

# The Oracle Paths

## - Chapter 930: Silver Platter |

### Chapter 930: Silver Platter

The mood of the Myrtharian Nerds plummeted drastically after their leader's speech. With the majority of those who perished during the Ordeal, the overall atmosphere had become considerably darker, almost funereal.

This kind of ambiance was not ideal for catching up and discussing. Several winners of the Ordeal, such as Aurum and Hephais, had been staring at Will for a while, raising their eyebrows as if they were trying to convey a silent message.

The merchant had long noticed the insistent looks from several of his companions, but due to the inappropriate atmosphere, he didn't know how to approach the topic. When Will finally mustered the courage to clear his throat and gain some time, someone saved him from his predicament.

"Ahem-"

"What the fuck! My Myrtharian Body Passive is gone!" A Myrtharian Nerd suddenly exclaimed, scrolling through the interface listing his Faction Skills.

Since his return, this Player had felt weaker than he should be. He no longer felt the usual hot and cold sensations, but upon exiting the Red Cube, he had felt the caress of the fresh air in this vast, hyper-ventilated room.

Obviously, this kind of air conditioning couldn't make someone shiver, let alone make a post Fourth-Ordeal Player sick. However, the fact that he could sense the air was colder than usual was unusual enough to be noted.

Evolvers at his level had superhuman perception, and their instincts were as sharp as the edge of a blade. Sensing something was amiss, he quickly traced the source and discovered that his stats were once again being calculated with a standard coefficient.

Now that someone had mentioned it, other Myrtharian Nerds soon reacted.

"Hmm, he's right! My hair has returned to its original brown!" Another Player exclaimed.

"Idiot, there's something more obvious than hair color, tsk. Even my short, translucent claws have turned back into ordinary nails..."

"Nooooooo!"

The howl of anguish ripped through the air, piercing the silence like a knife. It came from a cute Myrmidian woman, her attire and makeup rivaling that of any pop icon or club diva. She was one of the many who had effortlessly embraced the futuristic technology and beauty enhancements that were nonexistent in her former life, such as fake nails.

But once those glossy tips were clipped, the lady's existential crisis unfolded, as her newly shortened nails seemed to be an insult to her former self, reminiscent of a faded glory that could never be regained.

Her case was obviously extreme, but other Players were also disappointed with their appearance changes, while others welcomed the return to normal.

"My fair white skin is back," The Throsgenian warrior exclaimed, his voice filled with a euphoria that made him seem like he had just won the lottery.

While his friend complained, "Fair skin is good, but I feel like I've lost some muscle too," as he stared at himself in a pocket mirror with a feminine delicacy that clashed with his brutish appearance.

Suddenly, a slap landed on the back of the second Throsgenian's head, causing his mirror to crash onto the ground and shatter into a million pieces. Yet, no one flinched at the sound, as if it were just the shattering of glass and not a reflection of their own fragile egos. The victim of the slap snarled and bared his fangs, his primal instincts taking over in an instant.

Witnessing all these reactions and comments, Will massaged his forehead to relieve his budding headache but also sighed with relief. Turning to Jake, he asked embarrassingly,

"Jake, about the missing Faction Skill... When do you plan to take care of it?"

He dared not mention that he and Lucia, along with the other victorious Players, had raised this issue in the Faction Chat more than a year ago. But their leader, too focused on his training, was oblivious to it. They could have reached out to him through his Oracle Device, but they lacked the gumption to do so, fearing to disturb his concentration.

Jake felt an immediate pang of guilt, realizing his negligence and irresponsibility. However, his companions were also culpable for not reminding him of the matter earlier. In this regard, they all shared the blame.

Yet, this was neither the place nor the time to resolve the issue of which Faction Skill to choose. Besides, Players from other factions were continuously streaming out of the Red Cube, filling up the spacious room. Will and the others had also noticed the problem, and with a silent accord, Hade suggested,

"Shall we postpone this discussion for later?"

"Sure..."

The 2,700-odd Myrtharian Nerds who were blocking the way orderly moved towards the exit, but as they were about to pass through the automated door, Jake found himself face to face with an unknown and intimidating alien.

Four meters tall, four arms, a silver-metallic armor adorned with lines and patterns emitting a faint blue light, a helmet reminiscent of the Greek phalanx, but with a completely opaque visor...

Jake's and several other Myrtharian Nerds' eyes widened in astonishment, as if they had just been hit by a bucket of ice in the middle of a nap.

An Oracle Guardian!

What kind of cosmic coincidence was this? And why was he barring their path like a boulder in a river?

As the regiment of 2,700 players came to a screeching halt, the alien before them remained impassive, scanning each of them with a steely gaze before finally fixing on the striking figure of Jake Wilderth, with his flowing black hair, fairy wings, and unearthly complexion.

"Jake Wilderth?" the Oracle Guardian rasped in a cold, deep voice, confirming his identity.

Jake's eyes narrowed at the sound of his full name, but he remained cool and composed.

"Is there something you want from me?" He inquired calmly.

Instead of answering his question, the Oracle Guardian immediately began reciting the short message he had been charged with delivering, in a monotone voice with an Oraclean accent as sharp as a knife.

"His Highness, Oracle Overseer Oros, will hold a ceremony, as he does every week, at his Oracle Palace in Thelma to congratulate and canonize the new Oracle Knights, but also to inform them of their future privileges and duties. As a new Oracle Knight, you and up to three of your chosen subordinates are invited to this ceremony. Because His Highness is a devout practitioner of sleeping in, ahem... I mean meditative contemplation, the ceremony will be held tomorrow at 3 p.m. End of message."

Jake and the others remained silent.

What kind of Oracle Overseer whose Aether Constitution and Vitality were likely in the millions still needed to sleep this late? It was clearly an excuse to work less.

Jake had no problem with this ceremony. It seemed a bit excessive to be congratulated by the Oracle Overseer in person for a mere noble title, but in retrospect, it was understandable.

Even though thousands, if not millions, of fourth Ordeals were held every day on B847, the number of Oracle Knights promoted during them must be ridiculously low. After all, to become an Oracle Knight, Jake had aced his last three Ordeals, including his Fourth, which gathered the elites of an entire system.

One could argue that it was not necessary to have such an impeccable performance to obtain such a title, but since only his name had been mentioned by the Oracle Guardian, there was no doubt that these titles were not distributed lightly.

Otherwise, Lucia, Gerulf, and the other Quanoth winners who had also performed excellently in their previous four Ordeals would have been promoted as well.

After a short pause, Jake calmly replied, "I'll be there."

"..."

Time passed, but the Oracle Guardian did not move, making the situation awkward for everyone. It should not be forgotten that because of this alien, they were still blocking the exit.

"Cough, anything else?" Jake cleared his throat loudly to snap him out of his daze.

"I'm not daydreaming," the Oracle Guardian snorted disdainfully. Unexpectedly, he was perfectly awake. He had simply chosen to stand still deliberately.

'Now, that's awkward,' Jake lamented inwardly.

Trying to remain polite, he inquired cautiously, "In that case... may I know if we can leave?"

"Hmm? All right."

The Oracle Guardian stepped aside from their path, and at that moment, Jake and the others noticed the three androids that strongly resembled him, both in appearance and equipment. For the other Myrtharian Nerds, it was their first contact with this technology, but Jake immediately put a name to these robots: Model TX138.

He had just heard about them in the VIP Ordeal Store! Who would have thought he would encounter them so soon? When it came to the Oracle, Jake no longer believed in coincidences, and he could feel the shaft coming.

Still, Jake took advantage of the fact that the passage was finally clear and walked towards the complex's exit. To his greatest surprise, the Oracle Guardian and the three TX138 models began following them. This immediately gave Jake and the other Myrtharian Nerds cold sweats.

What was going on? With an increasingly ugly expression, Jake stopped and glared at the Oracle Guardian in a bad mood.

"What now?" He complained as politely as possible. It wasn't easy to keep his cool in front of such a big shot.

Still unperturbed, the Oracle Guardian reported, " These TX138 and I have been commanded to tail you like a shadow and monitor your every move. Think of it as four bodyguards offered on a silver platter. "

## **Chapter 931: Does She Want An Answer Right Now?**

"..."

Jake didn't know how to respond to this. Four bodyguards of Oracle Guardian standard? It sounded too good to be true.

However, even though the taciturn alien standing in front of him was being evasive, he could still sense the hidden intentions motivating this honorable treatment.

"Just to be sure, it's not because I was promoted to Oracle Knight, right?" Jake sneered coldly.

The Oracle Guardian remained stoic, his unwavering gaze fixed on Jake, and replied with a composed tone, "I'm afraid not. This edict doesn't stem directly from Oros, but from the all-seeing Oracle System itself. And rest assured, you're not the only one being subjected to such an intimate level of scrutiny."

Jake scowled, his mind racing with possible explanations for this intrusive surveillance. He knew without exerting too much effort that it had to do with his new condition, or rather, the "D" of his newfound bloodline. Since he had the power to vanish from the Oracle System's radar at any given moment and possibly fabricate data regarding his activities, the System had no choice but to resort to more conventional means of surveillance.

"So, if I tolerate this constant surveillance, can I still issue orders to these TX138 units as I see fit?" Jake inquired, trying to find some silver lining in his predicament.

The Oracle Guardian nodded his head and clarified, "Yes, you can certainly give orders to the TX138 units, but so can I, Oros, or the Oracle System. As long as your directives are reasonable and you remain faithful to the Mirror Universe, you're free to use them at your discretion. As for myself, I'm solely responsible for your protection and wellbeing until further notice, so I can't abandon my post for any reason. Do you have any other queries?"

Jake shook his head. He had nothing to hide from the Oracle System except for his Oracle AI's ability to obtain its own body, and he had everything to gain and not much to lose from this situation.

It was as if he held a precious jewel, shining bright and powerful in his grasp, but still chained to the larger, more complex system around him. He couldn't help but wonder what other hidden rules and intricacies he had yet to discover.

But for now, he felt a sense of relief. He could continue his journey without any immediate threats looming over his head. The Myrtharian Nerds seemed to feel the same way, their tense postures relaxing as they let out a collective sigh of relief.

Still... from another perspective, it also meant that their Red Cubes didn't really belong to them.

"Your Red Cube belongs to you," the Oracle Guardian assured him, guessing what was bothering him. "But the network connecting all the Red Cubes in the Mirror Universe belongs to the Oracle. If you wish and with the appropriate technology, you can create your own network of private Red Cubes to eventually organize your own Ordeals, but that has little interest. However, if it can ease your mind, changing a Player's emergence Red Cube is not within anyone's reach. I was only able to do so with the approval of Oros and the Oracle System. Your own Oracle Rank also has a direct influence on this type of action. If another Evolver wanted to use this functionality to conspire against you, they would need to surpass you in both Oracle Rank and nobility.

"But even if they meet these criteria, they would still need the approval of all high-ranking individuals involved in such a transfer. For example, if an Evolver from System ZZ830 tried to change your emergence Red Cube to a Red Cube from their territory, they would need not only the authorization of the Oracle Overseers on their planet and B842, but also those of the Oracle Governors of Systems ZZ830 and ZZ831. Just by seeing that you are an Oracle Colonel and Oracle Knight after only four Ordeals, such a request would have virtually no chance of passing."

This clarification not only reassured Jake, but also all the other Myrtharian Nerds who had built a Red Cube on their islands. Because what could be done with a Red Cube could surely be accomplished with Yellow or Orange Cubes as well.

If anyone with even a little bit of power could tamper with the coordinates of their destination, how could they dare to take these means of transportation in the future? It would be like throwing oneself into the lion's den and being at the mercy of their enemies.

"By the way... where are we?" Jake finally asked.

As they emerged from the building, a blinding light assaulted their senses, searing their eyes with the intensity of a thousand suns. Jake and his fellow Myrtharian Nerds blinked, their vision slowly adjusting to the radiance, revealing the looming planet B842 beyond the artificial orb. The sheer scale of the colossal planet was awe-inspiring, its slow rotation creating the illusion of a motionless giant.

But the truth was far more violent. With a velocity that could reach several thousand kilometers per second, the planet's surface was subject to catastrophic winds that would render it uninhabitable, were it not for the compartmentalized biomes made possible by protective force fields. Even then, some areas remained untamed, their swirling cyclones and relentless storms a daunting challenge for any who dared to venture too close.

And yet, amidst this dangerous beauty, Jake and his companions beheld the towering Oracle Buildings and Cubes, imposing structures that dwarfed those of other Oracle Cities. Such a sight could only mean one thing: they had arrived at the pinnacle of this system's power, the only place that could accommodate such a grandiose display of architectural might.

"The Oracle Capital of Thelma." Will proclaimed, with a hint of reverence.

Having managed their faction and dabbled in trade on the side, he had traversed Thelma on numerous occasions but never this far. Even so, he recognized the colossal structures from afar.

The Oracle Guardian confirmed their location with a curt nod before gesturing towards the distant white metal palace comprised of three impressive palaces. "That is the Oracle Palace, where you must venture tomorrow. It is typically forbidden for players of your rank to enter without authorization."

Jake accepted the challenge with a stoic nod. He knew the Oracle Palace was likely much grander and more intimidating up close than it appeared from this distance. Without any hesitation, he took flight towards the nearest Yellow Cube, located on the outskirts of Thelma, away from the Oracle Capital.

For security reasons, the Transportation Towers housing these Yellow Cubes were not built in the Oracle Capital itself, but on the outskirts of Thelma. Since Jake had already been here before, he did not need to calculate an Oracle Path to find his way.



As Jake soared away without them, the other Myrtharian Nerds stopped dawdling and took flight after him. Even those who, by necessity, still lacked the ability to fly ran and leaped at inhuman speeds, and despite being a bit slower and less charismatic, they still didn't take long to reach a Transportation Tower.

When Jake landed on the rooftop of the Transportation Tower, he hoped to bask in a moment of respite. But as he turned around, his gaze met the Oracle Guardian, and his eyebrows twitched at the sight of the alien's close proximity. The creature had been tailing him like a phantom, sticking to him like a shadow.

As if that weren't enough to make Jake feel suffocated, he broke into a cold sweat at the sight of Lucia's curvaceous figure just behind him. Despite her formidable strength, she was among the Myrtharian Nerds who couldn't fly. To keep up with him, she must have been running at the speed of a rocket.

Jake noticed the craters in Lucia's wake, each one perfectly matching her footprints. The supersonic blasts and shockwaves she generated had yet to hit them.

Thankfully, Thelma was a Floating Island that could house individuals of the Oracle Overseer's caliber. The damage caused by Lucia's speed would have otherwise resulted in its ruin. But the metallic ground was already smoothing over the indentations, and the shockwaves had been neutralized.

As he locked eyes with the Myrmidian princess, Jake found the Oracle Guardian's presence less daunting. Seeing her slight smirk, he imagined a cat that had just caught a mouse. In this case, he was that mouse.

When Lucia subconsciously ran her tongue over her soft and sensual lips, begging to be kissed, Jake finally remembered the promise he had made to her. The one to give her an answer at the end of the Ordeal.

'Fuck... Does she want an answer right now?' Jake hadn't planned for that.

When he had made that promise back then, it was just to buy some time. He had hoped that in the meantime, she would move on. He was far from imagining that she would not forget and would keep that rare promise of his carefully stored in her memory.

Now, what should he do...

## **Chapter 932: Good Answer**

As Jake's mind raced, he noticed a subtle change in Lucia's expression. Her eyes, once full of expectation and hope, began to narrow and darken, and her lips, once so inviting, now turned down in a slight frown.



"Jake," she said, her voice tinged with disappointment, "you made me a promise. I've been waiting for an answer. Do you have one for me now?"

In that moment, Jake felt like he was caught in a trap. He could see the hurt in her eyes, and it cut him to the core. He knew he couldn't keep avoiding this conversation, but the thought of giving her an answer he knew she didn't want to hear made him feel sick to his stomach.

Finally, he took a deep breath and looked into her eyes, the weight of his decision heavy on his shoulders.

"I'm sorry, Lucia," He said softly. "I don't have the answer you want."

Lucia's expression fell even further, and for a moment, Jake thought she might cry. But then, to his surprise, she straightened her shoulders and looked at him with a newfound determination.

As Jake stood there, his heart pounding in his chest, he watched as Lucia took a step closer to him. He could feel the heat emanating from her body, and he could smell the sweet fragrance of her perfume. For a moment, he was completely captivated.

Ignoring the presence of the Oracle Guardian, Lucia leaned in even closer, closing the gap between them until there were only a few inches separating their faces. Her breath was warm on his skin, and he could feel her chest pressing against his.

"Jake," She whispered, her voice low and seductive. "Don't you feel it too? This attraction between us. The way our bodies fit together perfectly. You can't deny that you want me, that you crave my touch."

Jake's mind was in turmoil. He knew he shouldn't give in to her, that it would only complicate things further. But as he looked into her eyes, he felt a familiar ache in his chest. He couldn't deny that he was attracted to her, that he wanted her in ways he shouldn't.

He had never seen this side of Lucia before, and he didn't know how to react. Back then, Sarah had unsettled him in the same way, but unlike her, the Myrmidian princess had the subtlety and self-respect not to cross a certain line.

For a moment, he considered giving in to her, letting his body take over and ignoring the consequences. After all, he was a young man in his prime. It was impossible for him not to have any reaction or emotion in the face of such beauty.

Then his rational mind, constantly scrambling for excuses and pretexts to avoid emotional entanglements, caught up with him, and he replied with a conviction that was a little shaky, "Building a relationship together isn't-"

Not wanting to hear the rest, she suddenly pressed her finger against his lips, silencing him.

"Shhh. Don't say it." She chided him, rolling her eyes in exasperation at his hard-to-get attitude. "I know what you're worried about. You're afraid that by getting attached to me, you'll suffer even more if I perish in the next Ordeal."

"Not exactly..." Jake muttered, feeling as if he were standing on the edge of a cliff.

"I'm not finished," She declared, cutting him off. "You're also afraid that our potential romantic relationship will distract you from your goals, making you less productive and more complacent. You may be the most powerful Evolver in our faction, and put on a confident facade, but I see through you. Deep down, you're riddled with insecurity. You fear not being good enough, and every failure or loss of your comrades, you take it all on yourself to the point where you can't sleep. Your endless training is a way to escape your emotions and keep your mind occupied, but trust me, it won't work. If you had feelings for someone, but they died before you could confess, would you really have no regrets?"

Her fierce expression softened, and she spoke with a gentler voice. "Life is short, Jake. You don't have to force yourself to love me or go against your desires. But can you at least open your heart a crack, so we can slip in?"

What could Jake say to that? It was as if Lucia had struck him with a thunderbolt of truth, leaving him with no retort to offer except the lie of feigning indifference.

Yet Jake was many things, but not a liar. Though they had known each other for over a year, their time together was scarce. His feelings for her had yet to burgeon into a consuming passion, but objectively speaking, Lucia was a goddess among women, outshining even the most renowned starlets from his former planet. And if one were to overlook her Myrmidian fixation on triumph and the toxic competition that was endemic to her people, Lucia was virtually flawless - a woman of exceptional qualities and few flaws.

She was disciplined, gentle, caring, adorable, friendly, witty, reliable, responsible, and sharp-witted... Ahem. Suffice it to say, it was nearly impossible not to adore her. Especially if one happened to be a man. And a man, Jake certainly was.

As his heart and mind grappled with a satisfying solution to this quandary, Lucia found the answer she sought in the frenzied dance of his eyes, and seized the bull by its horns.

Ignoring the Oracle Guardian standing on the side less than a meter away from them with the same composure as a priest officiating yet another wedding ceremony, Lucia abruptly seized his cheeks with both hands and pulled his face towards hers.<novelsnext></novelsnext>

As Jake stood there frozen, he could feel the warmth of Lucia's body against his own as she leaned in and kissed him fiercely, taking him completely by surprise. For a moment, he was paralyzed, unable to move, think, or even breathe.

But just as suddenly as it had started, the kiss was over, and Lucia pulled away with a sly smile on her lips. Jake could still feel the faint fragrance and the moisture of her saliva on his lips.

"I think that answers my question." She said, her eyes sparkling mischievously. "You can't deny that you feel something for me, Jake. I can see it in your eyes."

Before he could even muster a response, she pressed her palm against the Yellow Cube just behind them and vanished into thin air. Jake stood there, dumbstruck, watching her disappear helplessly.

Had he just been assaulted by a woman? On Earth, perhaps it could be perceived that way, but here in the Mirror Universe, with his current strength and reaction time, if Jake didn't want to be kissed, it was impossible for Lucia to succeed.

He had to face the truth. Deep down, he wasn't opposed to it at all. Lost in thought, he absentmindedly brushed his lips as if to remember the sensation. He could have stood there motionless like that for a long time until a suspicious throat clearing brought him back to reality.

"It's good to be young." the Oracle Guardian commented admiringly. "In my time, women weren't as assertive, but it may be a species difference."

Jake opened his mouth to retort, but no sound came out. He was speechless.

'No, no. Most women on Earth aren't as assertive either.' He wanted to shout out loud, but he only said those words in his head.

[Hmmp.] Xi snorted raucously, making him jump. [I can be bold too. Lucia isn't one of those submissive girls, but a winner in life. Have you forgotten that her Soul Class is Divine Princess of Victory? Whether it's in combat or in intimate life, Lucia is a go-getter who doesn't give up until she emerges triumphant.]

With a teasing tone more fitting of her personality, she jested, [Hehe, it appears that the indomitable Jake Wilderth has been conquered by a woman today.]

"I wish I had the same confidence as Lucia." Jeanie's envious and falsetto voice chimed in unprompted in his head.

As for Trash Runt, although he remained silent, he had silently witnessed the entire scene from inside the Spirit Dimension. All he was missing was popcorn.

"..."

At that moment, Jake finally remembered why he didn't want relationships. He was never alone. Two Evolvers in love had to deal with their respective Oracle AIs, which meant that a monogamous relationship automatically became a foursome...

And in Jake's case, with Xi, Jeanie, and Trash... They were already four in his head. As long as his skin wasn't thick enough, proceeding further in their relationship would be complicated.

[...]

If Xi had her own body at that moment, she would have probably pinched his hip vigorously. Registering the dead silence in his mind, Jake finally realized that he had made a mistake. Grimacing, he stumbled over his words, eager to make amends, but was interrupted by his Oracle AI, who whispered in his ear, her voice as soft as a feather,

[If I had a real body, and it was me who kissed you like that, how would you react?]

Jake's heart skipped a beat, but he managed to answer without pause, "What's the point of this hypothetical question? You know my deepest desires better than I do."

[Hmmm. Good answer.]

## Chapter 933: Back Home

In the wake of that emotionally charged moment, Jake yearned to preoccupy his mind, hastily returning to his Floating Island before his comrades could detect his disquiet. Considering their keen eyes, it wasn't unlikely that several friends en route to the same Transportation Tower had glimpsed part or all of the scene.

The mere thought of it already induced the beginnings of a headache in Jake.

No sooner had he touched the Yellow Cube and paid the required Aether fee than the view before his eyes transformed. The dark gray skyscraper summit was replaced by a flat, metallic disk spanning just over 3,000 meters in diameter.

The small island was divided into distinct compartments of varying architectural styles, with a central area spanning several tens of meters in diameter, isolated by a force field that served as his private quarters and training zone.

Directly opposite the Yellow Cube, and right next to the central area, Melkree's giant tree form towered over the other structures by a good third, casting its shadow over a quarter of the island.

Its massive, pale pink trunk, wider and taller than a sequoia, now boasted dense, brilliant auburn foliage, incomparable to the day Melkree had first rooted herself at the island's heart.

At least, that's how Jake remembered it. He had forgotten that before his Ordeal, he had taken with him the sole Aether Sun Core once in his possession, which also served as an artificial sun for his island. Deprived of light and warmth, the island had been plunged into darkness, and Melkree seemed somewhat... disheartened.

Because the Myrtharian Body passive had also vanished from the Faction Skills list, Melkree had lost most of her ability to withstand the conditions of the vacuum of space. If Jake hadn't programmed an artificial atmosphere in advance, it wouldn't have been long before the Dryad began to wither.

Fortunately, although Jake hadn't seen her for over a year, it had been just a little more than a day for the Dryad.

Upon spotting Jake, her leaves quivered with excitement, her branches and trunk bowing as if to greet his return. Melkree's humanoid projection, or rather her Dryad form, emerged from the trunk and ran towards him.

"Please Boss, turn the light back on as fast as p- Holy shit! Enemies!"

She wanted to ask him to restore the Aether Sun Core to its proper place, but before she could finish her sentence, four towering humanoid creatures over 4 meters tall appeared abruptly behind Jake, nearly giving her a heart attack.

Having been labeled an enemy by the Dryad, the dignified Oracle Guardian remained stoic, allowing Jake to make the introductions.

"Relax. It's just an Oracle Guardian and some androids assigned to watc- protect me." He quickly corrected himself. "From now on, they will be in charge of protecting this island."

"Oooh." Melkree nodded, easily accepting his explanation. For a plant-based life form, the concept of lying remained incredibly abstract in her mind.

However, her growing vital needs for light, water, and nutrients constantly occupied her thoughts, and when it came to these, she knew precisely how to express them.

"So, about the artificial sun... Can you...?"

Jake rolled his eyes in exasperation.

"Sure..." He replied, pretending to search for an Aether Sun Core in his Space Storage.

Then, his face froze.

'Wait. I don't have any Aether Sun Cores at all.'

They had all been assimilated at the same time as his Grade 10 Aether Core and everything else when he had digested his previous Oracle Device. Having no use for them anymore, he hadn't felt the urgency to create new ones.

"Hmm. Is there a problem?" Melkree's youthful elven face grew anxious, her long ears suddenly drooping like those of a sad or frightened cat.

Jake immediately felt uneasy.

"Cough, there's no problem. Just wait a brief moment," He lied without batting an eye. Luckily, he was talking to a tree and not Lucia, or he would have been exposed quickly.

If it were his former self, creating an Aether Sun Core from scratch would have taken several days or months to recreate an artificial sun like the old one. But now? With his Grade 10 Energy, he could accomplish this feat in mere seconds.

With a snap of his fingers, he condensed the required Aether Symbols and showered them with a beam of Aether akin to a laser using his free palm. Because he had perfect control over his Aether, Melkree could only see it by deploying her mental sense.

Grade 1, Grade 2, Grade 3... Grade 6. In less than five seconds, Jake recreated the once-precious Aether Sun Core that had posed so much difficulty for him. Before the radiation and heat from the false sun began to scorch Melkree, he projected it far above the island using his telekinesis. Accessing the mental interface of his island, he set an automated orbit for this new sun, aligned with the Earth's day-night cycle.

"Satisfied?" Jake smiled.

Melkree wanted to say yes, but the invigorating warmth she hoped for didn't come. Instead, she felt a slight pain from her leaves and the smell of smoke lingered in the air.

"I'd like to say yes, but I'm burning..." The Dryad pouted.

"..."

It was high time to replace the missing Faction Skill, Jake thought with a sigh. Without the Myrtharian Body passive, Melkree had only her high Constitution from her post-Fourth Ordeal Evolver status to withstand the radiation.

In the meantime, Jake adjusted the force fields enveloping his Floating Island to filter some of the radiation down to a tolerable level. Otherwise, apart from the Kintharians and a few other members with heat- or light-related powers, the others would have been forced to move elsewhere.

As soon as the new settings took effect, Melkree's tense face melted with happiness. That's it. This was the comfortable warmth she remembered!

While Melkree returned to sleep in her tree, basking in the long-awaited photosynthesis moment, Jake began modifying his island before the return of the other Myrtharian Nerds.

Most now had their own Floating Island, and apart from a few Kintharians who already found the environment perfect for them, but mainly too lazy to move, most other members tended to gather on Will or Lucia's island.

Will's island because it was the headquarters of his subfaction, the Myrtharian Scavengers. Ordinary-talented members with little interest in combat, like Secyone, a former lawyer, had long since joined his island to make themselves useful and earn some contribution points.

Lucia's island because she had also created her own subfaction, Myrmidian Nerds, copying the format of the main faction as a good admirer of Jake that she was before understanding its true meaning. He sometimes wondered if she had come to regret this hasty decision...

Before commencing the expansion of his island, Jake cast a glance at the current price per square meter, approximately 3,000 Aether points, then at the balance in his own Aether Storage, releasing a self-satisfied chuckle.

[Aether Storage: 90,689,728Qa Aether pts]

"Haha, with such a sum, increasing my island's size by a factor of several trillion should pose no challenge," Jake couldn't help but remark, anticipation shining brightly in his eyes.

The Oracle Guardian, standing just behind him, could only sigh and look upon Jake with pity. The alien's face conveyed the condescension of a wealthy, civilized aristocrat observing a country bumpkin visiting a modern metropolis for the first time.

To a Fourth Ordeal Player, a few trillion Aether points might make them believe they could purchase the Oracle Store itself, but reality was often harsh. The cost of each additional square meter on a Floating Island being slightly more expensive than the last, the alien estimated that even a fabulously wealthy Fourth-Ordeal Ace might, at best, increase their island's size by a factor of a thousand.



The price climbed steeply at first, then less sharply, but over time, it became a financial chasm for any nation. This was why a planetary nation like New Earth had intentionally limited the size of its Floating Island to that of England.

With all the talented and loyal Evolvers working for it, expanding further wasn't impossible, but it simply wasn't worth it. A larger island also meant increased maintenance costs for its shield, artificial atmosphere, and defense systems. With Earth's population now only a fraction of its original size, the Earth Union government had to make compromises.

Meanwhile, Jake had already begun spending his Aether points to enlarge his Floating Island. Swiftly, the disk's diameter of about 3 kilometers began to double, then triple, and quadruple...

The Oracle Guardian was already gleefully anticipating the disappointed, crestfallen, and angry expression on Jake's face when the outrageous price would force him to abandon his initial ambitions.

But soon, his gloating smirk faltered, and the alien's visage turned solemn and then pale as the island's surface continued to expand exponentially far beyond the 1,000-fold increase he had initially predicted.

10,000 times, 1 million times, a billion times...

## **Chapter 934: Faction Upgrade**

In the end, Jake unleashed a staggering 1 sextillion Aether points in a single thought, nearly a ninetieth of his wealth. The price per square meter soared from 3,000 Aether points initially, then slowed to a final cost of around 800,000 Aether points. The average price throughout the spending spree was about 500,000 Aether points—a sum that would have once made Jake's blood run cold. And judging by the slack-jawed Oracle Guardian beside him, even Eighth or Ninth Ordeal Evolvers were not immune to such breathless spending.

As Jake's Aether points dwindled at a dizzying pace, his disc-shaped island expanded equally as fast. Its former territory soon became a mere speck compared to its newfound vastness.

Within seconds, the expansion ceased, and Jake surveyed the result. The dark gray metallic surface of the enormous disc, untouched and uniform, overwhelmed him with a sense of emptiness and vastness, as if he'd landed in a strange, flat metal desert.

198,603 square kilometers—that was the new size of his Floating Island after this lightning expansion. Its surface area increased by more than ten billion times, its diameter stretching from just over 3 kilometers to now over 500.

To put this in perspective, South Korea spans about 100,000 square kilometers, while the United Kingdom covers around 243,000 square kilometers.

In a blink, his Floating Island now rivaled New Earth's size, supported by the Earth Union Government's centralized planetary resources. The Oracle Guardian had every reason to be speechless.

The alien licked his dry lips, searching for the right words. Finally, he asked with palpable disbelief, "How did you obtain so much Aether? Your past record doesn't mention such wealth."

This question caught Jake off guard. The Oracle System had dispatched an Oracle Guardian and three TX138 models to monitor him, and yet they hadn't been informed of the reasons?

More surprisingly, it should have been possible to access any Evolver's records from the Mirror Universe through the Archives, provided one had enough authority. Logically, an Oracle Guardian with eight or nine Ordeals should have at least reached or exceeded the rank of Colonel.

Consequently, Jake couldn't help but be suspicious. Was someone high-ranking protecting his records? Or was everything about his new Bloodline considered by the Oracle System to be connected to the Digestors and therefore subject to some form of censorship?

Once again, the Oracle Guardian deciphered Jake's confusion from his expression and explained, "Your records are indeed in the Oracle System Archives, but the Oracle Store has set an absurdly high price for your most crucial and personal information. Your Oracle Knight status and Oracle Rank account for part of this, but your new wealth is likely the main reason. Your unexpected wealth indirectly protects you as well because the Oracle System knows which information you'd be willing to sell to others or not. Without the Oracle System, learning these details about you would be very difficult, if not impossible, for another Evolver, especially if they're on the other side of the Mirror Universe. Following this principle, the Oracle System employs a highest-bidder logic. If someone is willing to pay 50 billion Aether points for your information, but you're prepared to pay double to block the process, the Oracle has no reason to give in to the Player's demands."

"Ah, I get it." Jake felt enlightened.

It made sense. In short, if Jake was willing in theory to break the bank to protect his information, that was the price his enemies would have to pay to get it. It was convenient.

From another perspective, one could conclude that information too cheap wasn't actually that important to the concerned Evolver, or that it could easily be obtained by other means.

In conclusion... Money is power.

"By the way, how am I supposed to address you?" Jake abruptly changed the subject. "If I'm to endure your presence twenty-four hours a day, I can't keep referring to you with heys and ohs."

"Saros." the Oracle Guardian revealed with a nod of the head.

"Hmm, more ordinary than I thought." Jake raised an astonished eyebrow. "Anyway, pleased to meet you, Saros. Let's be friends. Now, if you don't mind, I have other things to attend to."

It was no exaggeration. In addition to terraforming his island into a more habitable abode, Jake urgently needed to replace the missing Faction Skill so the other Myrtharian Nerds would no longer be penalized.

Yet, when Jake opened his faction tab, he was immediately confronted by a far more pressing issue: the number of members.

[Faction Name: Myrtharian Nerds]

[ Faction level: Lvl7 (Promotional conditions: 1T Aether pts, Oracle Rank First Lieutenant or higher)]

[ Number of members: 3200(+116458)/3200 (112839 humans/aliens, 619 beasts)

[Faction Aether Storage: 6 236 845 pts]

[ Aether production: 0 pts/s ]

[ Faction Skills:]

[Permanent Passive Skill lvl7: Vacant]

[Faction Space Vault lvl7: 640 (double with each level) cubic meters of common storage space accessible to authorized members and which can be compartmentalized into several blocks depending on the level of authorization and trust. Activation cost: 100 000 Aether pts/day.the daily cost can be shared by the faction's members. ]

[Vitality Link lv7: Allows the temporary transfer of member vitality to the Skill Activator. An injury can also be transferred to another member with its agreement. Cost: 400 000 (600 000> 400 000 or -100 000 per level) Aether points per minute.]

[United We Stand lv7 : For each member present within 700 meters, Aether, Body and Soul stats will be boosted by 0.7% For each additional level, the range increases 100 meters and the boost by 0.1%. Aether Cost: 1M Aether points per minute.]

[Main Floating Island affiliate: 46] [Subfactions: Myrtharian Scavengers, The Aristocats, Myrmidian Nerds]

On Quanoth, they had saved a significant portion of Laudarkvik's population, which Jake and Hade had then worked together to send into space, away from the Mana Storm to spare them from the Purge. Jake had completely forgotten about them when he returned to training, but Will and Lucia, being responsible individuals, had naturally taken care of them.

One of the two must have stored the Portable Fortresses, sheltering them in their Space Storage, and they were likely still inside. However, it was highly probable that the Quanoth natives trapped within these Aether Artefacts had already received their Oracle Devices. The absurd number of applicants waiting to join the Myrtharian Nerds confirmed this hypothesis.

Since Lucia, Gerulf, Rogen, Asfrid, Ulfar, and their compatriots had joined them, it was the first time their faction was once again limited by its level. It was time to upgrade it as well.

As luck would have it, the massive expansion of his Floating Island also addressed this problem. If Jake remembered correctly, they had saved far more than 116,458 natives. The figure was closer to half a million.

After Jake had left Laudarkvik to reunite with Ruby in the Schwazen Empire, the other Myrtharian Nerds had embarked on a slow and bloody pilgrimage toward the Celestial City. Along the way, they had rescued as many refugees as they could until they were forced to cease their efforts due to a shortage of Portable Fortresses.

Without this material constraint, they would have undoubtedly saved many more.

Upon seeing the prerequisites to upgrade his faction, Jake let out a mirthful laugh.

"1T Aether points? I would have surely wept tears of blood if I had to spend that amount a month ago." He mocked playfully.

Now? It was but a drop in the ocean. With his Oracle Rank of Colonel, he could upgrade his faction five times, and it would cost him a mere 11 quadrillion Aether points and change.

A sum his bracelet compressed in just over thirty seconds... Compared to his current wealth, it was hardly worth mentioning.

Without even glancing at the price, Jake clicked the Upgrade option five times in succession. He was already growing accustomed to his newfound wealth. The nonsense spouted by psychiatrists and psychologists about money not bringing happiness clearly didn't apply to him.

Being rich, after personally experiencing both extremes, was far better than being poor. End of story.

Still, upon discovering his faction's new population capacity, Jake couldn't help but concede defeat. 102,400. It was a vast improvement, but still insufficient to accommodate all the new members.

Would they really need to create additional subordinate factions like Lost Divinities and the other super factions did? He never thought they'd reach that point so soon.

As Jake prepared to momentarily set this problem aside to choose the three new Faction Skills (the one to replace, plus two new ones unlocked at levels 9 and 12), Will, Hade, Asfrid, and Lucia suddenly appeared before his Yellow Cube.

The sudden upgrading of the faction had alerted them, and they decided to come and take a look.

Will had already intended to pay him a visit to address the matter of the vacant faction skill, but the others had been mostly alerted when their own Floating Islands had been ruthlessly jostled from their orbits amidst the expansion of Jake's territory.

## **Chapter 935: I Grant You One Minute**

### **935 I Grant You One Minute**

The moment Jake's eyes met Lucia's, he was immediately consumed by unease. The stolen kiss had occurred just minutes prior, and its memory lingered.

Will, Asfrid, and Hade, all exceptionally intelligent and keenly perceptive, shared a knowing, subtle smile after the initial shock wore off. Silently, they gave Lucia a mental thumbs up, commending her boldness.

It must have been no small feat to shatter the icy armor Jake wore, an emotional firewall keeping everyone at bay. But his priceless, flustered expression made it worth it.

Jake, no less clever than the others, knew what thoughts danced through his friends' minds, and it chilled him to the bone. An overwhelming surge of spiritual pressure involuntarily radiated from his body, rendering the island's atmosphere heavy and oppressive, as if replaced by liquid lead.

"Cough, cough, Jake, have mercy, please," wheezed Will, the weakest of the three, nearly fainting on the spot.

Ironically, among Hade, Asfrid, and himself, Will was the only one who had survived until the end of the Ordeal. Perhaps the rewards he had gained had closed the gap between them, but Jake doubted that a merchant focused primarily on Charisma could surpass them so suddenly.

Asfrid and Hade may have perished before the Fourth Ordeal's end, but disregarding that detail, their overall performance had been stellar. Their rewards must have been substantial, but the extent to which their deaths had impacted them remained unknown.

With pursed lips, Jake reluctantly retracted his aura at Will's pleading. Asfrid and Hade had remained stoic, but they were still disconcerted.

"Your mental energy has increased considerably since the last time we saw each other," Asfrid observed expressionlessly, her inner turmoil hidden.

Through her mental sense, she could see that the density of his Spirit Body had become unimaginable compared to their last encounter. By her estimation, his Spirit Body level was extremely close to Hade's, but considering the quality of that spiritual energy, Jake likely stood a tier above.

Hade's only possible remaining advantage was his Soul Strength, which could only be developed through the accumulation of memories and experiences. This was the sole way to nurture a soul.

However, if Asfrid could see his current intelligence stat, she might have thought differently. The amount of information that Jake's brain and soul could process and store every second was simply extraordinary. At this pace, he would catch up to Hade in no time.

If Asfrid could perceive this, then the former Fluid Grandmaster sensed it even more distinctly. If one were to consider only the mass of knowledge stored within their respective souls, Jake probably already surpassed him.

In just one year on Quanoth, Jake's titanic intelligence could achieve what a normal human would need millions of years to accomplish. The only reason Hade's Soul Strength still surpassed

Jake's was his maturity. To truly mature, accumulating knowledge wasn't enough; one had to experience emotionally stimulating and enriching events.

But this was a problem easily resolved with Jake's mental strength. He merely had to deploy his mental sense across an entire city or country and, by merging his consciousness with all local life forms, he could rapidly accumulate maturity by experiencing and living their emotions and experiences as a silent spectator.

In a few years, Jake would become as mentally stable and rooted as an old hermit. The only reason he hadn't done so was that he had been too busy to waste time in such a manner.

To him, this sort of voyeurism was not only disrespectful but also akin to watching reality TV shows - an activity he had considered beneath him even as a humble Earthling.

"What business do you have here?" Jake finally inquired about the purpose of their arrival, though he already had a vague inkling.

Sensing Jake's willingness to spare them, Will hammered his fist into his palm with a look of realization and leaped at the opportunity,

"We noticed you've been upgrading the Faction." He said with a grin. "I expected merely a level or two, but your ability to produce Aether as Lucia mentioned has surpassed my wildest dreams. Tell me... How many Aether points do you currently possess?"

Seeing the merchant's burning gaze of curiosity, Jake could have withheld the information, but after being embarrassed by them regarding Lucia, he suddenly felt the urge to bruise his ego, "Merely 89 sextillion Aether points." He sighed smugly. "I had 90 before, but after expanding my Floating Island, I have only 89 left."

Will's and his three other friends' legs began to wobble upon hearing this astronomical figure. Lucia and Will had mentally prepared themselves by greatly inflating their initial estimates, but hearing the number for real still left them traumatized.

The falsely dignified and indifferent gaze Jake cast upon them only twisted the knife in their wounds, and in Will's case, his eyebrows began twitching with envy.

'Is becoming powerful truly more profitable than building a sprawling company spanning the entire Mirror Universe? The merchant didn't want to admit it, but he was starting to doubt himself.

However, he quickly regained his optimism and a beaming smile stretched across his face, his eyes narrowing into thin crescents. Rubbing his hands together with excitement like any shady merchant before a good deal, he approached Jake and whispered in a low voice, "Tell me the truth, boss..."



When Will called Jake "boss," it meant he had a favor to ask.

"Speak." Jake grumbled.

Having received the green light, Will chuckled merrily and inquired, "How many Aether points can you compress in a day?"

Jake blinked, but answered honestly nonetheless, "If I don't pay attention, about 300 trillion Aether points per second. If I decide to consciously focus on the task... I've never tried, but multiplying that value by ten shouldn't be a problem."

A stunned silence struck his four friends. Or rather, three and a half friends... Lucia had just managed to shed that label.

Once the surprise subsided, Will swallowed hard, realizing his throat was dry. He was still in shock even after making a quick mental calculation before asking his question.

"Boss..."

"Yes, Will?"

"Please, lend me 3, no 5... Wait, forget that. Give me 10 seconds of your passive Aether point production!

Seeing Will throw his ego out the window to beg put Jake in an incredibly good mood. Feeling philanthropic, he nodded and declared in a regal tone, "I grant you one minute."

The sentence sounded ridiculous just hearing it, but seeing the merchant's blissful face as if he'd received his Christmas gifts early, Jake suddenly felt in high spirits. Turning to the three others present, he announced, "Let me know if you need money."

"I need a quintillion Aether points to develop my laboratory and my Floating Island." Hade immediately requested without the slightest embarrassment.

"Granted." Jake agreed without hesitation.

Will's jaw dropped, a sense of absurdity pervading his being. Almost an hour of Jake's passive Aether point production had just been granted just like that... In that case, why had he bothered begging and demeaning himself like that?

At that moment, he felt the same way Jake had when he noticed the knowing smiles of his friends earlier. The vague feeling that he was being mocked...

"Grant me 2 hours. You know why." Lucia playfully blew him a kiss, but upon witnessing this overt display of affection, he broke out in a cold sweat and hastily handed her the Aether points she requested.

"Hehehe" The Myrmidian princess flashed the V sign with her hand before Will, taunting him, and the merchant nearly coughed up blood.

'I may be shameless, but I cant emulate your ways.' This time, he could only bow and admit defeat before Lucia.

Asfrid held herself with more dignity, but ultimately, like Hade, she requested a quintillion Aether points to develop her Floating Island and research certain Spirit Artifacts mentioned in the ancient writings of her people dating back to the arrival of Eltar, Myrmid, and the other heroes.

The Spirit Shell she had invented to connect the minds of all Myrtharian Nerds was part of this.

When Jake consoled Will by also giving him a quintillion Aether points, the group then returned to the main topic at hand, that being the selection of new Faction Skills.

The first priority was, of course, to replace the Myrtharian Body passive with the preferable Cosmic D Starfeyrves Body, but as a matter of principle, Jake shared his list of skills with his four companions. It was an act of trust he wouldn't dare with just anyone, but these individuals were the exceptions.

Upon discovering that Jake's astounding Aether production capacity stemmed from the Grade 10 Energy mentioned in his Cosmic D Starfeyrves Body and Spirit Body, Will exulted with anticipation but still forced himself to read on.

He thought nothing could surprise him further, but soon he had to admit that every skill within Jake's newfound bloodline enticed him. There was a reason Jake was their boss.

Nevertheless, the long-term benefits from the first two passive skills were too alluring, and unanimously, they resolved to choose one of them. But swiftly, they found themselves grappling with a vexing dilemma.

## **Chapter 936: Unpleasant Surprise**

### **936 Unpleasant Surprise**

"There's no debate. Cosmic D Starfeyrves Spirit Body is the far wiser choice." Asfrid declared with conviction. "The Grade 10 Energy attribute is present as well, though I'm uncertain of its efficacy. However, it's the ability to rapidly recover from any spiritual injury that makes this skill invaluable. No matter how powerful our physical bodies, if they're destroyed, our spirits still have a chance to survive. Freed from the mortal coil, a strong spirit is no longer bound by physics and can flee with astounding speed. In some respects, its survival rate even increases.

"On the other hand, regenerating a body from scratch isn't impossible by employing a Green Cube. It's costly, sure, but compared to the price for healing the soul or Spirit Body, it's inconsequential. Conversely, if our Souls are severely damaged or disintegrated, it's likely the end. Even minor damage can significantly impact our mental faculties, with symptoms ranging from temporary amnesia to an IQ drop so profound that we would become as lifeless as anemones."

In a softer voice, she concluded with a shrug, "I'll be the first to lament the loss of the Myrtharian Body Skill, but it's just common sense."

Hade remained silent. He was broadly of the same mind although any choice suited him. It was Will and Lucia who were more indecisive.

Logically, from the merchant's perspective, the Spirit Body Skill should have appealed to him more, as his specialty was intelligence and charisma, two stats with an undeniable spiritual component. However, he had other considerations.

Will's dream wasn't merely to become the most charismatic, attractive, or popular Evolver in the Mirror Universe - in that case, he would have pursued an acting career. He still chased the same dream of becoming the most successful entrepreneur, and for that, he needed a lot of money. A lot, indeed.

Without even needing to check, he knew that the Grade 10 Energy Body would possess far superior properties when attached to tangible cells rather than an ethereal spiritual shell. Unless one was a powerful spirit or ghost whose Spirit Body quality surpassed that of physical bodies of equivalent-level Evolvers, the resulting passive Aether production would undoubtedly be much lower.

With higher passive Aether production, one could buy more things. Things that could, for example, nourish, strengthen, or accelerate progress related to the spirit. With abundant Aether points, one could even afford the services of a Green Cube, regardless of how damaged our souls were.

As for Lucia, her reasoning was entirely different. Originally, her bloodline possessed some Eltarian traits, with Cekt even naming it the Myrtarian Bloodline. Jake owed his telekinesis, supernatural instinct bordering on prescience, and the convenient innate ability of his mind to maintain relative calm and strengthen itself to Lucia's blood.

Cekt had extracted the quintessence of Lucia's and Gerulf's Blood Essence to produce Jake's first Bloodline, but even so, Lucia could have developed all those abilities if she had wanted.

Reality turned out to be quite different. The path she chose focused on the concept of "Victory" from her Myrmidian Bloodline, and all subsequent choices to expand her skill tree were made in that direction, be it her Neithnikidian Divine Bloodline or her Soul Class Divine Princess of Victory.

Every victory rewarded the attributes involved. Since Lucia was more of a warrior than a strategist, or a psychist like Asfrid who dominated her enemies with spiritual pressure, her physical stats had surged ahead.

Her Spirit Body level was a mere 38, yet with the average Fifth-Ordeal Player at only 22, Lucia soared well above the norm. Many Sixth-Ordeal Players even trailed her in this regard.

Nonetheless, it was true that Evolvers specializing in psychic abilities with powerful minds were her weakness. For this reason, she had chosen to temporarily maintain the Digitization granted on Quanoth.

Separating her spirit and body would be more difficult, but as they became one, they would mutually reinforce each other, creating a more stable whole. It wouldn't be too late to change her mind in the future.

Her focus also meant that although Lucia could still use her telekinesis, and thus fly, her flight speed was inferior to her running speed.

Hence the enormous craters left in her wake when she attempted to catch up to Jake with the Transportation Power.

As they debated, Jake listened calmly, arms crossed, just like the Oracle Guardian standing motionless behind him. The alien was still in shock after hearing about Jake's absurd fortune.

The passive Aether point production of an Oracle Device depended primarily on three criteria: the amount of liquid alloy, the Oracle Rank, and the local Aether density. In Systems A, the average Aether density was so high that producing 300T Aether points per second wasn't so rare.

Of course, the Oracle would take into account the geographical circumstances of its Evolvers and Players. The prices displayed in the Oracle Store for certain items were adjusted for these Players, as were their Ordeals. Despite this, natives of these Systems had a certain advantage over those from newer Systems.

The flip side was that they participated in a different kind of Ordeal, far more dangerous. Most of these old Systems had been at war with the Digestors for millions, if not billions, of years. From birth, the local Aether density granted them immense power and intelligence, but they rarely had time to enjoy it.

Enclaves like those created by Xion Zholvur for the Zhorions, with lower Aether density, were an indirect way of increasing their chances of survival, although it could seem like a punishment at first glance.

Returning to Jake's case, such Aether point production in young Systems was typically found within powerful factions with the resources, power, and technology to produce Grade 9 or 10 Aether Cores. Due to the associated risks, handling them required great caution, and it wasn't easy to profit from their existence.

The most problematic aspect was that a Grade 10 Aether Core absorbed Aether from the surrounding atmosphere so quickly that a vast area of zero Aether would instantly be created, usually spanning millions, if not billions, of kilometers. To counteract this constraint, the Aether Core or the object it was installed on had to be in constant motion at extremely high speeds, several times faster than light.

The Oracle and some famous Aetherists had their methods to solve this issue, but they required a monstrously advanced understanding of Aether. Then, how had Jake managed to accomplish such a miracle.

As the Oracle Guardian was lost in thought, the debate over which passive Faction Skill to choose seemed far from over. On the contrary, the discussion was becoming increasingly passionate, and the tone began to rise.

Jake decided to calm the situation. Stepping in, he said,

"Clearly, each of my two abilities has its pros and cons. If I let you argue about it, I'm afraid we'll still be here tomorrow morning."

Pausing, he looked at each of them in turn, his gaze only stopping for a brief moment on Lucia before moving on to the next, and he suggested,

"If you can't come to a decision, why don't you just ask the other Myrtharian Nerds? After all, it concerns them too. Voting will be limited to regular members only."

The 500,000 natives of Quanoth who had just joined or were on the waiting list might not grasp the nuances between the two skills. Among them were ordinary natives who had never fought.

Hearing his suggestion, his friends ceased their quarreling and seriously considered the option.

"That's a good idea," Hade agreed.

"Let's do this," Asfrid nodded.

"We should have started with this from the beginning," Will said with a wry smile.

Lucia merely grumbled. Admitting defeat in the debate wasn't easy, but since the suggestion came from Jake, she had no choice but to concede the point.

With his companions' support, Jake drafted the message in the Faction Chat and shared the details of his two bloodline abilities. The reactions from the keyboard warriors lurking in the chat quickly blossomed.

[Nicolet: WTF?! These abilities are totally OP!] [Aurum: Grade 10 Energy Body?! My Midas Bloodline will become invincible with these skills.]

[Tim: Boss... Still interested in trading a drop of Blood Essence with me?]

[Peter Brady: It massively increases passive Aether point production?! All the precious drugs in the Oracle Store will be mine!]

Jake was speechless as he scrolled through the thread of responses. Fortunately, though the Myrtharian Nerds loved to comment on everything, they didn't forget to participate in the poll. Fifteen minutes later, the voting ended, and they got their answer.

"Yay! I won!" Lucia immediately jumped into the air with a triumphant fist, her exuberance infectious.

From her elation alone, it was clear that Cosmic D Starfeyrves Body had won. Hade and Asfrid could only gaze at her with a mixture of resignation and disappointment. As for Will, deep down, he was rather pleased.

'More money' He thought happily.

With the choice made, Jake selected his Cosmic D Starfeyrves Body as the first permanent passive Faction Skill, expecting it to go just like last time with the Myrtharian Body passive.

But this time, an unpleasant surprise awaited him. A notification from the Oracle System suddenly popped into his mind, and his vision blurred as he read its contents.

[Permanent Passive Skill lv112: Cosmic D Starfeyrves Body (45% (40>65% or +5% per level) of the leader's capacity)...]

[Upon analysis, the bodies of faction members cannot withstand the energy cost of transformation required to generate a Grade 10 Energy Body (65%). This can be compensated for by an adequate sum of Aether points. The Aether point cost per member is estimated at 1 Septillion Aether points per person. Do you wish to proceed with the transformation?]

## Chapter 937: A Reasonable Oracle

937 A Reasonable Oracle

Upon beholding Jake's countenance darken, his friends' hearts turned cold, sensing the ill tidings that loomed.

"Is something amiss?" Will inquired, his voice laced with anxiety. His future prosperity hinged on the response.

Jake paused, as if frozen in time, before reciting the content of the notification and heaving a frustrated sigh, "I fear my initial plan may be a flight of fancy."

Hade stroked his chin and murmured softly, "As expected."

Jake spun towards the ancient Fluid Grandmaster, raising a suspicious eyebrow, "You already had your doubts?"

His youthful-looking friend, over a century and a half in age, nodded serenely and said, "I held a glimmer of hope that the Oracle might be generous, allowing us to exploit a loophole, but this outcome aligns with the modus operandi of the Oracle System."

Asfrid patted Will's shoulder in a consoling gesture and added absentmindedly, "A Grade 10 Energy Body is too precious and difficult to create. I have no doubt the Oracle can accomplish it, but the energy required to create the equivalent of all those Grade 10 Energy Cores cannot be replaced. To forge it, you devoured the giant sun of Quanoth, right? How many similar giant stars must be consumed to provide the Aether necessary to equip each member with the equivalent of a Grade 10 Aether Core? I'm afraid it's simply not feasible."

"What do we do now?" Will queried their opinion, his hope dwindling.

"Simple," Hade spread his arms as if it were obvious. "Two avenues to pursue. The Septillion Aether points required to transform each person's body may seem astronomically steep, but I believe it's actually a fair bargain. Creating a Grade 10 Aether Core demands far more Aether than that. There's an easy explanation for this discount: The Faction Skill doesn't truly transform our bodies. Our appearances returning to normal as soon as the Myrtharian Body passive vanished is proof. Based on my understanding of Aether, the Oracle employs an Aether Spell mimicking the effects of this Bloodline Skill. Ambient Aether and our body's energy likely suffice for such spells. However, to ensure such a high passive Aether production, there's no cheating. Each Aether point produced must be drawn from somewhere."

Jake instantly grasped his meaning. The previous Myrtharian Body stemming from his Faction Skill and his own Myrtharian Body granted similar appearances and capabilities on the surface, but the methods differed. If he were to compare his Bloodline's Aether Code to DNA, it allowed for the production of various enzymes, hormones, and proteins in diverse quantities based on gene expression, influencing every aspect of his organism. His Myrtharian Body could be perceived as the visible result.



However, as science had proven time and again, modifying an individual's DNA wasn't necessary to alter their appearance. A person with poor genetics for muscle development could still inject steroids and other modern anabolics to simulate and even surpass what their DNA was incapable of.

Through its Faction Skill, the Oracle merely reproduced Jake's Myrtharian Body's "symptoms" on the other faction members, but their Aether Code likely remained unchanged.

Otherwise, their bloodlines would have displayed the word 'Myrtharian'.

And so, the exorbitant cost of simulating a Cosmic D Starfeyrves Body for each faction member was laid bare. Jake discerned that the Grade 10 Energy Body had little to do with his bloodline or Aether Code, but rather stemmed from his consumption of a Grade 10 Aether Core. No Aether Spell could replicate such a thing unless the spell itself possessed energy surpassing the latter.

"You've yet to reveal the two avenues you mentioned," Lucia cut to the chase.

"Getting to that," Hade tasked. "The first method I'm considering is, rather than an instantaneous transformation, to see if the Oracle System can delay the transformation by making it more gradual, allowing each faction member to finance it at their own pace. It would be akin to nurturing their own Aether Core bit by bit."

Jake asked Xi to verify, and she promptly confirmed it was possible. It seemed the Oracle was not entirely unreasonable. Still, it was not without drawbacks.

"The second method," Hade continued, "involves fragmenting the transformation. The Grade 10 Energy Body is not the most crucial aspect, but rather, reclaiming the lost benefits of the Myrtharian Body. The highly morphable body, the adaptability to any environment and situation, perfect digestion, the ability for cells to strengthen by devouring energy, and optimizing their own DNA and Aether Code these are the most important. Unlike the Myrtharian Body, our body stats are no longer amplified by a certain percentage, but in return, we progress much faster. So initially, we could ask the Oracle to provide a Cosmic D Starfeyrves Body for all faction members while disregarding the accompanying Grade 10 Energy."

Jake asked Xi to verify again, and this time he was genuinely surprised to learn it was also possible. With this approach, the cost of transformation per faction member was only 10 Quadrillion Aether points Per year.

Anyone other than him would have wept at the discovery of this amount.

"It's because you're no longer beginners," the Oracle Guardian Saros patiently explained as he registered the indignant complaints of the filthy rich Evolver he was supposed to monitor.

"What do you mean?" Will's heart skipped a beat.

He recalled hearing something similar before, but without the Portable Oracle Store Skill like Jake, he hadn't had time to check the new prices. However, even before his Fourth Ordeal, he had personally noticed that most prices had increased considerably compared to when he appeared on B842 the first time.

"Like when you used a Yellow Cube to teleport across vast distances," the alien critiqued matter-of-factly, crossing his four arms. "The Oracle charged you a paltry fee of a few Aether points when it required at least a Grade 8 Aether Core to move someone such a distance. It's more expensive now, but still reasonable since the various Yellow Cubes are equipped with their own Aether Cores and connected via an invisible Aether network.

"As for your Cosmic D Starfeyrves Body, 10 Quadrillion per year may seem like a lot, but to obtain 65% of an unknown Grade, yet higher than 10, bloodline body is surely worth it. At least, if it were up to me, I'd pay the 10 Quadrillion without hesitation to also obtain your Cosmic D Starfeyrves Body. These 10 Quadrillion Aether points correspond to the energy needed to support the Aether Spell behind this Faction Skill. With the Grade 10 Energy, the Cosmic D Starfeyrves Body can support itself. Hence the fact that this septillion only has to be paid once instead of paying 10 quadrillions per year."

It was an indirect admission. Even an Oracle Guardian, equivalent to an Eight or Ninth Ordeal Evolver, did not possess such a superior bloodline.

Jake also realized something else while listening to Saros. If this permanent Faction Skill was the product of an Aether Spell, he ought to be able to perceive it, especially one consuming such vast energy.

Intrigued, he first paid 10 quadrillion Aether points for himself and his present comrades and swiftly shifted into Lucid Aetherdreamer mode. Reality's veil tore asunder, and an indescribable vista filled his vision.

At level 12, his Faction Skills were no longer as weak as before. The effect of 65% of his Cosmic D Starfeyrves Body swiftly overlaid the first, inciting profound changes within his very being.

Jake's instinct was to focus his attention on seeking minuscule Aether Runes and strands of Dream Aethers, but he found nothing matching this Faction Skill. Perhaps even for the Oracle, generating the hyper-compressed Aether Code of a bloodline with a Grade beyond 10 was not so easily achieved.

In that case, how were the same effects replicated? Jake pondered the question earnestly, and his eyes lit up as he considered another possibility.

A macro spell?

He extended his mental sense as far as it could reach, and there he found it. A colossal Aether Symbol of astounding complexity. Each Aether Rune was larger than himself, and though their Aether density was inferior to his own highly compressed Aether Code, they compensated with size and sheer quantity.

It could have been an opportunity for Jake to study the Aether Code simulating his Cosmic D Starfeyrves Body, but unfortunately, the details were blurred. It was not simply to vex him but rather the Oracle's means of ensuring the confidentiality of its clients' secrets. Otherwise, any skilled Aetherist capable of peering into the Aetherdream would be able to deduce the Faction Skills of the Myrtharian Nerds with a single glance.

Now that they had a solution, Jake unflinchingly paid the required 10 quadrillion Aether points for each member, then set the Faction Skill to allow them to finance the associated Grade 10 Energy Body at their own pace if they were interested.

Saros, the Oracle Guardian, even offered another suggestion. To expedite the process, they could choose to barter something equivalent rather than simply use Aether points.

He was not, of course, suggesting that they sell precious Aether Artifacts at rock-bottom prices to the Oracle System, but rather exchange Aether Cores. According to the alien, offering a Grade 6 Aether Core in exchange would definitely allow them to obtain a Grade 6, or at least Grade 5, Energy Body immediately.

It could save them considerable time.

With this suggestion, Jake and the others finally saw the light at the end of the tunnel. For Jake and Hade, creating low-grade Aether Cores was child's play.

## **Chapter 938: Crossroads**

### **938 Crossroads**

As soon as Jake paid the 10 quadrillion Aether points required per person, the once dormant Permanent Passive Faction Skill finally surged to life. The changes were instantaneous.

Hade, Will, Lucia, and Asfrid, standing nearby, immediately felt a medley of tingling, itching, pain, and pleasure coursing through their bodies like an electric jolt. These conflicting sensations mirrored the tumultuous transformations and unusual strains their cells were subjected to.

Swiftly, their skin, regardless of its original appearance or hue, lightened drastically, becoming alarmingly pale in Hade's case, who was already sickly in complexion. Even

Lucia, whose skin originally bore a naturally tanned olive tone, found herself fair-skinned.

Cloaked in microscopic, invisible, crystalline scales, their skin shimmered as if they were vigorously rubbing glitter upon themselves, draping their bodies with a veil of stars.

Coinciding with and contrary to their paling skin, their hair darkened explosively. The golden curls that graced Lucia's silky tresses turned to a dark gold, while Will's now emerald-green and Asfrid's seaweed-blue hair similarly darkened. Once again, Hade, who already possessed jetblack hair, only had his sickly and shadowy appearance accentuated.

Through the Aetherdream, Jake could see the colossal Aether Symbol encasing each member of his faction, including himself, had begun to act like a magical formation, showering them with its mutagenic aura.

As with the Myrtharian Body, Jake, being a faction member, also benefitted from the Cosmic D Starfeyrves Body passive, boosting each attribute of his already exceptional physique by an additional 65%. His body, already fundamentally transformed, instantly experienced the bonus, but for his comrades, it would likely take anywhere from a few minutes to several days, depending on their individual Constitution and Vitality.

Evidently, his present friends were among the elite of the Myrtharian Nerds, and even Will and Asfrid, who weren't primarily melee fighters, completed their evolution within a matter of seconds.

Now a Dragon Rider, then a Soulspeaker, and finally a Dragon Soulspeaker, Will had addressed his primary weakness - his physique - through his fusion with Charizard.

Seeing Will's mutation finish before Asfrid's, who, in addition to her pure-blooded Eltarian lineage, was also a Nereid - a sea deity with a body adapted to the high pressures of the ocean depths - piqued Jake's curiosity.

"Is it just me, or has your body become much sturdier than before?" He asked with undisguised interest.

Will, sweating profusely and silently clenching his teeth in pain, his jaw tense as he tried to ignore the muscular and bony protrusions growing in his back and gradually tearing his shoulder blades, saw Jake's question as the perfect distraction and hastened to explain, "I have a Soul Class Skill called Draconic Link. It's a legacy from my previous Dragon Rider Soul Class. The connection between me and my dragon affects us both. Charizard becomes increasingly human, while I become increasingly dragon. It was meant to be a very slow evolutionary process, but since I became a Dragon Soulspeaker, I'm no longer limited to a single Draconic Link. All the dragons that joined me formed a Draconic Link with me, while my Draconic Link with Charizard evolved into

Draconic Fusion. My bloodline is currently ambiguously called Half-Hybrid Dragon, but thanks to it, my Body Stats, which were once my weakness, are growing rapidly."

As Will concluded his explanation, a pair of emerald fairy wings blossomed from his back, albeit somewhat more membranous and cartilaginous, resembling dragon wings. After testing his newfound appendages, he retracted them into his body with a mere thought.

In contrast, Asfrid, Lucia, and Hade fumbled a bit more in mastering the art of concealing their own wings.

"I've grown accustomed to my partial dragon transformation," The merchant chuckled modestly, met with puzzled expressions from his friends.

Nevertheless, even Lucia, the least astute of the four, needed only a fraction of a second to familiarize herself with her new wings. The eager sparkle in her eyes revealed her anticipation to test them in open skies.

Unlike Lucia, Hade and Asfrid closed their eyes, utterly captivated by their newfound ability to retain all sorts of information within their cells, using it to evolve or modify their appearances.

"Fascinating," Hade finally sighed, opening his eyes. "Merely touching my skin to the artificial atmosphere of your Floating Island allowed my entire body to adapt and restructure. My skin cells now breathe as efficiently as my lungs, yet even more impressively, they emit nothing. Nitrogen, carbon dioxide, and other atmospheric gases are all converted into energy. Simply put, your respiration consists only of inhalation. If not for occasional speech with your own mouth, you'd have no need to exhale at all."

In truth, Jake didn't need to inhale either. His cells could directly absorb Aether and all sorts of energies, converting them into whatever they needed. Out of habit, he continued to breathe normally with his lungs, but it was entirely unnecessary. It also distinguished him from the lifeless and undead.

"I'm glad you're enjoying my Cosmic D Starfeyrves Body," Jake finally said before briefly reminding them, "We still have two Faction Skills to choose."

His friends grew serious, and further deliberations ensued.

The level 10 Faction Skill was unique, almost as special as the permanent level 1 skill.

Rather than being as expected, it acted as a crossroads for the Faction, determining its future direction and development. Faction Skills were limited, but each could have a decisive impact on the faction and its members if exploited properly.

All shared a common goal - addressing the Myrtharian Nerds' population issue:

[Megafaction: Allows the faction to exceed its member limit, normally restricted by faction level. Each additional level equates to an additional faction level concerning population limit.]

[Faction Expansion: Allows the faction to increase its size by subjugating new factions.

These vassal factions lose their previous Faction Skills except one, replaced by a nerfed 50% version from the dominant faction. Each level allows the subjugation of an additional faction.]

[Faction Diplomacy: Allows the faction to improve its relations with other factions and form strategic alliances. The faction leader can designate an allied faction as the primary ally at any time, allowing their faction to use a nerfed version of their Faction Skills (5%). Each additional level reduces this nerf by an additional 5%.]

[Faction Technology: Allows the faction to increase its theoretical member limit by not counting artificial life forms and intelligences. In compensation, the effects of other Faction Skills on these members are nerfed by 95%. Each additional level reduces this nerf by 5%.]

[Faction Citizens: Allows the faction to increase its theoretical member limit by not counting Civilians. Any Evolver who has completed four or fewer Ordeals and has not participated in an Ordeal for at least 5 years is considered Civilian. With each additional level, the conditions for being considered a Faction Citizen become slightly more lenient.]

[Faction Resources: Allows the faction to increase its theoretical member limit by not counting mineral, plant, or animal life forms whose sole purpose is resource production for the faction. In compensation, the effects of other Faction Skills are nerfed by 95%. Each additional level reduces this nerf by 5%.]

[Faction Territorial Aura: Any individual acknowledged as residing within a faction member's territory (Floating Island or Oracle City) may also benefit from a nerfed 95% version of the Faction Skills of said faction. Each additional level reduces this nerf by 5%.]

[Warrior Faction: Enables the faction to surpass its theoretical member limit by conscripting a temporary army for up to 1 month per year (stackable), endowed with all the privileges of regular faction members. This temporary army can comprise at level 1 ten times as many soldiers as the faction's member limit. Each additional level doubles the maximum number of soldiers and increases the duration the army can be maintained by 0.025 years.]

Beyond these, a few other notable Faction Skills existed, but to their discerning eyes, these were the most captivating. Each held its distinct strengths, from the harmonious,



non-specific prowess of Megafaction to the razor-sharp situational expertise of Warrior Faction.

Jake could already fathom the skill New Earth had chosen. Faction Citizens was the sole option that deftly accommodated a substantial noncombatant population without imposing limiting conditions. All the others enforced restrictions, whether on the very nature of the additional members or their roles.

For example, Faction Resources might have seemed amicable at first blush, but Xi had corroborated that the term "resources" did not allude to associated jobs such as miners or farmers, but rather to the individuals themselves.

An Evolver apple tree, spontaneously yielding apples, fulfilled this criterion. Should Melkree ever bear fruit, she too would be eligible for the Resource Member status.

On the flip side... For certain life forms, some of these skills appeared, in no uncertain terms, to be tantamount to a cheat.

Faction Technology was nothing short of a heavenly boon for the Replicators. If the Oracle had not incorporated hidden limitations, the theoretical population ceiling for the Replicators would know no bounds.

PS: Will upload More after getting pics.

## **Chapter 939: Sorry. Don't Mind Me.**

939 Sorry. Don't Mind Me.

"You decide, Jake." Hade relented.

To him, vacillating in uncertainty was worse than making a wrong decision. Asfrid and Lucia seemed to share this belief, for they fell silent at once, turning to Jake as if awaiting his verdict.

Will's lips twitched with dissatisfaction, but ultimately he wasn't the leader of the Myrtharian Nerds. Jake offered a wry smile upon seeing his sullen expression. The merchant had strained to persuade them to choose either Faction Citizens or Faction Territorial Aura, to no avail.

None of them were fools, and they had no trouble discerning his intentions. By offering asylum to as many Civilians as possible, then providing them with work and decent pay, they could be exploited for a steady and continuous flow of profit through low-cost labor.



Without one of these two Faction Skills, it was entirely possible to house these refugees on their territory and even grant them citizen status in a fabricated nation of their choice, but this status would confer no advantages or guarantees. Only the promise of safety would remain valid, but Jake and his faction would be under no obligation to honor their commitments.

Viewed in this light, joining the territory of a malevolent Evolver could be akin to leaping into the jaws of a wolf. That's why, apart from a few naive or desperate individuals, most people preferred to live miserably in an Oracle Shelter rather than migrate to a Floating Island of an Evolver who refused to admit them into their own faction.

If Jake had chosen Faction Citizens or Faction Territorial Aura and paid the 10 quadrillion Aether points required to activate the permanent faction skill for each of these Civilians, he would have provided an absolute guarantee in the first case and evidence of his good faith in the second.

After all, while Faction Territorial Aura did not make these Civilians full-fledged faction members, who would be willing to spend 10 quadrillion Aether points for each of them? If Jake were genuinely prepared to pay such a sum, Will was certain that he would only have to spread the news via the Oracle System across B842 to see billions of desperate humans and aliens flocking to the gates of their Yellow Cubes.

Unfortunately for the merchant, Jake, like Hade, Lucia, and Asfrid, didn't care about welcoming all these refugees to put them to work. These Civilians could seek shelter under their wings and search for their protection, but they only wanted truly useful Evolvers in their faction, worthy of investing in.

The refugees Jake had recruited before his Fourth Ordeal during the Dungeon Digestor incident were exceptions, benefiting from unique circumstances. Some had proven their worth, like Nicolet or Ingranus The Bold, but even if the majority had shed their cowardice, their level and character still left much to be desired.

After Lucia, Asfrid, Gerulf, Rogen, Ulfar, and their elites joined the Myrtharian Nerds, the contrast between these refugees and them became even more pronounced, with their performance during the Fourth Ordeal being subpar.

Although Jake didn't intend to refuse all the Quanoth natives they had saved, he was already considering expelling those who were unqualified in the future. Of course, his goal wasn't to abandon them. By then, a second or even a third faction would have been created to care for them. This could be seen as the second or third division of a soccer team.

In that case, it would only take the appointment of a trustworthy Myrtharian Nerd veteran, no longer intending to partake in the Ordeals, to lead them. One of his abilities would then become the new Permanent Passive Faction Skill for these new vassal

factions. As long as the Myrtharian Nerds and these vassal factions were bound by a legitimate Oracle Contract, there would be no issue.

Seen this way, Faction Expansion was not necessarily a better choice, as the 50% nerf and the requirement for these subordinate factions to have the same faction skills could, in fact, hinder them.

Thus, since Jake only planned to recruit talented members in his main faction, capable of performing highly during the Ordeals or outside, there remained only three valid choices:

Megafaction, Faction Diplomacy, and Warrior Faction.

As Faction Diplomacy did not allow for overcoming the inherent member limit, Jake automatically excluded it from his selection list, reducing the number of options to two.

One could argue that for a faction composed almost exclusively of fighters, the ability to access the Faction Skills of an allied faction, even nerfed, was an intriguing advantage. The snag was that the benefit compared to the massive number of members they could recruit with the other two skills was clearly insignificant.

That is, unless they allied with an extraordinary faction like Demiurges or Lost Divinities, but even these superfactions favored the other options. In the long run, more population was always preferable.

In the end, Faction Diplomacy was best suited for those small factions of only a few individuals for whom an extra skill could directly reflect on their combat prowess.

After checking the information on Megafaction and Warrior Faction one last time, Jake spoke aloud, "I won't repeat everything we've discussed previously, so let's focus on Megafaction and Warrior Faction. Megafaction is the default, balanced choice. There are no loopholes to exploit with this skill, but it also has no real flaws. Its reliability and predictability make it appealing."

Will reluctantly nodded in agreement.

"On the other hand," Jake continued, "Warrior Faction allows for temporarily recruiting more members at equal faction level but has more drawbacks. However, as long as we're not in a total and ongoing war with another faction, we can maximize its benefits. For example, by planning our Ordeal days or missions. The problem is that we cannot predict the future. If tomorrow we're invaded by an infinite horde of Digestors, or worse, other factions, our temporary army of a few months would become our weakness.

"At first glance, one might think that Warrior Faction is more interesting in the long run. For each additional level, the duration this temporary army can be maintained increases

by over nine days. Assuming our faction can reach a high enough level, this army could then be maintained indefinitely, outperforming Megafaction by a factor of 50.

"But that's a sham. To accomplish this feat, we must raise our faction level to 37. Not to mention the amount of Aether points required for all these upgrades, the real obstacle is the Oracle Rank. The highest Oracle Rank I know of, thanks to my AI, is General, corresponding to Oracle Rank 21. We must not be misled by my Oracle Rank 17 of Colonel. Even though only four ranks separate these two grades, I am certain that climbing so high in the Mirror Universe hierarchy is not so eas-

A cough interrupted his speech. All eyes turned to the culprit, Will. Nonetheless, Jake noticed that Lucia was also trembling with surprise. He could see that her gaze burned with a mix of pride and competitiveness...

"Sorry. Don't mind me." Will awkwardly apologized, rubbing his sore chest. "I was just surprised. And to think I was proud of reaching Grade 13 of First Lieutenant..."

It was no small feat for a merchant like him.

Asfrid gently patted him on the back to console him, but though she wore a calmer facade, deep down she was just as disheartened.

Hade was undoubtedly the most disappointed, especially after Lucia lifted her chin, boasting through gritted teeth, "Hmmp! You've bested me by one rank, Jake.

I'm merely a Lieutenant Colonel..."

Her face softened, and she added cheerfully, giving him a playful wink, "I wouldn't expect anything less from my boyfriend."

Jake just wanted to vanish into the earth. Where was the shy, introverted princess he had met in a dingy antique infirmary four Ordeals earlier?

In the end, he was saved by Hade and Asfrid, who also shared their Oracle Ranks. Both were one rank below Lucia, as Majors. Asfrid was just at the beginning of Oracle Rank 15, while Hade was only a few Ordeal Credits short of reaching Rank 16. That amounted to nearly an 800 Credit difference.

Alas, only the results mattered. Hade had indeed been outclassed by Jake and Lucia, despite his vast experience and an overwhelming advantage during his first three Ordeals.

"Cough, to return to the matter at hand..." Jake raised his voice to conceal his embarrassment. "Even if there were 16 Oracle Ranks existing beyond General, which I highly doubt, even including nobility ranks, it's so remote that if we ever reach that Rank, the advantage of Warrior Faction over Megafaction would likely no longer matter.

And who knows if by then we won't be able to choose another Faction Skill in that vein, like at level 20 or 30?

"Consequently, I advocate for choosing Megafaction." He concluded calmly.

This time, no one, not even Will, contested his decision. All that remained was to select the final Faction Skill unlocked at level 12, which was more conventional.

Following the Fourth Ordeal, where they were often separated, sometimes by vast distances, United We Stand could not always be utilized to its fullest extent. When the Lost Divinities tested them after their conquest of Laudarkvik, the Myrtharian Nerds were, in fact, scattered across Quanoth to pilfer the liquid alloy from stray Players under Jake's orders.

These vicious deities had indeed exploited their isolation into small squads to ambush them simultaneously and teach them a lesson. Thus, in the spirit of Vitality Link, Jake and his friends decided on another Faction Skill from the same series: Space Link.

## **Chapter 940: Poor Vincent**

### 940 Poor Vincent

[Space Link: Allows each member to establish a space link with other faction members of their choice. Once established, it is possible to teleport to the side of or summon the designated faction member with their consent by paying the required Aether points for travel. Following the establishment of a Space Link, it remains immutable for 24 hours. One can decline a Space Link request. The number of Aether points required increases with distance and other local factors such as space stability or Aether density. Each additional level allows for the concurrent establishment of an additional Space Link.]

This novel Faction Skill adeptly complemented Vitality Link and United We Stand, conveniently allowing Myrtharian Nerds with the means to afford its services to congregate. One should not be misled by the limited number of Space Links.

At first glance, at level 12, they could establish only 12 simultaneous Space Links, and there was a 24-hour cooldown before they could change them. However, the key was that a loophole within the skill could easily be exploited to perform a rally if the situation demanded it.

If, by misfortune, a beleaguered Myrtharian Nerd found themselves compelled to establish 12 Space Links with other Myrtharian Nerds to summon them to their side, and they consented, the previously solitary Evolver would form a group of 13.

But this did not account for the Space Links of the twelve companions who had teleported to the summoner's side. One of their twelve respective Space Links would be automatically locked for the next 24 hours, connecting them to their summoner, but their remaining 11 Space Links were still at their disposal.

Since there was no delay in activating these Space Links, save for the response time of the contacted companions, it was indeed possible, through a simple chain reaction of summons, to rally millions of separate Players across vast distances in the blink of an eye.

The only true unknown was the amount of Aether points that would be consumed during the process. This cost increased proportionally with the distance separating the two connected Evolvers and could, in theory, become an insurmountable chasm.

After all, not all their comrades were as wealthy as Jake; most had only a few tens or hundreds of millions of Aether points after saving for many months. Sometimes, they had only a few Aether points left, especially after spending everything to survive or seize various opportunities during their last Ordeal.

Jake, Will, and the others were naturally aware of this uncertain factor, but it was better than nothing. Had it been the pre-Fourth Ordeal Jake, he might have thought twice, but now that he was flush with resources and a veritable money factory, he was not entirely powerless against this problem.

To enable the poorest Myrtharian Nerds to use the Space Link as well, whether to flee or request reinforcements, they simply needed to be allowed to use the Aether points stored in the Faction Aether Storage directly. To prevent some fool on the other side of the cosmos from draining their treasury with a single Space Link, they would need to set up an AI to monitor such actions, but with their Oracle AIS, it was not difficult.

Heck, with his supercomputer-like intelligence and the year he had spent studying various sciences and technologies, Jake was relatively confident he could code an AI capable of handling this responsibility himself. And he could do it all in just a few hours if he really put his mind to it. Chat GPT and its clones had better watch out!

Continuing this line of thought, Jake transferred 10 of his Sextillions of Aether points into the Faction Aether Storage to replenish their faction's coffers. Reviewing the new Faction Status, he couldn't help but nod with satisfaction.

[Faction Name: Myrtharian Nerds]

[Faction level: Lv112 (Promotional conditions: 100 Qa Aether pts, Oracle Rank Brigadier General or higher)]

[Number of members: 135839/419 430 400]

[Faction Aether Storage: IOS pts]

[Aether production: 0 pts/s]

[Faction Skills:]

[Permanent Passive Skill lv112: Cosmic D Starfeyrves Body (45% (40>65% or +5% per level) of the leader's capacity)... Due to the estimated cost of 1 Septillion Aether points per person to simulate a Grade 10 Energy Body, it is temporarily inaccessible. To access all the features of Cosmic D Starfeyrves Body, each faction member can finance this amount at their own pace, starting by simulating a lower-grade Energy Body first.]

[Faction Space Vault lv112: 20400 (double with each level) cubic meters of shared storage space, accessible to authorized members and compartmentalizable into several blocks depending on the level of authorization and trust. Activation cost: 100 000 Aether pts/day. The daily cost can be shared by the faction's members.]

[Vitality Link lv112: Allows the temporary transfer of member vitality to the Skill Activator. An injury can also be transferred to another member with their agreement. Cost: Free. Starting at level 10, each additional level enables an additional simultaneous Vitality Link, allowing multiple faction members to share injuries. Maximum number of Vitality Links activatable simultaneously per person: 3.]

[United We Stand lv112: For each member present within 1200 meters, Aether, Body, and Soul stats will be boosted by 1.2%. For each additional level, the range increases by 100 meters and the boost by 0.1%. Aether Cost: 1M Aether points per minute.]

[Megafaction lv112: Allows the faction to exceed its member limit, normally restricted by faction level. Each additional level equates to an additional faction level concerning population limit.]

[Space Link lv112: Allows each member to establish a space link with other faction members of their choice. Once established, it is possible to teleport to the side of or summon the designated faction member with their consent by paying the required Aether points for travel. Following the establishment of a Space Link, it remains immutable for 24 hours. One can decline a Space Link request. The number of Aether points required increases with distance and other local factors such as space stability or Aether density. Each additional level allows for the concurrent establishment of an additional Space Link. Maximum number of Space Links activatable simultaneously per person: 12.]

[Main Floating Island affiliate: 46] [Subfactions:

Myrtharian Scavengers, The Aristocats, Myrmidian Nerds.]



As the Myrtharian Nerds received the Oracle System notification announcing the changes at the same time, reactions quickly flooded the faction chat.]

[Aurum: This Space Link is great, but I fear it may not be as practical as some imagine. What really gets me is... WTF! Where did these 10 Sextillions of Aether points in the Faction Storage come from?!]

[Vincent Wilderth: ... After being captured by Lost Divinity, I was toyed to death by a damned firebird named Flend. My body and a good portion of my Spirit Body were completely incinerated... I have precisely 1 Aether Point left, and now I'm supposed to pay 1 Septillion Aether points for a Faction Skill? Anyone want to help me die again?]

[Lord Phenix: I dont recall that event. But anyway, this Overlord is more than willing to assist you in dying again.]

[Vincent Wilderth: @&

## **Chapter 941: Oracle Overseer Summit**

### 941 Oracle Overseer Summit

As the Myrtharian Nerds jubilantly responded to the announcement of new faction skills, discussing everything and nothing in the faction chat, a summit with far more dramatic consequences for the future of the Mirror Universe and its inhabitants had just come to an end.

System ZZ831, Oracle Capital of Planet AO.

At the summit of a monstrous skyscraper -a colossal black metal tower as massive as a small moon- an equally gigantic Yellow Cube suddenly sprang to life, blinking intermittently.

This giant cube, resembling a titanic amber jewel, hovered peacefully a few meters above the ground, bathing the entire Oracle Capital in its soft light. Dispensing its warm radiance, gentle to the eyes, it mingled with the light of other differently colored Cubes, each equally magnificent and gigantic, together forming a multicolored tapestry evoking the most sublime auroras.

The skyscraper and this cube together formed the central Transportation Tower of Planet AO, a technological behemoth reserved for the private use of the governor of this System and a few privileged elites who could afford its services. An unimaginably powerful Aether Core fueled its Yellow Cube, and its use was strictly limited to inter-system travel.



The Yellow Cube continued to blink faster and faster, becoming increasingly blinding, until everything went dark, revealing an alien silhouette at its base.

Xantheo, Rank 5 Oracle Overseer and probationary Governor of System ZZ831, had returned.

On probation because to be eligible for the title of Oracle Governor, the governed System must contain at least 10,000 planets. System ZZ831 currently had only 1,048.

Xantheo had a slender, elongated body covered in iridescent scales that shimmered with a bluish-green hue. He stood at around 7 feet tall, with four arms, each having six digits. His elongated head was adorned with a crown-like crest of vibrant cerulean feathers. He had large, almond-shaped, silver eyes that seemed to pierce through the veil of time. His lower limbs ended in cloven hooves, which gave him a distinctive, elegant gait.

In essence, he was a majestic alien, whose appearance did not disgrace his lofty status. Accustomed to observing trillions of living beings under his jurisdiction with a superior air, Xantheo normally exuded such an oppressive presence that even the Oracle Guardians who made up the palace guard found it difficult to approach him.

It wasn't just his guards who struggled to meet his gaze. Numerous Oracle Overseers managing the planets of the System under his supervision also had great difficulty behaving with dignity in his presence. Especially when he stared at them with inquisitive eyes during their annual reports.

Alas, not today. If anyone could see the current appearance of this feared probationary governor, they would find him pale and drenched in sweat - something that should be impossible for a lifeform as evolved as him.

Noticing two Oracle Guardians of his guard flying toward him to receive him, Xantheo evaporated the sweat on his forehead and soaked clothes with a single thought and, clearing his throat, forced himself to rebuild his intimidating and regal facade.

As the two Oracle Guardians landed in perfect sync before him, kneeling with their hands clasped in a sign of respect, his two lower arms joined behind his back, giving him an air of sovereign calm. With his two other hands, he gestured for them to rise.

Straightening up, the alien on the right immediately noticed his superior's strange behavior and was tempted to ask a question better left unasked. Sometimes, ignorance was bliss.

"Your Highness, what are your commands? Do you have any news or decrees to announce?" The alien to the left tactfully inquired, before his colleague could succumb to excessive curiosity.

Rather than responding immediately, Xantheo heaved a weary sigh, his dread of the impending challenges already weighing heavily upon him.

"Not just yet," he answered after a brief pause, his voice laden with fatigue. "Before that, I want you to summon all the Oracle Overseers to my palace for an emergency conference. They must attend in person, whether physically or by hologram. No one may shirk this order by sending someone else in their stead. I cannot stress this enough... Those who disregard this command or feign busyness will face severe consequences."

"All the Oracle Overseers from ZZ831?!" The left Oracle Guardian stammered in astonishment. Even the annual gathering, where they presented their reports, could be delegated to a trusted subordinate. Xantheo had always tolerated some absences, so long as the provided excuses were credible.

"I will not repeat myself," Xantheo growled coldly, finally managing to shake off the anxiety that had gnawed at him.

No longer able to contain himself, the right Oracle Guardian, who had remained silent until now, cautiously gave in to his curiosity and asked,

"W-what is really happening? Should we be concerned?"

The left Oracle Guardian wished to sew his lips shut to silence him, but it was too late. His body tensed, anticipating a verbal lashing or being pinned to the ground by a surge of spiritual pressure, but neither transpired.

Instead, Xantheo thoughtfully twirled his cerulean feathers, contemplating his choice of words before somberly announcing, "You will find out soon enough. And yes... You should be worried. Now, get to work."

As if he could no longer hear them, Xantheo strode heavily and with a face burdened by concern toward his palace, leaving the two Oracle Guardians bewildered. Suddenly recalling the command they had been given, their minds snapped back into action, and they hastily relayed the directive to the other planets in the System.

Precisely one hour later, the conference room in Xantheo's Oracle Palace was filled to capacity, each seat occupied by a fearsome Oracle Overseer and one or two Khaanul bodyguards the most common among Oracle Guardians.

Very few Overseers employed Oracle Guardians of other species or independent Evolvers in their close protection. There was a historical reason for this.

The Khaanuls were rumored to be an artificially created race, designed to serve the Oracle. They were inherently loyal and more resistant to Corruption than most other species in the Mirror Universe.

Among these Oracle Overseers and Guardians, blending in discreetly on a platform, were Oros and his loyal sidekick Garos.

Seated comfortably in his floating shuttle-chair above the ground, the thin, bamboo-like neck of the small but powerful alien swayed imperceptibly, carried by the shifting air currents in the room. His long neck was topped by a tiny, golf ball-sized head devoid of eyes, nose, ears, and mouth, rendering his thoughts unfathomable. Despite this, the Oracle Guardian Captain beside him knew Oros was deep in thought and must not be interrupted lest he face a painful reprimand.

As the silence stretched on, Garos respectfully inquired in a hushed tone, "Boss, why do you think we've been summoned here without explanation?"

Oros' neck suddenly ceased its oscillations, and a gentle voice answered telepathically in his head with indifference, "Something serious must have occurred, or an important order must be conveyed in person."

"Something serious? Like what?" Garos inquired with apprehension.

He considered himself experienced, but to his knowledge, he had never heard of a situation requiring the presence of all Oracle Overseers from a System in such short notice.

"The kind of seriousness that threatens the very integrity of the Mirror Universe. I haven't been an Overseer for very long, but before that, I'd heard of similar situations. For instance, when Syntharae and Vorthelax betrayed the Oracle and joined the enemy. Another time was when System A16 fell in just a few days after its leaders suddenly abandoned their posts without informing anyone. Yet another time was when..."

Garos listened with a vacant stare as the diminutive alien mentioned dozens of similar occurrences until he grew numb, but he quickly noticed a pattern. In each case, the cause was a profound upheaval that led to the overall weakening of the Mirror Universe.

It could range from a major catastrophe, like the betrayal of two of the twelve Ancient Designers, to the fall of a System or a key planet/ civilization/individual. In all of these cases, the consequences for the Mirror Universe were almost as heavy as the betrayal of an Ancient Designer.

In light of what Oros had just told him, Garos couldn't help but wonder which Ancient Designer had betrayed them this time.

Sometimes, instinct was a fascinating thing. Although Garos hadn't accurately predicted the news, in some aspects, the truth wasn't far from his assumption—and potentially... much worse.

As Oros finished sharing his anecdotes, the lights in the room suddenly went out, and a projector illuminated a circular platform that swiftly rose, floating in the air where the stage was meant to be. Despite its futuristic, metallic gray appearance, the room was arranged like a vast amphitheater.

The sinister silhouette of Xantheo was lit at the center of the levitating platform by the projector. The Rank 5 Oracle Overseer had never been known for mincing words, and he dove straight into the matter at hand. Drawing a short breath to muster his courage, he darkly declared, "The Ancient Designer Lure has fallen in battle."

## **Chapter 942: Beginning Of The End**

### 942 Beginning Of The End

The news struck the audience like a nuclear bomb, obliterating their composure and poise with the unstoppable force of a shockwave. For a long moment, many Oracle Overseers present were left speechless, gasping for breath before slowly returning to normal.

As the initial shock wore off, panicked and stunned reactions erupted throughout the room. Some remained seated, gripping their chairs and gritting their teeth to resist the vertigo that made their heads spin. Others, refusing to believe it, leaped from their seats and vehemently objected.

"Impossible! No Ancient Designer has ever been killed in battle before!" A highly respected and well-known Rank 4 Oracle Overseer roared in disbelief. A trace of anger could be detected in the tremor of his deep voice, as if he had just been the butt of a tasteless joke.

He was an alien standing at least 10 meters tall, with a relatively humanoid appearance. Muscular, barefoot, and wearing a long robe, his skin was covered in onyx-black scales, horns, and spikes. He could have been the final evolution of a civilization that developed from a carnivorous dinosaur or reptilian species.

Xantheo, known for his intolerance of disrespect, remained calm against all odds, allowing the furious alien to exhaust himself. This was because the spittle-flying creature was in charge of all the A Planets in System ZZ831.

Only one rank separated them, and apart from this disrespectful alien, there was one other recently promoted Rank 4 Oracle Overseer he had to handle carefully: the one in charge of the B Planets.

Speak of the devil, she couldn't let her rival steal the show without reacting, and a rather raspy, chilling feminine voice suddenly cut in, "Are you done whining, Viser?" A brunette

woman who might have been considered attractive, if not for the hundreds of purple eyes covering her face, blinked irritably in his direction.

Her voluptuous chest was concealed by a formfitting combat suit, her appearance undoubtedly appealing to human males - from the back, at least. Or from the front, if they had no issue with trypophobia. The real problem lay below the waist: one leg, two legs, three legs... far too many hairy legs and a massive, glowing orange abdomen.

Unhappy with the interruption, Viser bared his teeth but settled for disdainfully picking at them with his claw, "A little Silk Spinner managing only 848 Planets is hardly qualified to criticize me. Yao, come back when you manage at least 1000 like any self-respecting Rank 4 Overseer. I know Rank 3 Overseers who supervise more planets than y 11 A silk projectile splashed across his face, silencing him mid-sentence. The little Silk Spinner apparently didn't appreciate being prodded where it hurt, her ego unexpectedly fragile.

Seeing her so easily resort to violence, Viser tsked condescendingly, even though his face was still covered in her webbing. Clearly, this wasn't their first clash. And not his first victory either.

Once provoked, Viser would never hold back, to the point where he had amassed countless enemies. Despite a physique predisposing him to violence, appearances could be deceiving. His mind worked just fine; otherwise, he wouldn't have climbed the ranks to his current position.

When one reach their level and have lived as long as they have, there isn't much left in life to motivate them. His squabbles and bickering with his new colleague and rival brightened his days, and she was one of the few reasons he got up every morning.

Xantheo and the other Oracle Overseers found themselves riveted to their seats as they witnessed an exchange of barbs and insults that grew increasingly crass, until one of their guards, unable to bear it any longer, reminded them that there were more pressing matters at hand. Yet, their quarrel had not been wholly negative, as it had afforded the other Overseers and Guardians present a chance to recover from the devastating news.

During the squabble, another insignificant Rank 1 Oracle Overseer and his accomplice engaged in a telepathic discussion when the death of the Ancient Designer Lure was announced.

"Garos, pay close attention to the reactions of everyone present," Oros ordered immediately after Xantheo's shocking revelation.

Baffled by the unusual command, the Oracle Guardian Captain momentarily forgot his astonishment and stammered, "B-boss, you think there are traitors among us?"

"Sigh... Is there a single System where there arent?" The small alien retorted somberly.

Hearing his superior's gloomy comment, Garos grew serious and began to scrutinize the Oracle Overseers around him with extreme attention, gauging each of their micro-expressions. He knew it was probably already too late to detect anything, but he did his best to follow Oros's instruction. Because he knew it was an informal way of training him.

Why was it already too late? Because a being of an Oracle Overseer's level had excellent control over their body and emotions. It didn't mean they didn't feel anything—quite the opposite. Proportional to their intelligence, their emotions were sometimes, depending on the species, millions of times more intense than those of ordinary mortals. However, their reaction time and self-control were also an unfathomable number of times higher.

If there were any micro-expressions in response to an emotion, they had to be captured within a timescale shorter than a microsecond, especially if the person in question was trying to suppress them. That was why Garos thought his boss's order had come too late. All those flashy Overseers were probably just putting on a show or loved to make a spectacle of themselves.

"Whom should I be wary of?" He asked solemnly nonetheless.

"Anyone whose reaction is too theatrical, whether it's fear, disbelief, or anger. If it lasts longer than half a second, they're definitely suspicious," Oros lectured patiently.

Garos nodded in agreement, but the alien serving as his boss wasn't finished yet.

"...You must also be wary of those who haven't reacted at all. They may have already known."

Seeing his superior's faceless visage, the Oracle Guardian grimaced bitterly in his mind, You didn't move at all and have no face... If I follow your advice, aren't you the most suspicious of all?

Of course, he had enough functional neurons not to verbalize his opinion. Holding his tongue, he continued to listen dutifully to the small alien's wise counsel.

Those who have suppressed a microexpression of jubilation, mockery, or contempt must also be on your radar. But don't be fooled by those who quickly suppress slight signs of sadness or surprise either. The best liars can also simulate these false emotions to mislead us. In that case, you must observe their Aetheric, spiritual, hormonal, blood, and hormonal fluctuations. And don't forget to..."

Garos took note of all his boss's tips, knowing full well that they were for a future occasion. Ironically, he, who had been tasked by Oros to watch the reactions of those in the room, did not notice the change in atmosphere around his superior.



As the Oracle Guardian hearkened with rapt attention, the aura of the diminutive alien swelled, becoming as keen as a sword's edge poised to be unsheathed. While he educated his subordinate, he had marked 36 Oracle Overseers and their accompanying guards. These treacherous souls fancied themselves cunning, yet their ploys fell short, unable to slip past his vigilant scrutiny.

But there was always a better actor than oneself. A few platforms above them, the recently appointed Oracle Overseer of B847 slowly opened his eyelids, revealing two cold, silver eyes.

If anyone could see the lengthy list of suspects mentally compiled by Oros, they would have discovered that this Oracle Overseer was not among them.

The torrent of insults between the two Rank 4 Oracle Overseers came to an end more or less at the same time, and Xantheo resumed speaking, this time with extreme gravity in his voice, "For those of you who are unaware of what Lure's death means for us and the Mirror Universe, allow me to enlighten you. Lure is known as the Ancient Designer of Energy. She is an Aetheric life form nearly as old as the Mirror Universe itself, and she has devised and maintained the Aether networks that the Oracle System uses to transmit energy and support the various technologies and services it provides. For those who knew her, or rather knew of her, she had another nickname: the Heart of the Mirror Universe.

"Her death... will have numerous consequences, and you must prepare yourselves. The first consequence will be..."

This time, no utterly fake theatrical reactions pierced the silence, and no one interrupted Xantheo for the remainder of his speech.

And yet, Garos, who had just started to apply the lesson from his boss, detected uncontrollable fluctuations in their auras all along. If an average Sixth or Seventh-Ordeal Evolver had stood among them, they would have undoubtedly imploded on the spot.

For of all the possible deaths of Ancient Designers, Lure's demise most closely resembled the beginning of the end. If their Mirror Universe had been teetering on the edge of a precipice up until now, it had just been shoved into the abyss.

## **Chapter 943: He Finished First. Again.**

943 He Finished First. Again.

As Oros and his steadfast sidekick Garos returned to their Oracle Palace, a foreboding aura clung to them, so chilling that the Oracle Guardians tasked with welcoming them were petrified.



What abominable news had they learned to be in such an icy mood? Had they lost a relative? Merely entertaining this improbable possibility, the Khaanul warriors averted their eyes, swallowing nervously.

Regrettably, in a certain way, the truth was far worse. At least for someone like Oros, who cherished material comforts, tranquility, and loathed exertion.

Soon after passing several security perimeters, they were teleported directly into Oros I office or rather, his relaxation chamber—a small metallic gray room as oval as an egg's interior, furnished with every conceivable technology for his amusement. To an alien of a different species, the place would seem as entertaining as a slaughterhouse's cold storage, but Garos had grown accustomed.

Once alone and away from prying ears, Oros heaved a long sigh, while Garos, no longer able to contain himself, bombarded his superior with questions, wearing a constipated grimace.

"Boss... What do you plan to do about what we just learned? Will you reveal it to the Evolvers of B842? Will you shoulder the costs formerly mostly covered by the Oracle System, or will you absolve yourself of responsibility by charging the Evolvers themselves? And what about the Ordeals? The affordable cost of numerous Oracle Skills was only possible due to Lure's rapid energy transmission. The Oracle is powerful, but it cannot provide such a service to the entire Mirror Universe simultaneously. Does this mean it will start playing favorites? That would be the end of..."

"The impartiality of the Oracle System," Oros completed ominously, his voice weary and clearly irritated. The consequences of Lure's death were already making themselves felt.

For instance, the Aether fee for using a Yellow Cube. The Oracle System usually bore most of the expenses through its vast, efficient Aether network that reached every corner of the Mirror Universe.

As long as long-distance teleportations were limited to B842 1 s vicinity, the powerful Aether Cores powering the local Yellow Cubes sufficed most of the time. But when it came to traveling from one planet-ship to another...

Their journey to AO had cost them a modest sum of 100Qi Aether points each, even considering all the privileges and discounts bestowed upon them by their eminent status and Oracle Skills. It seemed like a lot, but the Oracle System still bore the brunt of the energy requirements.

Over such distances, measured in billions upon billions of light-years, even the Aether Cores sustaining the giant Yellow Cubes of their Oracle Capital were no longer enough.

The far-reaching energy network designed by Lure provided the missing energy by drawing from inactive Yellow Cubes' Aether Cores or other sources.

On a more local scale, each Oracle Overseer could, to some extent, influence the various Aether fees charged to the Evolvers under their jurisdiction. Some unscrupulous high-ranking officials didn't hesitate to overcharge their citizens to pocket the excess Aether produced and unused by the Oracle Cubes in their territories.

The residents of B842 were unaware of these details, cursing the Oracle with each price increase. But Oros was one of the most benevolent Oracle Overseers. Expertly managing his planet and its resources, he had minimized the fees charged to his population, strictly adhering to the guidelines set by the Oracle.

Alas, this fiscal shield was on the verge of collapse. Even for the little alien, there were things beyond his means.

Garos and Oros had experienced the consequences firsthand upon their return to B842. Xantheo, the first to be informed and with authority over the entire ZZ831 System, had acted decisively by eliminating all financial and energetic aid for interplanetary and intersystem travel. Simultaneously, Oracle Governors from other systems were enacting similar measures.

It was a race to see who could respond the quickest.

The reason was that the Aether network had suffered severe damage. Whoever the bastards were that killed Lure, they had been thorough. They had also searched her memory to discover all the primary nodes of the Aether network under her care.

The enemy attack had been surgically precise, destroying the most crucial "pipelines" of the Mirror Universe while stealing or destroying the most valuable Aether Cores and energy generators that maintained the delicate balance between need and expenditure.

This operation was of an unprecedented scale. According to Xantheo, the enemies—likely Digestors—had struck all these strategic locations simultaneously, the time between their appearance and disappearance lasting no more than a millionth of a second.

It was only in attempting to understand how such a flawless attack could have occurred that the Oracle and the other Ancient Designers and Oracle Sovereigns discovered that Lure was unreachable. Their hearts had tightened in fear of another betrayal, but instead, they found her lifeless body.

As a result, Oros and his subordinate had each paid an Aether Fee of one nonillion Aether points to return home!

Even though most Overseers were filthy rich, the small alien still developed stomach ulcers just thinking about it. Especially since he had to pay for Garos too. The pathetic salary of an Oracle Guardian Captain was far from sufficient for such travel. When not on duty, they tended to remain stationary.

"To answer your questions," Oros hesitated, pinching his chin thoughtfully, his faceless head still inscrutable. If the alien could have had a human expression, he would likely have had furrowed brows and a creased forehead as he faced this enormous puzzle.

Still, Garos waited patiently, having unwavering faith in his superior's ingenuity. That's why he was happy to follow him everywhere, even though he was mostly humiliated and tormented. Once again, his faith in Oros was rewarded.

"As for revealing the news to the Evolvers of B842, let's be vague, but we must give them a somewhat real reason to appease them.

Interplanetary travel won't concern them for the next four years, but entering a Red Cube often equates to intersystem travel since Ordeal Worlds are generally designed far away from numbered systems. Aas, the Ancient Designer of the Cubes, has promised to temporarily cover the transportation costs of the Players, but only the Oracle knows how long he can keep that promise. In this case, we must also prepare for the worst and accumulate energy before the Aether network is drained. Otherwise, not just these little Evolvers, but the entire planet B842 will be in danger if we don't have enough Aether to maintain our defense systems."

Garos nodded gravely, signaling his agreement with this analysis. Like a pipeline transporting gas, localized rupture would not immediately halt the supply. The gas that had already passed the area of destruction had a good chance of reaching its destination.

The Mirror Universe was vast, and the amount of Aether in the network encompassing B842 and even their System was large enough to maintain their planet's normal operation at full capacity for years, decades, and perhaps even centuries, depending on where the attack on the network had occurred.

Locally, each planet also had its own sources of Aether supply, but they paled in comparison to the nearly infinite flow of Aether they had once freely enjoyed.

For instance, in place of planet B842's core resided a massive black hole spanning billions of light-years. During the amalgamation of various universes that allowed the creation of B842, all the black holes from those realms were merged together in one location to form the planet's primary and perpetual energy source.

Oros was a competent Oracle Overseer, as this wasn't the case for all the planet-ships in their System. Harnessing such a black hole and connecting it to the local Aether network was no small feat and required colossal resources, both material and technical.

In the meantime, Oros had finally made a decision. Carried by his serene telepathic voice, a barrage of orders burst forth like a machine gun, "Let rumors circulate that the Aether resources of the Mirror Universe are beginning to dwindle, and that Aether fees will gradually increase over time. Concurrently, for what was once free and will become charged, start with ridiculously low prices to acclimate the populace to the heavy changes ahead. Though I trust Aas, impose an entry fee for the Red Cube starting today, even if it's just a symbolic Aether point. The first two Ordeals can remain free of charge for now. Meanwhile, I'll contact Cekt and a few Aetherists who owe me a favor to help me fortify B842's Aether network. We may need to capture other black holes in outer space or even force them to mass-produce high-grade Aether Cores, but we're all in the same boat. I'm willing to bet that aside from Cekt, most don't have enough to return home now that Lure is dead.

"Oh, I almost forgot." Oros paused, massaging his cranium. "Also inform all Evolvers with an Oracle Rank of Lieutenant General or above about the truth while monitoring their reactions to this news. I will take care of informing the Nobles."

"Speaking of Nobles," Garos suddenly remembered. "The new batch of Oracle Knights promoted over the past week have all received the message and will be present at the ceremony scheduled for tomorrow afternoon at 3 p.m. One of the Players you recommended for the Fourth Ordeal on Quanoth is among them. He finished first. Again."

The small alien's undulating neck, akin to a stalk caressed by a gentle breeze, suddenly stiffened. With a thought, he accessed the files of all the Players he had recently recommended. He soon found the one Garos was talking about. Upon seeing the extraordinary feats that Jake had accomplished, and that one of his Oracle Guardians was currently tasked with watching him, Oros let out a small laugh, his mood significantly brightened.

The latest disciple of Cekt Mogusar. For once, he had a good reason to hold this ceremony.

## **Chapter 944: How Much For That Information**

### **944 How Much For That Information**

While Oros was wracking his brain to prepare planet B842 for the impending energy crisis, elsewhere on the planet in high orbit, a certain civilization and their national Floating Island faced an entirely different plight.

The Earth Union and New Earth were on the verge of receiving an unexpected visit from an emissary hailing from far, far away.

They were unaware of it yet, but in their eyes, this calamity would likely not be less dire than the future increase in Aether fees tied to transportation and Ordeals that had not yet struck them.

Atop a skyscraper built in the style of the Empire State Building, an unassuming figure appeared beneath the magnificent levitating Yellow Cube at its top. Since violence was prohibited in an Oracle City and this alien's power was not particularly high, its request for a diplomatic visit to their territory had been granted without issue.

This towering Yellow Cube, several hundred meters wide, experienced constant traffic from travelers, tourists, and soldiers continuously entering and leaving. For this reason, the presence of this alien, surprisingly almost human, went unnoticed at first, blending in with the crowd.

This alien, with a cold and unapproachable face, could easily pass for a native Earthling with its 1.8-meter height, short-cut brown hair, impeccable dark blue checkered suit, and a tie two shades lighter perfectly adhering to the dress code so prized by New Earth politicians. Its efforts to resemble its interlocutors showed that the emissary knew what it was doing and was not on its first mission.

Upon arrival, the alien furrowed its brows, moistening its lips and clearing its throat while mentally rehearsing its speech. Its unmoving posture soon drew the attention of several soldiers responsible for the Cube's security.

Especially when it revealed a trace of its true aura for a split second, a predatory energy more compact than a nuclear bomb, which sent shivers down the spines of all humans and aliens present, including New Earth soldiers. With this modest demonstration of its strength, it immediately gained the attention it sought and much more.

"Hands up!" A South American-looking soldier barked aggressively, aiming his assault rifle at the alien.

"Lie down on your stomach, hands clasped behind your back." Another soldier shouted almost immediately after seeing the alien obediently raise its hands, putting on a slight innocent smile to show it had no ill intentions.

This was what the alien wanted. To be wrongfully arrested, and if possible, mistreated by these primitive Earthlings. That way, negotiating with these apes would be much easier. It was a trick it used every time and never tired of.

Otherwise, it and the faction it represented could have easily contacted them through the Oracle System to avoid this charade.

Interplanetary communications were not cheap, but for the faction it represented, it was only small change.

Unfortunately, these soldiers had been correctly warned about how to treat aliens of unknown identity, and before it could comply with their demands with a hidden smirk, a third, older soldier with a Sergeant insignia stopped them with a single word.

"Identity and purpose of presence." The noncommissioned officer was not one for nonsense and immediately took charge by asking the important questions.

The alien sighed internally, disappointed that its little scheme had not worked. Keeping its lips sealed, it simply shared through thought the file containing all the data it was authorized to reveal regarding its faction and itself.

From how the hitherto stoic sergeant's face fell apart, a film of sweat covering his forehead, it was more than enough to achieve the desired effect. All the while, the alien maintained its congenial smile.

"I-I must reach my superior. Please wait a moment." The soldier stammered, his parched throat betraying his newfound deference.

Around an hour later, the alien found itself

seated comfortably in a leather armchair at the City Hall, grimacing with appreciation as it sipped the black coffee that had just been served. The room was luxuriously furnished and decorated to accommodate dignitaries of alien races.

'Their technology is primitive, but this bitter concoction isn't half bad,' It mused inwardly, savoring the aroma wafting from the steaming beverage.

Across the table sat a middle-aged man adorned with medals, standing tall in his military uniform, and a stunning young woman with long white hair, noticeably shorter, both wearing expressions of exasperation as though they were victims of some grave injustice.

"But I tell you, I don't have it anymore!" Ruby cried out in frustration for the umpteenth time, on the verge of tearing her hair out. "I lost it!"

Indeed, the target of this alien emissary was none other than Ruby Hale. The muscular man with a rigid and unyielding temperament was General Eric, the military officer overseeing the Ordeals throughout the Earth Union, as well as the Prodigies project among many others.

With seven Ordeals under his belt, he ranked among the most powerful Evolvers of New Earth. As one of the first to colonize B842 and receive an Oracle Device, he had valiantly plunged into the hellish landscape of the Ordeals, conquering trial after trial to honor his homeland. Of the thousands of soldiers who participated in the Ordeals alongside him, only a select few, all of whom had become generals, survived.



After seven Ordeals, he and the others temporarily halted their adventures at the insistence of the Earth Union Government and received prestigious positions as rewards. This was because they were the only soldiers who had reached such heights, and New Earth was still too infantile a nation to do without them.

Most accepted the promotion without protest, loyal to their homeland and unsure of their chances to survive the next Ordeal. Some, like General Eric, obeyed reluctantly, but ultimately acquiesced due to the uncertainty of surviving their Eighth Ordeal.

In the end, only one soldier was permitted to continue participating in the Ordeals:  
General

Rob, the most formidable human of New Earth.

Rumors circulated that he had just completed his Eighth Ordeal, while less credible accounts claimed he had survived his Ninth.

Unperturbed and finishing his coffee, the alien, having just been yelled at, delicately placed the cup on the polished wooden coffee table before him. This time, he declined a third serving and, staring coldly into their eyes, rested his chin on his clasped hands, his elbows propped on his thighs.

Locking eyes with him, a palpable killing intent washed over them, and Ruby, who no longer possessed the constitution and fearlessness of a Digestor, involuntarily shuddered, her complexion paling. Only after the colossus beside her shielded her with his aura did her breathing return to normal.

Displeased and visibly annoyed, General Eric growled, discarding all semblance of respect and etiquette,

"Mr. Balus, Ruby is an honest soldier and has no reason to deceive you. Moreover, I am certain a super faction as influential and noble as Mirror

Vanguard has plenty of ways to verify our claims. "Your Purple Hell is not in our possession," He concluded, his tone resolute.

Bang!

Mr. Balus's fist slammed onto the coffee table, shattering it into pieces and sending splinters of wood flying in every direction.

"Enough!" The alien exclaimed, his frayed nerves erupting into an explosive rage, a stark contrast to his stoic demeanor just moments before. "Of course, Mirror Vanguard has the means to verify who possesses our Gold Artefact. But the trail ends here. She devoured one of Vexa's clones and the Purple Hell in its possession. As a Digestor Trojan at the time, the trail is obscured.



No Oracle Path can predict the location of our Artefact."

"But Ruby is no longer a Digestor Trojan," General Eric countered with evident delight. Colonel Hale and the other high-ranking officers could hardly believe it either. "And I don't plan on forcing her to talk if she doesn't want to."

On the surface, General Eric seemed to relish the alien's frustration, but deep down, he was just as exasperated. Learning that their most promising Player had become Jake's Oracle Slave was a devastating blow to them.

She likely knew far more about Jake's abilities than they did, but she had refused to divulge anything about him. As for Jake, obtaining information about him through the Oracle System had become nearly impossible since the end of his Fourth Ordeal, as it charged an outrageous sum.

Mr. Balus could see that neither Ruby nor General Eric were lying, but he was no fool and could sense when he was being led around in circles. Regardless of their claims, his Oracle Path indeed led here. Ruby, this general, and even their teammates aware of the truth. He had no intention of leaving without the answers he sought.

Changing tactics, the alien turned back to Ruby and said more amiably, "You say your Digestor half was killed. By whom?"

Ruby and General Eric exchanged a knowing glance, and reading each other's thoughts, they agreed it was time to cash in their chips.

"How much for that information?" Ruby suddenly asked with an innocent expression, catching Mr. Balus off guard.

However, upon hearing her question, a broad, relieved smile illuminated the alien's impatient, crinkled face. As long as the other party was willing to negotiate, he was confident he would get what he desired.

A few minutes later, Mr. Balus slammed the door of City Hall and stormed back to the Yellow Cube with an infuriated stride and the expression of someone who had just been duped. After paying 2 trillion Aether points, he had finally obtained the name he wanted.

A name he could have deduced on his own if that damned bracelet hadn't led him here in the first place.

Jake Wilderth.

## **Chapter 945: Please Pay The Sum**

## 945 Please Pay The Sum

'Jake Wilderth... If he was indeed the one who held the Purple Hell, it shouldn't be too difficult to persuade him to relinquish it.' Mr. Balus thought optimistically as he placed his hand on the Yellow Cube, entering his destination.

Even if he didn't know Jake's exact coordinates, as long as he had his bracelet and the Oracle System, he could locate him. Of course, that was assuming he had a high enough Oracle Rank.

Alas, he quickly realized things were not going as he'd hoped. For after placing his hand on the Yellow Cube, he wasn't teleported anywhere...

"WTF!" Mr. Balus cursed, pounding the Yellow Cube with his fist, immediately receiving a warning from a New Earth Oracle Drone and a small fine of 300 Aether points.

Vexed and utterly perplexed, he could only mutter under his breath, "Don't tell me he's blacklisted me? Aren't Vexa and him supposed to be on good terms?"

Unfortunately for him, his fears were wellfounded. That was precisely what had just transpired.

Jake, who had just managed to shake off Hade, Asfrid, and Luxia, but not Will, suddenly received a message from Xi in his head, 'Someone named Balus requested access to our Yellow Cube.' She informed him in a dull voice as if discussing the morning weather.

"Oh? Doesn't ring a bell. What did you do?" Jake asked distractedly as he frantically pressed a button on his interface to purchase a million more Oracle Constructors. Costing only 10M Aether points, he had "only 10 trillion" to spend.

I I blacklisted him.'

Jake paused momentarily, intrigued.

"Why?"

'He's from Mirror Vanguard.' Xi smirked, then quickly continued upon seeing his expression change, 'I know what you're going to say, but my instinct tells me it's best to avoid him as long as possible.'

Jake didn't immediately grasp what she was referring to, but remembering that Vexa had ended up in Ruby's stomach, who in turn had ended up in his, he realized the problem at once.

"Damn it!" He exclaimed, stopping what he was doing. "They want their Purple Hell back."

It would obviously not be an issue if the Gold Aether Artifact were still in his possession, but regrettably, that was no longer the case. Even if they somehow bought it back at full price, he would be unable to regurgitate it.

Aware of the bullet he'd just dodged, Jake promptly gave a thumbs up to his reliable Oracle "Good job," He praised her with a beaming smile. If she were in her Familiar body, he would have surely embraced her.

Alas, the recipient of his praise responded with cold sarcasm, 'Hmmpf. If you want to hug someone, just ask Lucia.'

Still stranded on New Earth, Mr. Balus had to face the facts, his mood stormy.

'This is going to complicate things.' The alien sighed with a weary, crestfallen expression, asking the Yellow Cube to teleport him to the next nearest Yellow Cube to his destination.

He still harbored a faint hope of landing on a Floating Island a few kilometers from his target's, but his expression darkened another notch upon discovering that the spaceborne island he had just arrived at was surrounded by nothing but the void of space, with not even an asteroid or another star in sight. In lieu of inhabitants, a few hundred aliens with cute antennae on either side of their foreheads were staring at him with confusion.

Remembering that, according to his information, Jake had once been as human as the citizens of New Earth he had just left behind, Mr. Balus's shoulders sagged in defeat, the alien in the suit temporarily admitting to his own shortcomings.

Reluctantly, he knew he had no choice but to contact Vexa. The Mirror Vanguard branch established on B842 was still in its infancy, and he lacked the courage to disturb his colleagues on their mission.

Indeed, for an Evolver from another planet to visit B842, which still enjoyed diplomatic immunity for just under four years, one generally needed approval from the Oracle Overseer, which required an ironclad reason.

Mirror Vanguard had its ways to send its agents to B842, but the motive and validation by the Oracle Overseer could not be entirely bypassed. To remain aboveboard, the Evolvers dispatched to the location had arrived invoking the motive that best represented them: "Eliminate the Digestor threat."

Every one of Mr. Balus's superiors, those who could unravel his dilemma with a mere flick of their fingers, were presumably ensnared in the ferocious maw of a Digestor swarm, gambling with their lives each fleeting second. Contacting them for such a trivial reason was utterly taboo.

Not to mention that contacting a colleague over such long distances wasn't cheap, even for a Seventh-Ordeal Evolver like him...

Fortunately, there was the Faction Chat for that, a legal loophole that allowed free communication regardless of distance. The Mirror Vanguard sub-faction in which Vexa and Prysm belonged managed the elites of planets B835 to B845. A Seventh-Ordeal Evolver like Mr. Balus naturally had a place there.

However, when the alien checked the Faction Chat that he seldom consulted, his eyebrows immediately furrowed, noticing an unusual irregularity. No faction member had said anything for several hours, which was nearly impossible.

Under normal circumstances, there were always a few chatterboxes and keyboard warriors lurking on the chat, commenting on everything and anything. This aroused his suspicion, but he didn't dwell on it further. Calmly, he mentally drafted his message and sent it to the Faction Chat, pinging Vexa.

A notification immediately dashed his hopes.

[Your message could not be sent. To ensure your message reaches each faction member able to consult the Faction Chat, please pay the sum of XXXX Aether points.]

With eyes bulging in sheer incredulity and his jaw agape, dangling inches from the ground, Mr. Balus clutched at his chest, seeking solace for his throbbing heart. The astronomical sum that had materialized before him threatened to seize his heart in its icy grip. This staggering figure eclipsed any he had ever seen in his entire life.

'What the hell is going on here?

One didn't need to be a genius to realize something was amiss. A Seventh-Ordeal Evolver typically had excellent instincts, or they wouldn't have survived this far. He prayed it was a temporary failure of the Oracle System that would be quickly fixed, but when his Oracle AI indicated it didn't understand what was happening either, he immediately prepared for the worst.

Regardless, did he intend to give up on his mission? Not at all. Unable to report to Vexa, he planned to treat this trip like a vacation.

He had already checked that the cost of Aether points would climb exponentially when trying to send a message to a faction member on another planet-ship. His colleagues on B842 were still reachable, even if it would undoubtedly cost him an arm and a leg.

His last resort was, of course, to contact his target directly. But who could guarantee, under the current circumstances, that his mission expenses would be reimbursed?

And so, without any remorse, the emissary decided to employ the most ancient method of communication: the spoken word. And for that, there weren't a thousand ways to proceed.

spaceship," Mr. Balus murmured with little hope, materializing a deep blue-armored spacecraft with a shape reminiscent of a short sword. "I hope his Floating Island isn't too far from here..."

Preparing himself a cocktail, the alien settled comfortably onto a divan in his ship, engaged the autopilot, and turned on the VR television. A lengthy journey through space of indeterminate duration was about to begin...

The following day...

When Xi's voice, thankfully warmer than the day before, reminded Jake that the time for the mandatory ceremony he had to attend was fast approaching, his eyebrows twitched with irritation. Since his return from the Ordeal, he hadn't had a single moment to himself.

First, he had expanded his island, then upgraded the Faction, updated, and chosen the new Faction Skills, thinking he could finally enjoy a much-deserved vacation day, as was his tradition after every Ordeal. It was his way of rewarding himself and taking a breather.

Compared to his procrastinating and lazy temperament before, it was really not much to ask.

But apparently, even a day of peace was impossible. Thank God, Lucia hadn't tortured him by sticking to him all day. Perhaps it was her unquenchable thirst for victory, but simply seeing that his Floating Island was much larger than hers had convinced her to leave early. She couldn't expand her island as much, but she couldn't afford to fall too far behind either.

No, the one who had been a constant thorn in his side was, of course, Will. All the natives they had saved on Quanoth had eventually learned how to use their new bracelets and applied to join their Faction.

Naturally, the question of their accommodations arose. Although the islands of Will, Lucia, and Asfrid had the space and residences to accommodate a few thousand refugees, half a million inhabitants far exceeded their capacity.

Inevitably, this duty fell to Jake, the only one with an island large enough and pockets deep enough to host so many people at once.

## Chapter 946: An Ominous Night

### 946 An Ominous Night

If it had been the Jake before his fourth Ordeal, he would not have been able to erect enough dwellings to house half a million faction members in a single night. At best, he might have purchased half a million tents, which still would have needed to be set up.

Now, Jake was an entirely different breed. Most importantly, he had an entire faction behind him. If he couldn't enjoy a peaceful day, then neither could the other faction members.

Without any remorse, with just a few words, he had mobilized the entirety of the Myrtharian Nerds ready for battle. 238 Eltarrians, 1345 Myrmidians, 416 Throsogenians, and 574 Kintharians had formed 42 homogeneous squads of 61 members each, guided by a pureblood Beskyrian to exploit their outrageous luck, then had been dispatched to B842. Each of them teleported randomly to a different Oracle Shelter.

Their task: Fill the Faction Vault with anything they found on B842 that seemed to have a semblance of value to beautify a territory and make it habitable: ore, plants, trees, wild animals, freshwater, seawater. If by chance they found something precious they couldn't identify, they were also authorized to contact him.

Having already been tested in the past, Jake would handle emptying the Faction Vault on his side, leaving the million freshly purchased Oracle Constructors to build whatever he wanted.

When requesting a specific construction listed in the Oracle Store's subcategory dedicated to Floating Islands, the Oracle System, as usual, applied a shameful extra charge. Especially when it involved advanced technologies.

To avoid this, it was possible to educate the Oracle Constructors by building the expected building type right in front of them as a demonstration. Another solution was to buy all the patents, manuals, and blueprints of existing technology, architecture, and construction techniques to lift their limitations.

With neither patience nor interest in constructing civil infrastructure, Jake had, of course, chosen the second solution. Namely, to officially purchase all available patents, manuals, techniques, and blueprints, so as to forcibly elevate his desolate Floating Island to the modern era and even beyond, leaping directly to the age of advanced space exploration and colonization.

It had cost him another quintillion, but it could have cost him much more if he hadn't spent the entire past year amassing all sorts of knowledge like a machine. By compiling

all his knowledge into a uniform file that the Oracle Constructors had downloaded, Xi had easily compensated for the shortcomings of their previous databases.

However, when Jake or Xi realized that a technology was missing or that a specific architectural style caught their eye, they wouldn't hesitate to buy it on the spot, not even looking at how much it cost them. After all, the 300 trillion Aether points he produced every second were just waiting to be spent, and the knowledge preceding the modern era rarely exceeded a few hundred billion points.

As for that last detail, Jake didn't hesitate to use it to motivate his troops. Giving a mission to all the veteran Players of his faction just after the end of their Fourth Ordeal could only lead to resistance and protests.

The Kintharians and Throsgenians, in particular, notoriously lazy, had obviously complained, but the competitive spirit of the Myrmidians and the professionalism of the Eltarians had eventually convinced them to get moving.

Of course, to titillate the competitive nature of the Myrmidians and motivate these two legendarily lazy races, Jake didn't hesitate to dip into his wallet. A quadrillion Aether points for each member of the most efficient squad and a trillion for all other participants.

The eyes of the other faction members had practically popped out of their sockets upon hearing the magnitude of the reward. Yet, once they confirmed its authenticity, all reluctance and complaints had vanished from their minds, leaving only an effervescent excitement.

If Jake had revealed that this bountiful prize didn't even amount to two minutes of his passive Aether points production, who knows if they wouldn't have coughed blood from envy after shedding every tear in their body? He wisely kept this detail to himself.

So, if it was his subordinates and the Oracle Constructors who did all the work, why was Jake in such a foul mood? Because something in his supposedly straightforward and simple mission had gone awry.

At first, everything had gone as expected. The 42 squads had teleported in unison to B842, eager to get to work. Even Gerulf and Rogen had forsaken their naps for a chance to prove themselves superior to their rival.

In the end, only Will and his dragons remained on their island along with the new recruits and the Aristocats. The former to welcome new members and brief them on everything they needed to know about the Myrtharian Nerds, and the latter because their sole purpose was to protect him and maintain order.

Their imposing presence was of great help in commanding the obedience and attention of the 500,000 new members. Renowned figures like Haynt, Aisling, Syn, and Melion



were not always enough. Especially when some were less obedient and harbored their own ambitions like Grimwald Dracul or Xaverie Zangruth. If Aisling wasn't their daughter, things could have escalated when they met for the first time.

Speaking of Grimwald Dracul, Jake had almost forgotten about him since the recapture of Laudarkvik. That was because the Clan Dracul leader had refused to fight to the bitter end with them upon learning of the Portable Fortresses alternative.

Jake could only speculate as to why Grimwald chose to withdraw from battle rather than fight alongside his daughter and ex-wife. He didn't seem like a coward. According to Aisling, it was the best decision for the survival of the Dracul clan. He was a man who put duty before emotions.

Given what happened every time he saw his exwife, Jake had serious doubts... If Aisling hadn't assured him that, unlike Xaverie, her father was a righteous and honorable man, Jake would have refused to accept him into his faction.

Anyway. Back to the mission he had assigned to the other members, things went awry almost immediately after their departure when the fastest ones attempted to use the Faction Vault.

For a long time, Jake had kept the Faction Vault active 24/7 at the trivial cost of 100,000 Aether points per hour. It had been that way for over a year. There had never been any additional charge.

Until yesterday.

As soon as the Faction Vault had begun to fill up, Jake immediately tried to empty it on his end. That's when things took a weird turn. A ludicrous sum of 10 billion Aether points was demanded to retrieve its contents.

If this had happened before his Ordeal, he would have suffered an aneurysm reading the message. But despite his confusion, he had paid the fee, thinking it was a one-time surcharge.

He couldn't have been more wrong. When the Faction Vault had filled up again, another exorbitant, albeit different amount, was demanded. After that, each time a squad filled the Faction Vault and he tried to empty it, an astronomical sum would be requested, each time different.

Within mere minutes, Jake realized that the amount demanded varied based on which squad filled the Faction Vault at any given moment.

Through deduction, he soon grasped that the sole differentiating factor was the distance separating them from him.

Shocked, he tried to abort the mission by notifying them of the situation through the Faction Chat, but that's when things took an even stranger turn. To send his message to each faction member, a monstrous sum of several quintillions was also demanded.

Ultimately, when the Myrtharian Nerds returned rejuvenated from their mission on B842, three of the ten sextillion Aether points he had placed in the Faction Aether Storage that very morning had vanished forever from his fortune, leaving Jake traumatized and bewildered. Truly heartrending.

If the imposed tax had been constant, Jake could have come to terms with it. However, the problem was that it had slowly increased throughout the night. Nothing alarming, but at this stage, one didn't need to be highly placed or exceptionally shrewd to realize something was amiss.

His comrades on the mission had also noticed the anomaly when they tried to communicate via the Faction Chat. Judging by the sinister expression on Ulfar and his squad's faces upon their return from the planet, they too suspected something was off.

The tide was about to turn.

Stifling a sigh, Jake nevertheless congratulated his subordinates, distributing the promised rewards to the participating faction members with twitching lips as he met the smug and cocky gaze of the King of Beskyr.

Unsurprisingly, Ulfar's squad, including his conquests from the Divine Academy, Nyx and Eris, had won the small competition hands down. No one could compete against a Luck Monarch, a Fate Bender, and a Providence Controller working as a team...

"Don't tell me you're going to back out now," Ulfar mercilessly teased as he saw Jake's twitching facial muscles.

It was on this deliberately provocative note that the distribution of rewards came to an end. Shortly after, Xi informed him it was time to meet Oros.

## **Chapter 947: You Know It's Not A Date, Right?**

947 You Know It's Not A Date, Right?

"How much longer do I have, Xi?" Jake sighed, trying in vain to forget Ulfar's insufferable face.

[Only fifteen minutes. You'd better hurry. I don't know this Oros, but I'm not sure you're prepared to face the consequences of keeping an Oracle Overseer waiting.]

"Well... You're right," Jake admitted shamelessly.

"Don't forget you can also bring three people of your choice, as long as they're part of your faction or another organization under your command," Saros, the Oracle Guardian assigned to watch over him, reminded him kindly. "Trusted individuals such as family members or friends are also allowed, but the Oracle will decide beforehand if they are eligible to participate in such a ceremony."

Jake paused, listening to the alien's reminder.

Determining the eligibility of those accompanying him likely referred to their Oracle Rank or the number of Ordeals they had completed.

"Xi, who do you suggest for this graduation... I mean, this ceremony?" Jake coughed quietly.

[Hade and Asfrid. Lucia or Ulfar as a third choice. Will would have been ideal, but he's tied up with the refugees from Quanoth right now. Asfrid is also quite busy. Hade... It's not certain he'll want to leave his lab.]

"They'll come if I insist," Jake commented indifferently, but it was just an empty statement. He had no intention of forcing them to join him at this event.

After sending them the message, thankfully free of charge, their responses arrived without delay.

This confirmed his theory that the Oracle System now charged them based on distance when they communicated via the Faction Chat.

Unsurprisingly, Will and Asfrid were too busy, though they were intrigued by the idea of meeting a real Oracle Overseer. Conversely, Lucia and Ulfar, whose presence he would rather do without, had nothing better to do, as luck would have it.

The only good news was that Hade agreed to come without any fuss. Maybe he wanted to make up for his poor performance at the end of the Ordeal.

As he headed toward the Yellow Cube on his island, Jake repeatedly praised himself on the excellent work of the million Oracle Constructors he had just purchased. They had successfully brought his vision to life, making his investment worthwhile.

The construction project was far from complete, but each of the refugees already had a roof over their heads. To avoid any conflict and to accommodate the customs and characteristics of each species, Jake had borrowed the model from Laudarkvik, dividing his island into pie-shaped sections, each representing a district.

This was not due to discrimination or class distinction but because it was necessary. The ideal environment for Kintharians was the polar opposite of that for Throsgenians, just as the course of the sun and the radiation received by the Vampire District needed to be adjusted as well.

Arranged clockwise around his own quarters and Melkree's tree at the heart of the island, the districts in order were now the Kinthar District, Myrmid District, Eltar District, Beskyr District, Beast District, Day District, Night District, Demon District, Astral District, Sky District, and Aqua District.

The Beast District housed both the Werebeings and the Aristocats, but like the Sky District, it required special architectural adaptations and plenty of space to accommodate the gigantic beastly forms of some of them. The Sky District was for avian species and dragons who thrived in three-dimensional environments.

These two districts were by far the largest.

The Day District welcomed all species, human or otherwise, as long as they had no need for specific living conditions and their size was not overly immense. Jake had designed enough diverse biomes to please everyone, from woodland elves and Nawaii to mountain dwarves.

The Night District was reserved for vampires and other nocturnal species abhorring daylight. For them, Jake planned to install a small artificial moon soon. Werebeings also required it for cultivation. Of course, some were considering acquiring their own Floating Island or, like his cousin Kevin, already had one.

The Demon District gathered demons, though it was the only area conceived as a ghetto. Despite their malevolent nature, Jake had no intention of banishing them, as long as they respected his rules. However, allowing them to mingle with ordinary citizens was far too risky, even with the surveillance of Oracle Drones he intended to purchase en masse and an exhaustive Oracle Contract to keep them on a leash.

Jake sought to segregate these inherently disparate souls, each with their own moral compass. Though they were not barred from venturing into other districts, this partition would serve as a bulwark against a cascade of complications.

As for the Astral District, it only housed Haynt for now, who also planned to acquire his own Floating Island in the future. Jake had created it for ethereal and spectral species not requiring a physical body to exist. It was impossible to let creatures capable of passing through walls haunt other districts without restriction.

The Aqua District was a small ocean to the north of his island, connected to rivers and lakes established in each district. Jake had filled it with all kinds of fish, but for now, aside from a few amphibious races like the Water Elf Tribe or Asfrid I s, nobody had any reason to call it home. It was merely anticipation for the future.

Finally, besides the 11 undefined border districts, there was the Flora District, a vast forest and gardens planted overnight around Melkree, forming a security belt between the future Oracle City where the Oracle Cubes were located, Jake's private quarters, and the rest of the island.

As the artificial sun dipped slowly toward the horizon, casting an ethereal glow across the sky despite it only being mid-afternoon, Jake, en route to the Yellow Cube, found himself wandering the newly planted gardens, the scent of blooming flowers filling the air.

He had hoped to clear his thoughts, but the serenity of the moment was shattered when he caught sight of Lucia, standing beneath a canopy of roses, the Yellow Cube floating slightly behind her.

Apparently, as soon as she had heard about the ceremony, she had hurried to come.

Adorned in her most exquisite sundress, its rich fabric shimmering in the twilight, Lucia had transformed into a vision of pure elegance. Her makeup, skillfully applied, accentuated her already enchanting features and made her dark golden eyes sparkle like stars in the night. It was evident that she had dressed with a singular intention - to captivate Jake's heart.

As Jake approached, he couldn't help but be captivated by the sight before him. Lucia's dark golden hair cascaded like a waterfall down her back, the delicate scent of her perfume teasing his senses. The way she moved towards him, with the grace of a swan and the confidence of a queen, made his heart race.

"Jake," Lucia murmured, her voice as melodious as a symphony, "I've been waiting for you."

Her eyes locked with his, and in that instant, Jake felt a magnetic pull, drawing him closer to the woman who stood before him. She reached out, her hand trembling ever so slightly, and touched his arm. The warmth of her skin against his sent a shiver down his spine.

"I wanted you to see me like this," Lucia confessed, her cheeks flushed coyly, "because I want you to know the depth of my affection for you."

As she spoke, her words wove an irresistible spell around Jake, ensnaring him in her web of seduction. He was mesmerized by her beauty and captivated by the raw emotion in her voice. In that moment, he knew that Lucia had dressed to impress, and her efforts had not been in vain. The tide of his heart was turning, and he could feel himself being drawn deeper into the allure of her embrace.

Still, Jake wouldn't be himself if he didn't have a well-honed defense mechanism to defuse such an ambiguous situation.

"You know it's not a date, right?" He blurted out casually.

Lucia's face immediately stiffened, and letting go of his arm, she kicked his shin in vexation instead.

[What a moron...] Xi facepalmed in his head. [Kiss her! At least give her a compliment, you idiot... How dense can you be?]

Fortunately, Lucia was not the vindictive type.

Seeing Jake disoriented and dumbstruck by her beauty was more than enough for her. She didn't expect a compliment, but couldn't he just keep quiet instead of ruining everything?

'I'll conquer your heart,' she reaffirmed with determination in her mind.

Different from her thoughts, she replied with a broad smile, "Of course, I know it's not a date. But we're going to meet an Oracle Overseer and a slew of new Oracle Knights. Among them are likely your future rivals. Don't you think it's best to make a strong impression by presenting ourselves in our finest form?"

Jake froze, realizing that Lucia's excuse made perfect sense. Still... Wouldn't sparkling armor made of precious magical alloys have made an even greater impact than a pretty dress?

When Hade and Ulfar appeared in front of the Yellow Cube dressed to the nines, Jake realized he was the one who was off the mark. They weren't going to Thelma to fight. Moreover, Ulfar didn't miss the opportunity to tease him. Gazing at him with a regal stare, he snickered, "Do you really plan to meet the Oracle Overseer dressed like that?"

## **Chapter 948: The Oracle Palace**

### **948 The Oracle Palace**

Moments later, five figures, four human and one alien, materialized side by side atop a towering structure of black steel - one of the many Transportation Towers encircling Thelma. Each of the four individuals was exquisitely dressed, including the handsome man with a deadpan expression at the center.

Faced with the insistence and sensible arguments (and Ulfar's digs) of his friends, Jake, with newfound resolve, had opted to don a striking ensemble that walked the line between sophistication and futuristic combat wear, thanks to cutting-edge nanotechnology. His attire, an amalgamation of black, blue, and silver hues that harmonized perfectly with his fairy wings, consisted of boots, trousers, a shirt, and a

high-collared overcoat - a perfect blend of elegance and power, ensuring he would make a lasting impression on the Oracle Overseer.

His instantaneous change of look, of course, left his companions gobsmacked, as they couldn't believe he had such attire in his wardrobe. And they were absolutely right to think so.

During the year spent in seclusion on Quanoth, Jake had not only accumulated knowledge but also put it into practice.

Replacing the artifacts he had lost had, of course, been one of his priorities. By immersing himself in the fascinating universe and the almost infinite potential of nanotechnology, Jake had naturally drawn inspiration to design his future equipment.

The elegant clothes he currently wore, which did not hinder his movements or combat abilities, were actually the same casual clothes he had been wearing a minute earlier. Their true form was a dense mesh of nanobots composed of several ultra-precious alloys of his own creation. Not only could they rearrange themselves to take the shape of any clothing Jake could imagine, but they could also change their texture and a number of their properties.

As the cherry on top, if Jake urgently needed energy or suddenly craved a snack, he could also reabsorb his own armor. These nanobots were fine enough to pass through the barrier of his skin (not that it would have prevented him from achieving his goals if they were larger).

This cutting-edge armor, reflecting the pinnacle of expertise Jake had reached, bore the symbolic name: Nanosuit No. 657.

Every day, he absorbed a wealth of knowledge so vast that an insatiable, frenetic urge gripped him - an impulse to reimagine and reforge his entire armament, down to the very last detail. This feverish obsession evolved into a habitual tic.

In the beginning, his creative spark would birth names that echoed inspiration and ingenuity, but eventually, weariness and pragmatism prevailed. And so, his current armor and, candidly, the entirety of his equipment, bore monikers that spoke to a more generic, utilitarian nature.

However, beware. One should not be misled by his dubious labeling sense. This equipment was the real deal. This unassuming nanosuit was an authentic mid-Bronze Aether Artifact.

This armor could withstand attacks that even Jake's Cosmic Chitin Scales couldn't endure, and it boosted his stats by 1500%, placing his performance well above that of his previous Myrtharian Adamantium Armor Set. But what made it invaluable was that it



passively increased Jake's energy absorption by 20% while he wore it and could even double it if Jake activated the Aether Symbols inscribed within.

In return, this would lead to the destruction of the nanosuit in less than an hour, but with Jake having already forged 656 versions before this one, it spoke volumes about the emotional attachment he had for his creations.

These energy boosts may have seemed insignificant compared to other Bronze Artifacts that amplified, even multiplied, their bearer's energy a hundredfold, but one must keep in mind that Jake was no ordinary Evolver. Boosting the energy production of his Grade 10 Energy Body was no small feat, let alone doubling it.

Upon receiving the explanation of his clothes' sudden transformation, Lucia and Ulfar were instantly filled with envy. The only difference between the two was that the princess immediately invoked her girlfriend status to claim her right to her own Nanosuit No. 657.

As for Hade, he too wore a nanosuit. However, as it was not something he could easily manufacture due to a lack of precious materials and time, he had never mentioned it.

"We'll be there just in time," Hade nonchalantly reminded them, glancing at the time.

It was 2:59 PM. They had but a minute to reach their destination. His confidence in their punctuality seemed somewhat... misplaced.

"Let's teleport," Jake calmly said, enveloping his three companions with his Fairy Force and mental sense. "Just go with it."

Baffled, his friends nevertheless complied without hesitation, including Ulfar and the Oracle Guardian Saros, who watched over him like his own shadow. Switching to Lucid Aetherdreamer mode, Jake converted their bodies into a stream of Aetheric data, and in the blink of an eye, they reappeared before a majestic building they had only seen from afar:

The building stood as a breathtaking testament to the brilliance of its architects. Stretching for miles, this immense, futuristic edifice, comprised of three interconnected structures, appeared as if it had been hewn from a single block of an unknown white metal, its seamless expanse an enigma to all who beheld it. The vast structure, with its sweeping curves and soaring spires, conveyed an air of otherworldly grandeur that left visitors in awe.

Surrounding the palace, magnificent gardens flourished in resplendent beauty, dwarfing the fabled Gardens of Versailles. These grounds, meticulously tended by skilled Oracle Drones, boasted an array of flora both familiar and exotic, their vibrant hues painting a vivid tapestry across the landscape. Graceful fountains adorned the gardens, their

cascading waters dancing in the sunlight, while labyrinthine hedges invited visitors to lose themselves in the verdant embrace.

Within the palace, the wonders continued. Intricate mosaics adorned the floors, depicting celestial patterns and abstract motifs. The walls were adorned with a myriad of artwork and masterful sculptures, paying homage to the great minds and artists of the time. Towering ceilings were illuminated by ethereal light, bathing the opulent chambers in a soft, inviting glow.

Throughout the ages, the Oracle Palace remained a testament to the power and ingenuity of an unknown civilization, forever capturing the imaginations of those who ventured into its storied halls. Its design was immutable, but each Overseer was free to personalize it in their own way. Oros, even lazier and more minimalist than Jake, had kept the Oracle Palace's appearance and decor exactly as it had come from the factory.

Hade, Lucia, and Ulfarl's eyes widened slightly as they recognized the majestic building. It was not the grandiosity of the Oracle Palace that had unnerved them but the fact that they hadn't received the Oracle System's notification asking them to pay the Aether fee to enter the Oracle Capital's barrier.

They turned to Jake for an answer, but time was pressing. The truth was simple. Jake hadn't dodged the fare. He had merely paid their Aether Fee during their two-step teleportation.

"Oros will receive you in the Oracle Chamber," Saros informed them, his face impassive. "You cannot teleport directly there, so I suggest... you hurry."

Realizing they had only 20 seconds left, Jake and his friends took his advice to heart, sprinting through the building at a speed far beyond supersonic. Three seconds later, they found themselves at their enigmatic destination.

The Oracle Chamber was a hallowed sanctum where the Oracle Overseer would share their wisdom and guidance. A sense of reverence permeated the air, as if the very walls of the chamber were imbued with a sacred energy.

Depending on the situation, the room could rearrange itself to resemble the grand amphitheater with suspended platforms and tribunes of the Oracle Senate. At other times, it resembled the minimalist chamber that Jake and his companions had just entered.

What struck them upon entering was the heavy atmosphere, followed by the astonishingly small number of guests. Aside from their party of five, there were only 33 people, divided into eight groups of four and a ninth group consisting of a single person. The unaccompanied Evolver was factionless.

"Saros..." Jake inquired telepathically, his brow furrowed. "Why are there so few of us?"

Considering the number of Evolvers on B842, shouldn't there be more? Even if it's just the Oracle Knights promoted today, we are far too few."

Hade, Lucia, and Ulfar cast curious glances at the Khaanul warrior, wondering the same thing. Unperturbed, the Oracle Guardian calmly confirmed, as if he was accustomed to hearing this observation,

"There are indeed many more new Oracle Knights each day than this. However, in addition to your performance in the Ordeals, there are other criteria. Unlike the Oracle Rank, where accumulating enough merit is enough for promotion, the number of noble titles is limited for each planet."

Seeing their change in expression, Saros chuckled and reassured them, "Don't worry. B842 is a young planet. There are still plenty of noble titles to be distributed and claimed. As for why you are so few in this room, it's because newly promoted Oracle Knights typically have five to six Ordeals under their belt. Sometimes seven. These Oracle Knights are indeed much more numerous, but their accomplishments don't carry the same weight. Their ceremony is held separately by someone else. Oros only makes the effort to attend for truly promising recruits like yourselves."

## **Chapter 949: Meet An Acquaintance**

### 949 Meet An Acquaintance

Seizing the opportunity before the Oracle Overseer had made their appearance, Jake shifted his focus to the other groups of Oracle Knights present. His eyes narrowed suddenly as he recognized one of them.

These Oracle Knights and their companions were humanoid aliens of unknown races. However, only three of them had appearances that might appeal to human aesthetic sensibilities. It was one of these three that had caught his attention.

Cho Min Ho. Another human from Earth and once a very famous Korean idol, but also known for his fragile health.

Just before his first Ordeal, as Jake waited in front of the Red Cube, Cho Min Ho and his group had emerged from the latter after completing their own First Ordeal. Jake might not have given it a second thought if the man hadn't brazenly attempted to recruit them, resulting in Amy's departure.

At that time, in their group of six, Jake, Tim, and Will were practically strangers, but Kyle, Amy, and Sarah had known each other before. Jake never held a grudge against Amy for choosing to trust her idol over strangers who had faced death alongside her, but now he had to admit that she might not have lost out in the end.

What were the odds that two Earthlings, who had barely crossed paths, would both become Oracle Knights on nearly the same day? Close to zero. Yet, the result was right before his eyes.

Cho Min Ho's appearance hadn't changed much, save that he was even more handsome and eye-catching than before. About as tall as Jake, the man had a charismatic figure with a lean, athletic build. His angular face was framed by jet-black hair that fell to his shoulders in soft waves. His piercing, almond-shaped eyes were the color of deep, dark chocolate, captivating and enchanting those who met his gaze. His skin was flawlessly smooth, radiating a youthful glow, and he had a charming, dimpled smile that could melt even the coldest of hearts.

At first glance, Cho Min Ho seemed harmless and radiant, the kind of person who put others at ease and could easily gain their trust.

Despite this, Jake felt the same inexplicable aversion and mistrust towards the young man that he had during their first encounter. It was this dissonance between the Korean idol's outward appearance and his own intuition that had convinced him to refuse joining Cho Min Ho's faction, in addition to his solitary and antisocial nature.

"That's weird," Jake thought, stroking his chin.

His current instinct was extremely reliable, bordering on clairvoyance. He trusted it more than his bracelet's Shadowguide.

Back then, Jake could have chalked up his aversion to a subconscious refusal to entrust his life to a stranger based on reputation alone, but now? He had his own faction and had no reason to still feel that aversion.

If Will had been there, he could have asked him if he felt the same way about Cho Min Ho. It also made him realize that it had been a long time since he had heard from Amy. He didn't even know if she was still alive.

"Maybe I should check up on her after this ceremony," Jake made a mental note, losing interest in the Korean.

As Jake turned his gaze away from Cho Min Ho, the man also looked at him, his pupils narrowing slightly.

"Where have I seen that guy before? He looks familiar..."

Unlike Jake, who hadn't met many notable people since arriving on B842, Cho Min Ho, as a celebrity, had been mingling with crowds for a long time. His memory wasn't eidetic just after his first Ordeal, far from it. His memories from that time were hazy, especially those of a face drowned among millions of others.

"Whatever, I can simply ask Wilum."

Wilum was his Oracle AI. Information on Jake quickly appeared before his eyes, but Cho Min Ho's doubt only burgeoned as he discovered the price to access the whole file exceeded the Aether Points amassed by all the factions under his command.

"What in the world..."

At the very least, Cho Min Ho now knew that Jake was an Earthling just like him, and recalling Amy's past tales, he finally connected the dots.

"So it's this guy... I must admit, Amy always had a knack for surrounding herself with the right people."

As Cho Min Ho tried to recollect everything he remembered about Jake, who was a nobody back then, Jake had already shifted his attention to the three Evolvers accompanying him.

Unlike Hade, Lucia, and Ulfar who were dressed as his equals, Cho Min Ho's three comrades wore near-identical combat suits, identifying them as his bodyguards - another way to emphasize his faction's strength.

After recognizing the Korean, Jake was less surprised to also recognize two of his bodyguards: Kang Jun and Lee Yoon. The arrogant man and icy woman had accompanied him even back then.

Kang Jun, compared to his boss, had changed significantly. His face was recognizable, but his frame had broadened, making his figure less lithe and slender than before. Built like the Hulk, his once long, slicked-back black hair was now sandy beige, just like his eyes. Conversely, his previously pale skin was now considerably darker, verging on a brown-ocher hue. His aura was oppressive, emanating immense power, as if ready to brawl at the slightest provocation.

Lee Yoon remained as slender and graceful as ever, but her modest chest had been replaced by two full, ripe peaches. It should have added to her sex appeal, but her skin was marred by blackish lines, demarcating thin plates of natural armor that followed her body's contours. Dark spines reminiscent of a praying mantis's legs also adorned the backs of her limbs and shoulders, rendering her utterly unapproachable. Likewise, her white, iris-less eyes and tiny black pupils made enduring her gaze horribly disconcerting. Only her long black ponytail and minimalist makeup remained unchanged.

On the other hand, Jake had never seen the third bodyguard. Cho Min Ho must have recruited him later on, or Jake had caught a fleeting glimpse, and his appearance had changed significantly since then.

As Jake was about to ask Xi to check the information on the Korean and his companions, a sudden silence filled the room, chillingly bringing him back to reality.

Everyone's eyes were drawn to a certain spot in the room, where the silhouette of a strange egg floated a meter above the ground, suspended beneath a long rod. Upon closer inspection, it turned out to be a tiny shuttle occupied by a small alien.

A body not even two feet long, a long neck, a small head, glistening gray amphibian-like skin, no face... Yep. This guy hardly matched their image of a mighty Oracle Overseer.

Nevertheless, despite this botched first impression, none of the Oracle Knights and their companions dared to disrespect him. After four Ordeals, if there was one thing they knew, it was that appearances could be deceptive.

"Greetings, Your Highness." Saros immediately knelt, bending his right arm against his heart as an example.

"No need." Oros halted him with a wave of his hand, noticing other Oracle Knights appeared poised to mimic the Oracle Guard. Sweeping his audience with his mental sense, he telepathically declared, "You are all destined for a radiant future. None can know who among you will survive, but perhaps one day I shall be the one kneeling before you. When that time comes, I hope you will remember this moment."

Aside from his rather high-pitched and odd voice, Jake and the other Oracle Knights relaxed, realizing this Oracle Overseer seemed more affable than the rumors had suggested.

What they didn't know was that this cordiality was reserved only for them. The other batch of Oracle Knights who had completed five to six Ordeals, whom he had visited just before, were not afforded the same honors. To Oros, it was evident he did not believe any of them could ever surpass his position.

Seeing he had put his audience at ease, the small alien calmly resumed, "First and foremost, congratulations on your promotion to Oracle Knight after a mere four Ordeals. You may not yet be aware, but this accomplishment makes you an invaluable asset to the Mirror Universe.

"For this reason, you shall now be eligible for numerous privileges. Some, you may have already realized. However, to enjoy these privileges, you will also have new responsibilities and duties—duties you cannot shirk. At times, there will be rules to follow, rules you must adhere to without fail."

Upon seeing his audience furrow their brows in discontent, Oros's neck swayed playfully, and then his voice resonated telepathically within their minds once more, diving straight to the heart of the matter, "Without further ado, let me delineate these duties, rules, and responsibilities for you. Let's start with the first rule, which is, in fact, to



your advantage: You can no longer participate in an Ordeal at any time and with just anyone."

## Chapter 950: Rules and Duties

### 950 Rules and Duties

A poignant silence enveloped the room following the petite Overseer's inaugural revelation. Each grasped his words in isolation, yet wrestled with visualizing their practical implementation.

The snag was that participating in an Ordeal bore no resemblance to acquiring a movie ticket. Not only was the choice of "film" beyond one's control, but reservations were utterly unattainable.

Each forthcoming Ordeal resembled a lottery draw for the Players, and until now, no known method existed to influence this gamble. Their sole stratagem was to enter a Red Cube with all their companions concurrently, ideally the same Red Cube, in hopes of landing in the same Ordeal World thereafter.

The Quanoth Ordeal stood as an anomaly, as the pool of contestants from B842 was sparse. By synchronizing their participation on a single day, it was effortless to arrive in the same locale.

Yet, Oros seemed to imply that, commencing with the Fifth Ordeal, influencing this whimsical draw was feasible, despite participants being indiscriminately selected from planets spanning one or more Systems.

"I'll know what you're thinking, but there's no need for doubt." Oros chortled as he gauged their skeptical reactions. "You've likely all beseeched the heavens to land in the same Ordeal World when entering a Red Cube with your comrades, and barring exceptions, your prayers have been answered, haven't they?"

Jake, the other Oracle Knights, and their retinues instinctively sought to refute him, but as they sifted through their recollections for a counterexample, they realized the extraterrestrial was right. Jake had never truly concerned himself with this matter, but in hindsight, a single Quanoth did not exist.

No guarantee existed that Ruby and her team from New Earth would materialize on the same Quanoth as him and his cohort. And yet, it transpired nonetheless.

Keenly observing their shifting expressions, Oros discerned that most were swayed, and continued with his didactic tone, "I see you've grasped that too. Never forget, the Oracle System is omniscient, all-knowing, and invariably makes the optimal decisions,



whether for your gain or that of the Mirror Universe. As for who holds more significance between you and the Mirror Universe, I'll leave that for you to determine..."

The hearts of the Evolvers in the chamber chilled upon hearing that ominous remark. Indirectly, it could be construed thus: If the fate of the Mirror Universe hung in the balance, the Oracle System would not hesitate to betray them.

Pleased with the stir he had created, Oros resumed in a more jovial tone, "In any case, to summarize, as long as you intend to participate with a particular individual, the Oracle System will strive to make it feasible. Ordinary Players may proceed as usual, but for you, a distinct system has been established. It is quite elementary. Agree beforehand on a date for your Fifth Ordeal with at least two Oracle Knights of your choosing and be committed to adhering to it, or face grave consequences—whose particulars I shall spare you. But trust me, attempting to evade them is ill-advised..."

"On this subject, there is indeed a rationale for assembling you all within this chamber. If you have taken a moment to scrutinize one another, you must have discerned that you bear a certain semblance to each other. By this, I imply that your statures and forms are rather alike. Possessing allies of similar species and appearances significantly enhances your likelihood of participating in the same Ordeal, whilst ensuring a more balanced contest. This nuance is of paramount importance, for if one of the Oracle Knights or their underlings with whom you desire to confront your next Ordeal is an enormous alien the size of a small planet, rest assured that at least one comparably sized alien or something equally daunting will emerge on the opposing side. All this, to maintain unmitigated impartiality for both factions. Unless you possess absolute confidence in your prowess, I strongly advise you to ally with those who resemble you. Certainty is elusive, but if it can increase your odds of victory even slightly, the endeavor is worthwhile."

As Oros concluded his elucidation, Jake's mood grew somber. His faction boasted dragons, gargantuan beasts, and even a tree. If he persisted in desiring to partake in the same Ordeal as them, then they would indeed have to steel themselves for the enemy camp to include analogous creatures within their ranks.

Jake harbored no trepidation toward his companions, but he was uncertain how a dragon like Immyr (Hade's dragon) compared to others of its ilk. If the opposing camp's Oracle Knight were selected from another race with a considerably higher innate potential, they might confront an adversary that bordered on invincibility.

This intelligence could prompt him to reevaluate the choice of faction members permitted to participate in their Fifth Ordeal beside him.

While Jake agonized over these uncontrollable variables, his comrades and those of the other Oracle Knights had already commenced assessing one another to determine who merited becoming their ally for the imminent Ordeal.

The lone Oracle Knight standing without a subordinate in a corner of the room was discontented with this new regulation and inquired with a hint of vexation, "What occurs if we find no Oracle Knight to participate with?"

Does that render it impossible for us to engage in our Fifth Ordeal?"

Oros nodded inwardly, anticipating this query from the outset, as it frequently surfaced at every ceremony. Patiently, he replied, "I may have misled you earlier. The rule merely mandates you to plan the day of your Ordeal, but you are certainly at liberty to participate solo if that is your preference. Just as you can elect an ally as colossal as a behemoth the size of a solar system if it pleases you.

"However, keep in mind that as long as you are an Oracle Noble, you are bound to defend the interests of the Mirror Universe, and your survival and performance in the Ordeals are part of that. Going solo means you will be isolated in your next Ordeal. In an Ordeal where the mortality rate exceeds 97% and the fate of your camp affects your survival chances far more than your individual skill, I strongly advise against such a gamble. It's okay if you die. You won't be around to pay the price. But if you survive your Ordeal and the Mirror Universe camp loses, I can assure you that you will bitterly regret it. The penalty for failing your Main Mission will be the least of your worries."

The Oracle Knight who had just asked the question shuddered at Oros' last words. He had no desire to discover what the alien meant by that.

Directing his mental sense at each of the other Oracle Knights, who stiffened slightly upon feeling his spiritual pressure, the Oracle Overseer resumed his lecture in a more solemn tone,

"The second rule is evident, yet I shall reiterate it: you must pledge unwavering loyalty to the Mirror Universe. The third rule is that to maintain your noble title and aspire to higher ranks, you must also accomplish a certain number of objectives.

Now that we've covered the rules, let us move on to your duties and responsibilities. As you may have deduced from these first three rules, your foremost and singular responsibility towards the Mirror Universe is to ensure its prosperity by any means necessary. Conversely, ordinary Players focus on their individual performance for promotion and maximum credit acquisition, while your noble title is directly influenced by your contribution to your camp's victory. Those individualistic, yet immensely strong Players who act selfishly to the point of compromising their camp's victory will never be promoted to Oracle Knights. For instance, the Anti-Life super-faction, which seeks the destruction of all life forms in the Mirror Universe to create their new order, has virtually no Oracle Nobles within its ranks.

"This gives rise to numerous duties. You have grasped the concept for the Ordeals, so let us now discuss other aspects that concern both you and me more directly. In the constant pursuit of the Mirror Universe's prosperity, you have the duty to defend it

against all internal and external threats, including the Digestors and beyond. Other Evolvers are not obliged to risk their lives, but you must."

Cho Min Ho immediately raised his hand as Oros mentioned this last point.

As comfortable as possible in front of the diminutive alien, the Korean cleared his throat without showing any sign of nervousness and expressed his doubts, "While conducting my research, I read that, on the contrary, an Oracle Noble cannot be forcibly mobilized, and my Oracle AI confirmed this information. Are the Oracle System Archives incorrect?"

As Cho Min Ho's incisive inquiry echoed through the chamber, a shudder rippled among the Oracle Knights, each arriving at the same startling revelation. Jake's mind flashed back to a similar sentiment uttered by Xi, not so long ago. But if that were the case, who was in error? The notion of a flaw lurking within the impregnable database of the Oracle System seemed inconceivable to Jake. And if it were true, then they would have every reason to be truly alarmed.

## **Chapter 951: Mirror World**

### 951 Mirror World

"It's an excellent question," Oros commended with appreciation. "And you're absolutely right. An Oracle Noble indeed cannot be forced to fight and risk their life by the Oracle in ordinary circumstances. However, they cannot shirk their responsibilities either. The Oracle System might, for example, mobilize you to defend a specific position, facing a generally identified threat.

"Where the Oracle Noble distinguishes itself from the common Evolver is that it no longer has merely the status of a simple soldier. Ordinary Evolvers are generally free to act as they please and even flee when they feel threatened.

However, do not be deceived. This semblance of freedom is but a gossamer veil. They are, in reality, much less free than you.

"Firstly, let us discuss the Civilians. All Evolvers who have not participated in any Ordeal and whose Oracle Rank is below that of Staff Sergeant can be reduced to slavery with but a thought, as long as their buyer can afford to pay the price corresponding to their value estimated by the Oracle System. Never forget this.

Everything has value in the Mirror Universe, including you. The only difference between you and the others is that the Oracle System makes you 'non-purchasable' as long as you meet the conditions.

"For those actual Evolvers who have reached or even surpassed the Oracle Rank of Staff Sergeant, they are immune to immediate purchase via the Oracle Store but not to invasion or capture by enemy Evolvers. Once your life is in the hands of your enemy, it no longer belongs to you. They simply have to find a way to force you to sign an Oracle Slave Contract to do whatever they want with you. If these Evolvers and their factions want to continue enjoying their immunity after the end of the diplomatic immunity period, they will then need to be what is called active Evolvers or Players. In simple terms, Fourth-Ordeal Players like you are untouchable for three years following the end of your Fourth Ordeal. This period extends to 5 years for a Fifth-Ordeal Player. An Evolver can also benefit from this kind of immunity by enlisting in the Mirror Universe army, particularly by accepting risky missions involving territory security, such as joining one of the many battlefronts against the Digestor.

"This immunity applies only to those enemies who are much stronger than you. In your case, Fifth and Sixth Ordeal Evolvers are entirely free to attack you if the opportunity arises. The reason is obvious. I don't have enough Oracle Guardians and TX models to enforce the law on a planet as vast as B842. These crawling Digestors are already causing me enough problems. It means that the only thing stopping your law-defying enemies from attacking you immediately is the potential fine they will have to pay. But a fine is just a fine. In the end, the Oracle System does not want to deprive you of your free will, and consequently, the amount of this fine is also highly codified. Do I need to continue?"

Cho Min Ho and the others shook their heads to indicate that it was not necessary. Everyone here was intelligent.

The explanation was as follows. An ordinary Evolver was indeed free, but they were not as protected as the Oracle Nobles and active Players. The market value associated with them made them vulnerable.

Like fragile porcelain in a tempest, the Civilians had no choice but to join a faction or a nation to benefit from their protection. Even the Evolvers and active Players had to sooner or later seek a protector or voluntarily participate in these risky missions if they wanted to maintain their immunity. After all, post-Ordeal immunity did not last indefinitely either.

This meant that most Evolvers and Civilians ended up voluntarily joining a faction or nation of their choice, thereby already relinquishing some of their free will, according to the Oracle Contract they had signed.

And who governed these factions and nations most of the time? Oracle Nobles.

Thus, the cycle was complete. When the Oracle Knights received a mandatory mission with specific objectives, they merely had to dispatch their "subjects" to fulfill their duty. Since all Oracle Nobles regularly received such missions, these Civilians and Evolvers under their protection couldn't just seek better opportunities elsewhere.

In short, nothing was without cost. Freedom or protection - one had to choose.

The only Oracle Knight who frowned after these explanations was the one who came without companions. Having no faction or homeland, he had no one to delegate these responsibilities to.

Seeing that they were all on the same page, Oros nodded with satisfaction and, out of pity for the disheartened Oracle Knight, continued on a more optimistic note.

"Since the duty that falls upon you is clear to everyone, let us proceed to the topic of your responsibilities. Just now, I may have frightened you, but the Oracle is always fair. At least, usually. It's rare for it to force Fourth-Ordeal

Players like you to join an ultra-risky warfront. For now, you have nothing to fear. I spoke earlier of objectives to fulfill to retain your noble title, and shortly you'll see that there's nothing terrifying about it. As long as you meet your quotas, you'll have no worries.

"At your level, your duty to protect the Mirror Universe is limited only to B842, and more specifically to your territories. Your objectives mainly concern the latter, which in reality is a goal you should have pursued even without the Oracle's encouragement. Just as the Oracle

wants you to grow stronger by facing Ordeals, they also want your factions and territories to develop as much as possible."

Another Oracle Knight raised their hand, and Oros nodded for them to speak. Having received approval, the alien asked in a raspy voice, "Where can I see these objectives? I assume that, except for exceptions, we can choose the missions we want and that a certain value is attributed to them, right?"

"I'm getting to that," Oros smiled (or at least, that's how they imagined his expression if he had a face). "You'll understand better when I address the subject of your privileges. But before that, I want to return to the first point concerning your safety. As you've understood, nobody is entirely safe in this world. Evolvers and Civilians are forced to seek your protection, but you too need it. One not-so-distant day, the courage to enter the Red Cube to face a new Ordeal will leave you. Your diplomatic immunity will eventually end, and your territories and factions will once again become vulnerable prey for your enemies plotting in the shadows."

The hearts of the Oracle Knights in the room froze in their chests, imagining this near future. Some already had knots in their stomachs just thinking about the massacre awaiting them at their next Ordeal.

They didn't know how long immunity lasted after each Ordeal, but it couldn't be that long. After a century of immunity, would they have to risk their lives in an Eleventh or

Twelfth Ordeal to maintain it? That was obviously unthinkable. The chance that they would be dead and buried long before facing such a dilemma was far more likely.

11. . . That is why Oracle Nobles can employ the principle of Vassalage, a method already used by numerous factions." Oros continued indifferently. "If a formidable foe seeks to harm you and has the means to circumvent fines and even disregard my Oracle Guardians, then you need only find an Oracle Noble with a higher title than yours who is willing to protect you. By becoming their vassal, you must pledge allegiance to them as your own Civilians do, for as long as you desire to bask in their protection."

Jake snorted upon hearing this disgraceful proposition. The problem with B842 was that it was a young planet. It was uncertain whether there was an Oracle Noble capable of truly protecting them when everything went to hell.

In any case, Jake couldn't care less. If it all went to pot, he could take refuge under the wings of his master, Cekt. He was unsure if Cekt held any noble titles, but he knew Cekt's Oracle Rank was more than sufficient to deter any foes.

In fact, if even Cekt's deterrence proved insufficient, then it would mean that B842 was likely doomed, and they'd need to skedaddle from there posthaste.

Oros knew that there was much to digest for these new Oracle Knights, so he clapped his hands to regain their attention and declared more cheerfully, "Onto your privileges!"

The Oracle Knights' eyes lit up upon hearing the last word mentioned, their burdens a distant memory. This was what they truly wanted to hear, not a series of depressing rules and tedious responsibilities.

". . . Your first privilege, which you have likely already experienced not too long ago, is the VIP Ordeal Store and the VIP Oracle Store." Oros announced knowingly. "Your noble status makes you eligible for a number of exceptional items and products not typically available through the standard distribution channels of the Oracle Store. Without a noble title, you would have needed an Oracle Rank of 21 as a General to unlock them, and I am only speaking of the VIP Oracle Store visible to an Oracle Knight here.

"Your second privilege... And by far the most precious and life-changing for you, is access to the Mirror World. A virtual reality that spans across the entire Mirror Universe and beyond. Considering the bad news I still have to share with you later... Sigh... Its significance in the future will only grow."

## **Chapter 952.2: Mirror World (part 2)**

952 Mirror World (part 2)



Jake immediately noticed he wasn't the only one left dumbstruck by this latest revelation. It wasn't the concept of a virtual universe within the Mirror Universe that was astounding, but rather their utter ignorance of it until now.

In truth, numerous virtual reality options already existed in most civilizations that had surpassed the information age. Hell, he even worked at a VR center before receiving his own bracelet!

Thus, any modern faction or nation of consequence would eventually develop such technology within their territories, whether for facilitating information transfer, socializing, entertainment, or military purposes like New Earth and its Trial Worlds game.

The enigma didn't lie there. The true peculiarity was Jake's complete unawareness of a unified virtual reality network connecting every corner of the Mirror Universe. The reason for this was evident: cost.

When millions, even billions of AP (Aether Points) had to be spent to contact someone on the same planet, Jake dared not fathom the astronomical fees that would be charged to support the maintenance costs of a network exponentially more advanced and demanding.

Until now, if an Earth game designer wanted to sell their creation to other races, they had to go through the Oracle Store or an official announcement. But if they wanted to expand their online game network to other planets and civilizations, they were left to their own devices.

Jake knew from Will's account that New Earth had restored and even enhanced its virtual reality network on its main Floating Island, but to connect and benefit from it, one had to be located nearby. Beyond a few million kilometers away, lags emerged, exponentially diminishing its appeal.

But now, Oros was declaring that a virtual reality world connecting the entirety of the Mirror Universe and even 'beyond' existed? Was this some twisted jest?

"It's no jest. This Mirror Universe also extends to other Mirror Universes. It's a collaborative creation," Oros sighed, gazing at their disbelieving expressions. Everyone reacted the same way upon hearing about the Mirror World for the first time.

"There's a common misconception regarding the Oracle System. Some things require copious amounts of Aether or energy, such as longdistance travel. Conversely, transmitting information across vast distances instantaneously doesn't burden a structure as advanced and sophisticated as the Oracle System. I could delve into the details, but that's not today's topic. Apart from the few Aetherists among you, I doubt you'd grasp much of it."



Jake understood that Oros was referring to the Aetherdream. When he observed the Oracle System directly through it, he had long noticed that there was a sort of presence within the packets of Aether Runes that made up its network. It closely resembled the mental sense of Evolvers.

So, he had theorized for some time that if the body of the Oracle System could be perceived as a vast Spirit Body, then it was indeed very easy for it to transmit information from one point to another within the Mirror Universe, as it all took place within itself. Its consciousness was already everywhere.

However, despite his Lucid Aetherdreamer vision, Jake had never identified any parallel network to that of the Oracle System that could correspond to this mysterious Mirror World.

Obviously, it didn't use the same channels. Oros confirmed this point immediately after, "The Mirror World network is connected to the public Oracle System through various nodes, but operates in parallel using a separate Aether network from the rest. Its existence is directly managed by the Oracles themselves. When a Mirror Universe reaches a certain level of development, its Oracle eventually connects its consciousness and its own virtual network to this global multiversal network. I don't have time mention today what directly concerns you.

"The first point to remember is that, unlike the conventional Oracle System, communications and long-distance travel within the Mirror Universe will not cost you much. Of course, 'not much' is a relative term. At least within the Mirror Universe, the cost can be considered negligible compared to what it would cost you to call someone residing in another System.

"The second point is that from here, you can access an interface containing all sorts of missions and objectives reserved for Oracle Nobles and high-ranking authorized Evolvers from different Mirror Universes. Each has its own contribution system, and it's also within the Mirror Universe that most of the showdowns between Oracle Nobles take place. This avoids unnecessary damage and collateral casualties during conflicts between multiple Nobles and their factions.

"The third point, which should interest you more, is its absolute simulation potential, mimicking reality to 99.999%. No one knows who created the Mirror World, but it is also managed by a sentient artificial entity that we simplify as the High Oracle. God spare you, but I doubt you'll have the chance to interact with it one day. Even for the Ancient Designers, our Oracle System and their Oracle AIs are the only things they interact with on a daily basis. It goes without saying, but the understanding of Aether and the physical laws that the Mirror World attained surpasses anything you can find in our Mirror Universe, and its network is neither created nor maintained by our own Oracle.

"Fourth point, the entertainment, services, business, financial, relational, and military opportunities are nearly infinite. Unlike the Oracle System and the conventional Oracle

Store, you can easily sell your creations and advertise them throughout the Mirror World. Managing your alliances with factions from distant Systems or even branches of your companies is much simpler from here. But believe me, this is just the tip of the iceberg.

"And finally... Fifth and last point..." At this moment, Oros became solemn. "The Digestors are not entirely excluded from it."

Seeing their expressions change, he waved his small hands and exclaimed, "Don't panic! In the Mirror World, Digestors cannot hide who they are and must follow the rules just like everyone else."

Aware once again that this was a lot of information for these new Oracle Knights to digest, Oros clapped his hands and said, "Nothing beats a good demonstration. Let's continue our discussion in the Mirror World. Consult your Oracle AIS. You should now have access to the Mirror World."

[Hmm.. Damn it, I can't believe it! He's telling the truth.] Xi cursed with understandable frustration. It might have been the first time Jake had heard her swear like that.

Rather than unlocking a new authorization, it was as if she had just awakened a very ancient memory. It was as if the Mirror World had always been there in a corner of her mind, but she couldn't notice its existence before. It was enough to drive her mad, and this kind of thing reminded her every morning that she didn't have full control over herself, even after merging her consciousness with Jake.

"Can you connect us to it?" Jake asked patiently, with a hint of concern in his voice.

[Sigh... It's as good as done. It's so simple it's depressing.] Xi lamented wryly, feeling a great sense of overwhelm.

In the blink of an eye, Jake's vision, along with the other Oracle Knights and their companions, shifted abruptly before stabilizing in a room identical to the Oracle Chamber they had just left. If it weren't for the floating pseudonyms above their heads indicating their identity, they probably wouldn't have noticed the difference.

"Welcome to the Mirror World." Oros smiled, spreading his arms in an inviting gesture. "The remainder of the ceremony will take place here. To access the other privileges you have, open the interface concerning you with the help of your Oracle AI or ask the Oracle's main module directly. Unlike the real-world Oracle System, it will respond to you here."

Jake didn't hesitate and mentally ordered, "Xi, I'll leave it to you."

"Don't worry, I got this." Xi whispered in his ear, making him jump in place.

If he hadn't been in such good health, he would have surely perished on the spot when his blood pressure spiked to 150. Turning his head, he noticed that other people had indeed appeared with them in the room.

Recognizing the holographic form of Xi, he immediately deduced that these strangers were the Oracle AIs of the other Oracle Knights and their companions. Clearly, they were all as shocked as he was. Ulfar, in particular, stared at the young woman serving as his Oracle AI for a long time as if he had just seen a ghost.

However, most of these figures were blurred, as if their owners didn't want to reveal their appearances. Or was this choice made by the Oracle AIs themselves? After casting a curious glance at the other Oracle AIs, Jake turned his attention to the interface that Xi had just opened before his eyes.

In addition to the various features and services offered by the Mirror World, everything he needed to know about his status as an Oracle Knight was clearly spelled out in black and white. With a quick downward sweep of his gaze, he read its entire content and closed the interface with an excited expression.

Just for the Mirror World alone, becoming an Oracle Knight was worth its weight in gold!

## **Chapter 953.3: Mirror World (part 3)**

### 953 Mirror World (part 3)

As for tangible privileges, Jake was now exempt from all taxes arising from a service provided by the Oracle System as long as it took place on the planet where his main territory was established, namely B842. For someone as wealthy as him, it wasn't a staggering advantage, but thanks to this, he no longer had to pay to enter an Oracle City.

If that was all there was to it, Jake would have been truly indifferent to this perk, but the benefits of this exemption went far beyond that. First and foremost, the Oracle System imposed a hidden Aether tax on virtually everything.

For instance, when an Evolver used a Yellow Cube, the displayed Aether fee did not represent the actual cost of transport. For those with fewer than four Ordeals under their belt, this Aether fee was heavily discounted, but for the rest, the Aether network assumed the vast majority of the energy burden, with the remainder charged to the user based on a fixed rate proportional to the distance.

On this basis, the Oracle Overseer of a planet, the Oracle Governor of a System, and the Oracle Sovereigns at the pinnacle of the social hierarchy could freely impose additional taxes that ultimately lined their pockets.

It was these additional taxes from which Jake and the other Oracle Knights were now exempt. As a rather lenient Oracle Overseer, Oros had previously imposed such taxes at only 1% of the price of these Aether fees, but with Lure's demise, this was sadly about to change. This privilege would only grow in importance in the future.

Commercial taxes also applied to products from the Oracle Store. When an item was shipped via teleportation to its buyer, depending on the distance and the item in question, these delivery fees could easily represent 5 to 20% of the price. It was akin to acquiring an Oracle Discount lvl to 4 for free.

These taxes also applied to real estate purchased in an Oracle Playground city or to placing a global announcement on private markets or commissioning a mission in one of the Oracle Halls.

In short, for those with a business acumen, this exemption was a godsend that could easily multiply their profits if properly exploited. Jake could only imagine the mortified, jealous expression on Will's face when he learned the news.

The second notable privilege represented an immediate financial windfall. This decree stated that as an Oracle Knight, Jake would be eligible to receive 1% of the taxes collected by the Oracle System within his territory. Oracle Nobles were exempt from additional taxes, but this was not the case for their subjects.

Every time one of them used an Oracle Cube or one of the paid services of the Oracle System, they would reap the benefits. Until now, a lone Oracle Knight had little reason to establish their territory or faction, but they no longer had any excuses.

The third advantage could be both a boon and a bane for Jake and his subjects. Essentially, he could shoulder all or part of the operational costs of the services offered by the Oracle System on behalf of his subjects. The owner of a Floating Island could already do this if they wished, but what changed here was that he could also do the opposite. He could add his own tax, on top of that of the Oracle System and the local Oracle Overseer, to inflate his income.

At first, Jake thought that no Evolver would accept living on the territory of an Oracle Noble who artificially inflated these already expensive rates and taxes, but he couldn't be further from the truth.

Things were still manageable on B842 because their diplomatic immunity had a few years left, and the Digestor threat was still under control.

On most, if not all planets, the Digestors were rampant, and the risk of being captured, kidnapped, raped, robbed, and then enslaved was omnipresent. The Oracle Overseers heading these planets had long since lost the military means to maintain their authority and enforce the law.

The average level of high-profile criminals was also much higher, nearing or even surpassing that of an Eight-Ordeal Evolver, which was the entry-level for an Oracle Guardian Recruit. On these planets, an Oracle Noble who could guarantee the safety and well-being of their subjects could indeed inflate their prices as much as they wanted, and no one would dare to utter even a complaint.

Unsurprisingly, the fourth privilege was that he and his subjects were virtually immune to enslavement as long as his fief, faction, or nation was still able to fight. If two Oracle Nobles wanted to settle their scores, they would have to go through an official procedure involving their entire faction and usually resolved in the Mirror World to avoid unnecessary loss of life.

The defeated party would generally lose almost everything, depending on what they had initially wagered. The subjects under their protection were not automatically "buyable" by the enemy based on their status, but they could once again be captured in the real world.

In the event of an official invasion knocking directly at the gates of his territory on B842, Jake could not be enslaved as long as his territory still existed, and he and his subjects had not surrendered. This would greatly complicate the task for his enemies, as they couldn't attack him directly if he chose to take refuge under the shield of his Oracle City, where violence was forbidden.

There were other privileges, but these were the most important. The others pertained to the Mirror World, which they were, in any case, the only ones allowed to visit. One of them, for instance, was exclusive access to certain major information and news events occurring within the Mirror Universe and beyond.

As for the objectives and quotas that Jake could fulfill to maintain his Oracle Knight title, he had a plethora of options. Participation in Ordeals, passive Aether production in his territory, increasing tax collection, the number and average level of his subjects, technological level, agriculture, faction development, and Digestor elimination...

The good news was that, fortunately, Oros hadn't lied. An Oracle Knight was but a tiny fish in the eyes of the Oracle, and except in cases of extreme urgency and desperate situations, they had little to fear.

No suicide missions currently forced them to defend the Mirror Universe by joining a front or a planet swarming with Digestors. The only semi-mandatory defense missions involving Digestor elimination concerned the security of their own territory, a responsibility they would have assumed even without being forced.

Not everyone had cognitive abilities as overpowered as Jake's, and it took a while for all the present Evolvers to finish their reading. When he saw the last of them detach their gaze from the invisible interface before their eyes with a perplexed frown on their face, Oros calmly inquired, "Any questions?"

Indeed, they had questions. One of the Oracle Knights, a horned, furry alien with a yeti-like appearance, immediately raised his hand.

"Speak," Oros growled.

"Is the Mirror World truly a copy of our Mirror Universe? Does this mean we can easily visit any other place within it or another Mirror Universe for an insignificant cost?"

The Oracle Overseer narrowed his eyes at this cunning question. "You can, but I strongly advise against visiting the Mirror World attached to other Mirror Universes. Besides the cost, if you

travel too far, you risk not being able to return..."

A shiver ran down the spines of the present Evolvers.

"Any other questions?"

"Does the Mirror World have a limit?" asked another Oracle Knight covered in translucent scales. "I mean, do we know how many Mirror Universes are part of it?"

Oros briefly pondered before saying, "No idea. Like the Oracle System, the Mirror World has different strata of authority, but none have reached the bottom. The answer to your question might lie at the deepest of those layers. Next question."

"I read that transactions in the Mirror World are made with Aether Stones. What are those?" Another Evolver growled in a raspy voice.

This question was quite common, and Oros answered tersely, "Grade 6 Aether Crystals or better. Don't dwell on it for now; it's too far beyond your reach. Next!"

The Korean idol didn't hesitate and blurted, "Why restrict access to the Mirror World to just

a few elites? From what I understand, it's obviously not a maintenance cost issue, and I think the entire Mirror Universe would benefit greatly from being able to communicate freely and instantaneously over vast distances. By proceeding in this way, crucial information transmission is delayed, and each planet and system becomes isolated from one another based on their respective financial capabilities."

Murmurs of agreement and thoughtful nods from the other Oracle Knights indicated that the Korean wasn't the only one vexed by this question. Jake had also pondered the same thing with Xi and had his own hypotheses.

Indeed, the small alien confirmed one of them without hesitation, "Excellent question." Oros approved with a nod. "I could give you all sorts of reasons, but the main one is to



prevent or at least complicate communication between Digestors and traitors from different planets and systems. As I said earlier, Digestors aren't banned from the Mirror World since it wasn't our Oracle who created it. However, it can prevent them from connecting to it from our Mirror Universe. Thus, their only way to bypass this limitation is through Corrupted individuals and Digestor Trojans who have access to the Mirror World. Even then, they cannot conceal their true nature once connected, as the Mirror World is renowned for its indisputable transparency and impartiality. Our Oracle, who manages the portion of the Mirror World associated with our Mirror Universe, can closely monitor them as long as the number doesn't become unmanageable. If the Mirror World were accessible to everyone, Digestors would only need to place Brain Eaters on a maximum number of victims, and the Mirror World would be flooded with them in no time. After that, I dare not imagine what would happen as they already are..."

"Already?" Jake frowned.

The other Oracle Knights also sensed something amiss in the alien's reaction, their throats subconsciously tightening. Aware that he had slipped up and that they were no longer in the mood to ask further questions, Oros bluntly spilled the beans.

When they returned to the real world, the faces of Jake and the other Evolvers were completely pale and lifeless.

## **Chapter 954: Alliance Proposal**

### 954 Alliance Proposal

"What do you reckon about him, chief? Did you manage to slip in a word about, well, our little situation?" Garos probed his superior, catching him in a rare moment of wakefulness in the aftermath of the ceremony.

Oros was an unusual specimen among the Overseers. Contrary to tradition, he eschewed the splendor of an Oracle Palace, instead opting for the cold metal confines of his toroidal mothership. This vessel, a symbol of personal safety and familiarity, had been meticulously modified and upgraded over the span of his lengthy existence, the majority of his amassed wealth poured into its intricate workings.

He was determined not to share the fate of those unfortunates on B847, ambushed in the very heart of an Oracle Palace.

Simply put, Oros only graced the public with his physical presence under direct orders from the highest authority, or when his own interests hung precariously in the balance.



Otherwise, he ruled from a distance, through holographic transmissions or the dispatch of a clone. The previous days emergency conference on planet AO, for instance, had seen only a doppelgänger in his place.

This ability, one of his most closely guarded secrets, eluded even Xantheo, the tentative Oracle Governor presiding over System ZZ831. And even if he did possess such knowledge, he would hardly hold it against Oros.

Avatars, clones, and astral projections were not unheard of, nor were they particularly scarce. In civilizations where biotechnology had reached its zenith, such practices were the norm, serving as life-preserving measures or even principal modes of reproduction for certain alien races.

In his rare good humor, Oros didn't chide Garos for his informal address. He responded nonchalantly, "I merely cast a gaze upon him, but he does show promise. The other Oracle Knights at the ceremony appeared like fledglings in his presence. None but me noticed his ludicrous Aether and spiritual signature, a testament to his impeccable self-restraint."

"Did you manage to puzzle out why Saros and the three TX138s were tailing him?" Garos posed the question that had truly been gnawing at him.

Oros didn't respond right away this time, his mind far away in contemplation. He couldn't deny a certain disquiet over the matter.

"Well, several theories come to mind, each less comforting than the last," he finally conceded with a sigh. "However, as long as Saros merely keeps tabs on him, it indicates that the Oracle still believes him to be an ally. Let's refrain from hasty judgments. After all, he remains Cekt's disciple. Let that curmudgeonly imp wrangle with this ticking time bomb. His Grade 10 Energy Body is the real deal, and he'll know how to handle it."

At the mention of the Rank 3 Aetherist, Garos's expression soured, the memory of their failed recruitment attempt still fresh. Even their personal visit hadn't swayed the stubborn old alien, who left them standing at his laboratory's threshold, treating his superior like a mere nuisance.

The audacity to scorn an Overseer in such a manner! The Oracle Guardian Captain still simmered with indignant rage and embarrassment, yet it was his infamously obstinate boss who maintained an uncharacteristic calm. In fact, he had returned from the encounter in an inexplicably buoyant mood. Successful negotiation or not, something had clearly gone right.

Indeed, it had. Cekt had swallowed the bait, and Jake would be the first to reap the consequences.

Ding!

Jake, freshly emerged from the Oracle Chamber along with his fellow Oracle Knights, came to an abrupt halt, his attention hijacked by an unanticipated alert from the Oracle System. An incoming communication request.

On recognising the caller as his master, Cekt, his relaxed demeanor instantly crystallized into a steely resolve. He acknowledged the video call.

The holographic projection of a diminutive, wrinkled, verdant alien with enormous yellow eyes and elongated, pointed ears materialized before him. Jake offered the figure a respectful nod in salutation.

"Master."

Cekt was a creature of brevity, dismissing formalities with an impatient grunt, "Report to my lab."

With those words, the hologram fizzled out, leaving Jake and his comrades in a state of mild shock.

"Um... Was that...?" Hade shattered the lingering silence, his coughing serving as a clumsy precursor to his unfinished question.

"It appears so..." Jake responded, his tone somber, his expression unreadable.

"Is that the one who transferred my bloodline?" Lucia queried, her eyes ablaze with recognition, recollecting that there existed only one being on B842 who could command such deference from Jake.

"None other," Jake conceded with a weary sigh.

"What's our next move?" Ulfar inquired, his arms folded, his lanky form slouched lazily against the cold metal of the corridor.

Hade scoffed at the apparent lack of insight. "It's rather self-evident, isn't it? We don't really have an alternative, do we? Besides, I've always relished the opportunity to engage with a genuine Aetherist."

Such was the curiosity of a wise Fluid Grandmaster who had dedicated over a century and a half to the study of Fluid, recently delving into Aether, and had birthed countless artifact's, including Jake's renowned Purgatory.

Observing Lucia's eager anticipation at the prospect of encountering the elderly alien, Jake conceded to his fate. "We should leave posthaste... His lab should be within reach, assuming he hasn't relocated it."

Jake recollected his previous visit; the clandestine entrance to the lab was concealed between two metallic residential units, the most affordable accommodations available near the Oracle Capital. They lacked the comfort of an individual cabin from the Oracle Bunker, but safety was virtually guaranteed unless one opted for a dwelling within the capital - an entirely different financial venture.

Just as Jake and his team were about to embark on their journey, their path was obstructed by Cho Min Ho's bodyguard, Kang Jun.

Unfazed, Jake studied the imposing figure before him, querying, "Got something to tell me?"

The hulking Kang Jun, reminiscent of a demigod, locked gazes with Jake, his tone as icy as his stare. "Cho Min Ho suggests we align for our Fifth Ordeal. We have other potential allies, but out of respect for Amy, we're willing to make an exception."

Upon hearing these words, Lucia's cheerfulness evaporated, supplanted by a stormy grimace and trembling lips. For a Myrmidian princess of her stature, such patronizing overtures from a selfdeclared superior group was an affront to her pride.

Ulfar met the human's audacity with a sneer. Was he oblivious to the fact that, if not for the shackles of the Oracle System, he would have already paid the ultimate price for his insolence?

Hade maintained an even loftier air of disdain, his gaze passing through the warrior as if he were naught but a wisp of smoke. Jake did not share his indifference, but Lucia and Ulfar, who braced for an explosive rebuttal, were left somewhat disappointed as he responded in an unruffled tone.

"Fine. Choose a date."

A wave of self-satisfaction surged within Kang Jun, fed by the sight of Jake's apparent spinelessness. He found himself questioning if Amy's portrayal of him had been misplaced. After all, her memory of Jake was a hazy recollection from their nascent days on B842.

Nevertheless, with Jake's acceptance of their proposal, Kang Jun found no room for excessive hostility. He forged ahead, adhering to the directives imparted by Cho Min Ho.

"Very well. You will be updated," Kang Jun grumbled with a foreboding undertone. "The diplomatic immunity of B842 remains intact for just under four years, hence my leader suggests we schedule the Ordeal just prior to its expiration. This way, we avoid squandering the reward of an additional five years of immunity. Any objections?"

"Not at all," Jake replied with a nonchalant smile. It was the exact course of action he had planned to pursue, regardless of their involvement.

As the presumptuous earthling strode away, Lucia could no longer contain her indignation. She promptly closed the distance between Jake and her, her finger jabbing accusatorily at his chest as she voiced her displeasure, "Why on earth did you consent? I've no inclination to ally with these cretins!"

Jake gently pushed her forehead to create a buffer between them, but when he attempted to retract his hand, she seized it in a vice-like grip. Finding himself ensnared, he cradled her skull, his fingers curling around it, and hoisted her aside to clear his path.

Anticipating her impending attempt to latch onto his arm in a koala-esque embrace, her expression a poignant blend of puppy-like pleading and unwavering resolve, he swiftly capitulated and put the brewing tension to rest.

"I'm not concerned with the identity of the Oracle Knights we team up with. What I am certain of is that I surpass them in strength and they're human too. I can't predict the number of Oracle Knights on the opposing side, but if I am the most formidable amongst us, then our Mirror Universe stands a better chance of victory."

"This dude was not entirely wrong, either. Amy and I are little more than strangers, but I know Will and Kyle wouldn't have wanted to leave her to face her Fifth Ordeal alone if it could be avoided. There's something off about this Cho Min Ho, and I trust my gut instincts. What better way to discern the truth than to unite with him during the upcoming Ordeal? by then, I'll know what's going on.

## **Chapter 955: You Have Five Seconds**

### **955 You Have Five Seconds**

As Jake and his comrades made their departure from the Oracle Palace, on a course set for Cekt's laboratory, Kang Jun reunited with Cho-Min-Ho, Lee Yoon, and the third bodyguard who were patiently waiting in one of the gardens, cupping a warm teacup, basking under the artificial sun of Thelma.

The third bodyguard was the sole non-human alien among them. An alien more insect than human by the name of Natan. Only God knew if it was his birth name or a moniker Cho Min Ho later assigned to simplify their communications. His native tongue was but a series of clicks and mandible scrapes—utterly incomprehensible.

On spotting Kang Jun strolling towards them, hands nonchalantly in pockets, Cho Min Ho and Natan shot him a disapproving glance. Lee Yoon, meanwhile, made no attempt to hide her revulsion and contempt.

"Was it truly necessary to display such arrogance in proposing our alliance?" Lee Yoon spat spitefully.

"What do you know, eh?" Kang Jun retorted coldly, spitting on the ground before lighting a cigarette, indifferent to the daggers Lee Yoon's hate-filled eyes were hurling at him.

The relationship between the two bodyguards was far from cordial before their arrival on B842, and had only deteriorated since. Their mutual disdain was now blatant, especially from Lee Yoon, who could hardly tolerate Kang Jun's presence.

She might have been able to tolerate his aggressive, unsubtle flirtation bordering on sexual harassment, but Kang Jun was also an unmitigated prick, stirring trouble for their faction wherever he went. Lee Yoon couldn't fathom why Cho Min Ho kept him around when he seemed to bring more harm than good. Then again, she didn't understand Cho Min Ho either.

Having seen and heard many things since she started working for him, she kept a safe distance, maintaining a strictly professional relationship with her superior. But lately, she began to question the nature of her young master. If it weren't for the absolute loyalty her clan owed his family, she probably would have jumped ship a long time ago.

Unfortunately, Cho Min Ho was far from mad and just a tad paranoid. All his bodyguards had to sign a horrifically strict Oracle Contract. At the time, she hadn't given it much thought, but now she was starting to regret it.

In the end, Kang Jun was an excellent bodyguard, performing his duties with an overzealous fervor. He was the hound who barked the loudest and rushed to anticipate and fulfill his master's desires before they were even voiced. Perhaps that was why Cho Min Ho kept him around.

Then, there was also the fact that the loud mouthed jerk was quite strong. Replacing such a loyal Evolver was no simple task.

"You shouldn't have done that." Natan suddenly screeched, clacking his mandibles in a decidedly irritated manner. To the unprepared, the sound of his voice could easily instill terror.

Standing at an imposing nine feet, he carried himself with a rigid, predatory grace, his body a chiseled sculpture of tight sinew and resilient scales. His skin, if one could call it that, was a vibrant tapestry of iridescent blues and blacks, akin to a star-studded night sky, flecked with sharp, red streaks that mirrored the deadly venom of his lineage.

His visage was a fusion of the human and the insectoid. Dual onyx orbs were set deep into an eerily human-like countenance, shimmering with an alien intelligence and the promise of peril. Above them, two thin eyebrows curved like the sinister arc of a scorpion's stinger. Where a human nose would be, twin antennae twitched restlessly,

ceaselessly sifting the air for scent and vibration. His mouth, a bold crimson gash, split open to reveal three pairs of supple, short mandibles.

From his wide, muscular shoulders descended arms that unnervingly mirrored human anatomy until the wrists, where the familiar gave way to the terrifying: formidable, clawed appendages. Encased in a hardened chitinous exoskeleton, these claws had the dexterity of a human hand, but with a bone-crushing strength that inspired dread.

A segmented, exoskeletal chest plate encased his torso, each piece shifting in a silent, fluid ballet with each breath. The armor-like plates offered defense that could rival any manmade armor, while permitting the flexibility and freedom that his predatory nature demanded.

His lower body followed the same uncanny pattern as his arms: mirroring human anatomy until his feet morphed into pointed, scorpion like appendages, tipped with razor-sharp talons, designed for swift and deadly strikes.

A menacing tail sprouted from his lower back, arching overhead in a grotesque mimicry of a human's spinal curve, ending in a venomous stinger that was ever ready to strike with lethal precision.

Yet, despite his terrifying form, there was a captivating, hypnotic allure about him. His movements were fluid, deliberate - each step, each gesture a testament to the lethal grace coursing through his veins.

No one knew where Cho Min Ho had found this Evolver, but one thing was certain: he was by far the strongest member of their faction and unquestionably loyal to their leader. Only Cho

Min Ho could face him without fear for his life.

As one might imagine, his personality was as cold and devoid of empathy as his insectoid appearance suggested, and in his presence, even Kang Jun had to mind his tongue.

Fortunately, the alien seldom, if ever, spoke. So Kang Jun's expression turned ugly when Natan suddenly addressed him directly. He wanted nothing to do with this fucking monstrosity!

"Cut him some slack, Natan," Cho Min Ho finally spoke, his voice sounding like divine forgiveness to Kang Jun's ears.

However, his relief was short-lived. The Korean leader then fixed his calm eyes on him and smiled kindly, but the arrogant bodyguard's hair stood on end as he sensed imminent danger, his body breaking out in cold sweat before he even realized it.

"Give me a good reason," Cho Min Ho said, maintaining his innocent smile.

Kang Jun cursed the pretty boy in his mind, but he responded constructively, "I thought showing him who's in charge would make it easier for you to control him if he decided to join us. If he refuses, we can simply find someone else instead of risking collaboration with Oracle Knight who might ruin our plans at any moment. Anyway, with your power and charisma, they will eventually succumb and be absorbed by our faction."

Cho Min Ho didn't show anger hearing his explanation, but disappointment was clearly visible in his eyes. "Even if what you say is true, it's easier for me to influence people when they have a good first impression of me. With your attitude, I'm afraid our faction will create many enemies... Give me a real reason. You have five seconds."

This time, he was not joking. As Natan's venom dripping stinger hovered less than an inch from his forehead, Kang Jun's life flashed before his eyes. Yet, gritting his teeth and exhaling a cloud of smoke, he coolly ground his cigarette into the dirt as if he didn't have a poisonous barb trained on him.

"Good cop, bad cop. I've got nothing more to say.

Isn't that how you always clean up my messes?"

Natan's stinger instantly retreated from his forehead. Lee Yoon seemed disappointed, but the inscrutable expression on her boss's face told her he had passed the test.

"As long as you remember the difference, I'll never stop you from being yourself," Cho Min Ho reminded him. "But there's a fine line between making a bad impression and irrevocably ruining a potential alliance."

Lee Yoon secretly rolled her eyes upon hearing the Korean's sermon. It felt as though she had witnessed this conversation a hundred times, and each time, to her great chagrin, Kang Jun would walk away without any punishment.

This was the first time Kang Jun had ever come this close to genuine retribution. It was unexpected, considering Cho Min Ho's unflappable composure, but she could tell he was truly displeased with his attitude.

'Are this Jake and his faction really that important?' She couldn't help but wonder, her curiosity piqued. 'But why? because of Amy? Impossible.'

Then she remembered that Cho Min Ho was filthy rich, and his Oracle Rank was higher than hers. Maybe he knew something else. Suddenly, Lee Yoon found herself excited about participating in the upcoming Ordeal.



Somehow, she had the sense that something interesting was about to happen - the kind of twist that would reveal her master's true nature and give her the chance she had been waiting for to break free from his control.

## Chapter 956: How Utterly Refreshing

### 956 How Utterly Refreshing

Jake and his friends located the new site of Cekt's lab a short while later. As he had suspected, the alien had relocated to another back alley, keeping his whereabouts shrouded from the constant stream of individuals who sought his services from dawn till dusk.

In its former state, the lab's entrance was a tiny door, more akin to a cat flap than an entryway designed for civilized humans. It was wedged between two incongruous metallic box-shaped residences, rendered invisible by an illusion.

Fortunately, Cekt had given his disciples permission to locate him through their Shadow Guide, saving them from a fruitless search that would've been as futile as seeking a needle in a haystack.

Jake had braced himself for another of his master's tricks, perhaps another cat flap, but even by overestimating the old gremlin, he was left agape as he watched his Shadow Guide vanish into a sewer grate.

'Fuck! Does he really have to go to such lengths to hide? Jake cursed inwardly.

[I think you're underestimating how rare

Aetherists are in the Mirror Universe. Especially a Rank 3 Master Aetherist like Cekt.] Xi remarked with an amused tone.

"Jake, why are you staring at that sewer grate?" Ulfar asked anxiously. "Tell me, that's not the entrance to your master's lab, right?"

Lucia was prepared to follow Jake even to hell as long as they called it a date, but her strained smile and the wistful glances she threw at her beautiful dress clearly showed she was less than thrilled with this turn of events.

"It's an illusion." Hade noted stoically. "Ulfar, stop relying solely on your luck. Lucia... nevermind..."

He had just observed her tentatively reaching for Jake's hand, but at that moment, Jake had crouched to examine the sewer grate. Her delicate hand had closed on thin air,

leaving her visibly flustered. It was so awkward that the Fluid Grandmaster swallowed whatever he intended to say.

'What a potent illusion.' Jake thought, admiring the myriad of runes composing the formation.

Aether wasn't the only energy powering the enchantment, and their Grade was high. His master's compact, almost viscous spiritual energy also permeated the formation, one of his wisps of consciousness merged within. If Cekt wished, he could transform this harmless illusion into a lethal formation with a single thought.

From this observation alone, it was clear that the old Wendok had little faith in the energy shield protecting Thelma, let alone the Oracle Guardians and other veteran Evolvers tasked with its defense.

Yet, as intriguing as this formation was, Jake had no intention of notifying his master of his presence. Activating his Cosmic Sight, his eyes filled with an ocean of darkness suddenly ignited from within, casting a moonlight radiance that immediately blended with the darkness of his sclera, forming a slowly swirling galactic vortex. Occasionally, arcs of electricity in various shades of blue traversed his irises, adding a splash of color to his inhuman gaze.

'Bingo.' Jake smiled, having finished analyzing and memorizing the rune formation.

His shining eyes flashed abruptly, forcing his companions to momentarily shield their eyes. An invisible psychic beam enveloped the sewer grate, which instantly vanished, revealing a smooth and glossy dark steel slab seamlessly integrated with Thelma's metallic ground.

Lucia and Ulfar betrayed no emotion, but as they watched him dissolve the illusion without breaking a sweat, an urgent sense of inferiority washed over them. Wasn't his master a formidable Aetherist with at least nine Ordeals under his belt? Had it been them, even a year would not have sufficed to neutralize it without external aid.

Did this imply that Jake could trap them in an unbreakable illusion if he wished? The thought sent a chill down their spines.

Below them, unbeknownst to the duo, Cekt was in his laboratory, hurling a barrage of insults and spittle at one of his witless disciples. He abruptly halted his tirade, his eyes snapping skyward.

"Hmm? My formation has been disarmed?" The already wrinkled face of the gremlin scrunched up even more in intense contemplation.

As he mentally scanned the surface, his eyes imperceptibly widened in surprise upon recognizing the culprit. After a brief jolt of disbelief, a delighted smile stretched his hideous face, revealing a row of yellow fangs in dire need of dental attention.

"Master?" Syrbarun, the one who had been berated by the Aetherist moments ago, blinked in confusion, wiping the alien's saliva off his face with his sleeve.

Why had the old gremlin suddenly stopped cursing his Vrusug ancestors ten generations back? Cekt's lips tightened in displeasure at the bovine expression of his fifth disciple.

'Damn it! Why is there such a disparity between my disciples...' The Wendok lamented, shedding a symbolic tear of exasperation.

As Syrbarun was about to ask him again, Jake and his three companions abruptly materialized before him, dropping from the ceiling as if it were not solid metal but a viscous, swamp-like liquid.

The moment Jake had touched the surface slab, which liquefied after scanning his hand to let him pass, he had fallen directly onto the usual teleportation cube before plummeting through several hundred meters of liquid metal to land here. His friends had followed in quick succession, arriving almost simultaneously.

"Wow, quite the rollercoaster ride," Ulfar quipped, checking his clothes before pulling out a pocket mirror to fix his hair.

Before he could even draw his comb, Lucia snatched the mirror from his hand without asking and hastily tidied her hair and smoothed the creases in her dress, hoping Jake hadn't noticed her tousled hair.

Fortunately, or unfortunately depending on one's perspective, his attention was elsewhere at that moment.

"You must be Master Cekt Mogusar. It's an honor." Hade bowed respectfully, oblivious to the other two buffoons.

Jake followed suit with equal solemnity. "Master.

I arrived as soon as I could."

Cekt's lips twitched at his cocky smirk.

'Well, well... Aren't you a bit too proud after

unraveling just one of my illusions?' The Wendok gritted his teeth but kept his thoughts to himself to avoid appearing sour. Instead, he responded with a falsely satisfied smile and said soberly,

"Thank you for coming. With you, we are complete. As for your friends... Well, I suppose they are welcome too. The more, the merrier."

Cekt had intended to send them away, but after giving them a quick once-over, he changed his mind. 'Interesting.'

"You are...?" The alien inquired, his gaze lingering on Hade with curiosity.

"Sigmar Aelsinire, but I go by Hade now," the pale, sickly-looking dark-haired youth introduced himself sententiously.

SMACK!

"Fuck, why didn't you just say your name is Hade?!" Cekt suddenly exploded like a manic, showering the bewildered Fluid Grandmaster's face with spittle. "Did you think I asked your

name because I'm interested in your life story?! If you want to stay here, answer the damn questions straightforwardly."

"M-my apologies," Hade mumbled, his gaze dropping and his cheeks flushing red (and not only because of the slap).

Jake bit his lip to stifle his laughter, while Lucia and Ulfar were too shocked to utter a word. Their mouths agape, they struggled to believe what they had just witnessed. The usually aloof and apathetic Hade had just blushed and stammered in front of a decrepit alien barely taller than a stack of apples.

After Hade's public crucifixion by the caffeine addicted old gremlin, Lucia and Ulfar introduced themselves in turn, sticking strictly to their names.

Satisfied, the cantankerous alien then asked for further details, such as their bloodlines, specialties, and preferred weapons, but quickly lost interest in Lucia. Conversely, he was intrigued by Hade's expertise in artifact creation and Ulfar's Witcher Bloodline, which required various potions for his personal use.

Being a Potioneer was also a highly sought-after subspecialty of an Aetherist. Cekt still needed to test them, but if they were even half as promising as Jake, he was inclined to accept them as his eighth and ninth disciples.

As luck would have it, he had prepared the perfect test for them!

"Syr, fetch the others," commanded the alien.

"Right away." The Minotaur-like alien in his mech suit hastened to obey.

Syrbarun's Vrusug fur had deepened to a darker shade of ochre since Jake last saw him. Not only had he grown taller, nearly scraping the ceiling, but he now boasted twenty mechanical arms attached to his back instead of ten, indicating his recent equipment upgrade.

While Syrbarun could have used his bracelet to contact the other disciples, he was all too eager to escape the cranky alien's presence for a few precious minutes. From the moment he arrived, he'd been nothing more than the old sadist's punching bag.

If he had known what awaited him, he definitely would have taken his sweet time getting here instead of being the first to arrive...

## **Chapter 957.1: Cekt I s Disciples (part 1)**

### 957 Cekt I s Disciples (part 1)

A handful of minutes later, Syrbarun returned, accompanied by five distinct individuals, each bearing a unique style and appearance.

Jake immediately recognized Siri, a Delkron android woman who could pass for a human were it not for her skin, which resembled white plastic, and the electric blue gleam in her eyes. She was the third of the latest generation of Cekt's disciples, while Syrbarun was the fifth in recruitment order.

As for himself, Jake was the seventh and current last disciple of Cekt, but that status might soon change.

"Jake, you're already familiar with Syrbarun and Siri, but I'll reintroduce everyone since it's the first time we've all gathered here simultaneously." Cekt took over from the Vrusug, making the introductions. "The one who resembles a humanoid red dragon is Drakon Solara, my sixth disciple. His bloodline confers upon him immense physical strength and an absolute immunity to fire, in all its forms. And by fire, I mean broadly speaking, including heat and all plasma resulting from combustion."

The expressions of Jake and his friends morphed upon hearing this. It was their first time encountering the concept of immunity to an element. It was important to note that even his Cosmic D Starfeyrves Bloodline only provided resistances.

How one could become entirely invulnerable to heat to the point of violating the laws of thermodynamics was utterly beyond him.

"Pleased to meet you." Drakon nodded kindly, his intimidating reptilian appearance contrasting with his temperament. He seemed eager to return to whatever he was doing before being dragged here.

Standing at only two meters, his body exuded restrained power and a grace that was both controlled and imposing, as if his original form of a red dragon had been compressed into a humanoid shape. His skin was a burnished ruby crimson speckled with gold. From his slit eyes, a fiery glow erupted, a reflection of the dormant power within him. Two curved horns emerged from his head, adding to his draconian stature.

"Drakon is reserved, but he's a passionate seeker of knowledge who's willing to do anything to quench his thirst. The plasma-based weapons of mass destruction he designs are promising."

Cekt praised the reticent lizard, much to Syrbarun's surprise, who glanced at him with a bruised look of injustice.

Why was their treatment so different? As the envious Vrusug hoped that his master would change his attitude towards him, the following sentence crushed all his hopes,

"The Vrusug looking foolish and resembling a red-haired minotaur mechanic, that's Syrbarun, whom everyone calls Syr."

Cekt continued bluntly. "His passion and specialty are technology and science in general, but his guilty pleasure lies in exoskeletons and mech suits. The mechanical arms in his back that assist him in his research and boost his combat capabilities are one of his achievements. Vrusugs are generally known for their brute strength and simple-minded but stubborn spirits, and Syr is no exception."

Just as Syrbarun began to believe his master had no positive comments to make about him, Wendok added, "Still, I appreciate his driven mind and his dream of creating a mech suit that allows an ordinary civilian to match high-level Evolvers. Such things exist already, of course, but there's a limit to what technology and artifacts can do. His ambition remains admirable nonetheless."

The Vrusug proudly puffed out his chest at receiving validation from the little alien, two streams of tears silently trickling from his dark eyes.

He yearned to enfold Cekt within his arms; the latter must have sensed it, for he swiftly brought down his cane on the Vrusug's skull, knocking him unconscious in an instant.

Jake and the other disciples struggled to swallow, their faces twitching in sympathetic discomfort at the sight of the formidable knot, stubbornly resistant to their high vitality, on Syr's skull. Each one of them had, at least once, painfully experienced a similar fate—Jake included.

"Ahem, where was I? Oh yes, introductions!"

Cekt nonchalantly leaned back onto his cane as if nothing had occurred and continued, "The woman appearing as an indistinct mass of light is Lyra Silversong, my fourth disciple. She is of the Sylian race, an ethereal species closely related to the Astrals. Her bloodline allows her to manipulate light, create illusions, or turn invisible. Like Drakon, she is wholly immune to all kinds of electromagnetic waves."

As the Aetherist didn't point anyone out, Jake and his friends momentarily faltered, their gaze shifting between two individuals. Lyra was not the only luminous being among them. Both creatures were radiant, their contours indistinct; they weren't sure who Cekt was referring to.

Nevertheless, after a brief hesitation, Jake and Hade eventually fixated their gaze upon one of the two glowing silhouettes.

"She is the young woman to my left," Cekt clarified, cutting the suspense. "The one emitting a gentle white light."

'As expected,' Jake and Hade thought, nodding in understanding.

Having been identified, a melodious laughter

echoed in the room and Lyra giggled, "Hehe, I wanted to see if any of you could tell the difference. It seems we have a few sharp minds among us. As for my specialty, it's quantum optics. By forcing Aether to radiate and focusing these rays, I can observe them up close, much like a microscope. Cekt recruited me based solely on this ability, and since then, I've been studying diligently under his guidance and assisting him with his research."

Ulfar and Lucia didn't quite comprehend what this meant, but for Jake and Hade, who had a solid understanding of Aetherism, the implications of such an ability were astounding. If Jake could zoom into his Aether Code like this, he could have directly analyzed his own bloodline. His mastery of Aether would have advanced by leaps and bounds in no time.

"Lyra shows promise," Cekt acknowledged gravely. "Even for me, with access to the right technology, such an ability would be invaluable. If I could, I would transfer her bloodline to myself for this ability to control Aether radiation so absolutely, but unfortunately, our species categories are far too different. The exchange would come at too great a cost."

Jake knew what he meant. Despite his bloodline and appearance having drastically changed, the core of his DNA was still human. Well, at least before his last mutation.



If he desired, he could absorb the bloodlines of creatures with unique and extraordinary abilities, like the Space Worms, for instance. The ability to control space at will and open wormholes with a mere thought was indeed a powerful one.

The problem was that to be compatible with such a bloodline, one would have to become a repulsive, truck-sized worm. Even a Rank 3 Aetherist like Cekt could scarcely change that.

Back in the day, when Cekt had fused and customized his Myrtharian bloodline using the genes of Gerulf and Lucia, he had been faced with a host of necessary compromises. This was chiefly due to the fact that Gerulf, despite his humanoid appearance, was not exactly considered human. Strictly speaking, the Kintharians and the Throsogenians were hybrid lifeforms bearing more kinship to minerals or flora than to humans.

Of course, this was not to suggest it was impossible, just that it was beyond the reach of a Rank 3 Aetherist like Cekt, particularly given the high-Grade nature of Lyra's bloodline.

Unperturbed by their questions, Cekt proceeded to formally introduce Siri, a familiar face to Jake,

"The lovely Delkron android, that's Siri, my third disciple. Her rational mind and emotional impenetrability make her an exemplary student, and I have nothing but praise for her," Cekt flattered with a broad grin, which promptly faded at the young woman's lack of response. "Alas, this absence of emotion is also her sole and unique flaw. Like most advanced artificial intelligences, she excels in utilizing and combining data but struggles to infer from it to create truly novel concepts. This lack of emotion also impairs their Soul Strength, leaving them practically talentless in awakening techniques based on their True Will, which are largely reliant on obsession and emotional attachment. Among android races, we find numerous decent Aetherists, but almost no Rank 5 Aetherists, the level at which one can touch the realm of the Soul Code.

Preempting the objections from Jake and his fellow disciples, Cekt corrected himself, "I know what you're about to say, but the Ancient Designers Aurae and Syntharae are exceptions. That's because they merely resemble androids. Their intelligence isn't artificial, and they were born naturally."

Jake immediately quieted down, understanding what he meant. Aurae might have looked and acted like a robot, but he was anything but.

However, the first one that came to mind was not Aurae but Vhoskaud. That malicious android surely experienced all kinds of emotions, making him a genuine prick!

## Chapter 958.2: Cekt's Disciples (part 2)

### 958 Cekt's Disciples (part 2)

Jake and the others next cast their eyes upon final two disciples that Cekt had yet to introduce. Their contrasts couldn't be more striking. As they pondered who Wendok would unveil next, the second disciple stepped forward. the

"I am Rigel Ironcore, the second disciple of Master Cekt." A voice that echoed like the rumble of shifting tectonic plates emerged from the cracked crevice that served as his mouth.

Rigel embodied the resilience of the mineral world. Towering at a lofty height of four meters, he possessed an anchored calm. His body, a captivating tableau of interlocking stones and crystals, shimmered in hues of metallic gray, cobalt blue, and deep emerald green. His eyes, twin radiant crystals, glowed with unwavering light, reflecting his steadfast spirit. His form, rugged and rough-hewn, bore an alien beauty a testament to nature's majestic artistry.

Cekt, noting his usually reticent disciple had stolen the spotlight, felt a pang of discontent.

Regardless, he promptly redirected the attention back onto himself and continued the introductions as planned.

"Rigel is a Gorgonite, as you may have guessed, hailing from the mineral races. His power lies in geokinesis, the ability to shape and control all manner of rocks and minerals, particularly gems and crystals. It may seem rudimentary, but the Mirror Universe, especially in areas where the Aether density exceeds 100,000 units, is teeming with gems and minerals possessing extraordinary properties. The basic Earth Manipulation that many boast of is typically powerless against these objects due to the powerful force fields they emit. Rigel, however, suffers no such limitations.

"His primary field of research is planetary geology, specifically of planet-ships like B842. As an Aetherist, he aspires to create one of these planets and unravel its many mysteries. If he succeeds, he will become a formidable Aetherist, both in battle and in technical expertise. You should know that planet-ships are not created by Aetherists, but by the Oracle, or the Mirror Universe itself if you prefer. Creating planets from scratch is within the capabilities of the Ancient Designers and many Evolvers, according to their abilities. However, these planet-ships, resulting from the perfect fusion of several Dark Universe's Seed Worlds, remain exclusive to the Oracle."

Jake and the others viewed the Gorgonite differently, albeit for disparate reasons. Jake, indeed, was impressed by such a lofty ambition, but what truly puzzled him was his

preconceived notion that the construction of these giant planets was not as profound a mystery.

In the simplest of terms, it was merely several small universes roughly fused together. If that was all there was to their construction, it wouldn't pose any problem. However, their design touched upon all the physical and Aetheric laws possible in the Mirror Universe.

Time, space, void, gravity, formations, barriers mastery of each arcane was required to hope to create a functional, habitable planet, not just a chaotic mass of matter where all sorts of cosmic environments collide. -

Even if they succeeded, the issue of gravity remained. Forming a planet with such a monstrously high mass should logically result in crushing gravity. Then, an autonomous energy system capable of maintaining the barriers isolating each biome and ecosystem from each other must be created.

The amalgamation of different worlds was a nightmare in itself, due to the different flow of time in each Seed World relative to the new planet-ship being created.

Rigel's ambition was not minor by any stretch of the imagination. Despite their knowledge that the Gorgonite may be biting off more than he could chew, Cekt had no intention of dissuading him. For even if Rigel failed, the journey itself would be enough to shape him into an exemplary Aetherist.

In every world and culture, the same adage held true: If one had the audacity to aim for the moon, they could still end up among the stars, even in failure.

With Rigel's introduction complete, there remained but one disciple to introduce, the first of Cekt's latest generation of apprentices. a year prior, he alone was qualified to be on the receiving end of Cekt's teachings. A genuine Rank 1 Aetherist.

This distinction indicated he could invent his own Aether Spells, had at least one unique spell, and knew how to extract and transfer a bloodline.

Cekt signaled the second luminous being to step forward. This one glowed with a radiance encompassing the entire visible spectrum, setting him apart from Lyra's white light. Cekt announced with an appreciative smile, "Behold Epsilon Bolt, a Zephyrim, and my first and only true disciple among you."

This being was a breathtaking spectacle. His form, entirely of pulsating energy, radiated in a plethora of vibrant colors that ebbed and flowed with his mood and power. His body, lacking any concrete physical structure, constantly shimmered and shifted like a sentient aurora. He moved with swift, fluid motions, leaving iridescent trails of energy in his wake. His eyes, twin sparks of electric blue, flickered with a wild fervor mirroring his volatile nature.

"Hi," the alien casually greeted, raising a hand. His speech was starkly contrasting to his extraordinary appearance, relaxed and informal, akin to bumping into a friend on the street. His voice, however, crackled like thunder, a chorus of energy echoing and forming a haunting symphony.

Compared to the other disciples, his aura and the passive spiritual pressure he emitted were in a league of their own. Jake felt a sense of threat as he sized him up, a feeling he hadn't experienced with the others.

To his surprise, Epsilon harbored similar thoughts. This was unusual for him as he had hardly ever experienced such a sharp sense during his Ordeals.

Cekt showed nothing, but inwardly, he rejoiced, noting the mutual surprise of his most promising disciples. Epsilon needed this stimulus to continue his meteoric rise. If he believed his position unshakeable, it would do him no good beyond temporarily stroking his ego.

"Epsilon, like Lyra, is also a being of pure energy," the elder gremlin calmly explained, noticing their fascinated expressions. "But unlike the Sylans, who belong to the family of Light Elementals, Zephyrims are royalty among the Ethereal Races. If one were to compare him to Lyra, he could roughly be qualified as an Energy Elemental. Light is not the only thing he has absolute control over, and his immunities extend to energy in general. In the Mirror Universe, many consider them unkillable. Regrettably, in light of recent events, this is clearly no longer the case... Cough... Unlike the vast majority of species, Zephyrims are cosmic beings born spontaneously from the universe itself. Each one is unique and they are by default infertile. It's truly fortunate and coincidental for me, and for you all, to have encountered one here on B842."

"I am the one who is fortunate to have met you, Master," Epsilon immediately countered in a solemn voice, a multicolored electric arc crackling from his mouth. "Without you, I'd still be drifting through the cosmic void, ruling over a desolate nebula, believing myself to be alone in the universe."

A smile of contentment tugged at the Wendok's lips at this. There was nothing more rewarding than knowing his disciple appreciated the efforts he'd invested in him. However, through his lengthy experience as a teacher, such gratitude had unfortunately not always been forthcoming.

Many had perished in the Ordeals, or elsewhere, before they could realize their full potential. Some lost the spark that drove them to face adversity, while others fell drastically short of his expectations. Lastly, he had also encountered a fair share of ingrates, the worst of whom had even betrayed him, ending up corrupted by the Digestors.

But, that was all in the past. Regarding his current generation of disciples, he was rather optimistic. He hadn't forced anything, nor had he recruited anyone against their will, yet ironically, this generation of disciples was one of the most exceptional.

A Draconian, a scholarly Vrusug, a Delkron android, two Ethereal Beings, and a human with seemingly limitless potential. Their bloodlines had even reached or exceeded Grade 10 for five of them, with the exception of Syr and Siri.

"So, what's his speciality?" Ulfar broke Cekt's train of thought with the question that was on everyone's mind.

So far, every introduced disciple seemed to have their own area of expertise and ambition to fulfill.

"I don't have one," Epsilon answered directly, unfazed by the disrespectful way Ulfar had referred to him. "I merely learn everything my master teaches me."

## **Chapter 959: What Do You Expect From Us?**

### 959 What Do You Expect From Us?

Jake, along with the other disciples, found themselves utterly speechless at the nonchalance with which Epsilon delivered his words. He didn't seem intrigued by the knowledge he was gaining, his actions borne merely from a sense of obligation to his master.

Yet, the reality couldn't be ignored. According to Cekt, the Zephyrim was indeed the only disciple who could claim such a title. At least, that was true a year ago. Since then, much had changed, and not solely on Jake's side.

If Cekt failed to recognize this, it would be a disgrace to his status as a Rank 3 Aetherist. Tapping the ground with his cane to regain their attention, the elderly Wendok cleared his throat and declared sternly,

"Now that introductions have been made, let's cut to the chase. I've gathered you here for a reason, and it's not merely to break the ice among you."

His seven disciples and the three outsiders (aka Lucia, Hade, and Ulfar) became grave, their ears pricking at his words.

Satisfied with their seriousness, Cekt didn't keep them in suspense for long, swiftly moving on to the central issue,

"Those among you who are Oracle Knights have likely already heard the news, and so it won't be much of a surprise. But I will repeat it once more for the others." With a brief pause to heighten the suspense, the alien announced ominously,

"The Ancient Designer Lure has been murdered."

Jake, previously uncertain of who among Cekt's disciples were also Oracle Knights, was abruptly enlightened by this shocking revelation. It was obvious from the impassiveness of Epsilon and Drakon that they were already aware.

The others were not particularly devastated, but that was because they were yet unaware of what this implied for them. Regardless, the assassination of an Ancient Designer was grim news enough to crack their indifferent facades. If Oros had been there, he would have commended Jake for picking all the microexpressions betraying the emotional turmoil that rocked them upon hearing the news.

The only one given the benefit of the doubt was Siri. Being an android, the news was processed as a mere data stream, her electric-blue pupils flickering rapidly for a moment. Still, a single glance at her aura allowed Jake to assert with nearly 100% certainty that she was not adequately equipped to attain the rank of Oracle Knight.

Seeing their lack of reaction, Cekt sighed and repeated what Oros had told Jake and his companions just a short while ago - the short and long-term consequences of the death of the Ancient Designer of Energy. When the gremlin mentioned that Lure was of the same race as Epsilon, the latter finally showed a reaction.

He had never encountered another of his kind, and knowing that the oldest and most respected among them, a Zephyrim nearly as old as the Mirror Universe had perished, he couldn't remain indifferent.

In comparison, Jake and the other disciples saw him in a new light upon learning that he was of the same race as Lure. No wonder Cekt was so confident that his potential was the greatest among them. It wasn't just because of the talent he had demonstrated so far.

Once everyone was on the same page, a silence descended upon the laboratory, which Syrbarun quickly broke.

"Forgive me, Master, but why should this concern us?" He asked innocently, wearing his most bovine gaze. "Sure, the Aether Network being compromised is indeed an unprecedented disaster, but what can we do other than accept paying fortunes for what was once free. Being isolated from other planets and Systems is indeed regrettable but it doesn't concern us yet."

This time, Cekt did not bring down his cane on the skull of the Vrusug to correct him. His questions were legitimate, albeit he was a bit slow on the uptake.



"Where do you think the Aether Network comes from?" The small alien launched calmly. "Do you think it built itself? As powerful as Lure and the Oracle may be, they cannot create an Aether Network of this magnitude."

Before his disciple could utter another folly, Cekt stated matter-of-factly, "It is the role of the Aetherists and other competent life forms to take care of its maintenance and expansion. Whatever the energy network, you need a source of energy and conductors to transmit the energy where it is needed. Those who commissioned the assassination of Lure had everything planned and destroyed or stole the most important energy sources of the Aether Network. They then blew up all the main Aether channels connecting the Systems to each other. The Aether Network of our System is intact, but we have lost our main Aether supply source. The Aether Cores and other energy sources that each planet-ship sets up are sufficient to maintain the basic operation of the Oracle System, but anything involving communication or long-distance travel will quickly drain the Aether from the network before it renews. This includes purchasing items in the Oracle Store, accessing the Ordeals via the Red Cube, using the Faction Vault, long-distance communication, and so on... No one knows if the Aether Network can be repaired and how long it will take. In the meantime, each System must prepare for the worst."

Cekt then raised three fingers. "There are only three ways to cope with this prolonged shortage of Aether. The first is Aetheric sobriety. All tax shield aids that each System and Planet provided to its citizens will be reduced to a bare

minimum, if not completely stopped. Xantheo, Our System's Oracle Governor did not delay and has practically closed the Aether taps of our System, choosing to favor AO where he resides. We cant blame him, I would have done the same.

Planet AO is the most important bastion of our System. We cannot afford to see it fall into the hands of the Digestors. In response, the Oracle Overseers of each planet must also take drastic measures to maintain the operability of the Oracle System in their territories."

"The second course of action is to develop our own Aether sources and strengthen our local Aether Network so that at least on the scale of B842 we are not as affected, the ideal being to become totally autonomous. We are far from that. However, thanks to Oros' good management, we are faring much better than most of the other planet-ships in our System."

"Finally, the last lever we have is at the level of each individual. Despite all the efforts and means that the Oracle Overseer and his Guardians will put in place to cope with the

Aether shortage, in the end they will probably not be enough to restore the situation to what it was before. For this, if you do not want to be too heavily affected by this situation, the Evolvers of B842 must in turn find ways to enrich themselves. Not only will



the taxes and fees collected support the Aether Network of B842, but you can also continue to enjoy the same services as before."

"Any questions?"

This time, Syrbarun's reaction was starkly different, his face a mask of palpable distress. Lyra's fluctuating luminescence, the stony grinding in Rigel's jaw, and the flickering of blue light in Siri's pupils all bore testament to their shared unease.

"H-how much Aether are we talking about?" Lyra blurted out, extracting a miniature Oracle Store from her Space Storage. Her earlier sprite-like levity was nowhere to be seen.

She immediately attempted to purchase one of her favorite beauty products, a pure light ointment crafted from Light Slime excretions. However, the glow radiating from her dimmed abruptly upon discovering the new shipping charges.

"WHAT THE FUCK?!"

Syrbarun rapidly turned ashen, finding that even the most common materials he regularly utilized in his laboratory had become prohibitively expensive.

"Goddamn it, what kind of fucking rip-off is this?" The Vrusug swore under his breath, but this was just the beginning. "5000AP for an adamantium nail, plus 60 trillion AP for shipping. FUCK YOU, ORACLE STORE!"

The mechanical minotaur had finally lost it. His once innocent and guileless demeanor was nothing more than a distant memory now.

Jake and his companions had already had a taste of this bitter pill the previous night, especially Jake who had footed the bill for everyone. They were not as affected, but that was simply because Jake was filthy rich.

Nevertheless, this was still a colossal problem. Jake hadn't tested the extent of his teleportation abilities, relying only on his Energy Body and the Aetherdream, but he seriously doubted he could traverse even a thousandth of B842 in a single leap.

He was ignorant of what kind of Aether Cores and other fantastic energy sources had once made all those instant long-distance travel possible at such affordable rates. But what he knew was that their absence wouldn't be easy to replace. No Evolver, no matter how wealthy, could truly function without the Aether Network entirely.

Aware that the crux of the issue rested on the second course of action outlined by Cekt, Jake asked somberly, "What do you expect from us, Master?"

## Chapter 960: Jake Has Passed The Test

### 960 Jake Has Passed The Test

Cekt did not immediately respond, his eyes weighing heavily on each of them in turn. After maintaining the silence until it became uncomfortably palpable, he declared calmly,

"Oros, the Oracle Overseer of B842, has solicited my services. I mentioned earlier the three means of action we have to face the impending scarcity of Aether and energy. The role of me and the other recruited Aetherists will be to reinforce the Aether Network of B842 by all means at our disposal. This will involve finding or creating new energy sources, accelerating the production of those we already have, and increasing the number of Aether Network channels to counter a potential future sabotage. Other Evolvers accredited by the Overseer will develop B842's planetary defense system. As long as we don't know who sabotaged the Aether Network and how, we must consider all scenarios. I fear that Lure's assassination and the Systems' isolation are the first step in their plan. Logically, their next target should be each System's Aether

Network, isolating the planet-ships from one another, and finally the Aether Network of the planets themselves.

"All the contingencies we will put in place are in view of this worst-case scenario. Let's just hope it never comes to that."

Jake and Hade frowned pensively after listening to the gremlin known for his legendary indifference. It wasn't really the Wendok's style to interrupt his research for the common good.

"Is the pay good?" Lyra couldn't help but ask bluntly, voicing what everyone else was silently wondering. It was the only plausible reason to explain why Cekt had accepted this thankless high-stakes task.

But this time, the small alien caught them off guard with a response completely out of character,

"It isn't. To be perfectly honest, I accepted this mission for free." Cekt grinned, amused by their flabbergasted expressions.

"Why?" Epsilon uttered just one word, but it was enough to betray his skepticism.

The Wendok shrugged indifferently, then said, "Because I have no choice. It's in my own interest to preserve my haven of peace. The reason why Aetherists like me venture to new planets like these is to enjoy their low Aether density. You understand how your

Aether stats work, right? An Aether Intelligence of a million in a world where the Aether density is a million simply makes you an ordinary being, roughly speaking. 1 1m simplifying, but that's the idea. When a highlevel Evolver with high Aether stats arrives on a new planet like this one, my cognitive faculties and reaction times are multiplied compared to if I stayed in my home System."

"In that case, why not just migrate to a younger planet if things go south?" Jake objected. He cared little for the world beyond B842, but he knew at least that it had not been the youngest planet for quite some time.

"Have you already forgotten that the Aether Network was damaged?" Cekt chuckled. "What you said would be true if all were well. New planets indeed have a lower Aether density that facilitates my research, but they are not as developed as B842. The latest planet, B847, had barely finished its amalgamation when it found itself isolated. I doubt that any Rank 3 Aetherists like me from an old System had time to get there. Considering the situation, I'd better stay here and help this planet develop as quickly as possible. Call it my Aetherist instinct if you want, but it rarely leads me astray."

Jake and the other disciples exchanged thoughtful glances, reading the same perplexity in each other's eyes. Cekt the Altruist? It sounded strange just thinking about it.

"I know what's troubling you, but worry not, I haven't been replaced by a Digestor." Their master chuckled proudly. "I may have taken on this mission voluntarily, but no one has ever swindled me for as long as I've been alive. The mission itself will be our reward!"

"What do you mean?" Rigel growled in his gravelly voice, echoing throughout the laboratory.

"Tsk, you'll understand soon enough," Cekt dismissed the Gorgonite. "I've gathered you here because this mission is the perfect opportunity to test you, but also to familiarize you with the methods Aetherists use to rapidly increase their fortunes. Those who pass my test will become official disciples and can learn by my side like Epsilon."

"When do we leave?" Drakon asked without enthusiasm. He had several plasma weapons in development on the burner.

"Now."

"Shit. Fuck me..." The Draconian grumbled darkly, his long tail lashing furiously behind him, forcing Syr and Siri to distance themselves to avoid being whipped unconscious.

"How long will this mission last?" Jake asked immediately afterward. In truth, he had nothing planned, but from another perspective, he had a mountain of things to do.

"Possibly from a few months to a few years. You'll have leave from time to time when I decide it's appropriate," Cekt answered matter-of-factly. "You're free to leave anytime,

but I won't pay for those trips. Keep in mind that with the damaged Aether Network and the new measures, using the Yellow Cube to return to your Floating Islands will likely cost you anywhere from one billion to one quintillion AP, depending on where we are. Maybe even more."

"P-pardon?" Syrbarun stammered, his face pale. He had only 350 million AP left after spending it all on the development of his latest mech suit.

By the frantic blinking of Siri I's pupils, she too had just realized that she wouldn't be able to use the Yellow Cube as before. Many of her plans were now compromised.

Drakon and Rigel weren't thrilled by the news, but their admirable calm suggested either they had no intention of leaving or they had a bank account solid enough to bear the cost of each trip. Still, their clenched jaws betrayed their true feelings.

Unsurprisingly, it was the two ethereal beings,

Lyra and Epsilon, who remained utterly unfazed.

Epsilon was already studying under the Aetherist and had never intended to go anywhere. As for Lyra, her situation was similar. A loner with no faction, she was determined to take this mission seriously.

In the end, it was Jake's unshakable composure that caught Cekt's attention. Throughout, the mood of his newest disciple and his three companions remained as placid as a tranquil river.

"I understand Lyra and Epsilon's reactions, and I know Drakon and Rigel's backgrounds," Cekt decided to get to the heart of the matter. "But what are your reasons for being so serene in the face of such grim news? I know Oros just briefed you, but your mood should still be somewhat gloomy, don't you think?"

Contrary to his expectation, it wasn't Jake who enlightened him, but Lucia. With a proud smile as if she possessed all that Aether herself, she lifted her chin high and boasted,

"My Jake isn't daunted by these paltry numbers. We could make round trips costing a quintillion AP from dawn till dusk if we fancied."

Hade and Ulfar had no inclination to join Lucia in singing her boyfriend's praises, but they found themselves with no choice but to confirm her words with apathetic nods.

"She's telling the truth," they sighed in unison.

"Hmm?" Cekt finally sensed an anomaly in their demeanor and

suddenly decided to consult the Oracle System Archives regarding his seventh disciple.

He was taken aback when he was abruptly blocked by a notification demanding a payment of more than 100 sextillion AP. Such an exorbitant sum for a post-Fourth Ordeal Player was simply outrageous!

But once the initial shock passed, Cekt calmed himself and realized the implication. Somehow, his disciple had become fucking wealthy!

Although he was capable, he had no intention of spending 100 sextillion AP when he could simply ask his disciple to share the information with him.

This would be necessary anyway if he intended to tailor the training of his disciples and teach them to work as a team. After making his request to Jake orally, Jake didn't flinch, aware that refusing would risk losing the favor of a Rank 3 Aetherist who had never done him any harm.

The Wendok had even saved their lives in the Dungeon Digestor. If he couldn't take this small risk and trust his master, he would be better off dissolving his faction and going solo.

A morbid silence enveloped the laboratory following Cekt's review of Jake's status. A few agonizing seconds later, even before the mission and test had commenced, Cekt abruptly declared, making the jaws of all the other disciples drop...

"Cough... Jake has passed the test. From now on, he joins Epsilon as my second official disciple of this generation."

"HEEEH?!!"

## **Chapter 961: Are You A Trojan Digestor?**

961 Are You A Trojan Digestor?

It was Syrbarun who had roared in disbelief, his shock as plain on his face as ink on parchment. All save for Epsilon, the other disciples were equally confounded, unable to grasp what could have spurred such a sudden decision.

Their master was riddled with faults, but he hardly seemed the type to show favoritism or succumb to bribes. What could Jake have shown him to make him change his stance so swiftly?

"Master, what's going on?" Drakon inquired politely, but the way his pupils narrowed into thin slits, the Draconian's dormant pride was clearly threatening to rise to the surface.

Cekt was no Machiavellian puppet master who thrived on division and chaos, stoking the flames of jealousy and hostility amongst his disciples for his own amusement. Thus, he withheld nothing, clarifying the reasons behind his decision to avoid any misunderstandings.

"I have consulted Jake's Oracle Status. Be it his bloodline, his Aether manipulation, his Oracle Rank, or his accomplishments as an Aetherist, he is qualified to receive my teachings. You would understand what I mean if you had seen what I just saw. To prevent the brewing of any sense of amongst you, I will only say this: Bronze Aether Artefacts. Jake can craft many of them from his own body without spending a single Aether point."

The other disciples grew solemn at this. Bronze Artefacts was a rather vague term, but one thing was certain: their price ranged between 1 and 1,000 Quadrillion AP.

The reason being that most of them were not just incredibly hard to destroy or overpowered, but passively generated Aether Points. Take the Purgatory, for example. It produced 1 billion AP per day on B842, where the Aether density was 260.

Acquiring such a Bronze Aether Artefact, even if it was priced at 1,000 Quadrillion AP, could be paid off in a few thousand years. That might seem long, but any Evolver capable of spending 1,000 quadrillions without batting an eye generally boasted an incredibly long lifespan.

And that's when the Aether density was low. In those Systems where the Aether density was measured in millions, the same Bronze Artefact would be many times more efficient at harvesting Aether.

"It's insane..." Syrbarun murmured, casting his eyes down to his mech suit, his gaze hollow.

His precious mech suit, which he had spent so much time fine-tuning, was only an Advanced Aether Artefact, and that was only due to the set effect. If each piece was considered separately, the quality would be deemed a notch below.

"Life is really not fair," Siri concurred, having finished a series of mental calculations.

While the Vrusug was merely envious, she was looking ahead. If Jake needed an entire year to produce a Bronze Aether Artefact, their master would not have made such a fuss. It meant Jake's body was producing the required materials quickly enough to be highly profitable and impress the old Wendok.

As for Jake's Aetherist skills, that was a mere detail. She was interested in leveraging their relationship as fellow disciples to secure a stable supply of Bronze Materials at a discount.

She used to go through the Oracle Store or other Evolvers for her supplies, but the prices were exorbitant and the supply was not always reliable. Now that the Oracle Store was planning to charge them the full delivery fees, she would have to change her plans.

In the same vein, Siri kept staring at Drakon Solara's scales, their ruby hue speckled with gold. To her, the Draconian was just another inexpensive resource within her grasp.

She then set her gaze on the Gorgonite, her eyes gleaming with the same hunger at the sight of the magnificent gems jutting from his body. The stone man subconsciously shivered as the android's gaze locked onto him, sensing an indescribable danger.

"If there's nothing more to say, it's time to move," Cekt clapped his hands, punctuating the end of briefing.

Drakon appeared ready to protest further, but seeing his master's impatient expression, he swallowed his words. During the mission, he'd have plenty of opportunities to prove his worthiness.

Each member having their own Space Storage, none required time to prepare. However, those with their factions needed to relay the reason for their extended absence, Jake included.

Of his three companions, Jake had to delegate a messenger role. Without much deliberation, the role naturally fell to Lucia. Sensing his intent as his gaze fell upon her, she vehemently protested,

"No way! I'm coming with you!"

Suddenly, Jake felt a wave of exhaustion wash over him as he realized that the stubborn Myrmidian princess wouldn't budge. With his new girlfriend tagging along, the mission was bound to be eventful.

Knowing when to retreat from a lost cause, Jake reluctantly conceded, "Fine. But don't regret it."

In the meantime, the question of the messenger was still unresolved. Jake was about to resolve to contact Will directly through the Faction Chat, ready to blow a few trillion AP, Ulfar blurted out of the blue,

"Go on without me. I have a bad feeling about this."

Jake and Hade's expressions shifted drastically upon hearing these words. 'Fuck! Is his legendary luck warning him against joining us?'



If so, it suggested that this seemingly innocuous field mission might be more perilous than anticipated. When Jake and Hade voiced their concerns to Cekt, the Wendok frowned, albeit briefly.

"This only confirms my suspicions, but it further proves that this mission must continue. Expect to encounter Digestors on site," Cekt warned with a stern look.

"What kind of Digestors are we talking about?" Lyra asked, her voice tinged with excitement. It had been a while since her last battle.

"The that can kill a Sylian like you if you don't take them seriously," Epsilon retorted icily on behalf of his master. Being Cekt's sole official disciple until a few minutes ago, he had a good idea of where Cekt intended to take them.

"He's not lying," Cekt confirmed with a nod. "Where we're going, the primary Digestors you'll encounter are Cosmic, Space, and Void Digestors. Among these three categories, there are many Digestors capable of killing even a Zephyrim. They may not physically harm you, but they can devour your vital energy in an instant."

Turning to the others, Cekt added, "That goes for everyone. Don't let them touch you. It's advice that holds even for the terrestrial Digestors of flesh and blood."

Immediately after, the Vrusug enthusiastically raised his hand.

"Yes...?" Cekt sighed, visibly annoyed, anticipating a pointless question.

"If the mission is so dangerous, may I wait for you here in the lab?" Syr attempted hopefully.

"You're coming!" Cekt cut him off mercilessly.

Stubborn as a mule, the Minotaur wouldn't admit defeat so easily and thus suggested in a hushed tone, "In that case, can we recruit some additional bodyguards?"

The Vrusug was poor, relatively speaking. His 300M AP was more than enough to hire a handful of Fifth-Ordeal Evolvers from the bottom of the barrel.

"Please, shut up," Cekt snapped. "If you want to hire mercenaries, by all means, do so, but you'll be footing their travel expenses, okay?"

Realizing his blunder, Syrbarun's face twisted into a grimace, and he grumbled beneath his breath, mind..."

Speaking of additional bodyguards... Jake and his companions suddenly looked around, searching for a certain four-armed alien.

"Uh, aren't we missing someone?" Ulfar coughed awkwardly, vocalizing the concern that had been gnawing at all of them.

"We're missing Saros," Hade confirmed calmly. "He must have gotten stuck outside the lab."

Overhearing their conversation, Cekt confessed with a mocking chuckle, "Heh, if you're talking about the Oracle Guardian that came with you, I left him cooling his heels outside. Every time I let them in, they pester me until I promise them what they want. Pehh! These Oracle servants have no manners..."

Regrettably, Jake would have to disappoint him this time. "Master, I'm afraid he has to come with us. He has been ordered by the Oracle System to watch over me twenty-four-seven. He's not allowed to let me out of his sight, but in return, he plays the role of my protector."

Cekt was taken aback by this development, but after reading Jake's extensive file, he narrowed down the reasons that could explain such treatment to only a few possibilities. Not wanting to alarm the other disciples, he inquired telepathically, "Are you a Trojan Digestor?"

"Not that I'm aware of," Jake responded ambiguously, easing the alien's concern. Then, clearing his throat to hide his discomfort, he added, "But I've devoured one..."

"..."