was also Jake.

"... " Wyatt didn't know how to describe what he felt when he saw Carmin and Seren eagerly eyeing the leader of another faction, but his heart definitely felt stifled.

Ryne and Ashun said nothing, but they too were waiting for Jake to speak. They wanted to see what he had to say after learning all of these grim news.

Aware that he couldn't avoid it, Jake cleared his throat and simply muttered, "Train hard."

Without another word, Jake teleported to his building, leaving them behind. His companions looked stunned for a moment, but quickly relaxed. As expected of their leader.

What more was there to say? If they wanted to survive, they simply had to ensure that they were much stronger than their future adversaries. If they were as strong as Jake, would they be as worried? Probably not.

That meant that every second they spent hesitating, standing around like posts, was a second wasted and as much time during which their power stagnated.

"See you in a year," Lucia said, walking nobly towards her building.

Several, like Gerulf, Rogen, or Hephais, had already left without a word. These proud warriors were the ones for whom their leader's laconic encouragement echoed the most.

Will elegantly removed his glasses, tucking them into his Space Stora. The emerald crystal embedded in the middle of his forehead suddenly glowed. The merchant had rarely been more determined.

"See you next year." Will waved goodbye without turning back and silently walked away, enveloped in the spectral shadow of Charizard that transported him directly to his Building.

Soon after, the rest of the Myrtharian Nerds dispersed and a long year of seclusion consisting of intense training, study, and introspection began. In this regard, the Myrtharian Nerds were cut from the same cloth. As long as their leader set the example, none of them would accept falling behind.

Ashun and Ryne were soon left alone in the Celestial City, and the Goddess of Love found herself without her toys. Boredom quickly caught up with her, and with a frustrated pout, she kicked a stone and returned to her own Building.

Normally, she would have gone to bother Deimos, and the Spartan would have given her a hard time to get her to train, but strangely this time, she found herself in her Building before realizing it.

"No big deal... I'll shut Ael and the others up when they see my power at our reunion."

As for Ryne, even if Jake had never spoken those words, she would have done the same. As a factionless Player, her survival had always depended on her own strength.

While everyone was returning to their Buildings, Jake had already cut himself off from the outside world. Even if he seemed isolated, he was never alone. Xi was always with him.

"Here we are alone again." He joked contemplatively.

[And I will be by your side as long as I exist.] Xi completed with a clichéd response, her soft, emotion-laden voice sending shivers down Jake's spine.

"Please, don't ever say that again."

[Hehe~]

Chapter 919: One Year In A Flash

The next year on Quanoth passed in a blur. Jake and Xi never once left their assigned Building.

The first thing Jake did when he was alone was to refine the Building, which was in fact a powerful Silver Artifact. This was the reward offered by Aurae to every winner of the Ordeal and these Players were not disappointed to say the least.

In addition to being able to withstand a calamity like the Mana Storm without difficulty, Jake was currently unable to damage its structure no matter how hard he tried.

It was only by using all of his amplification techniques and combining a Bronze Aether Weapon with his True Will that he was able to damage it slightly. The gash in the wall was no more than a centimeter deep and would regenerate within seconds of the attack.

Just on the basis of this one reward, Aurae had made all their efforts and sacrifices worthwhile. Those who had been eliminated just before the end could only curse their lack of strength.

The most depressed by far was Ulfar. Because he had appeared directly in the Divine Academy he did not have to fight to capture any of those 10,000 Buildings. More than 9400 Buildings could not be claimed due to the lack of survivors, making them available to the competent Players in the Academy.

This should have been good news for the King of Beskyr, but unlike Jake and the others who had already risked their lives to earn this reward, Ulfar instead had to buy his Building with his own Contribution Points. Needless to say, the price was steep.

All of the Contribution Points that he and the other students were so darn proud to have saved up were consumed in the blink of an eye, making them doubt that they had ever owned such a fortune. Now, all Players, whether they were from the Divine Academy or outside, were on equal footing: broke.

Because the Building was already pre-customized for its owner, putting a spiritual stamp on the Artifact took Jake only a few hours. If the Artifact Incarnation limit was not that of a Bronze Artifact, he would certainly have attempted to devour his Building in one bite.

Once refined, the Oracle System's description was concise but more than long enough to justify the artifact's rank.

[Silver Aether Artifact: Jake's Sanctuary: This is an extremely resilient artifact capable of withstanding a full-powered attack from an Oracle Guardian by default. Automatically repairs itself with the Grade 7 Aether Core infused into its structure. Can generate the ideal environment, energy and nutrient types for its owner. When its owner hides inside it he/she will enjoy the Oracle Cloaking lvl3 and Oracle Promotion lvl1 buff. These two bonuses can be cumulated with the corresponding Oracle Skills.]

This Sanctuary seemed to have been designed specifically in anticipation of the Fifth Ordeal to give another trump card to their Mirror Universe elites. Far from rejoicing, Jake became even more worried.

Since both sides were always of equal strength, at least on the surface, and considering their rate of defeat over the last 1000 years, Jake could only deduce that the elites of the opposing Mirror Universe also had trump cards of the same ilk.

This realization only strengthened his resolve to make the most of every second of this out-of-time year to train, and so he did.

After his evolution and the meteoric increase in his intelligence, Jake could no longer approach his training as he had before. He could now split his consciousness into multiple parts, allowing him to multitask at an unprecedented level of performance.

Simultaneously, he could also temper his Spirit Body and his physical body by subjecting them to the harshest temperatures and stresses. If he had attempted to subject his body and mind to such harsh treatment a few days earlier he probably would have passed out after a few minutes.

His body would have recovered in seconds, but his Spirit Body and Soul would have been severely damaged, requiring days or weeks of recovery. During this time, Jake would likely have lived as an amnesiac, his consciousness treading a fine line between lucidity and insanity.

That kind of catastrophic scenario could not so easily happen after his profound transformation. His Grade 10 Energy Body and Soul guaranteed that he would never run out of energy. Add to that the nourishing and energizing properties of his personal Sanctuary, and it was safe to say that Jake could train at 1000% capacity 100% of the time.

Under these unbelievably favorable conditions, the second thing Jake did after refining his Building was to decisively cast his Phantasm ability to conjure a brand new Purgatory and project several dozen slivers of his consciousness inside to participate in the many training modules contained within.

While his fighting skills and knowledge in various fields were not up to par in the fight against Ael, Jake quickly caught up under these new auspicious conditions.

While Jake's mind was assimilating all sorts of advanced techniques and knowledge from all sciences and fields of expertise, his body and main consciousness were focused on putting into practice everything he had learned while experimenting with his new Bloodline and Soul Class abilities.

For the first three months, Jake focused solely on mastering his Life Manipulation Skill. Partly because he was hopeful that it would speed up Jeanie's rebirth and partly because it was by far the skill with the greatest potential if used in conjunction with his Digestor ability to recombine any Aether and DNA Codes contained in his mental database.

During this time, Jake had a great time. In just one day, his proficiency had already surpassed that of the best biologists and geneticists on Earth. And we were talking about his era, the 22nd century. In the days and weeks that followed, he went much further, making full use of his formidable brainpower.

During these three months, Jake became able to use his new bloodline's ability to shapeshift, biomass generation and adaptive mutations to their fullest potential. Create life, heal, modify his genetic expression, manipulate his own life force or that of another person, etc. Jake quickly became very good at all of these subfields.

During those three months, several memorable things happened. The first memorable event was that through the mastery of his Familiar and Life Manipulation skills, Xi was able to create a body that was independent of and completely different from Jake's.

From now on, his Oracle AI could walk around with her own body and even modify her own DNA and Aether Code to become a truly independent and original life form. If the other Players found out, who knew how they would react?

For obvious reasons, Xi decided not to create a permanent, independent body from Jake until he had a reliable way to hide its existence. She could only hang out in a body conjured by his Familiar ability, but that was more than enough for her to play around.

The second major event of this period was, of course, Jeanie's "rebirth". Jake and Xi feared the worst, but it turned out that the fairy had not changed. From her words, she thought she had perished, but instead of simply vanishing, she had simply drifted off into a very long dream.

The Minmin fairy still felt the same inside, but her situation had changed irrevocably. Like Xi, her body did not really belong to her. She was now a Cosmic Fairy and a Familiar. Jake could recall her body and reabsorb it at any time.

Still, Jeanie was happy with this outcome. In Jake's Spirit Dimension, she felt safe. She would no longer have to live in fear.

The third event occurred at the end of the three months, and this time it was a much more unexpected surprise for Jake, Xi, and Jeanie. The second fairy spirit hatched from its egg...

Jake had no expectations regarding this second fairy spirit. Inwardly, he had even prepared himself for the possibility that the next fairy spirits to come into the world would be clones identical to the Minmin, thus confirming that Jeanie had indeed died and that only her data had been preserved.

This was why he was pleasantly/unpleasantly surprised to discover that this second fairy spirit had a face and an appearance fundamentally different from Jeanie's.

Trash Runt.

He was the Half-Leprechaun boy Jake had met at the beginning of his Fourth Ordeal and who had perished shortly thereafter when they had been involved in the joint attack by Vhoskaud, Azeus, and Shamash. Jake had forgotten about him, but his body was stored in his Space Storage when he had digested his bracelet...

The next nine months were much more routine but no less full of twists and turns. During this long and short period of time, Jake achieved a decent level of mastery in all his new abilities, including the Aetherdream.

365 days later, Jake was in his Lucid Aetherdreamer mode when one of the Dream Aether filaments attached to his body suddenly expanded and his consciousness and body were suddenly compressed into a mass of data and Dream Aether, then sucked inside.

When he opened his eyes again a split second later, Jake found the familiar, dark surroundings of the Red Cube.

His Fourth Ordeal was truly over.

Chapter 920.1: Ordeal Rewards (part 1)

Upon returning to the familiar darkness and loss of sensation that made him doubt his own existence, Jake reacted with a stoicism befitting a king. No longer was he the ignorant and easily impressed neophyte who had not yet faced his first Ordeal. He had grown in strength, in knowledge, and in the ability to face whatever challenges the universe threw at him.

But this return was different. His mind, still in Lucid Aetherdreamer mode, struggled to make sense of the torrent of information and Dream Aether flows that accompanied his repatriation to the Red Cube. Even with this precaution, he was overwhelmed and disoriented, left without a sense of his body or surroundings.

As he grappled with this strange state, Jake realized that his Aetherdream Vision was the key. With this heightened perception, he came to a startling realization: he no longer had a physical body. Inside the Red Cube, he existed only as a mass of static information and Dream Aether, his Soul the only thing retaining its structure.

But this newfound security was tempered by the knowledge that this state was fragile. The Red Cube, with all its magic and technology, was not infallible. Jake had studied its anatomy and technology in great detail during his year of seclusion, and knew that it was vulnerable to tampering.

The thought of being trapped in the Red Cube sent a chill down Jake's spine, if he still had one. He couldn't help but think of worst-case scenarios, but he knew that his Aetherdream Traveler Skill offered a way out if needed.

As the familiar Oracle System mental interface popped up, signaling the start of the Ordeal Rewards, Jake couldn't help but wonder what new challenges awaited him. But he was ready, his steely resolve unshakeable even in the face of the unknown.

[Participant: Jake Wilderth, Cosmic D Starfeyrves]

[Assessment of injuries in progress...]

Upon reading these first two lines, Jake figuratively shed a symbolic tear of emotion. And with good reason. Compared to his critical state at the end of his Third Ordeal, he definitely preferred this outcome. Back then, upon reading the same line, he was far from serene.

[...]

[Assessment complete. No injuries detected. Corruption... negligible. Estimated medical cost: 0 credits.]

It was only upon receiving confirmation that he had no hidden injuries that Jake truly relaxed. At least now he knew for sure that, from the perspective of the Oracle System, his soul and body were doing well.

Wait! Negligible corruption? What was this half-assed diagnosis? Jake immediately started to doubt.

Negligible... According to what criteria?

Jake wanted to curse someone, but he didn't know who to complain to. Perhaps because the Oracle System sensed his agitation, the rest of his Ordeal results arrived immediately after.

[Fourth Ordeal concluded]

[Type: Heroic-fantasy/Race Against Time]

[Aether density: *100 or 1000 pts.]

[Number of participants: 9,891,386]

[Main Mission: Find a way to board the Celestial City before its departure. If you fail, you will be left to undergo the Purge with the rest of the damned.]

[Penalty for failure: None.]

[Assessment of the Ordeal in progress...]

[...]

[Assessment complete. The outcome is as follows:]

[-Main Mission; Rating: Perfect= +200]

[-First Side Mission: Obtain at least one Soul Class. The rating will be based on the Soul Class(es) obtained at the end of the Ordeal; Rating: ...Uncertain... +500]

[-Second Side Mission: Keep Ruby Hale alive; Rating: Perfect= +50]

[-Third Side Mission: War between Ret'Asi and Khinchod. Regardless of the final outcome of the conflict, your rating will be determined by your performance; Rating: Good= +50]

[-Fourth Side Mission: Save the population of Laudarkvik from the Purge; Rating: Beyond perfect= +200]

[-Fifth Side Mission: Obtain revenge against Lost Divinities; Rating: Good= +150]

[-Sixth Side Mission: Assist the Mirror Vanguard in their war against the Serinese Theocracy; Rating: Perfect= +150]

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

[Exploration; Rating: Excellent= +50]

[Proactivity; Rating: Excellent= +50]

[Combat; Rating: Very Active= +25]

[Other exploits:]

[Exploit n°1: Obtain a unique Soul Class of Tier higher than 10: Rating= +100]

[Exploit n°2: Obtain a unique bloodline of Tier higher than 10: Rating= +100]

[Exploit n°3: Creation of an Original True Will Move: Rating= +50]

[Exploit n°4: Become an Intersystem Class Player: Rating= +200]

[Exploit n°5: ??? : Rating= ???]

[...]

[Special Exploit n°1: Obtain the favor of a Minmin= +20]

[Special Exploit n°2: Traumatize an android= +50]

[Special Exploit n°3: Stele Pillager: Rating= +50]

[Special Exploit n°4: Destroy the Sun: Rating= +100]

[Special Exploit n°5: ??? : Rating= ???]

[...]

[Total rating: +2120]

[Some exploits and mission results could not be correctly interpreted by the Oracle System. After deliberation, an additional 800 credits granted.]

[Total rating after adjustment: +2920]

[This score ranks first in this Ordeal and in the top 0.000 000 000 000 000 000 01% of all Fourth Ordeals combined. Congratulations!]

[Distribution of rewards in consequence:]

[Reward n°1: Oracle Rank +4= First Lieutenant>Captain(-400)>Major (-800)> Lieutenant Colonel(-800)> Colonel (-800)]

[Reward n°2: Gold Aether Artefact: Codex of Aurae (final form). A Codex of Aurae resulting from the fusion of 29 other Codexes.]

[Reward n°3: Digitalization: If you wish, you can choose to maintain your body and mind in a digitized state. If you refuse, this reward will be lost forever once you leave the Red Cube.]

[Reward n°4 : Ordeal Store. 2920 credits to spend.]

[...]

[After counting the 90 credits you had left, you still have 3010 credits to spend.]

As Jake finished reading, it would be an understatement to say that his mood was excellent. The result was insane, but it's not like he hadn't expected it a little.

If at the beginning of the Ordeal the Oracle had told him the results of his future performance in advance, he definitely wouldn't have believed it. The gap between his initial abilities and his accomplishments was too great.

Some Ordeal Mission ratings were disappointing, while others exceeded his expectations, especially the rating of his first side mission. 500 points! Jake was dying to know how the Oracle System calculated these results.

On the other hand, 100 credits for literally destroying a sun and creating a Grade 10 Aether Core seemed underwhelming compared to the obstacles and risks associated with such an accomplishment. Perhaps the Oracle was trying to subliminally tell him that such acts should not be repeated...

When he arrived at the passages full of ???, Jake had really thought that the Oracle was going to try to trick him, but in the end, it had worked out well. He didn't know if the extra 800 credits were a good deal, but it was better than receiving nothing at all.

Without needing to be too perceptive, Jake could assume that all these ??? were related to the Digestors, be it the Corrupted Schwazens, the Digestor Trojans, Digestor Ruby, or... himself.

The Oracle was undoubtedly aware of all these disruptive elements, having even personally issued the Special Ordeal Mission requiring him to restrain Ruby's Digestor half. However, even though the Oracle System could follow the situation to a certain extent, it seemed irreparably incapable of calculating anything related to the Digestors.

Jake could only imagine what bizarre and unfathomable method the Digestors used to so miraculously jam and parasitize the senses and algorithms of the Oracle System. It was a kind of power that even with his growing intellect, he was not capable of comprehending.

Another notable novelty was that it was the first time a Main Mission rewarded him with more than 100 credits. The Oracle apparently had some common sense and was aware of the difficulty of such a mission. Looking back, if Jake had rushed straight to the Celestial City from the beginning of the Ordeal, he would most likely have lost his life by acting without thinking.

It was a lesson for the Ordeals to come. No matter how much he thought he dominated or surpassed his opponents, it was wiser to keep a low profile and delay avoidable confrontations as much as possible to increase his strength. The time spent during the Ordeal mainly served this purpose, and it was a resource that should not be wasted.

And what in the world was that exploit "Traumatize an android"? In that instant, the image of a pitiful Vhoskaud teetering on the edge of a nervous breakdown fleetingly flickered in his mind. To have secured a place among his roster of exploits, the extent of PTSD the android harbored towards him must have been nothing short of crippling...

In the end, time passed in silence in the darkness of the Red Cube... One minute, two minutes... One hour...

After two hours, Jake turned his attention away from the interface, his brain buzzing on the verge of a nervous breakdown.

"Fuck! It's the first time I have more than 3000 Ordeal Credits to spend, but I don't know what to do with them..."

Chapter 921.2: Ordeal Rewards (part 2)

During those two hours, Jake had sifted through hundreds of millions of items, but he was still far from deciding. There were plenty of interesting articles, but nothing seemed exceptional enough to push him to spend his Ordeal Credits. If he didn't find anything, he would rather save them for his next Ordeal to increase their value.

[...It would be so much easier if you weren't rolling in money.] Xi complained in his head with an exasperated voice.

[Hmmhmm. Filthy rich.] Jeanie chimed in.

Thankfully, Trash remained silent. It was already difficult enough to host a cohort of fairy spirits somewhere in his mind. He was starting to feel like his cat Crunch, who had recently confessed to suffering from multiple personalities.

"I never thought that one day being too rich would become a problem..." Jake sighed, feeling a migraine coming on.

His unreasonable wealth was indeed the cause of his dilemma. Due to the Grade 10 Energy characterizing his body and soul, Jake continually produced billions of Aether points every second without even thinking about it.

The bracelet he had recreated to reinstate Xi in her functions was currently compressing a little over 300T of Aether points per day. Such a figure was so absurd for a Fourth Ordeal Player that it was scandalous.

During his First Ordeal, 1000 Ordeal credits were estimated to be around 100M Aether points. Such an amount seemed astronomically high to him at the time. And for the common mortals, it was indeed the case.

With 100M Aether points, a First Ordeal Player could buy several manuals, skills, or techniques and even acquire a pure blood sample of a Grade 7 Bloodline.

Unfortunately, this was no longer entirely true for a Fourth Ordeal Player.

The value of Ordeal credits doubled with each successive Ordeal. This meant that 1000 Ordeal Credits were worth 800M Aether points today at the exchange rate of his early days. For ordinary Players belonging to small factions, it was an unimaginable amount.

To put things into perspective, 800M Aether points were the market value of approximately 5 or 6,000 Rank 8 Digestor corpses. Such Digestors rarely traveled alone and had average Aether stats approaching 10,000 points. It was the kind of prey that even a mediocre Fifth Ordeal Player tended to hunt in teams, and this kind of hunting was not without risk.

Like Evolvers, there was a great diversity of talents, size, and morphology among Digestors of the same rank. For every ten mediocre Rank 8 Digestors, there was one standout. Among a hundred Rank 8 Digestors, there was a mini-boss. And if, by unfortunate chance, they stumbled upon the rare gem among millions, they might encounter a "friendly" Digestor Jake, or something of the sort.

Come to think of it...Jake remembered that there was, in fact, a Digestor Jake roaming free somewhere on B42. One of the bosses of the Digestor Dungeon had adopted his appearance and managed to escape alive.

In any case, Jake was facing a serious dilemma. 3000 Ordeal Credits were worth less than the Aether points his body produced every second.

[That's not entirely true.] Xi suddenly reminded him, while consulting the Oracle System. [The prices in the Oracle Store were heavily discounted so that new Evolvers and Players could quickly acquire some decent techniques or a bloodline. Prices have increased considerably since you became a Fourth Ordeal Player. Logically, the value of an Ordeal Credit should have followed suit.]

Hmm. Xi had a point. Jake remembered that detail.

His novice manual on Aether Manipulation cost several billion Aether points the last time he checked. It was dozens of times more expensive than its value in Ordeal Credits when he bought it back then.

As for his Grade 7 Myrmidian Bloodline, it was no longer even available. To acquire a blood sample, he had to make a request in the Oracle Store through the Evolver Market.

The price of a dose of Blood Essence from a Grade 7 Bloodline theoretically sold for anywhere between 1 and 500B of Aether points depending on the species... The thing was, most sellers did not want to be paid in Aether points, but directly in Aether crystals of a certain color, but above all, of a certain grade.

It was all fine and dandy if those vendors wanted Grade 2 or 3 Red Aether Crystals, but if they demanded Grade 4 or higher Blue or Violet Aether Crystals, the exchange rate

would skyrocket exponentially. This was a harsh reminder that most Evolvers and Players didn't possess a Self-Encoding ability in their bloodline. Or if they did, it was often biased towards certain Aether stats, causing a lag, or even stagnation of neglected attributes.

Sadly, fate was cruel, and it was often the mental stats that were the most difficult to increase. And it just so happened that Blue, Indigo, Violet, and Black Aether Crystals of high Grade were also the most challenging to condense. Not every Aetherist was capable of doing so.

"Xi, can you tell me the current value of an Ordeal Credit in terms of Aether points?"

[I have already checked. 1000 Ordeal Credits are still worth 800M Aether points as we anticipated.] Xi reported calmly. [Your Ordeal has earned you a little less than 2.4B Aether points. However, there is a catch. The Ordeal Store doesn't follow exactly the same pricing grids. Here, your Novice Aether Manipulation Manual is still worth 250 credits instead of the 3,000 or 4,000 credits it would cost if we based the rates on the Oracle Store outside. These Aether points have a market value of Grade 4 Red Aether. Grade 4 for Fourth Ordeal... The Oracle Store categorizes and prices its items based on the required Oracle Rank to purchase them, their rarity, demand, utility, and objective value. An Oracle Skill of level 5 or 6 that would have cost you hundreds, if not thousands of billions of Aether points outside, would cost you around 600-1500 credits here. But there is another catch. Similarly, an Oracle Skill of level 1 would still cost 100 credits. Just like your First Ordeal. Following this logic, Ordeal Credits are best spent on high-value items that require a high Oracle Rank.]

"I see." Jake understood. The Ordeal Store favored specialists who had put all their chips on one or two techniques.

However, Xi had also reminded him of another crucial piece of information. Now that he was no longer considered a beginner participating in tutorials, the prices in the Oracle Store would no longer change out of the blue.

That meant his nouveau riche status was now unalienable.

Jake thought for a moment, then said, "In that case, filter out all the items in the Oracle Store, leaving only those that can be purchased with my Oracle Rank of Colonel."

[Right away.] Xi complied.

In the blink of an eye, the number of available articles drastically dropped as if the water of an ocean had been removed, leaving only a few fish gasping for air on the ocean floor.

[Categories:]

[Aether/Genetic Code Enhancements]

[Knowledge and skills]

[Aether Skills]

[Oracle Device Skills/Upgrades]

[Objects/ Machinery/Vehicles]

Despite his formidable brainpower, it still took Jake several hours to skim through the content of the five categories. However, this time he was able to read everything with Xi filtering out articles that were of no interest to him.

At this moment, Jake finally decided on a satisfying buying strategy. Before that, he took a look not at his Ordeal Credits, but his Aether Points.

[Aether Storage: 110 376 564Q Aether pts]

"Alright. This should be enough..."

After a short hush,

[...Never say that in front of other Players.] Xi solemnly warned him. [Their hearts wouldn't be able to take it.]

"..."

Jake's plan was as follows. He and Xi had indeed found many manuals, Aether Skills, cultivation techniques, Oracle Skills, and even artifacts or technologies that might interest them. The problem was that most of the time, in the case of an Aether or Oracle Skill, one often had to buy its lower version first. Spending their Ordeal Credits on these low-level skills would be a waste.

At the same time, even if he converted his 3000 Ordeal Credits into Grade 4 Red Aether points, it would only amount to 800 trillion Aether points. It didn't even represent a hundred-thousandth of his fortune.

From this point of view, Jake still had no reason to spend his credits even if their value was now much more interesting. He and Xi were about to give up until they compared the prices of some items in the Ordeal Store to those in the Oracle Store.

It turned out that a number of items requiring an Oracle Rank of Colonel cost a reasonable amount of Ordeal Credits, while they were absent or disproportionately priced in the Oracle Store to the point that even Jake's Aether Storage would bleed if he decided to purchase one of them.

This was the case with several manuals and Oracle Skills. He needed to buy their lower versions, but Jake couldn't bring himself to spend his credits on that.

What to do then? Simple: Spend his Aether points first.

And it turned out that Jake had the perfect Oracle Skill for this, one that he had never really used before:

[Portable Oracle Store lvl1: The owner of the Oracle Device can access the Oracle Store from anywhere, including during an Ordeal, and his purchases will be delivered instantly. However, the prices of the goods in the Oracle Store will be 200 times more expensive. Regardless of the item purchased, a shipping fee of 20 million Aether points will be charged.]

Chapter 922.3: Ordeal Rewards (part 3)

When Jake bought this Oracle Skill he thought he had made a good deal, as it allowed him to get what he needed wherever he was. Typically, if he found himself teleported to the bottom of an ocean at the beginning of an Ordeal, he would have been able to purchase a diving suit immediately, as long as he paid full price for it.

As it was, he was too strong to need that kind of equipment and too poor to afford the artifacts and skills he really needed. Except for buying one or two small items, this Oracle Skill had never been used to its full potential.

That was about to change.

"Xi, upgrade the Portable Oracle Store to level 5." Jake requested calmly.

There was a reason he hadn't been greedier. From level 6 onwards, the price of most Oracle Skills reached sky-high prices. Even with his wealth, he had to think twice before buying them through the Portable Oracle Store where everything cost him two hundred times more.

This was because, as Xi had explained to him earlier, even though the Oracle Store only displayed prices in Aether points, its items were categorized according to value and Oracle Rank requirement and then assigned a Grade. This Grade was obviously the Grade of Aether.

In the Ordeal Store, because the value of the credits doubled with each Ordeal and their Grade increased by one, a level 1 Oracle Skill might be worth 10-100 credits, then 20-200 at level 2, 40-400 at level 3, and so on.

In the Oracle Store, although the prices displayed may differ from those in the Ordeal Store, the logic would be more along the following lines: A level 1 Oracle Skill worth 1 billion Aether points would be worth 2 billion at level 2, then suddenly 400 billion at level 3 instead of the expected 4 billion.

This was because its actual price of 4 billion Aether points was calculated on the basis of Grade 2 Red Aether, with each Grade 2 Aether point being worth 100 Grade 1.

For the most part, Jake and Xi observed that this was a recurring pattern. When it came to Oracle Skills, or Aether Skills, the first two or three levels had reasonable prices that doubled or tripled with each upgrade. But for other skills, the upgrade cost jumped exponentially from level 2 onwards.

The Portable Oracle Store Skill fell into this second category, with its upgrade cost increasing 100-fold with each level. The Oracle was no fool and knew that if it priced this Oracle Skill too low, all the Players would rush in and it was sure to lose out in the future when its Oracle Store was ransacked in the midst of an Ordeal by unscrupulous Players.

Fortunately, that was why Jake had upgraded this Oracle Skill in the first place. At level 6, it was no longer as select and could fit into the skillset of Players with more modest financial resources.

Seeing how worthwhile this Oracle Skill was, Jake weighed the pros and cons with figurative grit, then gave in to temptation and asked Xi to upgrade it once more to level 6.

[It's done.]

Jake glanced at the description of the freshly upgraded Oracle Skill and felt a deep sense of contentment.

[Portable Oracle Store lvl6: The owner of the Oracle Device can access the Oracle Store from anywhere, including during an Ordeal, and his purchases will be delivered instantly. However, the prices of the goods in the Oracle Store will be 5 times more expensive. Regardless of the item purchased, a shipping fee of 20M Aether pts will be charged.]

"Awesome."

His mood darkened sharply right afterwards when he saw that his previous fortune of 110 sextillion Aether points had just been cut by nearly 20 sextillions. The reality check brought him crashing down from his lofty dream of boundless riches.

The Portable Oracle Store lvl7 cost a whopping 800 sextillion Aether points and that was taking into account the upgrade of the Portable Oracle Store to level 6.

"Okay, I guess level 6 is my limit." Jake reluctantly sighed.

This was also the case with the Ordeal Store. Most level 6 Oracle Skills cost between 320 and 3200 credits. Even with his 3010 credits that didn't give him much room to maneuver. If he focused on one of the cheaper Oracle Skills, he could upgrade it from level 6 to 7 for 640 credits.

If he was willing to wait until the end of his Fifth Ordeal, the value and Grade of his credits would double again, allowing him to buy level 7 or 8 Oracle Skills for the same number of credits.

It was tempting, of course, but Jake had always been a firm advocate of immediately converting any credits in his possession into his own strength. What he was certain of was that he didn't want to die filthy rich and full of regrets for not spending his fortune sooner.

Yet, he was also acutely aware that he was no longer just another guy. He had a solid bank account and an ability to increase his purchasing power that was probably unrivaled among Fourth-Ordeal Players.

Therefore, Jake had only one real target in the Oracle Store: the Oracle Discount Skill. As far as he knew, only Will had bought it as a merchant and he never expected to follow suit.

[Oracle Discount lvl1: All items in the Oracle Store will be discounted by 5% of their listed price permanently for the owner of this Oracle Skill. Purchase cost: 10 credits]

This was the minimum price for a level 1 Oracle Skill from the Ordeal Store. However, as with the Portable Oracle Store, the Oracle knew that such a skill should not be too easy to upgrade or it would lose a great deal of profit in the very long run.

For this reason, its price was spiraling out of control in the Oracle Store even more than that of the Portable Oracle Store Skill, and its upgrade price in the Ordeal Store was no exception, although not as dramatic. Instead of the upgrade price doubling with each level, it tripled.

On the one hand, in the Ordeal Store upgrading from level 5 to 6 would "only" cost him 2430 credits, while in the Oracle Store upgrading from level 5 to 6 was currently costing a nightmarish 19 septillion Aether points.

It was the perfect target and his strategy was clear.

"Xi, buy the Oracle Discount Skill in the Oracle Store and upgrade it to level 5. Then spend 2430 credits to upgrade it to level 6 via the Ordeal Store." Jake ordered in a resolute voice.

[Consider it done.] Xi executed the command promptly.

A few seconds later, Jake inspected his brand new skill.

[Oracle Discount lvl6: All items in the Oracle Store will be permanently discounted by 30% for the holder of this Oracle Skill.]

Jake then reread the list of items in the Ordeal Store one last time to see if there was another good deal hidden among them, but after another long moment of deliberation, he decided not to buy anything else.

There were unique items that could only be acquired through the Ordeal Store, but even after careful consideration, Jake did not think he urgently needed them. As for the other items and skills he could afford, he could also buy them via the Blue Cube on his Floating Island at their real price.

In this context, he couldn't find a good reason to spend the remaining credits.

"That's it. I'll keep the 580 credits for next time." Jake concluded his shopping session satisfied and signaled his intention to close the interface and leave the Red Cube.

As he was about to close the Ordeal Store interface, another message from the Oracle System popped up in his mind.

[Evaluation of Player Jake Wilderth's cumulative performance in the first four Ordeals ongoing...]

[First Ordeal: Status: Alive. Main Mission: Accomplished. Ranking: 844th/8,658,435. Global Ranking: Top 0.01%.]

[Second Ordeal: Status: Alive. Main Mission: Accomplished. Ranking: 1st/11,658,435. Global Ranking: Top 0.000 000 001%.]

[Third Ordeal: Status: Alive. Main Mission: Accomplished. Ranking: 1st/6,694,729. Global Ranking: Top 0.000 000 000 01%.]

[Fourth Ordeal: Status: Alive. Main Mission: Accomplished. Ranking: 1st/9,891,386. Global Ranking: Top 0.000 000 000 000 000 000 000 01%.]

[Analysis completed. After deliberation, the Nobility Rank of Oracle Knight is awarded to Player Jake Wilderth. VIP Ordeal Store unlocked in advance.]

At that moment, the Ordeal Store interface that he was about to close suddenly changed and a new tab labeled "VIP Ordeal Store" appeared at the bottom of the five categories, unofficially becoming the sixth.

Jake, who was previously satisfied with his purchases, began to have a bad feeling. Had the Oracle been waiting until now to make him spend his credits in advance?

When he anxiously clicked on the tab, a short list of items scrolled before his eyes and upon seeing the price of the first item, an unprecedented sense of anger and humiliation stemming from the insidious conviction of being scammed almost made him faint. The Oracle had fooled him. Once again...

[Dungeon Digestor Nexus: The Nexus of a freshly captured Rank 15 Dungeon Digestor. Cost: 3010 credits.]

Chapter 923.1: Interlude (Part 1)

As Jake and the other 577 winners were repatriated to the Red Cube, thousands of other Divine Academies and Celestial City were suddenly cleared of their student populations, some becoming dreary ghost schools.

The natives and Evolvers who had chosen or been granted permanent residency in their respective Divine Academies panicked slightly, while those who had been through the process several times before reacted calmly, their eyes crinkling slightly.

"It's quiet again." Grigori sighed as he looked up at the ceiling of his office room.

His piercing gaze was not focused on that ceiling, but looked beyond it, boring through multiple layers of walls, and clouds to establish eye contact with a colossal black steel face with six fiery suns burning in symmetrical rows of three.

At that moment, the enormous hand of Aurae covered the Celestial City and its Divine Academy, masking the stars of the cosmos and throwing it into darkness like a black curtain that had just been drawn to mark the end of the show.

The space around Grigori and the few permanent students seemed to distort, first compressing, then stretching infinitely. The process of spatial distortion had hardly begun when it ended in silence. The darkness receded and Grigori caught a fleeting glimpse of Aurae's huge steel hand veiled in energy, pulling away before disappearing completely.

Aurae was gone. Grigori deployed his mental senses with the stoicism of someone used to this scene. A new Quanoth planet, almost identical to the one he had scanned a year earlier, appeared in his mind.

"One, two, three, four... and ten..." The childlike alien and Divine Academy principal counted out loud in a monotone voice, his face lifeless from boredom.

As he uttered the last number, his pupils suddenly constricted. A "new" Aurae appeared in the space above him and its two hands grabbed without touching it, one hand above, one hand below, this new intact planet in the manner of a basketball. A mass of black clouds oozed out from its fingers and then began to spread out from its poles.

"Here we go again..." Grigori sighed. A new Fourth-Ordeal and a new planetary apocalypse was about to begin.

Unprompted, Grigori gave a mental command to the Celestial City, which was primarily a spaceship, and started the landing procedure in the center of another Shatug Empire slightly different from the last one.

A moment later, millions of Players appeared simultaneously all over the planet, with a few lucky ones opening their eyes directly at the doors of his Divine Academy.

Grigori sighed again and poured himself a cup of his favorite spiritual tea. He was about to take a sip of his steaming beverage when his half-open eyes suddenly widened, his pupils dilating in terror.

An earthquake of inconceivable force shook the Divine Academy, spilling his precious tea all over his desk. Grigori would usually be extremely distressed if this happened, but this time he didn't even notice. His attention was already elsewhere.

The next second, a dreadful spiritual pressure descended upon the Celestial City and the Divine Academy under his authority and the hitherto relaxed alien burst forth with a sharp aura of overwhelming power.

In a millionth of a second, the childish and lazy principal condensed all sorts of high-level Aether Spells, activating all the defensive formations and measures of his Divine Academy. An artifact resembling a miniature version of the Divine Academy materialized in his hands and began to glow brighter than a star.

A torrent of energy and Aether of a density that even Jake's Grade 10 Energy Core couldn't match radiated from the small alien and his Artifact, merging with the Celestial City's defenses.

"AAAAAAAH!"

With a shout from Grigori, a blast of energy released from his body stabilized the energy shields that were about to give way under the weight of this immense pressure. The alien took the opportunity to scan his surroundings with his mental senses, but when he received the feedback from the latter, all fighting spirit deserted his soul, his face congealing in a mixed expression of acceptance and despair.

Resolute, he gritted his teeth and tried to contact someone via his Oracle Device. He was connected immediately and Aurae's hologram appeared above his overturned desk.

"What's going on Grigori? If it's not urgent, let's talk later." The Ancient Designer grunted in a robotic voice a tad annoyed.

Normally, the alien would have adopted a servile attitude, wallowing in lame excuses, but not this time. Seeing the livid and upset face of his subordinate, Aurae realized that something was wrong and his mood darkened.

"What's going on?" It asked a second time, this time in a solemn voice in which a trace of regret and dull anger lurked.

It already had an inkling of the answer. Was it going to lose another of its loyal subordinates today?

"Another of your Avatars has given in to the Corruption." Grigori reported with a clenched jaw, "It's already too late for me. The space is already sealed."

"Impossible. I just left. I would know if any of my avatars had fallen under the control of the enemy." Aurae refuted this vehemently. "Unless..."

The Ancient Designer's supposedly inexpressive robotic face twitched imperceptibly, and an otherworldly killing intent shot through space to his hologram.

"Hold on. I'm coming right u-"

BOOOOOOOOOOM!

Around Quanoth, the two colossal arms of the "corrupted copy" of Aurae that still held the planet like a balloon suddenly contracted, swelling and tripling in size in the blink of an eye.

The two palms at the origin of this enormous spiritual pressure, until then separated by several hundreds of thousands of kilometers, then moved closer to each other at the speed of light, slamming against each other and generating a dark-as-night shockwave of unparalleled power.

The new planet Quanoth, the Celestial City, the Divine Academy, and all living beings living peacefully on their surfaces were atomized body and soul into a fine mush of particles. Their existences had been erased from the Mirror Universe with a simple "clap."

In the midst of the silence following the passage of this apocalyptic shockwave, Aurae's corrupted avatar, the only survivor within several light years, began to move again. Its

appearance fluctuated and the two lightning suns forming its two upper eyes split, increasing the total number of eyes from six to eight in two vertical rows of four. The color of its light globes changed from a mysterious purple to a silver-white filled with malevolence.

This android was not Aurae, but looked like the second statue carved above the fountain erected not far from the Stele that Jake had stolen. The one that Aurae seemed to be fighting.

Apathetic, its eight eyes scanned the rare debris of the pulverized solar system. Soon, a tiny life signal was picked up by its senses. This tiny life force was as frail and unstable as the flame of a candle tossed by the winds of a thousand hurricanes. It could be snuffed out at any moment.

At that moment, space cracked somewhere over the right shoulder of the huge android and a humanoid figure emerged, floating in the void with even less presence than a specter.

As soon as this figure emerged from the spatial rift, his mental sense scanned the sidereal void and detected the tiny life force.

"Hmm? A survivor." His timbreless voice was audible even in the void, his words reverberating in the cosmos. "It would seem that you are getting old, Syntharae."

As he said this, the veil of black energy blurring his appearance dissipated and a man as perfect as a Greek god statue revealed his beauty to the world. Alas, there was no audience.

However, anyone who believed this individual to be human would be making a grave mistake. His irises were golden, emitting a soft light, his skin was pale, almost translucent, and the blood running through his veins was like molten gold.

As soon as he revealed his appearance, four golden wings 100 meters long spread behind his back as if he had an irrepressible urge to stretch.

"Hmmp. It was just a casual clap." The android named Syntharae snorted in response. It spoke extremely slowly, taking several seconds to speak each word. "Verxes, open your eyes wide. This survivor may be a mess right now, but his Aetheric fluctuations are as vast and unchanging as the tide of the oceans. We've caught a big fish."

This handsome man was the mighty Digestor Seraphim who slaughtered a squad of Oracle Guardians and snatched Nylreg at the end of Jake's third Ordeal! This was too big to be a coincidence.

Verxes glanced at the "survivor" and Grigori's bloodless, broken body appeared clearly in his line of sight. The alien's body drifted amidst the fragments of his Artifact, the frozen time around him keeping his body in an imperishable state.

"My bad. A Rank 4 Oracle Overseer, that's unexpected. That would explain a lot." The Digestor offered an apologetic grin, revealing a set of pearly whites that could cause a maiden's pulse to skip. Alas, such affable demeanor held no sway over the unfeeling android.

Soon after, however, his smile dropped and disappointment clouded his face.

"Unfortunately, it's not the one that devoured my Blood Essence and the spiritual imprint I left on it. We must have missed it by a few seconds. Weird, I was sure I had calculated the timing correctly... Fuck!"

As he spoke his last words, his expression underwent another dramatic change, his eyes widening like Grigori's a moment earlier.

"... She's coming!"

Without hesitation, Vexes rushed into the still-open space rift, and Syntharæ apathetically entered after him after miniaturizing its enormous body to a size smaller than a speck of dust.

Just after their departure, the silent darkness of the shattered solar system turned white and the rare debris and stellar dust that survived Syntharæ's attack was obliterated a second time.

Except that this time, space-time itself had collapsed.

Chapter 924.2: Interlude (part 2)

Several Universes away, Auræ, who was about to execute a long-distance teleportation, suddenly froze. The six lightning suns serving as its eyes dimmed significantly, and the tsunami-like waves of energy radiating from its being suddenly receded.

As improbable as it may seem, the titanic android "frowned."

"Who did this?" The robot snarled with a tinge of frustration and helplessness in its metallic voice. "I had finally managed to breach their defenses and pinpoint the coordinates of Grigori's Divine Academy when I lost them again. I can't even lock my mental sense onto the coordinates of Seed World Z4ZF1367 anymore. It's as if it has literally been erased from the Mirror Universe."

Aurae was no ignorant small Evolver but a venerable Ancient Designer. Faced with this unusual situation, its processor accessed the Oracle System's Archives and sifted through billions of decillions of exaotets of data in less time than it takes a human to blink.

In an instant, it found thousands, millions of occurrences that could correspond to such a phenomenon. The common denominator of all these unusual events was invariant: space-time and Aetherdream had collapsed to a level of degradation beyond Grade 20.

In other words, all Aether Runes and Symbols whose compression level was below Grade 20 had disintegrated, reverting to pure Dream Aether. At such a degree of disintegration, very few things could survive, and the space-time of the Mirror Universe was not one of them.

To make it even easier to understand, one could consider that the Mirror Universe now had a hole somewhere in its body. Between two Mirror Universes, there could be "void," but this void was not the void as we usually describe it.

This void was the infinite Dream Aether in its purest form. The same Dream Aether that the Mirror Universes and Digestors were so fond of. The problem was that this Dream Aether belonged to no one, and it was not so easy to claim.

And the main reason for this was the theoretically infinite density of Dream Aether in these places. Whatever the strength of an Evolver, even an Ancient Designer could only perish if it dared to venture there without precautions. The only known thing that could "swim" in it was the Mirror Universes themselves.

Tacitly, the less-informed experts from various Mirror Universes called these untraversable places Chaotic Space, while the slightly better-informed ones called them Blank Aetherdream.

Confirming the terrible news, Aurae gave up all hope and became calm again. No need to rush anymore. Grigori and all living beings on this umpteenth planet Quanoth were no more.

"A Blank Aetherdream? The Oracle has been decisive this time. I wonder who it sent." Aurae murmured, pinching its enormous chin thoughtfully. "Still, I have to see it with my own eyes to confirm Grigori's death."

That was the least it owed to its loyal subordinate. Even if it had no chance of finding his body, it had to go there in case he had miraculously managed to escape in time.

Projecting its mental sense into the Aetherdream, it locked its attention onto a set of coordinates not too far from the now non-existent Seed World Z4ZF1367 and prepared to teleport. It was about to disappear when a familiar "Beep" from its Oracle Device rang in its mind.

Aurae read the notification from the Oracle System, and its body, which was about to be compressed into a stream of information and energy, immediately solidified. The gigantic android was still expressionless, but this time one could feel the deep emotions that shook it through the flickering of its six eyes.

The message was short, but the news it brought was enough to shake its steel heart and make its circuits overheat:

[An Ancient Designer has fallen in battle. All Rank 5 Oracle Governors or higher personnel are required to join the emergency war council at the Oracle Palace of System A1, Planet A0. Your presence is mandatory, and any personnel absent without a valid excuse will face severe sanctions.]

At that moment, Aurae made the parallel between the destruction of Seed World Z4ZF1367 under its authority and a bad premonition began to creep into its mind. Its instinct as a robot billions of years old whispered to it that these incidents were only the beginning, and that the worst was yet to come.

A new era was about to begin. Would it be the last for their Mirror Universe? Aurae didn't care. In the end, it was just a robot.

A year before the annihilation of Seed World Z4ZF1367 or a few minutes ago for some, a few victorious Players had left the Divine Academy prematurely, choosing not to take advantage of the one-year stay offered by Grigori. Vhoskaud, Ael, Felphi, and Psykow were among them.

One might wonder what the point was in leaving an Ordeal World so early? After all, regardless of the time spent in an Ordeal, didn't all Players emerge from their Red Cubes at the same time? Namely, 8 o'clock in the morning sharp.

Such restrictions did not apply to the powerful and the wealthy. In the Mirror Universe, everything had a price, even the Oracle. It was both fantastic and frightening.

By leveraging its super faction's relationships, Vhoskaud had been able to be projected onto Quanoth hundreds of years before the other Players.

In this way, at 8:16 a.m. of the same day, sixteen minutes after the start of their Fourth Ordeal, two humanoid aliens with pale blue skin and darker blue stripes emerged from a huge Red Cube floating a few inches off the ground in a huge, deserted room.

The alien on the left, half a head taller, was a pleasant-looking man, even for humans, but only the lower part of his face was visible under his hood. His clothes and armor were in tatters, but somehow his hood had been spared.

The alien on the right was a drop-dead gorgeous woman with curves where they should be, and the state of her clothing matched that of her companion, exposing much more skin than modesty and decency allowed. To her great disappointment, the man at her side was totally indifferent to her "attire."

The two Players had barely taken a few steps out of the Red Cube when another similar alien bearing a vague resemblance to the couple teleported in front of them, blocking their way. He wore the same kind of dark hooded mantle as Nullifyer when Jake had first met him.

Smiling, the blue-skinned man greeted them, "Ael and Felphi, you're already back? You're just in time."

Like them, this man was what the Archives of the Oracle System called a Neron God. Neron was their species, but unlike other gods who were born or gained their power by harvesting the thoughts and faith of their followers, they were what one could call a genuine divine race.

By birth, they were immortal and had a unique Divinity within them, a divine body and spirit. Their powers were random and quickly stabilized with their personality. To procreate, Neron Gods mixed their divine essence, ensuring their offspring had the same potential.

Unlike most of the Deities in Lost Divinities, even if no one believed in them they could still develop their divine powers and were not in danger of being "forgotten" to the point of extinction.

Another typical racial trait of their species was that they liked to be called by a common name evoking their divine ability rather than using the usual format "God of Something."

Recognizing the alien before him, Ael, aka the Nullifyer, frowned and quipped,

"Uncle Carbonizer, what are you talking about? We only parted ways a few minutes ago as agreed. I hope the main branch of Lost Divinities didn't lie to you about this secret dimension you want to send us off. A year of free time on Quanoth, let alone in such a Divine Academy, is not so easy to give up..."

"Don't worry, the Omniscient God personally crafted this Divine Realm, and I paid a small fortune to send you and Felphi there." Carbonizer reassured his nephew calmly. "An hour here is equivalent to three years there. Two days there, it's definitely worth it."

Ael and Felphi exchanged a glance and nodded, "Okay then."

The couple pretended to start walking again when Ael noticed that his uncle Carbonizer had not moved.

"Anything else, uncle?" He raised an eyebrow suspiciously.

Carbonizer became serious and disclosed,

"A few minutes before your 4th Ordeal, a meeting was held this morning at the Oracle Senate on our planet, gathering the Oracle Overseers and the most powerful leaders and Evolvers of B836, B839, and B840. The topic was the impending end of B841's diplomatic immunity and to a lesser extent that of B842 in a little less than four years. As you know, the Evolvers and territories of these new agglomerated planets are little Corrupted, and their strength is still lacking. Aether density is also still low, while the Digestor threat remains manageable."

"Tell me what you really want to say." Ael squinted his eyes. When his uncle beat around the bush, it never boded well.

"Maybe you don't know this, but three-quarters of the surface of B836, where we are, is already under Digestor control. The leaders of the most powerful nations and factions on our planet have, therefore, decided to participate in the invasion of B841 and B842. B841 is already a lost cause. Their Oracle Overseer is incompetent, and 90% of their territory has already fallen under Digestor control. Even if we capture and enslave the Evolvers there, we are closer to a rescue mission than a raid.

"However... B842 is more promising. Oros, its Oracle Overseer, gave Jax, the Oracle Overseer of B839, a good lesson not long ago. Jax is a vengeful and grudge-holding individual, but he also knows how to be generous when necessary. Zana, our Overseer, has thus decided to help him invade B842 when his diplomatic immunity expires. Of course, this kind of bribery has no sway over our super factions, but a competent Oracle Overseer and a properly defended planet are much more attractive. For this reason... Local branches of Replicators, Anti-Life, and Lost Divinities have also decided to get involved to relocate their forces. So... Are you interested?"

Ael and Felphi exchanged another surprised look, and the latter spoke up with a delighted smile,

"Isn't this planet the territory of the Myrtharian Nerds? Oya... I can feel the fun already~"

"Myrtharian what?" Carbonizer repeated in a confused tone, opening the interface of his Oracle System. Consulting the Archives, he muttered to himself, "Hmm... This name sounds familiar... Oh yeah, it comes back to me. Their leader has passed his second and third Ordeals and received a recommendation from Oros for Quanoth. He seems promising. Any problem with him or his faction?"

Ael remained silent for a brief moment, then a gleam of anticipation lit up his eyes. He said coldly, "Not really. But I have some advice to give. Don't attack him or his faction. Whatever is promised to you, let Replicators and Anti-Life handle it."

His uncle Carbonizer did not immediately accept but did not refuse either. Even if Lost Divinities was not completely under his orders, he could influence decisions concerning other Neron Gods and his own sub-faction.

Ael never spoke for no reason. If he was willing to say this, it meant he was confident.

"Any reason for this advice?" Carbonizer inquired.

Ael shrugged and replied laconically, "No need to kill each other."

Chapter 925: It's Too Quiet

System ZZ831, Planet B847.

Today, a new planet-ship was about to reach maturity. It was the fifth planet-ship produced since the completion of B842 just a year and some months ago, and that alone should raise alarm bells about the unprecedented threat the Mirror Universe was facing.

To put it in perspective, B841 had been completed 4 years before B842, while B840 and B839 had reached their final form almost at the same time, 5 and 5.5 years ago. The final form of a planet-ship was the moment when all assimilated worlds were completely integrated, forming a completely stable mega-planet.

B840 and B839 had recently lost their diplomatic immunity, but strangely none of the neighboring planets had taken the initiative to invade them. That was because there was nothing to conquer. These two planets had become huge battlefronts almost entirely under Digestor control. The Evolvers who had the misguided greed to invade them often ended up being forcibly conscripted by the two desperate Oracle Overseers.

Therefore, Jax, the Overseer of B839, had not lied to Oros back then. Although the question of whether he had betrayed the Oracle and the Mirror Universe was still relevant, he did indeed need "more time."

His recent craze of bribing powerful factions and Oracle Overseers of neighboring planets to invade B842 had several hidden intentions and was not just a clumsy and childish way to compete with his rival.

However, none of this had to do with the new planet B847. At least, not on the surface. Something much worse was brewing there.

At noon sharp, local time of the Mirror Universe, B847 stopped growing permanently, reaching its final form. To mark its inauguration, an incalculable number of living beings

snatched from their respective universes appeared all over the planet at the same time, sometimes terrified, sometimes excited.

Not all of these beings were created equal.

Some had sturdy bodies and formidable attributes offset by a primitive brain and equipment. Others had superior intelligence and more advanced technology. In contrast, their bodies were fragile, unsuitable for these wild and unexplored lands far from civilization.

A few more evolved species stood out from the rest with both overdeveloped cerebral abilities and powerful physiques with futuristic equipment. These newcomers, far from showing any surprise or panic, had a calm and confident look, albeit tinged with a hint of vigilance and evident concern.

This concern was because they had lost contact with the military bases and Floating Islands that their governments had built on-site to prepare for their arrival.

Somewhere on B847, one of these aliens from a remarkably advanced civilization had just opened his eyes. His physique was impressive.

Humanoid and over 2.70 meters tall, his skin was a dull black, his muscles were bulging and shredded, and a natural black-onyx scale armor covered 90% of his body, leaving only his face, the inside of his forearms, palms, and soles of his feet vulnerable. In addition to having saw-toothed teeth that would make a megalodon jealous, the alien had long spikes along his back and tail, two long dragon-like horns on his forehead, and claws harder than raw diamonds. His inhuman eyes had no sclera, resembling two emotionless black holes.

When this alien gestured or contracted his muscles, an audible metallic creak could be heard for several dozen meters. One could only imagine the strength such muscle fibers could mobilize.

To top it off, a triple pair of membranous wings folded behind his back, each spanning up to 9 meters, completed the picture.

Despite possessing a body that could be considered a natural deadly weapon, the alien had opted not to fight like a wild beast and was heavily equipped: A plasma rifle powered by a nuclear battery in its right hand, a black ovoid shield in its left, and a long black saber at the belt of its heavy combat suit. An arsenal of grenades, ammunition clips, knives, and other devices completed its equipment.

Undoubtedly, this alien was a powerful specimen of its kind and a seasoned soldier.

As soon as it appeared, the alien's luck turned sour, and a pack of Rank 3 Digestors lurking nearby pounced on it. One, two, three... 38 Rank 3 Digestors with the appearance of giant praying mantises the size and weight of an elephant.

If Jake had fallen into such an ambush back then, he would have been torn to shreds before he even knew where he had landed. Panic and terror would likely have caused him to lose his cool, and only a miracle could have saved him.

If an Evolver like Jake, armed and relatively athletic upon arrival on B842, had no chance, then it was the same for 99% of humanity and other ordinary races. On this point alone, unless this alien was terribly unlucky, one could already sense that the situation on B847 was abnormal.

Seeing all these insectoid monsters rushing towards it, the alien admirably did not panic and, pointing its plasma rifle at the enemy, opened fire, spraying them with incandescent bullets with surgical precision.

Tatatatatatatatatatatatatatatataattatatataata!

The firing rate of the rifle was just prodigious, and less than two seconds later, the alien ceased firing and lowered its weapon, the barrel red-hot and smoking. Activating some kind of earpiece, it dialed a series of numbers on its electronic watch as if making a phone call.

The soldier waited for several long minutes and then tried again. At that moment, the previously serene alien became solemn.

At that moment, it had just tried to contact the nearest base that its species had established in advance on this planet to welcome them. Its electronic watch was incredibly advanced, able to make calls over distances spanning several hundred light-years.

Even if the nearest base was out of range, thanks to its Oracle Device, it could have at least contacted it using an Oracle Shelter as a relay antenna. It would have cost it a certain amount of Aether, but its people were not a superior species for nothing. Each of its kind carried several million points of Aether on them.

With Plan A having failed, the alien remained calm and went straight to Plan B. A superior species like its own never put all its eggs in one basket. Being lucky enough to appear at the top of a hill, it searched for a characteristic blue light pillar serving as a rallying point for new Evolvers that had just appeared in the vicinity.

But soon its mood deteriorated.

"No light? So no Instructors..." the alien realized grimly.

Plan C then.

Dialing another number on its watch, it released a kind of sonar around it, revealing vital signatures that could correspond to other sentient species.

Comparing them to its database and with the help of its Oracle AI, it smiled upon detecting several of its kind among them. Then its face immediately turned ugly, becoming livid.

These vital signatures were extinguishing one after the other at an alarming rate. In contrast, another kind of vital signature that did not appear on its radar, but that it could smell and hear approaching rapidly, was multiplying.

"Digestors? How can there be so many?" the alien muttered lowly, increasingly worried.

Harvesting and absorbing the Aether from the defeated Digestors, the alien disregarded their valuable carcasses and activated the invisibility of his combat suit. Then, contracting his powerful leg muscles, he sprinted towards the nearest Oracle Shelter at the speed of a race car.

As he descended the hill, he caught a glimpse of another of his kin armed to the teeth trying to escape by air.

Covered in blue blood, the alien quickly climbed a tree in a few bounds, anxiously spread his wings, and leapt over eight meters into the air. He seemed well on his way to take off, but before he could flap his wings, dozens of silver lianas, faster than a sniper bullet, shot out from the canopy below and impaled him from top to bottom, one piercing him through the groin and exiting through the top of his skull.

Reflexively, the soldier squeezed the trigger of his plasma rifle, and a spray of blue blood accompanied by blaster fire rained down from the sky, forming a gruesome bi-colored fireworks display.

Watching from below, the first alien congratulated himself for not trying to fly, thinking it would save him time. He was a seasoned warrior, and with his invisibility, strength, equipment, and experience, he managed to navigate and orient himself in this hostile environment, traversing a tropical forest, a tundra covered in dry ice, and then a savanna teeming with Digestors.

When the veteran alien finally arrived at the location of the nearest Oracle Shelter, he was covered in blue and silver blood, his and his enemies'. Despite his sturdy constitution and vitality, he could barely stand.

Exhausted and lifeless, the alien limped until he touched an invisible wall marking the entrance to a canyon. It was the Black Cube camouflaging the Oracle Shelter.

Shrrriiii!

Hearing the shrill cries approaching rapidly, the alien paid the Aether fee without hesitation, then entered the Black Cube without looking back. Once on the other side, relief washed over him as he collapsed to the ground.

The alien was ready to coma for a few hours to regain his strength when suddenly his scales bristled.

"It's too quiet."

Chapter 926: All Dead

Several minutes later, in the outer space high orbit of B847, a steel island the size of Australia silently drifted billions of kilometers above the planet's surface. This Floating Island belonged to a certain extraterrestrial race, or more precisely, to their planetary government.

To own a Floating Island of such magnitude while B847 had just inaugurated its final form was no small feat. In comparison, the New Earth island was still only the size of England. This spoke volumes about the immense potential of this civilization.

But at this moment, besides the reigning silence, something was amiss regarding this large Floating Island: the absence of light and shield.

Such an island had to be constantly protected by a powerful energy shield to intercept celestial bodies and cosmic debris wandering through space at dozens of kilometers per second. Even a simple rock could cause serious damage to the infrastructure and environment if it collided with the ground.

Besides these cosmic threats with a certain destructive potential but relatively rare, this energy shield generated by every Floating Island was also necessary to isolate the island from a much more tangible danger: Space Digestors.

At this precise moment, this essential energy shield was deactivated, while the cities and landscapes on the surface of this Floating Island were completely exposed. Because no force was holding the atmosphere of the island anymore, it had started to leak out, forming a barely visible comet trail in the wake of the drifting island.

Despite all these anomalies, there was movement on its surface. A lot of movement.

When this unhealthy darkness and silence seemed destined to endure, a faint yellow light flashed several times at a certain location on the island: the top of a ruined

skyscraper. The things swarming on its surface screamed shrill cries of excitement, stretching their silvered scythes to try to grab what had just been ejected.

A blue-blooded alien missing its right arm crashed to the ground, rolling several times before struggling to get up. It was the same brave soldier who had appeared on the surface of B847 a little earlier.

At that moment, his calm and confident demeanor had long since disappeared. The alien was exhausted, and his gaze was wild with despair.

It hadn't been easy for him to survive until now. Crossing an entire Oracle Shelter crowded with Digestors, then entering its Oracle City and climbing the skyscraper to touch the Yellow Cube at its summit.

Without his equipment allowing him to become almost invisible, his experience, and his superhuman strength, he would have failed halfway. Even with all his assets, he had lost an arm and ended up on the brink of death. Thanks to the real-time analysis of his bracelet, he knew he didn't have much longer to live.

His body was saturated with various poisons, he had lost more than 80% of his blood, drank too much Digester Blood, and absorbed too much Digester Aether directly to have a chance of survival. Assuming he survived, the Corruption and pieces of Digester souls he had assimilated without any filter had already critically damaged his consciousness.

An ordinary human would have long since gone mad, a vulgar beast thirsty for blood, but this alien could still formulate coherent thoughts. Despite his desperate condition, he had not yet given up on life.

Until now.

The Floating Island he had so desperately tried to reach belonged to his people. He had already sensed it by receiving no response to his attempts at communication, but it was one thing to suspect it and another to confirm it with his own eyes.

Looking around him, his eyes widened in horror, and the tension rising aggravated his wounds, making him spit out phlegm of blood. He fell to his knees.

Surrounding him...there were only Digestors. Billions of them. As far as his sight could extend, these nightmarish creatures covered every inch of land and building constructed by his species.

Upon witnessing this sight straight out of an apocalypse film and what he had faced since arriving on B847, the alien accepted the harsh truth. The Krynnis race was no more.

As the Digestors approached him with interest, the alien felt no fear and was even ready to let himself die. On this island was his wife and children. He had no reason to live anymore.

He closed his eyes.

When he was on the verge of being devoured without defending himself, a sudden thought crossed his mind. His eyes opened in a start.

"No, there is still a slim hope. The Oracle Capital of B847!"

It was the last bastion of the planet. The floating island where the Oracle Palace and Senate of the planet were located. If the Oracle Overseer and the Oracle Guardians assigned to the planet were not on a mission or in their spaceship, then that was where they were most likely to be found.

"RAAAAAAGGH! Scram!"

Letting out a roar of rage containing all his resentment and hatred towards these monsters, he threw his last grenades in front of him to make a path and opened fire without restraint. The nuclear battery had been able to recharge his rifle a little during his few seconds of respite.

Only a few meters separated him from the Yellow Cube covered with Digestors busy devouring the Aether irradiating from its surface, but this distance was like a chasm wider than the universe. When he managed to touch the Yellow Cube by some miracle, he had lost both his legs and half of his left hip.

His body covered in Digestors was teleported away, and the silver creatures, thinking they were about to enjoy a good meal, fell to the ground pitifully.

Bam!

The alien reappeared in mid-air at the top of another, much more majestic skyscraper and collapsed to the ground. His vision was blurry, and he was ready to be attacked at any moment. But as he tried to put his intestines back in place, gritting his teeth to endure the excruciating pain taking his breath away, he received a familiar notification.

"Serious injuries detected. Oracle Green Cube nearby. Do you want to be teleported to it and receive emergency treatment? The cost of the procedure is estimated at 2*****."

"Cough, cough! Fuck..."

Coughing up another burst of blood, the alien was still lucid enough to realize that even with the millions of Aether points on him, it was far from enough to pay for such treatment. Despite this, he clicked yes anyway.

"Fix what you can. At worst, I'll contract a debt." That was his only thought to live a little longer.

A few minutes later, he crawled out of a gigantic Green Cube. His body had aged several decades, and he was completely naked. All his wealth, from his longevity, his equipment to his Aether, had been requisitioned to finance his treatment.

The Corruption and his altered consciousness could not be cured, but at least he was no longer in danger of death. Opening his tired eyes, he looked around to see where he was.

His blood froze, but not for the same reasons as before.

In this Oracle Capital, there was not a single Digestor's shadow. Only corpses. A lot of corpses.

The thing was, these were not just any corpses. Among the hundreds of thousands of bodies lying around him, a few thousand had four arms, some had six, and they wore futuristic armor with an opaque visor helmet resembling black liquid mercury.

Oracle Guardians. All dead.

But it wasn't the shocking scene of macabre carnage that shook the hardened alien to his core. These corpses had no visible wounds, and their armor remained pristine.

Worse yet, when the curious alien removed the helmet of one of the Oracle Guardians, he found the deceased's face to be peaceful and serene. He even appeared to be in good spirits.

Whatever or whomever had massacred them had ripped out or annihilated their souls in one fell swoop. But their killer had not devoured or harvested the bodies, which ruled out a mere Digestor invasion.

The exhausted alien had already forgotten the unjust extermination of his people. He wanted to understand what had happened. His soldier's mentality took over, and he forced himself to traverse the picturesque battlefield where the dead, clad in shining armor, seemed merely asleep. Every time he breathed a little too heavily, he would hallucinate that they all woke up simultaneously to shout "Boooo!" at him.

Of course, nothing of the sort happened. The alien limped across the battlefield for a long time until he reached a certain place: the Oracle Palace. Three unique and vastly

different aliens from the rest stood there, still as statues. Even in death, they emitted brilliant waves of Aether visible to the naked eye.

They too had been killed in one blow. His instinct told him that these Evolvers were entities superior to mere Oracle Guardians. Perhaps Oracle Overseers or powerful Players/Evolvers who had come to attend the inauguration of B847?

He would never get the chance to ponder this question.

As soon as this thought emerged in his mind, an event that was extremely common in the Mirror Universe but much less so in an Oracle City, let alone an Oracle Capital, occurred.

A Digestor spawned.

Chapter 927.1: There Is Fate Between Us (part 1)

It was only possible because the defense systems of the massive Floating Island had long been deactivated.

The Digestor could have spawned anywhere, but chance had it that it was born precisely at the junction where the Aether waves emitted by these three powerful Evolvers intersected.

An amorphous mass, silver and partially translucent, trickled down from an invisible singularity about a meter off the ground and streamed out into a long, sticky stem that stretched out to plop to the ground. A puddle resembling a large drop of water contaminated with heavy metals spread quickly, then suddenly condensed, manifesting all the embryonic stages of an alien fetus in fast forward.

Less than a second later, a vaguely humanoid, genderless, and faceless creature appeared before the stunned survivor of the Krynnis race. This abomination was no bigger than a tamarin and had no fangs or teeth to harm him. It only reached him at mid-calf, yet the alien was overcome with a cold shiver of horror that made his hair stand on end.

"N'rakth, by the void of space, what the skrell is this?" The Krynnis alien blurted out, losing his composure for the first time.

His bracelet told him that this thing was indeed a Rank 0 Digestor, but his soldier's instinct, honed by years of risking his life, urged him to flee as fast as his legs could carry him!

As if awakening to the fact that the involuntary cry of the Evolver was meant for him, the newborn Digestor tilted its head adorably in his direction. If it were a Krynnis toddler or a pet, this cuteness might have touched him.

"Shrri?"

Sadly, not this time. When this harmless-looking, tiny Digestor fixed its attention on him and let out a small, piercing cry of inquiry, the alien, who prided himself on having unshakeable composure, felt his resolve crumble as a warm stream of liquid betrayed his unsteady nerves and flooded his suit.

He had just peed himself.

This realization shocked the alien even more than the deaths of all those Oracle Guardians and his people. His mind had not yet grasped the horror of the thing standing a few meters away from him, but his body was much more honest.

At that moment, his mind was in a dilemma.

'What am I supposed to do in this situation? Run away?'

His reptilian brain was insisting that he escape from here as fast as possible, but the rational and lucid part of his gray matter was vociferously telling him not to move a muscle. Torn between his two urgent impulses, the veteran soldier found himself frozen in place, ultimately favoring the second option.

In reality, he was just in a state of shock. Like a mouse ceasing to struggle after being cornered by a cat, fear had paralyzed his limbs. His mind was perfectly alert and awake, but his body no longer obeyed him.

This instinct saved him. Temporarily. After a few seconds, the Rank 0 Digestor lost interest in him and finally noticed the three dead Evolvers standing in a triangle around him.

The moment the limited-intelligence, silver creature laid its eyes upon them, a thunderous surge of rapture reverberated through its cells.

Food! Eat them!

If its cells could speak, that's what they would have said.

To a newborn Digestor, these three Evolver corpses were the epitome of culinary perfection - a succulent feast that promised to sate its insatiable hunger, imbuing it with power and vitality. The corpses hummed with an irresistible energy, their very essence pulsing with an otherworldly force that drew the baby Digestor in like a moth to a flame.

Disregarding the Krynnis alien completely, the Rank 0 Digestor lunged forward like a newborn human, testing its unsteady legs as it made its way towards one of the three glowing corpses that shone like stars through the haze of its Aether Sight.

"Shrrri!!!"

As the Rank 0 Digestor approached the towering Evolver corpse, its body hummed with anticipation, and its once featureless face split open to reveal a small, razor-sharp maw. With a twitch of its jaw, the creature tested its newfound ability to chew, the movement fluid and instinctual. In an instant, delicate, translucent teeth sprouted from its gums like blooming flowers, reminiscent of the sharp, efficient dentition of a dolphin.

Feeling properly armed to enjoy its first meal, the alien opened its mouth wide. Much too wide.

The Krynnis soldier, who had already thought he had witnessed the worst atrocities imaginable, was utterly unprepared for the sight that greeted him. As he watched the small, seemingly harmless head of the Digestor expand and stretch, the gaping maw now spanning over thirty centimeters, a wave of paralyzing terror surged through him, threatening to buckle his knees and send him reeling to the ground.

With an excited and impatient snap of its jaws, the little Digestor bit down on the tibia of its prey.

CLANG!

Its teeth and jaw broke immediately. To even entertain the notion of taking a bite out of an entity as formidable as an Oracle Overseer, let alone its impenetrable armor, was the height of madness.

Yet, faced with this failure and searing pain, the creature displayed no panic or dissatisfaction. Quite the contrary.

"Shriiii!!!"

Giving up on using its teeth, it scrambled up the corpse of its prey like an agile chimpanzee. Then, a long, translucent tongue very "human-like" pointed out of its mouth, and like a kitten in front of its bowl of milk, it began to lick the exposed face of its prey.

Slurp!

One lick was enough.

Like all those Digestors clinging like leeches to the Oracle Cubes to extract the Aether emitted by their Aether Cores, the rest of the small Digestor's body also pressed against

its prey's face as if trying to merge with it. Its translucent body quickly inflated like a balloon, and a bright silver light shone from its entrails.

"Shrrri!"

Pop!

Just before it exploded, the body of the Rank 0 Digestor detached automatically and fell to the ground as an amorphous mass in full mutation.

Chapter 928.2: There Is Fate Between Us (part 2)

The surviving Krynnis saw this as the signal he was waiting for to escape, but he had barely managed to convince his body to take half a step when his eyes widened in astonishment.

The evolution of the newborn Digestor was already complete. A humanoid child of about ten or twelve years old, with short white hair, and two silver eyes stood up calmly. The light in its eyes no longer seemed so foolish, and although its instincts as a brainless predator were still there, they were suppressed by a certain degree of wisdom and self-control.

"Is this really just a Rank 1 Digestor?" The Krynnis warrior swallowed with difficulty. Nothing he had experienced today came close to the level of absurdity of the scene unfolding before his eyes.

As if he could read his thoughts, the now Rank 1 Digestor looked at him disinterestedly and with a slight disdain, then pressed its two hands on the faces of the two "prey" it had not yet tasted. A low-level spiritual pressure radiated from the child, and under the influence of an intangible force, the easily accessible fluids contained in the bodies of its two new targets - namely saliva, tears, gastric juices, and the blood of some vulnerable capillaries - were painfully extracted from them, then inhaled in one gulp.

The scene played out once more, unfolding in a slow and dramatic spectacle. The child's form ballooned grotesquely, illuminating with a fierce radiance, only to collapse and crumble into a formless heap of biomass. The Krynnis soldier stood rooted to the spot, having learned from experience that there was no fleeing the inevitable.

However, as he witnessed a humanoid Digestor, as tall as a grown man, gradually taking shape, he was struck by its growing aura, and a resolute thought emerged in his mind.

"I must inform the rest of the Mirror Universe of what's happening here."

It was his soldier's instinct, and convinced he would not survive, he decided to risk everything. This time, he overcame his paralyzing fear and managed to move.

"I can do i-"

Suddenly, a pillar of white light shot up from the ground beneath his feet, and a two-meter-diameter laser heated the air to billions of degrees Celsius, obliterating and atomizing his body to the last atom.

He was dead, just like that.

After the Krynnis warrior's eradication, whose presence here was an unfortunate string of bad luck, a man with long white hair in black robes appeared in his place and calmly walked towards the newborn Digestor. His hands were clasped behind his back, giving him the poise of an expert.

His aura far surpassed that of the three dead corpses, and an infinite vicissitude seemed to emanate from him. This mysterious and powerful individual was the Oracle Overseer of B847 and a traitor of the Mirror Universe who had long since joined the Digestors' camp.

He was responsible for everything that had transpired here. However, everything had not gone exactly as he had initially planned.

For instance, this newborn and voracious Digestor. Upon seeing it, his interest was piqued, and his eyes filled with malice lit up.

"Hmm? A Digestor spawned in my Oracle Palace? That shouldn't have happened. What to do..." The man monologued aloud, disregarding the ravenous gaze the precocious Rank 2 Digestor was giving him.

Sensing that this powerful stranger was not someone he could defeat at his level, the Rank 2 Digestor realized that his all-you-can-eat buffet was about to be taken away from him. Like a shipwreck survivor clinging to his life buoy with all his might, he immediately resumed devouring the three precious corpses, this time as if his life depended on it.

Fascinated and speechless, the Oracle Overseer of B847 momentarily forgot to think and simply observed him with curiosity. Until he remembered that these three corpses were his precious trophies. With a wave of his hand, he telekinetically separated the Rank 2 Digestor from his meal and, after a brief hesitation, said,

"Rahh, too bad. There must be fate between us. For now, I'll spare you, little one. However, you have no business here. Join your peers and become worthy of this feast. I will follow your adventures closely. Since you owe me your life, I suppose I should also give you a name worthy of it. Hmm... You have tasted the flesh of Clayneth, Kolrath,

and Dancrest. Okay, I've decided. From now on, you shall answer to the name Clayn Koldan."

"Clayn... Koldan?" The Rank 2 Digestor repeated in a hoarse voice, struggling to articulate.

Ignoring whether he appreciated his new name or not, with a snap of his fingers, the man tore through space and the little Digestor was sucked inside, teleported far away, somewhere on B847. In the blink of an eye, he reappeared in the midst of a barren plain, surrounded by millions of other Digestors like him, ranging from Rank 0 to 4.

Clayn had barely had time to comprehend where he had landed when the air tore open again, revealing an enormous black spatial rift before the disharmonious horde of monsters that had been hastily assembled.

A psychic shockwave of extreme violence burst forth from the rift, and an impossible-to-disobey telepathic command emerged in their limited cognitive faculties. The disorganized and agitated horde of Digestors ceased their bickering and rushed towards the gaping spatial tear as one.

The young Rank 2 humanoid Digestor didn't want to obey. He wanted to stay here and grow in peace. But carried away by the crowd of his kin, he had no choice but to follow and disappear into the rift.

A few minutes later, after the entire horde of Digestors had been swallowed up, the spatial rift closed, and silence returned to the plain. At that very moment, an innocent world that had until then been spared the scourge of the Digestors was on the brink of facing the same apocalyptic invasion that billions of universes had confronted before it.

As for the future Digestor calamity named Clayn Koldan, his story was only just beginning.

Chapter 929: Welcome Back

[Dungeon Digestor Nexus: The Nexus of a freshly captured Rank 15 Dungeon Digestor. Cost: 3010 credits.]

Jake seethed with anger and disbelief at the description of the first item. 3010 credits? Who was the Oracle kidding?

Not a single credit less, nor a single credit more. it was the exact amount he had before he started squandering them away.

A Dungeon Digestor Nexus was a hot potato that not all Evolvers could hold onto for long without burning their fingers. However, for those with a strong enough backbone, it was a veritable treasure trove and an unending fountain of riches.

Hosting a Dungeon Digestor on one's territory, even without its consciousness, did not remove its Corruption and nature. It was a living, breathing entity that refused to be tamed or controlled.

But the allure of these Dungeons was a siren's call that no faction or nation of Evolvers could resist. In addition to providing a controlled environment for honing their troops, it was also a source of Aether Artefacts, Aether Skills, materials, ingredients, and even bloodlines.

All adventurers dying inside would become food for the Dungeon Digestor, but would also enrich its database. An almost extinct bloodline could become a commodity again thanks to these Dungeons which birthed new Digestors in their image from the flesh and blood of their victims.

Unlike a wild Digestor Dungeon, the Nexus could be parameterized and influenced to some extent. For example, the Dungeon Digestor could be set to absorb only the bodies and a tiny portion of the spiritual energy and memories of its victims, thus ensuring the survival of dungeon explorers.

The Nexus could even be completely enslaved by a powerful enough Evolver and become the equivalent of an Oracle Pet or Slave. In this context, the troops produced by the dungeon could even be mobilized to fight other Digestors if their owner's territory were invaded.

Of course, this was still a Rank 15 Digestor. Even with its mind obliterated, its theoretical stats remained monstrous. Sooner or later, the Nexus would generate a new hybrid consciousness generated from adventurers exploring its depths, or one of the created Digestors would eventually take control of the Nexus and merge with it.

Therefore, only a powerful and cautious Evolver could assume the responsibility of such a time bomb. However, if these risks were managed and the resulting Corruption carefully monitored, it was possible to reap considerable profits from a Dungeon Digestor for at least a few thousand years without notable consequences on the surrounding population.

Unfortunately, all these promises of wealth that the VIP Ordeal Store was dangling in front of Jake had already slipped through his fingers. In the end, Jake didn't buy anything else.

Except for this Nexus, there were other remarkable items at more affordable prices that he could actually afford to buy, such as:

[Oracle Guardian (android) Model TX138: An android designed by Ancient Designer Eona-12 to compensate for the exponential decline in Oracle Guardians of the Mirror Universe over the past few million years. Powered by a Grade 6 Aether Core and a mini black hole, this android has the combat power of an average 8th-Ordeal Evolver. Cost: 580 credits.]

Coincidentally, the cost of the robot was the exact sum of credits Jake had left in his pocket, and that was precisely why he had decided not to buy anything after careful consideration. On the surface, such a robot seemed incredible, but it was subject to the condition that he could quickly find a use for it.

B842's diplomatic immunity was not over, his Floating Island was not under attack or invasion, and Jake was almost certain that he could buy these special troops in the Oracle Store now that he had the privileges of an Oracle Knight.

[I confirm. The Oracle Store also has a dedicated section for Oracle Nobles.] Xi murmured approvingly in his mind. [It's much more expensive in the Oracle Store than here, but it's still within your means.]

"So that's settled." Jake declared with a determined tone, officially ending their shopping session.

Jake closed the Ordeal Store interface for good and waited patiently in the darkness for the Red Cube's mercy to release him. It wasn't his first time, and chatting with Xi and occasionally Jeanie made the time pass quickly.

Trash was almost silent out of shyness, but he seemed to get along with the little fairy. He spent most of his time in Jake's Spirit Dimension when he couldn't wander outside.

A few hours later, light appeared in his field of vision, and he was finally able to make his way to the exit. With the poise and grace of a triumphant hero, he emerged from the Red Cube's chamber, his expression as calm as still waters and his gaze cold.

After his eyes adjusted to the sudden change in brightness, Jake noticed the presence of his many companions. Not just those who had survived with him until the end, but all the Myrtharian Nerds who had participated in the Ordeal on Quanoth with them.

For most, it had only been a few hours since they last saw each other, as the time spent in the Red Cube was roughly the same regardless of when they died or were disqualified during the Ordeal.

Ironically, it was the other finalists who hadn't seen Jake in a long time. When they had parted to train in their respective Buildings, Jake had not left his residence once in the past year.

As Jake appeared before them, his presence was a magnet that pulled the gaze of his peers towards him. The beautiful eyes of some, such as Lucia, Esya, or Aisling, lit up, but others, like Will, Hade, and Asfrid, displayed very professional facades. However, most of the Myrtharian Nerds who had died prematurely displayed shocked expressions, clearly struggling to recognize some of them, including their leader.

Even Asfrid and Hade, who had been eliminated during the final battle, had a hard time recognizing Jake at first glance. Almost everything had changed, from his aura, appearance, to his hair color. The most astonishing thing was the beautiful translucent fairy wings with different shades of blue folded behind his back.

"Jake?" Vincent and Kevin, his two cousins, blurted out at the same time.

Why were they getting goosebumps looking at him? It was as if they were facing their nemesis or some invincible predator.

Vincent had been captured by Lost Divinities and probably killed a few hours or days later, while Kevin had died during the final battle without anyone noticing. The forgettable fate of two minor characters.

"The one and only." Jake replied flatly, looking at his two cousins with a sense of pity, knowing they were not destined for a leading role in this grand drama.

Having confirmed his identity, Hade walked calmly towards him and immediately apologized.

"Sorry I couldn't fight with you until the end. I hope my absence didn't cause you any harm." The former Fluid Grandmaster sighed with a trace of regret in his voice. "It won't happen again."

Jake keenly observed Hade's countenance, noting the telltale signs of self-blame such as the tautness of his jaw and the constriction in his throat. With his experience and age, he had shown an excess of confidence during this Ordeal. If only he had dedicated himself more ardently to training, the result would have surely been different.

"Don't blame yourself too much." Jake comforted him, patting his shoulders. "We won, but believe me, even if you had survived until the end, the result could have been even worse."

Hade raised an intrigued eyebrow towards Asfrid, who put on a stiff smile.

"I'll explain everything later," Will sighed, adjusting his glasses on his nose.

Seeing Asfrid's forced grimace, Enya, who was hugging her sister, suddenly stiffened as she remembered something. Like a guilty puppy with its tail between its legs after

making a big mistake, she anxiously walked towards the Eltarian leader and prostrated herself on the ground.

"Asfrid, forgive me! If you want to immolate me alive or demand financial compensation, I'll let you do it!" Enya declared through gritted teeth, her eyes downcast.

Asfrid didn't really hold much of a grudge against the blue-algae-haired Nereid, but seeing this heart-wrenching and embarrassing apology, any lingering resentment instantly dissipated. She lifted the remorseful young woman up with a telekinetic gesture, cleared her throat, and played it down.

"Ahem, I accept your apology. But know that I don't blame you. It wasn't your fault, it was Psykow's. If you really want to take responsibility, then in that case, I also have a share of responsibility for having perished by your hand. Considering the fact that I am the psychic expert of our faction and couldn't do anything to stop Psykow, one could even say that my share of responsibility is greater than yours in this fiasco."

"Asfrid is right," Jake commented coldly. "Have you forgotten that the last time we met, Enya, you subconsciously feared me? Before resurrecting you with Aurum's Oracle Heal, I mutilated several of you. You and Lucia included. I wasn't immune to Psykow's spell either. However, I was strong enough to survive until the end, and so were you. In the next Ordeal, the plain truth is that Asfrid would definitely be dead, but you would be alive."

At that moment, Jake turned to the other Myrtharian Nerds, intensely scrutinizing each of them, and added, "This goes for each and every one of you. You don't know how this Ordeal ended, but I can tell you. Out of the more than 2700 Myrtharian Nerds who joined this Ordeal, we were no more than 20 at the very end. Everyone else died. Meditate on this fact and draw your own lessons and conclusions.

"On that note... Welcome back."