

The Oracle Paths

- Chapter 962: He's Clean |

Chapter 962: He's Clean

"Y-you're joking, right?" Lira chuckled with a hint of unease.

Before Jake could ponder how the Sylian woman had eavesdropped on their telepathic exchange, Cekt hastily whipped out a device akin to a metal detector from thin air and scoured Jake from head to toe with it. When the gremlin instructed him to gaze into the lens at the device's tip and a familiar spiritual pulse surged through his body, he instantly recognized its purpose.

Though slightly different in appearance from the one employed by Mirror Vanguard, the gadget's purpose remained the same - a Corruption detector.

"Corruption at 56%, Stage 5!" Cekt blurted in horror, his eyes bulging wide in disbelief.

That was one Stage higher than Vexa!

The other disciples, oblivious to the unfolding events, stiffened like cats inadvertently stepped on a tail at the old Aetherist's death sentence.

"What the fuck? We have a Corrupt amongst us?!"

The disciples' reactions were unanimously identical, but in stark contrast, the countenances of Hade and Ulfar were exceptionally grim. Hade remained uninformed about the incidents during the end of the Ordeal, while Ulfar, engrossed in the Divine Academy, hadn't paid much attention either.

Remarkably, Lucia was a beacon of tranquility amidst the upheaval. Like Enya and others who had immediately sensed a shift in Jake's aura and temperament a year earlier, a visceral fear that made them dread him, she also knew that her greatest fears had not materialized.

Jake was still Jake, as shocking as it might seem. his year-long seclusion under the guise of training, Lucia had harbored doubts, possibly prompting her to proclaim her love and push their relationship forward.

But it was undeniable - Jake was still as awkward as ever when it came to relationships, and his typical personality had practically resurfaced. So much so that Hade and Asfrid

only noticed his physical transformation upon their return from the Ordeal, overlooking the accompanying intrinsic and psychological changes.

"How do you feel?" Cekt inquired gravely, scrutinizing him with unerring intensity.

"Hmm... Myself?" Jake shrugged nonchalantly, a wry smile gracing his lips.

"Do you feel an urge to massacre us, or a hatred so profound that merely standing here amongst us would evoke it?" Cekt pressed on, his tone stern.

"Not... that I'm aware of? I mean, I do have an urge to devour everyone, particularly Epsilon, Lyra, and Drakon, but it's akin to my craving for an excellent hamburger or a good pizza. As frustrating as it may be to resist this urge when it's right before my eyes, I can certainly do without it."

A heavy silence befell the laboratory. Among those mentioned, Lyra cautiously retreated three steps, while Drakon and Epsilon watched him with curiosity, as if questioning whether they tasted as good as he suggested.

"Jake... Is that the truth?" Hade queried gravely, clenching his He didn't want his friend to become another Nylreg. Losing one son was enough.

Lucia confidently grabbed Jake's hand and declared, "So what? Even if his Corruption reached 100%, I'm certain he would retain control."

Hade, who understood better than anyone the futility of such a claim, opened his mouth to contradict her but sighed deeply instead upon seeing her determination. The other disciples were also skeptical, but surprisingly, it was Cekt who diffused the brewing tension.

"I'm unsure if resisting Corruption at full capacity is plausible," declared the alien, steadied by newfound tranquility, "but what I do know is that Stage 5 is typically the point of no return for a common Evolver. And by common, I mean anything and anyone with fewer than Seven Ordeals under their belt if cultivating the mind isn't their forte. That accounts for 99.9% of Evolvers and Players out there. At this Stage, corrupted Evolvers must exist in isolation. As long as they're solitary, they remain largely themselves, but the moment they make contact with a lifeform from the Mirror Universe, even a plant, a switch flips in their psyche. The murder instinct and hatred that overwhelm them at those moments are unbearable to the point where most opt for suicide or ostracism. Those elect to persist in society, and manage to keep up a semblance of normalcy, are ticking time bombs that eventually detonate without fail.

"Jake," he ventured again, "how do you feel?" BOOM!

An immeasurable spiritual pressure exploded from the Wendok as he posed his question this time, his voice imprinted with an eerie aura echoing in Jake's head like a

peal of thunder. Nearby disciples who weren't even the target of this energy reeled back under the impact of the mental shock, a torrent of sweat cascading from pore of their bodies.

Only Epsilon and Drakon managed, albeit with considerable difficulty, to maintain their composure, a mental barrier reflexively enveloping them. Hade also weathered the spiritual shock without issue, but the luckiest of them all was Ulfar, miraculously spared by the torrent of mental power.

As for Lucia, standing extremely close to Jake and holding his hand, she was squarely struck by Cekt's spiritual pressure. Her eyes rolled back into her head and she collapsed into her lover's arms as lifeless as a Ragdoll cat.

Jake frowned coldly as the young woman passed out in his arms, and his relaxed face gradually hardened. A spiritual aura of unfathomable hostility then emerged from him like an unstoppable tide, slowly but surely pushing back the psychic assault of the small alien.

Despite being the target of all this spirit power, hadn't moved a muscle. It was as though this terrifying spiritual was harmless, merely a gentle breeze casually blowing over him.

Cekt finally felt something while contemplating his seventh disciple's solid mental defense. Of course, he could release more mental energy to increase the pressure on Jake, but it wouldn't serve any purpose. By releasing his aura thus, he had already accomplished his goal:

To force Jake to reveal his true nature when faced with a life or death situation. The outcome was different from what he had imagined, his disciple's mental strength being unfathomable for a post-Fourth Ordeal Evolver, but the crucial point was the restrained killing intent.

Someone more ignorant and vindictive than Cekt would have immediately passed judgment, but instead, the Wendok felt incredibly relieved. This killing intent was real, but behind it hid just a trace of anger and confusion after Lucia had been attacked for no apparent reason.

The gremlin retracted his aura and, with an apologetic smile, pointed the tip of his cane at Lucia's forehead. Her pallid face instantly its color.

"Cough, apologies for the recent...incident," Cekt cleared his throat with embarrassment as he the fury in his disciple's eyes had not dissipated one bit.

Before Jake could fly off the handle and question him about what had just happened, the gremlin turned to his other disciples, solemnly pronouncing, "He's clean. Don't ask me why, but the situation is completely under control."

The other disciples had their doubts, but following their master's confirmation, avenerable Rank 3 Aetherist, they set aside their skepticism. It was rather Hade and Ulfar who breathed sighs of relief upon receiving the Wendok's assurance that their leader had not yet been supplanted by the mind of a mad Digestor.

When Lucia fluttered open her eyes a few moments later, her expression sleepy, a warm smile bloomed on her face as she found herself nestled against Jake. Suddenly, the memory of her fainting spell rushed back, and she looked nervously about her. Realizing she was the only one who had passed out, a wave of shame washed over her, nearly causing her to swoon again.

Never again! Her Myrmidian pride would not allow it, but it went far beyond that. If Cekt had been an enemy, she would have perished with a single glare.

It was an absolute, indisputable defeat.

Jake, naturally, had a keen understanding of the thoughts currently roiling within the young woman's mind, and took no offense when she anxiously pushed him away as if he were plague- ridden.

In a glance, he noted Lucia's aura had weakened significantly, a direct result of the blow her ego had taken. Yet, he didn't fret for her. With the Spirit Of Revenge skill and her relentless spirit, she would recover from this setback in no time!

"Onward," Cekt finally announced, putting an official end to the incident.

This time, no one protested. The recent mental clash between master and disciple served as a stark reminder, keeping them in line. Even Ulfar, initially reluctant to join, decided to stay.

Jake was left with no choice but to inform Will and the others through the Faction Chat about today's events. The merchant was taken aback upon learning about Lure's death and its ramifications but quickly reined in his emotions.

"Count on me."

Reading his brief response, Jake nodded in agreement, confident his faction was in capable hands. Moments later, Cekt and his entourage reappeared on the surface, much to the astonishment of Saros, who had been searching for the entrance to his laboratory.

A minute later, they vanished in a flash after touching one of Thelma's Yellow Cubes, bound for an unknown destination.

Chapter 963: Good Luck with that

With a pulse of light that faded as quickly as it came, Cekt, his seven disciples, and four additional guests appeared before the Yellow Cube, the familiar teleportation device that had brought them from the distant planet of Thelma. As the lingering energy dissipated, they found themselves facing an imposing, seemingly endless structure stretching as far as their eyes could see, shimmering in the ambient light emitted by the Cube.

The structure's elegant geometry seemed almost incongruous against the surrounding vacuum, a testament to intelligent design amidst the wild cosmic emptiness. It was colossal, dwarfing them into insignificance, the sheer scale of it sparking awe within their hearts.

Jake, his tall frame outlined against the ominous structure, stared into the void. His stormy eyes reflected the swirling darkness around them, a stark contrast against the myriad of stars they had left behind on Thelma. Here, the void was punctuated by an almost hypnotic abyss, a black hole that filled the expanse with a terrifying yet fascinating grandeur.

The sheer gravity of it held them captive, the pull of the black hole undeniable, almost sentient. It was like gazing into the eyes of a cosmic beast, an enigma that swallowed not just light, but hope itself.

Around them, the cosmic silence was nearly tangible, hanging heavily in the air and stirring a mix of dread and reverence within their hearts. Even the usually impetuous Ulfar seemed quiet, his usual bravado replaced with a sense of disquiet as he stood beside Hade, their gazes locked onto the abyss.

master, Cekt, remained as as ever. Though even he, an esteemed Rank 3 Aetherist, couldn't completely hide the flicker of awe that passed through his gaze. His voice, when it finally cut through the silence, seemed unusually soft in the vast expanse,

"Welcome, my disciples."

As the sound echoed miraculously through the vacuum, they all shared a moment of dwarfed by the humbling spectacle of cosmic power. The silent darkness around them, interrupted only by the haunting allure of the black hole, signaled the beginning of a journey none of them would ever forget.

"F-fuck! What is this place?" Syrbarun stammered, only for his words to strangle in his throat as he and Drakon began to choke.

The airless expanse around them rendered not just sound, but breath an impossibility. In response to their predicament, Drakon swiftly adjusted his posture, inhaling deeply, his ruby scales rippling with an uncanny grace. Abundant, yet intangible energy was instantly extracted from the vacuum, replacing the oxygen upon his cells had previously relied.

Jake, using his senses and various affinities, swiftly identified a blend of Aether, electromagnetic radiation, and cosmic particles. Through a mysterious and complex process, Drakon was converting the residual vacuum absorb. into a form of Fire Particle that he could

With a casual wave of his hand, Cekt materialized a high-tech helmet, placing it with a flick of his finger onto the head of the regretful mechanical Minotaur, who had exhausted the air in his lungs needlessly. To an ordinary human, this misstep would have been fatal, but the Vrusug could easily survive without breath for a few hours, courtesy of his exceptional Constitution and Vitality.

Once the helmet was secured, Syrbarun took a loud gulp of air and cast a grateful glance at the small alien. "Thanks, master," he said, bowing, sweat pooling on his brow as he realized Cekt had brought them somewhere far from a holiday camp.

Embarrassment washed over him as he discovered he was the only one unable to breathe without aid, especially as a mechanic specializing in mech suit design. But how was he to know their master intended to take them to an uninhabitable, atmosphere-devoid location? If he'd known, he would have prepared in advance, learning an Aether Spell to generate a stable source of oxygen...

Guessing his disciple's thoughts, Cekt chuckled dismissively, and then lectured with a sense of smug superiority. "Lesson one for today: Always the worst when you go somewhere new," he said, turning to Syr with a sharply judging look. "If this had been your fifth Ordeal and we were not here, you'd have perished pathetically. For your information, where we are is usually uninhabited."

Syrbarun considered making an excuse to justify his mistake, but remembering he was indeed the only one who had failed his master's first test, he chose to remain silent.

'Unfair... he mourned internally.

A Draconian, a Gorgonite, two Etheric Beings, an Android, and four humans-wait! Why could these four humans survive here without issue? Jake, being an anomaly, was understandable, but why did the other three also seem perfectly at ease in this godforsaken place?

Fortunately, Cekt was wondering the same and saved him further embarrassment. Assessing Jake and his three companions with evident perplexity, the Wendok curiously

commented, "I'd initially prepared extra helmets and even airtight suits just in case, but it seems I was worrying for nothing, hehe."

He'd had suspicions at first, but after reading Jake's status and noticing several similarities in their appearances, he quickly connected it to his disciple's Cosmic D Starfeyrves Bloodline.

Upon their emergence, Lucia, and Ulfar had momentarily choked as did Drakon and Syrbarun, yet nearly instantly, their breaths steadied. Pores on their skin dilated indiscriminately, drinking in the vacuum's energy.

Their was far superior, even more potent than Drakon's, indiscriminately absorbing cosmic particles, radiation, magnetic fields, gravitational waves-whatever was present.

"The Permanent Passive Faction Skill, eh?" Cekt approved with a curt nod. "Good choice." Suddenly, he queried with keen interest, "What of the Energy Body?"

"Temporarily unavailable." Jake shook his head, a hint of frustration edging his words. "The AP required to outfit even a single faction member staggering."

"Do tell," Cekt prompted, his interest piqued.

"One septillion AP per person."

"...Well, good luck with that."

Detecting his disciple's sour mood, the old gremlin hastily reevaluated his response. "Still, it's a fair deal. When you're capable, don't be afraid to give the Oracle its due. Energy Bodies of such grade are far more rare and complex than you might think."

Jake understood the reference: the ability to generate vast amounts of Aether without depleting ambient Aether density. Obtaining a Grade 10 Aether Core was difficult but not impossible. Given enough time and energy, it was straightforward-patience was the only requisite.

However, a Grade 10 Energy Body was an entirely different beast. Apart from a few privileged species like Lure or Epsilom, who had a unique affinity with Aether, it was practically unattainable without near-peak comprehension and mastery of Aether.

Even Cekt made no pretense of having reached such a level. Despite his gruff demeanor and apparent arrogance, he was merely a humble Rank 3 Aetherist.

Just as Jake thought they had put the subject to rest, the alien murmured softly, "I may join your Faction in the future."

Jake was taken aback. Cekt had indirectly admitted his interest in the Grade 10 Energy Body. The other disciples were equally stunned.

Despite their limited knowledge of their master, it was widely known that the Wendok had been a factionless Evolver for ages. Numerous factions and organizations had attempted to recruit him to no avail. Because of a simple Passive Faction Skill, Jake may have succeeded where countless organizations, far mightier than his own, had failed.

Of course, to understand why, the other disciples first needed to understand what the Energy Body entailed. Except for Epsilon, who seemed thoughtful, and Lyra, who harbored her suspicions, the others were utterly baffled.

"So. Where are we?" Rigel inquired telepathically, surveying his surroundings.

He wasn't particularly fond of them. Steel stretched out in every direction, forming strange artificial contours. As a Gorgonite, manipulating the minerals and metals composing this alloy should have been simple, yet it was oddly difficult. Not impossible, but it required such a significant effort it practically was. With no intention of leaving them in suspense,

Cekt spread his arms wide in a grandiose

gesture, a sense of ceremony entering his voice.

"We stand upon the Magnetic Resonator BX9684, within the confines of planet B842. The vast black hole you see in the distance is a conglomerate of many such phenomena drawn from various universes, absorbed by the planet- ship. This singularity fuels the majority of the Oracle Cubes, along with other functionalities of the Oracle System on B842. This black hole is but one among many, yet it's the sole one under our control currently. Despite all of Oros's efforts, it's the only one we've managed to secure."

His tone grew grave, reflecting the weight of recent events. "Regrettably, in light of recent events, the energy we draw from this black hole has become insufficient. My fellow Aetherists and I have been tasked to increase B842's energy and Aether output by any means necessary, and we have several distinct methods at our disposal."

He paused, allowing the significance of his words settle before delivering his final point, a spark of challenge gleaming in his eyes. "Their common denominator, however, is that they are ideal for testing and refining your skills as Aetherists, and as Evolvers in general."

Chapter 964: The Real Danger

"What do you expect from us, master?" Epsilon asked calmly, his ethereal form and flat voice rendering his emotions inscrutable.

Cekt was about to reply, but was first interrupted by Lucia and Ulfar raising their hands simultaneously. After an exchange of glances, the king of Beskyr gladly gave the honor to his comrade, aware that his question would probably be considered stupid before a master Aetherist.

"Ahem, what exactly is a Magnetic Resonator?" Lucia coughed with a hint of embarrassment as the gaze of the seven disciples converged on her.

For a moment, she wished to vanish beneath the earth, regretting her curiosity, but the expectant gaze of Syrbarun immediately made her feel a little better. Luckily, Cekt passed no judgment and patiently explained,

"A Resonator is one of the two main methods we use along with the Gravitation Oscillator to harvest the energy of a black hole. Our location is roughly the size of a small moon and is in stable orbit around the black hole, mere kilometers from its event horizon. The core component of this structure is a sophisticated device known as a magnetic field disruptor, engineered to manipulate the intense magnetic fields surrounding the black hole. The disruptor generates a massive opposing magnetic field, strategically colliding with the black hole's own magnetic lines. This collision triggers a magnetic reconnection, resulting in a powerful release of energy. You could see this as snapping a rubber band - the tension builds as opposing forces pull against each other, and when the band finally snaps, all the stored energy is suddenly released with such force that the event horizon can even regurgitate what it has swallowed, allowing us to achieve returns exceeding 150% of the initially invested energy."

"The released energy mainly consists of highly energetic particles and intense electromagnetic radiation. These are captured and funneled by a vast array of energy collectors and converters, transforming them into a more usable form of power. In case, Aether. The Aether is then directly injected into the Aether Network, where it will be used to maintain the operation of B842 and the Oracle System."

After hearing this explanation, Lucia's brain was already smoking, struggling to imagine that such a machine could exist. If she hadn't strived to fill her gaps, she might even have been stuck at defining a black hole or a magnetic field.

Fortunately for her, her Oracle AI was briefing her simultaneously to update her as quickly as possible. From the fine bead of sweat trickling down Ulfar's forehead, he was undergoing the same treatment.

"Impressive," Syrbarun exclaimed, his heart pounding. If he got his hands on this technology, his mech suits would make a gigantic leap forward!

"What about the Gravitation Oscillators you mentioned, master?" Lyra asked eagerly.

Cekt suddenly pointed into the void of space, but when they looked in his direction they saw nothing but pitch-black skies. Much like everything else, in fact. If it weren't for their Aether Vision and mental sense, they would all be blind.

"I see nothing," Rigel grumbled without any shame. The Gorgonites were not known for their good vision.

"And that's normal," Cekt comforted him with a small laugh. "These Gravitation Oscillators are at least a few light-years away and emit no light. It would be a miracle if you could see them."

"These colossus contraptions, their girth spanning hundreds of kilometers, are stationed within the close yet safe vicinity of a black hole. Because of its gargantuan mass, we can afford to place them at a considerable distance. The Gravitational Oscillator is comprised of a substantial assembly of superconducting rings, organized in concentric circles, primed to capture gravitational waves generated by the black hole."

"These gravitational waves, tremors within the fabric of spacetime birthed by the black hole's gravity, are ensnared by the Oscillator. As these waves traverse the superconducting rings, they incite oscillations within the structure of the rings. Using principles akin to electromagnetic induction, these oscillations are then into utilizable electrical energy, or in our case, into Aether."

"The method reaps two-fold benefits: first, it offers an unfathomably vast source of energy, and second, it acts as a protective bulwark against the black hole's destructive gravitational tug, courtesy of a meticulously designed repulsive gravitational shield. Contrasting the Magnetic Resonator, the yield of energy is somewhat less, but it is significantly more stable and the peril considerably less. You must comprehend that in the case of the Magnetic Resonator, a slight mishap could derail its orbit and plunge it beyond the event horizon of the black hole, the point of no return where the pull of gravity is so overpowering that nothing can escape. Likewise, the slightest alteration to its structure or shields and it could be obliterated by the very energy eruptions it produces. Therefore, one must proceed with the utmost caution."

Rigel, who aspired to specialize in planet-ship design, quickly built upon his master's explanation with another question.

"If these Gravitational Oscillators are so reliable and less dangerous, why build them so far from the black hole? Does not the produced energy significantly diminish?"

Cekt let out a sigh that was heavy with patience at hearing this remark.

"That is indeed the case. I mentioned earlier that constructing these structures closer to the black hole presents more danger, and not merely because of the hazard of the event horizon. When we speak of a black hole, we refer to highly dense matter, highly dense energy, and thus extreme Aether density. The singularity of a black hole also

represents one of the few forms of Aether Cores that can form naturally and its Grade is monstrously high. So high, that spacetime has long since collapsed around it, an area of zero Aether. This should result in the destruction of everything surrounding it and thus the black hole itself, but when an Aether Core of such a high Grade is deprived of its primary energy source, it seeks elsewhere, piercing the fabric of space so profoundly that it ends up tapping into a purer and inexhaustible source of Aether. Consider it akin to digging a well. Once the well is dug, the spacetime around a black hole's singularity regenerates rapidly, since its Aether is no longer being consumed, yet the Aether Core within continues to grow, ironically even boosting the ambient Aether density."

"Have a glance at your Oracle Scans, and you might be in for a surprise."

Jake and the others followed the instruction and indeed noticed that compared to the surface of B842, the Aether density at their location exceeded 2500, instead of the expected 265 and some. He'd already noticed this anomaly with his heightened perception, but it was the distinctive operation of the Aether Core within a black hole that truly fascinated him.

Didn't his Grade 10 Energy Body function similarly? Otherwise, it would have long since drained the surrounding Aether, much like when Quanoth's sun was swallowed.

"We still don't know the danger we face," Syrbarun grumbled under his breath, instantly earning a slap on the back of his head from Siri.

"Fool." The android rolled her eyes in disdain.

Being insulted by a robot was an unforeseen event. Consequently, when Siri rebuked the Vrusug, he was plunged into a deep depression. The others offered no solace this time, each gazing at him as though he were an uncommonly idiotic specimen of Aetherist.

Adding insult to injury, Lucia and Ulfar regarded him with the same dismissive look.

'Fuck! What the hell did I say?'

"Aether... Digestors... Lots of Aether," Jake shrugged nonchalantly, refusing to elaborate further.

Syrbarun's eyes suddenly widened in understanding.

"Ohh..."

"Yeah ohh," Lucia giggled.

"Fool," Siri added relentlessly.

Still, they underestimated the minotaur's thick skin. Resigned to his fate, he raised his hand again and ventured to ask,

"Why not directly exploit the Aether Core at the center of the black hole? If it's so incredible, wouldn't that be better than constructing all these Resonators and Oscillators? I'm sure the Oracle or a top Aetherist could pull off such feats, right?"

The idea excited Lucia, Drakon, Lyra, and a few other disciples, but reality soon dampened their spirits.

"You underestimate the perils of a black hole and overestimate the capabilities of the Oracle and us Aetherists. Crafting a ship capable of crossing the event horizon is feasible. If prepared, I could likely traverse it myself. But you're forgetting the most significant danger tied to a black hole's existence. This danger isn't the event horizon or the Digestors, but the flow of time itself."

"Under the influence of gravity, as you draw closer to a black hole, time slows. Right here where we stand, time crawls so slowly that for every few minutes here, centuries could pass outside. That's why to avoid this, the Magnetic Resonator is enveloped in a high-level Aether Array, synchronizing the flow of time with B842's surface. If for any reason you stray too far from the Resonator, you'll be trapped for a very long time."

Upon hearing this, Jake and the others gulped. Unfortunately for them, the elderly Wendok hadn't finished. He hammered the final nail in the coffin,

"For the same reason, a black hole's singularity and its formidable Aether Core are theoretically unreachable. But what concerns us more are the Digestors spawning near the Magnetic Resonator. To survive in such an environment, most of these Space Digestors have developed extreme capabilities and an unparalleled hunger for Aether and energy. These Space Digestors are unlike any you're familiar with. They're accustomed to encountering high-level Oracle Guardians and Evolvers, and those who endure in environment are either powerful, intelligent, or both. The most dangerous ones can directly affect time and space, posing a threat even to an Aetherist like me, let alone you."

"To them, this Magnetic Resonator and us... we are nothing more than tantalizing prey, glowing like a beacon in the heart of the darkness. Oracle Guardian squads and TX models regularly purge those who spawn upon it, yet as a precaution, the Magnetic Resonator never operates at full capacity to avoid drawing Digestors that we might not be able to repel. For all these reasons, it's impossible to construct more. Between the cost, the Aether array, and the necessity to defend them, we've simply reached our limit." Marking a brief pause, Cetk sternly scrutinized each of his disciples, then declared in an unwavering tone,

"The first stage of your trial will be to seize control of this Magnetic Resonator as swiftly as possible, and upon its full reactivation, defend it while producing as many Aether

Cores as you can with its aid. I will assess your performance directly. Those of you whose performance satisfies me will then be informed of the second stage. You're allowed to team up as you see fit."

Chapter 965: Ulfar in Action

Without giving them a moment to respond, Cekt exploited their surprise and vanished before them immediately after detailing their first objective. An invisible dome-shaped barrier that unknowingly isolated them from the Magnetic Resonator dissipated with a hum, the air subtly distorting where it once existed.

Caught entirely off guard, non-combatant disciples like Syrbarun and Lyra displayed desolate and gloomy faces following their master's abrupt departure. The task of their initial test was a nightmare to them, while conversely, others rejoiced internally.

Lucia, for instance, had completely regained her self-confidence.

What of slaying a swarm of Digestors? Hadn't she been doing this daily for years? Fighting monsters was straightforward and fun, fitting perfectly within her area of expertise. It was ten times better than competing with these disciples over their mastery of Aether.

Jake, Hade, and Epsilon remained unflustered, Ulfar seemed profoundly bored, Siri silently calculated their odds, while Rigel, with his stone-like appearance, made his emotions unreadable.

Lucia broke the silence first by clapping her hands. "What are we waiting for?" She exclaimed enthusiastically, unsheathing her sword. "These Digestors won't kill themselves!"

Ulfar grumbled realizing she was absolutely correct, "Damn, you're right..."

Yet he hadn't given up on his easygoing nature. Aware that Cekt was watching them from the shadows, he decided to contribute.

Albeit lazily.

Wordlessly, he summoned a beautiful white bow with metallic reflections and a heavy quiver far too wide to sling over his shoulder.

The bulky quiver crashed onto the steel ground with a dull noise, the vibration indicating its substantial weight. The equipment was filled with strange steel arrows, their heads resembling warheads more than sharp points. There were several thousands, at least.

"What's that?" Syrbarun asked with ill-intentioned curiosity, sensing something ominous.

Lucia wasn't surprised, having seen many times what the King of Beskyr was capable of, but it was the first time Jake and Hade saw him in real combat. Of course, his quick duel against Jake didn't count. That was more of a test and friendly battle than anything else.

Jake had already recognized this long white bow as the Reverse Fate Bow, the only Oracle-grade Aether Artefact he'd ever encountered. Oracle Aether Artefacts were those unclassified Artefacts above Diamond grade. Such artefacts could influence the destiny of entire worlds, and their effects were incredibly hard to counter or reverse.

"What do you plan to do?" Jake asked, raising a wary eyebrow.

"Just shut up and watch." Ulfar chuckled ominously.

Suddenly brandishing his bow above his head, the King of Beskyr drew the bowstring to its limit without nocking a single arrow. Jake had personally experienced this technique and backed away cautiously.

Swoooch!

His fingers and the bowstring began to vibrate at a supernatural frequency as thousands of intangible, invisible projectiles erupted in all directions. They dispersed along unpredictable trajectories as if their targets were predetermined.

This was currently the case. No sounds of explosions or impacts broke the silence, leading the other oblivious disciples to believe that Ulfar's initiative was a dud. In comparison, Jake, Hade, and Lucia were much more solemn.

'Poor Digestors.' They thought in unison, showing a trace of pity towards these unsuspecting, creatures.

Every victim of these ghostly projectiles was now temporarily cursed, fortune and misfortune swapping roles in a dance as old as time. Ulfar's aim appeared random, yet with his divine luck, there was no doubting that the majority of his arrows found their targets.

The function of the Reverse Fate Bow was no secret to the high-ranking officers of the Myrtharian Nerds. As one of their ultimate trump cards, Ulfar had relinquished the exclusivity of his bow once its capabilities were laid bare. Still, the bow remained with him, every use of it bound to his approval - all the more crucial given he alone possessed the luck required to wield such an artifact safely.

"Is that it?" Lyra coughed out, her voice raspy and edged with disbelief, thinking Ulfar's technique had missed its mark.

Drakon, Rigel, and Epsilon exchanged knowing looks and, not waiting for the outcome, chose to tread their paths, opting to be rivals over allies. But before they had time to make three steps, Ulfar clutched a hundred arrows, filling his quiver, and notched them gracelessly onto his bow. Brandishing the bow once more, he let loose another volley of projectiles, this time very much visible and real.

Swoooch!

Their trajectories were easily traced by the naked eye, and as thousands of arrows scattered across the sky, cleaving the air like a firework of shooting stars, Drakon and Rigel paused. Only Epsilon continued, levitating above the ground at a steady pace.

When the projectiles struck their distant targets, the results were deafening, impossible to ignore.

BOOOM! BOOM! BANG!

A series of ear-splitting explosions formed blinding spheres of violet light, each several hundred meters wide, illuminating the surface of the Magnetic Resonator around them, triggering an earthquake measuring at least 20 on the Richter scale. Had the earth been bombarded by such warheads, apocalypse would have ensued, with lava eruptions and crust shattering extinguishing all life within weeks, if not months.

Fortunately, the steel or alloy forming the surface of the Magnetic Resonator was of extraordinary hardness, effortlessly withstanding this barrage of explosions. However, the ensuing shockwaves and detonations eventually gave birth to cataclysmic winds.

These gales would reach them soon. The other disciples glared at Ulfar, their expressions filled with reproach. 'Damn it, if you want to kill yourself, there's no need to drag us down with you,' was the sentiment their eyes conveyed.

Regrettably for them, Ulfar was far from done. Alternating between intangible volleys and real warhead-tipped arrows, he continued firing relentlessly for several minutes until he finally decided he'd had enough for the day.

At that moment, a shockwave boasting a temperature far surpassing that of the sun, propelled by winds many times the speed of sound, descended upon them, chilling the hearts of Syrbarun, Lyra, and Rigel. Even Siri held a pessimistic view of their chances of survival.

Ironically, these superheated winds posed no threat to Lyra, whose body was a mere cluster of light, yet the sight was terrifying enough. Epsilon was nowhere to be seen.

"Tsk! Happy now?" Lucia rolled her eyes at the sight of Ulfar stowing away his quiver (still full, by the way), a smug smile etched onto his face.

"Very happy," the Beskyrian chuckled, stretching his aching fingers with satisfaction. It had been a while since he had indulged in such a satisfying bout of archery, heedless of the consequences. "I'll leave the rest to you."

His companions would be the ones to clean up his mess. Jake, fully understanding the type of character Ulfar was, couldn't help but snort as he watched him cross his arms behind his head, as if preparing for a leisurely nap.

"You or me?" Hade queried, locking eyes with Jake in a casual manner.

"Well, I'll take care of it," Jake sighed, raising his hand.

He was prepared to neutralize the imminent blast when it suddenly disintegrated as though it had never existed, leaving him utterly perplexed.

"Who did this?"

In response to his query, Rigel calmly commented, pointing to a distant speck of light with his stony finger,

"Epsilom has made his move."

Casting their gaze in the indicated direction, Jake and the others indeed recognized the silhouette of Cekt's prime disciple, situated some tens of kilometers away from them, swirling around their location while moving at near-light speed. An odd fluctuation accompanied his movements, transmutating the energy of the overheated winds in his wake into a readily available energy for Epsilom, fueling his own light transmutation and his surreal speed.

In the end, seeing the prime disciple neutralizing the fallout of Ulfar's attack with ease, Jake lowered his hand without a hint of resentment, indifferent to the fact that Epsilom had stolen the spotlight. Still, having observed Cekt's favored disciple in action, he had now gained a new understanding of his abilities.

Evidently, the title of Oracle Knight was not unearned. The prime disciple of Wendok unsurprisingly had a plethora of tricks up his sleeve.

Yet, Jake observed an intriguing paradox. Once flung into the dance of light speed, Epsilom seemed chained to its relentless rhythm. The ethereal alien persisted in his orbit, tracing a luminous embroidery in the air, each pass birthing another halo of pearly light - the ghostly echo of his unyielding velocity. Only when he had devoured the last vestige of the detonations' energy did he snap the chain, relinquishing his luminary guise.

A hint of embarrassment tainted his demeanor, and he thus resolved to continue in this newfound direction, not turning back.

Chapter 966: Ulfar, Get To Work

"Is it really okay to let Epsilon roam freely?"

Hade inquired, his features folding into a frown.

"We don't know the rank of the Digestors teeming here, but we are near a black hole. The creatures that can spawn and survive in such a place will be far from ordinary. A single misstep could spell our doom."

His concern was as deep as it was genuine, and it gave the others pause. Despite this, there were some among them who remained undeterred.

"I won't stay with you lot." Drakon grunted, stalking off in a direction opposite of Epsilon.

"This is a test, after all. We can communicate through our bracelets anytime, and I am sure Cekt is watching us from the shadows. Knowing him, he won't truly let us die if our lives are in danger."

"Makes sense," Jake and the others reluctantly agreed after a moment of consideration, giving up on trying to convince him.

However, that didn't mean the rest of the disciples were ready to go their separate ways.

It

was one thing for Drakon and Epsilon, two Oracle Knights, to split off, but the others weren't exactly fighters. They held more confidence in their ability to craft Aether Cores than in combating Digestors.

"Our master didn't specify whether we need to exterminate the Digestors on the Magnetic Resonator before or after we begin producing Aether Cores," Rigel mused out loud, his hand pensively stroking his goatee, a chiseled formation of quartz stalactites. "Before we tackle these Digestors, we should first determine how we're meant to utilize this Resonator to produce these Aether Cores."

"I agree," Hade nodded.

"Me too..." Lyra chimed in, albeit timidly.

It went without saying that Syrbarun and Siri, the two weakest fighters of the group, fully supported this idea. The only one visibly disappointed was Lucia, who began to grumble, her sword furiously scraping against the unforgiving ground.

"Tch! Just how fucking hard is this ground?"

Jake overheard her muttering under her breath, her

gaze casting envious glances towards Drakon who was rapidly moving away from their "peaceful" group.

"Does anyone have any suggestions?" Syrbarun asked hopefully, expecting someone amongst them to have a clue on how they might harness the Magnetic Resonator.

At first glance, their master's explanation of this giant energy generator's operation seemed crystal clear. In practice, it was woefully vague. They were still unsure where the energy produced by the Magnetic Resonator was stored or even where it was absorbed and created.

On paper, harnessing the black hole's energy through magnetic reconnection would naturally produce unthinkable temperatures and radiation, and potentially eject plasma at terrifying velocities.

If the entire Resonator served as a converter, they'd already be dead, swept away by physical constraints far surpassing those of a star's core.

It wasn't just a matter of temperature or radiation, but also the destructive forces at work stirring the resulting plasma with such violence it would likely be impossible for them to survive.

Neither Jake nor the others feared an invasion of Space Digestors. If that were to happen and those creatures could survive, their only mission would be to flee this Resonator as quickly as possible.

Hence, logically, only a tiny portion of the structure would directly handle this task, while the rest of it served as reinforcement and support to all the Aether Arrays strengthening the conversion chamber where the Magnetici Field Disruptor was placed.

Jake, Hade, and Rigel harbored their own theories, but when all was said and done, deeds held more weight than words. Why waste time pontificating when they had the perfect compass within their grasp?

"I've already tried," Lyra interjected anxiously, following their discussion. "No matter how I frame my wish, my Shadow Guide offers no direction. The Oracle Scan is equally useless, hampered by the metal veiling the Resonator's surface. At any rate, it could

mean we are already in the right place or that my Oracle Rank is inadequate for information regarding this Magnetic Resonator."

"Or that this place is teeming with Digestors." Syrbarun nonchalantly shrugged, clutching a blaster tightly against his chest.

Jake had to admit that this was also a plausible argument. Still, he had another kind of compass in mind when he'd raised the idea.

"Ulfar... Get to work." Lucia patted his back with a charming smile, delighting in his exasperated expression.

Why strain their brains when they could simply ask Mr. Lucky to arbitrarily point towards the correct path? The other disciples were skeptical, but after his otherworldly archery display, they set their doubts aside and chose to trust the Beskyrian.

"I get the feeling this jaunt is going to be a real pain in the ass..." Ulfar sighed listlessly, trudging joylessly eastward.

The group followed suit behind the king of Beskyr, and Jake, bringing up the rear, jumped as he felt a delicate hand intertwining his fingers before he could react. Turning his head, he met

Lucia's wordless warning glance.

Her message was clear: "Don't you dare let go of this hand. They've already stolen one chance for me to fight, so at least allow me this pleasure."

Whether they were in hostile territory swarming with Digestors or amid the end of the world, she was determined to make their relationship official and push Jake to fall into step.

"Are you sure this is the right place for that?" Jake stared at her more calmly than she had anticipated.

"Why not?" She retorted, playfully pinching his hip. "If things get dangerous, I can easily protect you."

"I would have thought the reverse." Jake chuckled, starting to walk again, drawing her along by the arm before she could protest.

Lucia exhibited a fleeting expression of surprise, then a broad smile lit up her face, and she clung to his arm like a koala, ensuring that even if he changed his mind, it would no longer be possible.

Jake could, of course, guess at the sort of thoughts running through her mind but had no intention of challenging her on this slippery battlefield. Unbeknownst to him, his reluctance was already beginning to ebb away. If it were the Jake of yesterday, he might have pulled back to maintain some distance between them.

Within a few minutes of walking without any monster encounters, delighted surprise flickered across the faces of Syrbarun and Lyra.

"It seems Ulfar's arrows were more effective than I'd imagined." The Vrusug offered the warrior a thumbs up. For once, he was genuinely glad the man was accompanying them.

Strangely, instead of appearing flattered, Ulfar and his companions wore frowns. He had faith in his archery skills and his supernatural precision, but he doubted that the number of arrows he had released could have eradicated all the Digestors.

If it were that easy, Cekt wouldn't have made it such a pivotal component of their initial test. Given that there wasn't even a trace of any bodies, he started questioning whether he had hit anything at all... It was utterly perplexing.

"Something's off." Rigel warned them. "If Cekt wasn't bluffing to scare us, these Digestors are

not where we thought they'd be."

"In that case..." Hade's eyes abruptly narrowed, focusing on a distant point towards which Ulfar was leading them.

They would have their answer once they reached the entrance to the generator proper. Based on his expertise, Hade had already hypothesized that the Magnetic Field Disruptor must be nestled within the Resonator, oriented in the same direction as the Resonator's orbit for its magnetic fields to efficiently collide against those of the black hole.

Jake had temporarily configured the Oracle Device as his Artifact Incarnation and deployed his mental sense akin to a boosted Oracle Scan to confirm this. The probe couldn't penetrate the ground's surface, seemingly shielded by a highly efficient Aether Array, but scanning the Resonator's surface posed no problem.

Thanks to this, he had a sound understanding of where Ulfar was leading them. He had already relayed what he saw to his companions, but consciously decided to keep the other disciples in the dark.

He didn't like what his Oracle Scan-boosted by his Grade 10 Energy Body and powerful mind- was showing him. It wasn't that there were no Digestors; it was that these

creatures were intentionally maintaining their distance, evading their path but responding to their every action as if they could see them directly.

Jake, feeling no spiritual fluctuations and not feeling watched, was understandably baffled.

Chapter 967: I Don't Understand Anything

'What sort of ability are they using to track us like this...'

His first instinct wasn't to suspect a traitor among them, but that Cekt had made certain arrangements before disappearing to complicate their mission. Of course, the possibility that the Digestors spawning on the Resonator were different from the others was also not to be dismissed.

After sharing his observations with his companions, Lucia finally released his hand and focused once again, hand resting on her sword hilt, ready to react at the slightest hitch.

A moment later.

"We're here." Ulfar announced, stopping at the edge of a precipice. "We can't go any further."

He meant this in the most literal sense. Progress was barred by a force field.

If they had wondered earlier where and how the Magnetic Resonator produced its energy, they now had their answer.

Before them, the ground abruptly ended, giving way to an enormous chasm—a hole at least 20 kilometers in diameter, its bottom invisible. The walls lining this hole appeared to absorb almost all light, making it difficult to discern their exact shape.

Still, with his Cosmic Sight, Jake could fairly confidently assert that the hole was wide at the surface and narrowed progressively with depth, funnel-like.

"It seems we're stuck." Syrbarun sighed with feigned dismay, almost as if he hoped this was simply an oversight by Cekt, who had forgotten to "open" the door for them.

Perhaps some sort of pass was required to breach this barrier. The other disciples each had their reservations and theories, but Jake's countenance had grown significantly darker.

His mental sense had clearly registered the countless Digestors shadowing their actions, traversing this barrier and disappearing into the bowels of the Resonator. If

even these hostile creatures could wander here as if in their own garden, then why were they barred?

"It's coming!" Hade suddenly shouted, pulling them all back with his telekinesis without warning.

The energy barrier that had hindered their exploration of the chasm beyond the precipice began to flicker abruptly, shifting from invisible to a brilliance surpassing lightning. The course of the Resonator veered dramatically, dangerously encroaching on the black hole's event horizon.

At the same instant, an invisible magnetic field for Cekt's disciples but crystal clear to Jake's eyes, gushed out from the bowels of the funnelshaped chasm, clashing head-on with the much more diffuse, but infinitely larger magnetic field surrounding the event horizon of the black hole.

BOOOOOM!

Immediately following, a blinding radiance far surpassing that of a million nuclear bombs forced them to close their eyes, only Jake and Lyra keeping theirs wide open. Jake, because this level of light was but a tonic for his eyes, and Lyra, because she was literally made of light.

She wouldn't be hurt unless the radiations reached a level that would destabilize the very structure of light itself. Jake wasn't sure that was possible without affecting the very cohesion of space-time, but too much energy in one place could also cause the generation of matter, the opposite state of an ethereal being composed of light.

This was the risk Lyra had to consider, but before reaching this point, she had some leeway. Especially since the bulk of the radiations and particles emitted by the clash of magnetic fields were intercepted by the barrier.

The initial burst of radiance lasted only a moment, but shortly after, due to the magnetic fluctuations, ionized gas at very high temperature was regurgitated from the black hole's event horizon and miraculously landed in the gigantic funnel surrounded by the impenetrable barrier.

Then, the collisions between magnetic fields continued for a while, radiations, heat, and plasma being redirected in the form of an impressive laser beam several kilometers wide towards the depths of the funnel.

At a certain point, even Jake had to shield his eyes with his Fairy Force to continue observing the spectacle. Lyra also ceased admiring the sight to stabilize the continuous stream of light sweeping her body and nourishing her cells to the point of overindulgence. She was on the verge of overdose, and this was while being shielded from the radiation by the barrier!

Several minutes later, whatever was emitting the magnetic field gushing from the bottom of the funnel went into cooldown, and the Magnetic Resonator disengaged from its previous path, returning to its previous high orbit at a safe distance from the event horizon.

The plasma storm raging within the barrier faded as swiftly as it had appeared, absorbed by the heart of the Resonator. The temperature took longer to drop, but being on the other side of the barrier, they had no way of measuring this process.

"So what do we do now?" Siri asked their opinion in a neutral tone. "I see no other entrance than the mouth of the generator itself, and a barrier separates us. Not to mention the barrier, even if we could cross it, we would be at the mercy of the next activation of the generator, which can

occur at any time."

Everyone agreed with her. Without knowing the pattern of these magnetic field emissions, entering the funnel directly was too dangerous.

"There must be other entrances, but clearly we don't have access to them," Rigel clicked his tongue, massaging his temples, his fingers scraping against his forehead like steel grating on steel.

"Please, stop doing that!" Lyra snapped, grabbing her radiant skull.

Rigel immediately stopped, but Siri rationally objected, "You have no ears. Even the most unbearable ultrasound should not bother you."

"Yeah, well fuck off," Lyra shot back without mincing words. "I listen with my consciousness, and I can assure you that this sound is like poison to my soul."

Instead of being offended as a human would and stooping to her level, Siri remained impassive and stated factually, "What you're saying makes no sense."

"Okay, that's enough you two!" Rigel growled,

frustrated. He'd never thought that massaging or scratching his head would alienate his companions. It wasn't his fault that he was the only Gorgonite here.

While they squabbled, Jake, Hade, and Syrbarun had finished inspecting the barrier.

"Absolutely impervious," Hade admitted, shaking his head reluctantly. This barrier exceeded his expertise.

Without finding the switch to deactivate it, he doubted he could disrupt it or find a way to cross it without spending at least several months or years. If only he knew where the control room was, he could have tried to hack it.

Even a simple entry point into the Magnetic Resonator's computer system would have sufficed, but sadly, they didn't even have that chance. The metallic surface was the same everywhere, without any obvious irregularity suggesting that another path existed.

Jake was about to reveal what his Oracle Scan had recorded when the Digestors had gone through without hindrance when he saw everyone suddenly turn their heads towards the barrier behind him. Turning around as well, he saw Epsilon on the other side of the funnel crossing the barrier like a phantom, then disappearing into the depths of the Resonator.

"Damn it! He could have helped us," Ulfar grumbled, poking the barrier with the tip of his sword in search of a loophole to exploit.

"It's not difficult for Epsilon to cross this barrier as he is invulnerable to all forms of energy," Rigel explained helplessly. "By changing his energy signature, he can even pass himself off as the barrier."

"Lyra can also go through," Siri stated coldly.

"The light produced in the funnel was reaching us earlier, and we can see what's on the other side. As long as the light intensity doesn't exceed a certain limit, she shouldn't have any problem."

After encouraging her for a while, they managed to convince the maiden of light to cross the barrier first as a scout, but before that, they planned to wait for the next activation of the generator.

Jake decided to wait a bit more before revealing what his Oracle Scan had seen, but what

happened next didn't give him that chance. From a different direction than Epsilon, they spotted the iconic figure of Drakon, recognizable by his ruby and gold scales, membranous wings, and long horns.

They were prepared to warn him to avoid banging against the barrier as they had, but to their surprise, the Draconian crossed the barrier without a hitch, not even slowing down, leaving them dumbstruck.

"I don't understand anything anymore," Lucia gave up, deciding to take Jake's hand again and take advantage of this lull to flirt with her lover.

Chapter 968: Is It Because I've Already Passed The Test?

Minutes turned to dust, yet no further magnetic eruption occurred. The Resonator maintained its steady orbit, unmoved. Perhaps the Field Disruptor activated only hourly, or perchance merely once a day.

Given Jake's knowledge, waiting was a luxury he could ill afford. The chilling number of Digestors that had infiltrated the funnel before them was sobering, and he was acutely aware that Epsilon and Drakon were also within.

'Should I inform them of the Digestors or not...' Jake found himself wrestling with indecision.

His hesitation stemmed not from a lack of trust in these disciples, but rather from his apprehension of exposing one of his most valuable trump cards: his mental sense when his bracelet was designated as an Artifact Incarnation. Even the Digestors were unable to scramble his signal when he utilized it, the spiritual impulse emitted was swift, fleeting, and so effectively camouflaged that it verged on undetectable.

Unlike a conventional Oracle Scan, this one was not merely tethered to his Grade 10 Energy, but also his mental strength. A year prior, his intelligence was already his greatest attribute by a considerable margin, and that gap had only widened over the last twelve months. If one were to consider his intelligence and his intelligence alone, he was an absolute anomaly amongst Players of his level.

[I would advise against it.] Xi firmly dissuaded him. [Cekt might have recruited them, but we do not truly know these disciples. If I go by how he recruited you, I get the feeling he doesn't dig very deep. A background check via the Oracle System and a single meeting with you where you effectively bribed him with the blood samples of two Grade 7 Bloodlines hardly seems a solid basis to judge someone's character. Especially not that of a disciple.]

Jake's hesitation evaporated in the face of Xi's reasoning. He had no doubts that Cekt had his ways of assessing his disciples, such as reading their aura, but no method was truly foolproof.

'Alright, in that case, we'll bide our time a bit longer.' Jake conceded. 'Let's hope I'm worried for nothing!'

Jake was not overly concerned for the two Oracle Knights, but the same could not be said for the remaining disciples. What vexed them was not the improbable notion that something could happen to Epsilon and Drakon, but rather the fear that they would get so far ahead in Cekt's test that the gap would become insurmountable.

Syrbarun, in particular, was especially anxious. As one of the weaker combatants Wendok's disciples, he could only rely on his creation of Aether Cores to make up for lost ground if all the Digestors were slain by his two companions...

"Damn it, why are those two fuckers the ones who can pass the barrier unscathed!" His wrath erupted, and he struck the barrier barring their path with a forceful punch.

It was not the first time the minotaur had lashed out against the force field, and the other disciples watched him make a spectacle of himself with mirthful anticipation, expecting another instance of him breaking his knuckles against the barrier, followed by a matched howl of pain.

"Ahhhhh! Ah? WHAT THE

FUUUUUUUUUUUUuuuuuuuuuuuuk!"

Jake and the remaining disciples sprung up, their expressions suddenly alert. Instead of smashing his fist against the barrier, Syrbarun's fist had passed through it, and caught off guard, he had been swept away by his momentum.

The barrier was erected at the edge of a precipice; the grumbling Vrusug had just plunged headfirst into the void...

"Is the barrier now letting us through? That makes no sense." Siri couldn't conceal her skepticism. This raised further questions. "Unless our master is behind this. In which case, he wants us to in a certain ord-"

Before she could finish, someone usurped her words with action. The Gorgonite charged fearlessly at the barrier, his rocky contours blurring with speed.

CRASH!

A ripple spread omnidirectionally from the point of impact, flinging Rigel back twice as fast as he had approached, a shower of rock and gem debris splattering the barrier in his wake.

"Or a fluke?" Hade suggested, arching an eyebrow. "Maybe the energy influx of the force field fluctuates, causing these rare moments of vulnerability. Perfect timing would allow you to slip through."

"But I don't detect any fluctuations indicating a power failure." Siri reported flatly, after running another scan.

Meanwhile, Rigel had already picked himself up. Debris that had separated from his cracked skull was reabsorbed into his body, reforming a glistening, smooth forehead.

"That was unexpected..." The Gorgonite grumbled, rubbing his forehead to assure it was all in place. "Beyond a certain inertia, the barrier throws our kinetic energy back at us, amplifying it hundreds of times. I thought I was a goner... Luckily, I'm hard-headed."

Jake and the others threw him a sympathetic glance. That explained why the Gorgonite had suffered such damage despite his low speed.

'Low speed' was, of course, relative. For a post- Fourth Ordeal Player and a mineral lifeform of his weight, Rigel was actually quite fast.

"If it's a matter of turn order, why don't we let someone else try?" Lucia suggested, advancing towards the barrier.

Jake expected her to be halted by the barrier like Rigel, but to everyone's surprise, she passed through it effortlessly, like Drakon and Syrbarun her. Meanwhile, Syrbarun had just managed to halt his fall and clamber back up to the surface.

Seeing him open his mouth but not hearing a sound, they deduced that the barrier also blocked sound waves-a logical expectation, considering the lethal cacophony that would result from the clashing magnetic fields. The plasma storm within could easily exceed 200 decibels.

In air, the theoretical maximum decibel is 194, beyond which a shockwave forms. However, while the decibel scale in the air capped at this point, the power of the resulting shockwave could continue to gain strength indefinitely.

Of course, there was no atmosphere on the surface of the Magnetic Resonator, rendering Syrbarun's attempt at verbal communication pointless. By straining his voice, he was wasting the air produced by Cekt's gifted helmet.

However, Jake reacted differently when Lucia began to excessively and slowly articulate, inviting him to read her lips.

"Hmm?" Jake realized it wasn't Syrbarun who was being foolish, but the barrier that was also blocking their telepathy attempts. 'But if I retain the same Artifact Incarnation, my mental sense can still go through.'

With this understanding, he enveloped Lucia and Syrbarun with his mental sense and asked them not to panic.

"You can hear us?!" Syrbarun exclaimed, both elated and shocked. Jake found his admiration somewhat insincere but attributed it to his inferiority complex.

"I can. But they can't," Jake responded vaguely. "We'll find a solution, so wait for us."

Lucia nodded with absolute confidence, but Syrbarun showed a hesitant expression. He finally had a chance to catch up, but lacked the courage to explore the funnel alone. In a creepy, loaded gesture, he turned expectantly towards Lucia, flashing his best smile.

"What do you want?" Lucia stepped back immediately, but after hearing his explanation, she was struck by a wave of excitement. "Okay! Let's go!"

"Don't rush and wait for us," Jake ordered in a patronizing tone.

Lucia pouted, but ultimately she obeyed. Syrbarun wore a wry smile but did not move either. As crucial as the test was, they still needed to be alive to appreciate the results.

Encouraged by Lucia's success, other disciples tried crossing the barrier but failed. Minutes passed, but unlike before, they were determined to test the solidity of the barrier, hoping to pass through by sheer luck.

Ironically, this method bore fruit. Less than two minutes after Lucia's successful crossing, Ulfar also made it through. Five minutes later, Rigel succeeded as well, followed by Siri ten minutes after, and then Hade half an hour later. Lyra could pass without assistance, leaving only Jake on the other side.

Assuming this was part of their master's plan, the others waited patiently on the other side. But when an hour and a half passed and Jake was still stuck, their attitude began to shift.

"How about we start without you, and you catch up later?" Rigel suggested hesitantly. It seemed unfair, but they had already lost a lot of time.

Jake was not thrilled with this idea, but seeing the impatient expressions of Lucia, Ulfar, and others bored to death, he saw no way to persuade them to wait. Having already warned his companions about the Digestors infiltrating the Resonator, he vaguely said to the others,

"Start without me, but assume this place is teeming with Digestors. Don't separate under circumstances."

"That goes without saying!" Rigel agreed. "This is our master's test, after all."

Siri and the others nodded in agreement, following the eager lead of Syrbarun and Lucia, they plummeted into the bottomless funnel. Hade stayed a second longer behind and mouthed slowly to Jake,

"I will watch over them."

Watching him fly after them, disappearing into the abyss, Jake felt strangely abandoned after the departure of his three friends, including his new girlfriend.

'Is it because I've already passed his test?' Jake thought with a trace of derision. It was the only reason he could think of.

Chapter 969: Tell Me What's Going On

In the beginning, Jake could still track the movements of his companions using his mental sense. But before long, they seemed to vanish, as if ripped from his mental grasp. Somewhere along the constricting neck of the funnel was a Faraday cage, aimed not at electric fields but spiritual energy, that scrambled his perceptions, disrupting and dispersing the mental energy he had forcefully engaged.

If he were closer, he could have undoubtedly maintained control of his spiritual energy. Yet, with the interference of the barrier and the introduction of this psychic Faraday cage, it became an intricate jigsaw puzzle. Despite his persistence, he managed to project his mental sense slightly further, but as the difficulty exponentially increased, he had no choice but to abandon the attempt.

"From now on, you're on your own," Jake didn't forget to warn his three companions before his connection with them was completely severed.

In the next instant, they moved beyond the range of his mental radar, and he was officially left stranded on the surface. Annoyed and restless, Jake immediately began pacing along the barrier, his mind wandering. He allowed his fingertips to glide across its length, ready to cross the moment the force field showed signs of weakening.

Alas, even after an extra hour of devoted patience, the barrier showed no intention of letting him through. The Magnetic Field Disruptor did not reactivate, and he received no news from his companions or the other disciples. He tried to contact them through the Chat, but the impenetrable alloy covering the surface of the Magnetic Resonator made long-distance communication impossible.

Bored to the bone, Jake suddenly thought of the Mirror World he had recently unlocked. Focusing his intention, he tried to access it. Surprisingly, his consciousness was easily sucked into the virtual dimension. The Aether network supporting this virtual reality was clearly superior to those of the Oracle System, even able to ignore the interference from the Resonator and the Digestors.

Aware that his physical body was not safe, Jake didn't waste a second. He hadn't logged in out of boredom, but in search of information. As an Oracle Knight and Colonel, he was privileged to access a wealth of information, yet the Oracle System's network had been compromised since demise.

Compared to that, the maintenance costs of this Mirror World remained unchanged, being unrelated to their Oracle. His level of authority here was essentially the same as

in the Oracle System, but accessing the Archives from this place wouldn't incur any additional costs.

Another benefit was he wasn't alone here. Beside him stood a stunning brunette, clad in form-fitting black jade armor that traced every curve of her body. Her ageless irises, a fascinating mix of black and red, gazed at him with tender curiosity. He could lose himself in those eyes...

"Xi, find everything you can on Magnetic Resonators and Digestors spawning in their vicinity. I want to know what I'm dealing with."

"Right away." Xi replied, a smile playing on her lips as she gave him an odd look. "But before that..."

Before Jake could react, she gently pecked his lips. As he stood there, dumbfounded, wondering what had just happened, Xi had already drawn back, her eyes closed as she connected to the network.

Jake could have done it himself, but he was accustomed to relying on his AI. In this regard, she was more seasoned and proficient than him, and, more importantly, never complained no matter what he requested...

For instance, in the past year, they had managed to create a body for her, but she had never used it to progress their relationship... The only reason he could think of to explain this change of attitude was Lucia.

Even though Xi shared and knew all his thoughts, she was still a woman and felt threatened.

"So, you're not entirely beyond redemption." Xi murmured with her eyes closed, her lips curling into a disapproving pout as if he had wronged her or owed her money.

Jake grimaced at her reaction. He had always been against any form of infidelity, and right now, he felt as if he was two-timing Lucia, someone he respected and genuinely cared for.

Did the fact that one was an Oracle AI and the other a real person excuse what had just transpired?

"Ouch, that was harsh." Xi openly chastised him after he had dared to compare her to a "real" person.

Even though her eyes remained closed, Jake could've sworn he saw a fleeting sadness so intense that it bordered on despair.

"I'm sorry, Xi. That's not what I meant and you know it." Jake quickly backpedaled, but the damage was done. Instead of dwelling on it, he decided to change the topic. "How's the info coming?"

The young woman sighed, opened her eyes, and transferred everything she had found with a thought. Jake processed the influx of data calmly, his pupils contracting and dilating rapidly as he absorbed the content into his memory, claiming it entirely.

"Thank you, Xi." Jake breathed out heavily, massaging his forehead as a sign of slight fatigue.

"Hmm."

Faced with the lukewarm response of the woman who was now turned away from him, Jake felt as his mind had been plunged into an iceberg. It was nearly so, as Xi's icy and depressive mood literally affected him due to their mental connection.

Realizing the situation was escalating and not wanting to lose her, Jake broke into a sweat and almost tore his hair out in frustration. "Give me time. Put yourself in my shoes, and Lucia's. And please don't tell me I don't put myself in yours. You know that's not true."

Xi spun around suddenly, closing the gap between them in an instant until their faces were mere inches apart, forcing him to meet her gaze willingly or He didn't know how she did it, but he could smell her addictive perfume even in the Mirror World. If his AI had a Charm stat, the succubi like Aisling and her mother had better watch out.

Terrifying....

In the end, it was Jake who surrendered first. As if he had just relearned to breathe, he took a deep breath and logged out of the Mirror World, returning to reality. The mental connection with Xi there, but he knew something had been strained between them due to her silence.

It was for the best, because he hadn't yet found an answer that could satisfy everyone involved without hurting anyone. And Xi, who knew him better than he knew himself, was well aware of this... She was just trying to hasten his final decision by backing him into a corner.

Only a few seconds had passed in reality, and Jake became serious again. Xi, too, stopped making him uncomfortable and resumed her unwavering role as an AI. In the end, they made a fine team, and neither could function properly without the other.

No matter what they felt for each other and the complexity of their relationship, one thing would never change. Xi existed for him. His happiness and safety were her highest priority, and these directives were deeply ingrained in her Soul Code.

"There's definitely something wrong." Jake confirmed with a frown after analyzing the data gathered by Xi.

[Digestors shouldn't be able to cross the barrier isolating the Field Disruptor and the Conversion Chamber.] Xi agreed gravely. [There's definitely something abnormal about this situation. I don't think Cekt would allow so many Digestors to pass through just to test you.]

"We're on the same page."

Jake weighed the pros and cons for a split second, then stated decisively, "Let's contact Cekt. Since I've passed the test, this one is irrelevant to me. Whether or not it's part of his plan, he just needs to answer yes or no. My inquiry doesn't require him to reveal anything that would his impartiality."

With his decision made, he felt a sense of relief and immediately tried to contact his master via the Oracle System. He didn't know how many Aether Points it would cost him, but as long as the Wendok wasn't hiding somewhere inside the Magnetic Resonator, he should be reachable.

For what seemed like tens of seconds, the line rang into oblivion, and Jake started to believe the alien would never answer. Just as he was about to give up and try again later, the communication finally stabilized on the other end, and he stated icily,

"Master, I'm done playing games. Either let me cross the barrier or tell me what's going on now."

Holding his breath, only a static that could make teeth grind responded to him, and his heart turned cold. His foreboding was immediately confirmed when his master's distorted and garbled voice attempted to respond,

"Jiiiiijaaaaaaaaakkkkkkke...sshhhrrr... weeeeeeeeeee... shrrrrrrrh... S-shrrrrrrrrr-
orrrrrrrryyyyyyyyyy, Ä¿Ä¿Ä¿Ä¿Ä¿Ä¿Ä¿Ä¿Ä¿iiit'sssss aaaaaaaa tttttrrr....
Shrrrrrrrrrr-aap."

The communication link severed as abruptly as it had begun, hurling Jake into a gaping maw of dread. The worst-case scenario, one that he had not even dared to entertain, had just unveiled its ugly face.

Cekt himself was ensnared in a predicament he could not readily disentangle. And that could only mean one thing - their enemy was of an caliber, at the very least.

Chapter 970: Are You Good For Anything At All?

"Fuck..." Jake exhaled, the staggering gravity of their predicament settling upon him like a yoke of stones. Each disjointed word from Cekt, each distortion of his formerly unflappable voice, struck him like a pebble skimming a tranquil pond, dispatching waves of unease through the still reservoir of his mind.

His heart drummed a rhythm of trepidation within his breast. The silence that followed the termination of their link was oppressive, descending upon him like the promise of an unsheathed blade.

With distortion and background noise making his mentor's voice choppy and protracted, Jake had struggled to parse Cekt's intended meaning. Yet, despite the challenges, he had finally pieced together the message.

There was no longer any room for doubt. His master had been ensnared in a trap. And a formidable one at that!

Jake began to suspect he was cursed with ill fortune. Each time he personally embarked on an adventure, leaving the cushy confines of his Floating Island, a disaster involving Digestors or other Evolvers ensued.

Yet, this was simply a reflection of the precarious state of the Mirror Universe. It was likely not only he who faced such ordeals, but all those with the courage to venture beyond the safety of their Oracle Shelters.

But was his luck truly this wretched? He began to question his Luck stat.

[Cekt's voice was distorted, taking long seconds to relay each word instead of the usual microseconds that telepathy allows.] Xi analyzed calmly. [Given the time it took for him to respond, the interference, and the distortion of his voice... my conclusion is that he's fallen into a temporal trap. Somehow his enemies have managed to draw him out of the reach of the Aether Array covering the Magnetic Resonator.]

Jake frowned, conjuring a multitude of unpleasant scenarios in his mind before finally inquiring,

"Assuming that's true, how long will it take for him to free himself and return?"

[Several possibilities, but don't hold your breath.] Xi sighed somberly. "First scenario, Cekt accidentally left the Aether Array and is only a few meters from the safe zone of the Magnetic Resonator. In this case, it could take from a few minutes to a few hours, depending on his circumstances. This is the most optimistic case, but also the least likely, I fear. Second possibility, he was teleported by an enemy far from here. In which case... I have absolutely no idea how long it would take him to return. Instinctively, I would like to believe that an experienced Rank 3 Aetherist like him, tasked with extracting Aether from black holes, would have adequate contingencies in place for incidents of this nature, like a spacecraft covered with a Time Aether Array similar to

that of the Resonator or a portable Yellow Cube. If that's the case, it's not impossible for him to escape the trap within a few hours or days depending on his distance from us. But..."

"But?" Jake knew he wouldn't like what was to follow.

[But if it's a trap and not an accident, enemies capable of ensnaring a Rank 3 Aetherist would undoubtedly have anticipated all of this. Digestors spawning near black holes are feared for their space-time abilities. If one of them is capable of stabilizing the space where Cekt is trapped, any teleportation will become much more difficult, if not impossible. As for a spacecraft, even if we're talking about that of a Rank 3 Aetherist, it's even less reliable. Unless he possesses an exceptional ship and his enemies give him a chance to start it, I wouldn't count on it.]

Jake's heart sank as he listened to Xi's grim deductions. No matter which way he looked at it, their situation was riddled with foul play. The stench of it was too potent to deny.

The other possibilities raised by Xi weren't much better, sometimes worse.

Refusing to believe Digestors could orchestrate such a trap when, just a day ago, Cekt was blissfully ignorant of his impending mission here, Jake's eyes narrowed in a slow, serious squint. He muttered gloomily, "Traitors?"

His mind initially flickered towards Oros, the Oracle Overseer himself before promptly discarding the thought. He started to recap the significant events that had transpired recently, searching for potential connections to their current predicament. Before long, his body stiffened in the clutches of realization.

Lure's death!

The scheme concocted by the Digestors and other enemies of the Oracle was chillingly thorough. After their first stab at the heart of the Mirror Universe, they had no intention of letting the wounded beast bleed out at its own pace for fear it might miraculously recover.

"So now, they're targeting those trying to mend or fortify the Aether Network." Jake reasoned out loud, unable to hide his fearful admiration for the sheer breadth of the enemy's conspiracy.

This was a stark lesson in humility for him. If the enemies had anticipated every response from the Oracle and the Mirror Universe following Lure's death and the sabotage of the Aether Network, then it wasn't just Cekt and them in danger. Everyone who had been hastily recruited and mobilized across each System and Planet to reinforce their Aether Network was also in the crosshairs.

Yet, such an ambitious and magnificent plan raised another significant question: How had they predicted their arrival and successfully deceived the vigilance of Cekt and the regular squads of Oracle Guardians who came here to exterminate the Digestors spawning here?

Jake now knew that the Oracle had its ways of identifying and tracking Digestor Trojans, so it certainly wasn't as simple as it seemed.

Thud, thud!

Hearing heavy footsteps rapidly approaching, he swiftly pivoted, raising his guard, only to lower it upon recognizing Saros. Squinting his eyes suspiciously, he inquired coldly, "Where have you been?"

Saros also sized him up in return, maintaining his distance. He too seemed to be wondering if he was part of this intricately woven scheme. However, seeing the same wariness reflected in the eyes of the man he was tasked with monitoring, a palpable wave of relief visibly eased his shoulders.

"Cekt asked me to keep my distance so as not to interfere with your test. Since my sole duty is to monitor you, I had no reason to refuse. Just now, I received the same message as you. I tried to reach Thelma using my bracelet, but to no avail. I was able to alert them via the Mirror World, but the situation is dire. We're on our own."

Jake displayed a world-weary exasperation at this familiar predicament. Weren't the circumstances almost identical to when they tried to save Maeve, Kyle's sister? The Oracle Shelter where she was enslaved had been attacked by Digestors, and if Cekt hadn't arrived to rescue them by some divine grace, they'd likely all be dead.

Since that day, Jake had come to the conclusion that he couldn't rely on the Oracle's rescue.

'Although, if I remember correctly, there was another Oracle Guardian with six arms who came to help but was injured by one of his colleagues before he could even prove useful.'

Even the Oracle Guardians had their share of traitors. And from Saros's glum expression, he wasn't far from the truth.

"Can you contact any Oracle Guardians you trust?" Jake suggested without much hope.

"No," Saros disappointed him instantly.

"Why?" He asked anyway, striving to stay polite.

"Because I don't have any friends."

Jake blinked stupidly, his jaw dropping in disbelief.

Fuck!! Of all the Oracle Guardians, they had to stick him with the most antisocial one!

"No matter..." Jake let it go, resigning himself to his fate with a gloomy countenance.

[What do you plan to do now?] Xi pressed relentlessly, not allowing him time to wallow.

Jake was about to seriously ponder a plan when a mad quake reminded him that he didn't have that luxury.

CRACK!

The steel ground that had so far proven utterly solid cracked beneath his feet. A faint but noticeable shockwave had simultaneously coursed through his body, originating from the ground. If he wasn't mistaken, a colossal explosion from within the Resonator was the source of the quake and ground's fracturing.

The faces of his companions on the other side of the barrier flashed in his mind, and worry seized him. A wave of urgency, fueled by the peril they faced, crashed over him. He whirled toward Saros, his voice echoing amidst the tumult,

"Can you deactivate this damn barrier?"

"No."

"..."

"..."

Jake didn't endure their silent staring contest for long. He was already a pressure cooker teetering on the edge of explosion, and release was inevitable, one way or another.

Instead, with a regal calm that belied his inner turmoil, his face radiating with unmistakable disdain, he asked, "Seriously... Are you good for anything at all?"

Jake was on the brink, frustration pushing him dangerously close to planting his fist square in Saros's face just to drive home how utterly useless he found him. He drew a shaky breath, fighting to rein in his temper, and finally declared, his words heavy with resolute determination,

"In that case, we've got no choice but to bulldoze our way through."

Chapter 971: The Power Of Adaptation

Jake's demeanor shifted to a serious tone and he strode determinedly towards the barrier blocking his path. Saros merely shook his head at this, sighing with resignation.

"Forget it, that won't work. This barrier was designed to halt the kind of Digestors that even we, Oracle Guardians, struggle to defeat. Without disabling the barrier from the inside, it's impassable. The Resonator's full energy supports its operation and the last thing we want is to destroy it. Trust me, you can't afford the repair costs..."

Jake wavered momentarily at the warrior's warning, but then, his countenance hardened and he reached out to touch the force field with a scowl.

"I don't want to destroy it, I just want to pass through," he justified aloud, without much conviction in his own words.

The moment his palms pressed against the barrier, a counterforce far greater than his push against the force field began repelling him. Rigel had borne the brunt of this earlier, and a fool would be the one to underestimate such retaliation.

Jake snorted, finding that no matter how hard he pushed, his hands could not move a smidgen, let alone pierce through. Saros shook his head again, anticipating Jake's capitulation any moment now, after realizing the futility of his attempts. But he underestimated Jake.

He might not be a Myrtharian anymore, but the pride and arrogance he had built during that time remained. This obstacle only stoked his combative spirit.

His muscles tensed sharply, inflating to thrice their size and becoming as hard as titanium to the touch. Slightly bending his knees to secure his footing, he began to push against the ground with great force and the latter, which had until then demonstrated its incredible resistance, started to cave in.

Scrrrrrrrrrrrrccch!!!

Saros, who had been watching the spectacle with crossed arms, stiffened in surprise as the barrier began to sizzle with a piercing, high-pitched noise that was utterly unbearable. Jake had kicked it up a notch.

His cells suddenly began to spew an unceasing torrent of Red and Yellow Aether, swiftly forming a veritable ocean of energy within his own body. Like a fountain in the open air, the Aether expelled by his cells was immediately reabsorbed by them, or under Jake's influence moved towards the recruited muscles.

Both his physical strength and toughness had already quadrupled, and with his current high Aether stats far exceeding that of other Evolvers of his level, this feat was no longer as easy to achieve.

It was because even the flesh of the most ordinary Earthling could bear an Aether density of about 1000 to 10,000 points without dying. Under the effect of his Grade 10 Energy body tempering, his Aether stats were already the maximum his body could tolerate.

Exceeding this physiological limit was a real uphill battle and placed a relative cap on the Evolvers, to a certain extent determining the heights they could aspire to reach.

This intrinsic limit was not the same for all species, but species originating from worlds with high Aether densities were naturally privileged, the life forms developing there having had millions, billions of years of evolution to adapt.

Pure Aether could temper cells and matter in general, with the latter passively absorbing a fraction of ambient Aether to fortify its internal cohesion. Yet, it was a tortuously slow process, measured in decades and increasingly time and Aether-demanding when the density surpassed a certain threshold.

This was why the Eighth Ordeal was considered a second considerable hurdle after the Fifth Ordeal. The main concern was no longer mortality rate but merely entering such an Ordeal World without immediately perishing, crushed by the ambient Aether.

Jake knew this all too well, having spent a whole year reflecting on this problem. After undergoing various excruciating tests, he came to the conclusion that his only path forward was to push himself to the brink. Neither his intellect nor technology could aid him in this task.

And that, he knew how to do well! Fortunately, he had the perfect bloodline and stubborn mindset for such self-inflicted torment.

Cosmic D Starfeyrves - a species renowned for its remarkable adaptability!

The flow of Aether circulating through his muscles quickly intensified, and soon Saros had no choice but to squint against such a concentration of Aether.

A blindingly golden-crimson aura radiated from Jake's body, and the Oracle Guardian could see his skin and flesh slowly peeling away as they disintegrated. Simultaneously, the damaged cells were working at full throttle to repair their DNA, produce new proteins, and divide to form new cells.

Often, before they could completely disintegrate, the expelled cells that had escaped the Aether storm and finished regenerating were telekinetically reabsorbed by Jake to resume their initial function. This continuous cycle of destruction, regeneration, and

replacement allowed Jake to further amplify his physical strength and defense. At some point, even Saros started to perspire.

Uncrossing his arms, the Oracle Guardian rubbed his eyes incredulously to ensure he was not hallucinating.

'Am I dreaming, or are his hands starting to deform the barrier?!' Saros exclaimed dumbfoundedly in his head. This defied all sense!

BOOOOOM!

It wasn't over yet. When Jake's physical strength seemed to reach its limit, an intangible radiance bathed in a dark blue halo and threaded with black lightning began to emanate from Jake's skin, forming a second skin harder than any armor.

His Cosmic Force, the evolved form of his telekinesis. This unfathomable force was protecting him while applying an astounding pushing force against his back and muscles to boost their performance even more!

The propulsion exerted by his feet against the ground and this advanced telekinetic force finally deformed the steel floor for good, forming an inverted spherical dome several meters in diameter and continuing to expand.

Sizzzzzzzzzle!

Despite his impressive display of power, Jake's journey was far from over. Although he managed to deform the barrier and slightly push it back, the truth was that it showed no signs of yielding.

On the contrary! The more he exerted himself, the fiercer the counterforce generated by the barrier to prevent him from continuing. The generated forces had long since surpassed what would atomize any other disciple of Cekt who stood in his place.

The only ones with a chance of making it were Epsilon and Lyra because of their ethereal nature, but even Lyrza's survival was a question mark as they didn't know if the barrier could also attack light.

Jake's face hardened, a glint of savagery flashing in his pupils, and suddenly, the halo of Cosmic Force enveloping him brightened even more, his two hands appearing as two blinding lasers.

"BREAK!"

BOOOOOM!

In the end, it was Jake's body that got blasted tens of kilometers away, a spray of silver-blue blood brighter than a sapphire twinkling in his wake. Saros was shocked, but deep down, he felt a sense of relief. If a Fourth-Ordeal Evolver could achieve what he, an Oracle Guardian, could not by brute force, his entire life would be called into question.

BANG!

His relief at preserving his fragile ego had barely begun when a blurry luminous comet faster than lightning zoomed before his eyes to crash into the barrier with a violence unparalleled by the previous impact.

Tiny ripples quickly rolled across the surface of the force field from the epicenter, and this time, squinting attentively, Saros saw it!

The game-changing difference between Jake and him.

BOOOOOM!

Jake was blasted again, but this time, the Oracle Guardian knew he had a good chance of success. And indeed, when Jake charged for the third time without allowing himself a microsecond of respite, the anticipated thunderous explosion did not occur.

Instead, he passed directly through the barrier, it harmlessly molding around his form as if he had just dived into a pool. The resistance was still there, but no worse than if he'd tried to get through a wall of mud.

"Done." Jake sinisterly smiled as he nonchalantly cracked his neck bones.

The secret behind his forceful passage wasn't so complicated. He had simply adapted. He had taken his time with his first attempt, but that was only to let his cells adapt to this counterforce. Once he had instinctively understood how this barrier used his own strength against him, he appropriated the technique and returned it in kind.

On the second impact, the counterforce produced by the barrier was absorbed by his cells and temporarily stored in a solid form of kinetic energy. On his next charge, he simply released it simultaneously with his own strength, but that didn't suffice. The barrier retaliated once more, and his cells, having adapted better to the stress, stored even more kinetic energy for the third charge.

The third attempt was the charm. In addition to having enough power this time to try a forceful passage, his skin had also unknowingly developed a kind of barrier dynamics to glide smoothly through.

Now, even if Jake wanted to pass through it again, he probably wouldn't even need a quarter of his strength to succeed.

That was the terror of his Cosmic D Starfeyrves Bloodline.

Chapter 972: Jackpot

After his successful passage, Jake didn't shoot straight down into the depths of the funnel. First, there was something he absolutely had to do.

Saros, still trapped on the other side, watched him in bewilderment as he began to palpate the steel wall of the funnel just a few inches below the lower base of the barrier. Was he trying to disrupt the force field by directly damaging its base?

However, the Oracle Guardian soon realized he was off the mark. Jake's intentions towards the steel coating the funnel's walls were entirely different.

There hadn't been time earlier because he had other priorities and damaging the Magnetic Resonator was something they must avoid at all costs to succeed in their mission, but circumstances had somewhat changed since.

Time to eat!

Whatever the metal or alloy that covered the immense structure's surface, it was durable but not enough to stop Jake. The warped ground, shaped like an inverted bowl several meters deep after Jake used it as a footing, was the most blatant evidence of this.

Still, deforming the metal was one thing, but cutting off a piece he could ingest and digest safely was an entirely different challenge. In addition to being ridiculously tough, this metal was also remarkably ductile, capable of withstanding considerable torsional and tensile forces.

Up until now, only the mysterious earthquake that had shaken the Magnetic Resonator earlier had managed to crack its surface, leaving some fractures behind. It would take much more to break off a chunk.

Accustomed to working with metal, Jake first tried to manipulate it directly using his Cosmic Manipulation, but he failed miserably. Supporting this initial attempt with his telekinesis didn't help much either, leaving him feeling helpless.

"It's going to be hard," Jake frowned, identifying the reason for this difficulty.

There wasn't just a Time Aether Array covering the Resonator's surface. Many other Aether Arrays performing various functions formed a complex, intertwined mesh virtually impossible to untangle.

One of them had the function of unifying all the components of the giant structure, treating it as a single enormous particle, rather than a construction made of countless blocks.

That was why his telekinesis and Cosmic Manipulation failed. As long as this unifying Aether Array existed, Jake could only affect the entire structure at once, but not its separate elements.

"Whoever conceived such an Aether Array is clearly a genius," he grumbled reluctantly, admitting his inferiority to this Aetherist, but not admitting defeat. "If direct manipulation doesn't work, let's try to cut off a piece directly."

Pointing his finger at the funnel's surface, a bright white laser shot from its tip, instantly striking its target. For a brief second, Jake allowed himself to hope that this thin laser would bore a glowing hole into this steel like a red-hot blade through butter, but reality proved

to be far more disappointing.

Forget a hole or any glowing redness indicating that at least the laser was heating the metal at the impact point, the metal remained completely cold and dull. He might as well have done nothing at all.

Once again looking for the cause of the phenomenon, with his Cosmic Sight Jake bitterly noted that another Aether Array had kicked into action. This one spread thermal energy evenly throughout the Resonator, making his efforts futile.

Unless he planned to melt the entire Magnetic Resonator, he might as well give up this method. Moreover, he had a hunch that such an endeavor would meet numerous other obstacles.

Such a technological marvel left nothing to chance. This unknown metal or alloy was inherently tenacious, resilient to both heat and radiation, or else it wouldn't have been chosen to armor the walls of this monstrous funnel.

But make no mistake. It wasn't the heat- resistance of this metal that proved a problem but rather the Aether Array that entwined the very essence of an element within the structure to the entirety of the Magnetic Resonator. Given another circumstance, Jake was confident he could have prevailed, and likely, could have done far worse...

"In that case, it's down to the manual method," Jake grimaced, his words dripping with irony.

Saros had watched him, curiosity piqued from the onset, and as Jake suddenly hurled a furious punch against the wall of the funnel, a look of baffled bemusement blanketed Saros's face. 'What the fuck is he doing?'

Employing the same amplification techniques he had used against the barrier, Jake began assaulting the metallic wall with intense speed, this time supplementing his efforts with the use of Sharpening and Penetration Aether to hasten the desired outcome.

He didn't use any weapons, most of them rendered obsolete by this newfound metal. This unknown substance outclassed the performance of all the alloys he had previously crafted and worked with, and for that very reason, he was determined to procure a sample. Once devoured, all his gear would make yet another giant leap forward.

Jake's mood darkened, however, when he found that even his Sharpening and Penetration Aether was scattered by these Aether Arrays, thwarting his efforts. Ultimately, he had no choice but to rely solely on his raw, unbridled strength.

The trick that his cells had just learned when confronting the barrier was still fresh in his memory, and inspired by a sudden intuition, he let his bloodline adapt freely.

Life Force gushed out of his cells, along with a torrent of biomass from god-knows-where. It was another one of those breakthroughs from the past year. By combining the Life and Space Elements, he had successfully created a stable dimension within his own cells capable of supporting living matter.

With each punch, his arm and the rest of his body began to double in size. The arm responsible for hammering the wall adopted an increasingly inhuman and disproportionate design, bristling with organic thrusters spitting out crazy amounts of Cosmic Force and a sort of bluish-black plasma.

Each kinetic energy generated was reabsorbed by his cells, dramatically boosting the next strike. By the sixth punch, a thirty-meter giant hovered in the vacuum in front of the funnel wall, the punching fist transformed into a monstrous crystalline drill, rotating and vibrating at a frenzied speed.

Sssssssshhhhhrrrrrrrr!

Thank goodness there was no air in the funnel, for the piercing sound produced would probably have exploded the teeth of anyone unfortunate enough to hear it, including its creator. But even without that privilege, Saros, witnessing this horrific Frankenstein-like spectacle, was gripped by stunned disbelief at such an approach.

The high-frequency vibrations cracking the ground under his feet were definitely proof of that. A few seconds later, unsurprisingly, Jake brandished a handful of black steel shards in front of his face with a victorious grin.

The Oracle Guardian might have shared his joy if the man standing before him, taking pride in his achievement, wasn't a fifty-meter monstrosity. As he wondered what Jake intended to do with this invaluable metal, his eyes nearly popped out of his head when

his "protégé" tossed the entire contents of his hand into his colossal maw, as if he were tossing back a large peanut.

It was too much for one day for the poor Oracle Guardian. Watching Jake tear into the Magnetic Resonator, Saros had hoped, somehow, that he had a precise and sophisticated plan that he hadn't thought of, but it was just to whet his appetite and satisfy his gourmet curiosity.

BOOOOOM!

When the metal hit his stomach, his internal furnace capable of digesting anything got to work, transiently revealing the shape of his stomach as it glowed brilliantly. The metal held out for a few seconds, a feat in itself, before melting, then disintegrating and joining his bloodstream.

The digestion was already complete.

Jake closed his eyes for a moment to feel the difference, and when he opened them again, he raised his hand, and the same metal he had just consumed oozed from his pores in liquid form, morphing into a long sword, then various pieces of armor.

Simultaneously, the smith wove numerous Aether Symbols, brought out numerous other ores and materials to add to his creations, and then finally inscribed all sorts of engravings on his new equipment.

Inspecting the result with his bracelet, Jake clicked his tongue in dissatisfaction, "Barely Bronze Grade. But it will do for now."

It was inferior to his previous equipment, but unlike the new gear, he had spent entire days in a perfectly equipped workshop to forge those artifacts. Producing a batch of Bronze Aether Artefacts in a few minutes of makeshift forging said a lot about the potential of this new material.

Thanks to the bracelet, Jake also now knew what it was. It was an alloy aptly dubbed Voidsteel (Incomplete).

He should have been pleased, but he could sense that the steel produced by his cells was indeed slightly different from the one he had devoured. Tasting it on the tip of his tongue, his first thought was that the taste was... lacking?

'Didn't I digest it all?'

Puzzled, he then scrutinized his stomach with his mental sense and was shocked to find a solid particle no larger than a grain of dust at the bottom of it. When he read the scan description, blood rushed to his head in a surge of irrepressible excitement.

He had hit the jackpot!

Chapter 973: The Fox Is In The Henhouse

[Horizon Hardstone: A rare ore, occasionally spat out from the event horizon of a black hole nestled in a world where the average Aether density surpasses five million units. Terrifyingly dense, this ore withstands the extreme physical stresses existing beyond the threshold. An excellent Aether absorber, it can fortify its internal cohesion by increasing its own Aether density, contradicting the foundational rule that excessive Aether destabilizes matter unless it has been sufficiently tempered beforehand. To manipulate it, one needs only to extract the contained Aether, rendering it malleable and even sliceable without atom destruction. Once the atoms are separated, they can assemble with other elements and materials to forge a broad array of alloys with unique properties highly sought after and appreciated across all Mirror Universes. This material has a high demand but no market, rendering its price per gram rather tricky to determine. Average selling price: 70-1000 Grade 15 White Aether Crystals/g.]

"Holy shit!" Jake's eyes stretched wide at the estimated price per gram of the mysterious material. One Grade 15 White Aether Crystal converted into Aether Points was worth one nonillion.

Jake was skeptical that a world with such Aether density existed. The asteroid of System AO from his Second Ordeal, the oldest fallen system of their Mirror Universe, only had an Aether density in the mere millions.

In other words, someone with a terrifying mastery of Aether was needed to produce such currency. Finding someone capable of utilizing it without squandering this high-grade Aether was even more challenging. If Jake tried to absorb even a filament of Grade 15 Aether, any part of his Spirit Body or flesh making contact would have its existence erased without a trace.

If he diluted it first, he might as well directly purchase lower Grade Aether crystals, more accessible and cheaper. The fact that this material was directly traded with these Grade 15 White Aether Crystals spoke volumes about its worth.

It was a late-game metal that Jake should never have possessed so early. If word got out, it could cause him considerable trouble.

And Oros had managed to acquire it to construct this invaluable Magnetic Resonator, which surely wasn't the only one. One could only wonder whether this was typical among Evolvers of his rank or if the small Oracle Overseer was resourcefully talented.

"And I can't digest it at all," Jake sighed, concealing none of his frustration. Saros, who was on the other side of the barrier, couldn't hear him anyway, nor read his lips since he had his back turned.

A gnawing yearning to study and experiment with this material chewed at him from the inside out, yet regrettably, it was neither the time nor place. With a reluctant act of surrender, he stowed away the Horizon Hardstone grain into his Space Storage. After a final wave to Saros, he shot downward, bullet-like, into the murky depths of the Magnetic Resonator.

The Oracle Guardian, trapped on the other side of the barrier, was left gritting his teeth with an expression even more frustrated than the one he was supposed to keep an eye on. Disillusioned, the alien regarded the Voidsteel ground with a troubled countenance, questioning his bravery to damage the Resonator.

Unlike the Evolvers, who enjoyed a great degree of freedom, he sadly couldn't say the same. Damaging a Magnetic Resonator without a compelling excuse would require him to reimburse the costs from his own pocket. The presence of Digestors and a peculiarly behaving barrier did not constitute an excuse...

As for keeping an eye on Jake? The mission didn't specify the lengths he could go to fulfill his duty. Faced with this dilemma, he was left with no choice but to swiftly connect to the Mirror World to contact his superior. However, by the time he received the authorization he sought, Jake had long disappeared.

Turning back to Jake, when flying at his maximum speed, he was as elusive as a ghost. Alternating between an ethereal data state and a solid one, he moved in and out of the Aetherdream with a single thought, teleporting hundreds of kilometers with each leap.

Within a few accelerations and teleportations, he touched the bottom of the funnel. The distance of several thousand kilometers had taken him no more than a few tenths of a second to cross. Had he not been afraid of teleporting into a Voidsteel wall, he could have transported himself directly there.

In hindsight, he could probably have tried this method before charging into the barrier like a mad bull...

The first thing he did upon landing was to survey his environment. The pitch blackness, the smooth steel ground devoid of grooves extending the adjacent walls, blocked access to the heart of the Magnetic Resonator. If this was some sort of protective door isolating the Magnetic Field Disruptor after each activation, it was a clever design.

He then attempted to deploy his mental sense again, but the Faraday cage interfered with his spiritual energy even more atrociously here.

"Shit... I'm as good as blind in this fucking place." Jake cursed, stomping the ground once or twice before giving up.

Just from the sound, he had anticipated that breaking this ground, the last barrier separating him from the core, wouldn't be easy. Persisting here was a waste of time.

"Let's find another way out." He encouraged himself, lifting off once more to explore his surroundings.

The bottom of the funnel was pitch black, but rather spacious. Without mental sense, orienting himself was troublesome, but Jake had more than just his eyes to make sense of his surroundings.

His skin pores dilated and an invisible gas sprang forth, filling the bottom of the funnel with a simple telekinetic flick. The next instant, Jake took a big gulp of oxygen.

He had just recreated the air.

A year earlier, this feat would have been impossible for him, the materials he could produce were strictly limited to the minerals and metals he had consumed. It was challenging for him to bypass this limitation, but by cheating a little, he had managed to ingest solid hydrogen.

With his new bloodline, playing with the elements had become even easier. To produce air the first time, he had simply consumed some metal oxides like iron oxide, copper oxide, and so on to indirectly produce oxygen.

For nitrogen, lithium nitride, titanium nitride, iron nitride, and many others did the trick. For carbon, it was even simpler, graphite, and diamond being entirely composed of it.

For the rest, once he had all the ingredients, it was extremely easy to manufacture breathable air as long as the energy required for the chemical reactions was sufficient. And energy was the one thing he was not likely to run out of.

Air also meant sound. Opening his mouth, his vocal cords emitted an inaudible sound and waited for the feedback. Using this echolocation method, Jake quickly formed a perfect mental representation of the inside of the funnel.

"Gotcha." Jake chuckled, finding not one but several well-hidden exits. They were, in fact, more of vents than exits intended for maintenance personnel, but they were enough for him.

Sniffing the air, he detected the scent of Lucia and the others at the entrance of one of them and understood that they had chosen to explore this one. Maybe not by choice. Unless one of the other disciples had a similar method to his for mapping the area, they must have groped around for a long time before finally finding an exit.

However... Teleporting in front of this discreet entrance, Jake frowned as he discovered that this opening should not have been so easily breached. The corroded and melted metal lining the vent's entrance indicated that someone had forced their way through well before the arrival of his companions.

"Digestors." Jake spat, recognizing the stigmas of Destruction True Will.

Over the past year, his familiarity with this oppressive form of energy had considerably increased. Not necessarily by choice.

Now that he didn't have Saros around, he could rely on it without fear.

Fearless, he dashed into the corridor extending the vent, just wide enough for an adult man. He even had to lower his head a bit.

Running at a superhuman speed, a blurry shadow zigzagged and charged through the maze of corridors serving as ventilation, turning and retracing his steps numerous times before finally finding another exit. The lid and filter of this ventilation entry and exit were intact, so it wasn't the one his companions had taken.

Anyway, he had lost their scent for a while. Their odor faded after a few kilometers as if they had been teleported elsewhere. Perhaps they had, but Jake had found no sign of such technology.

This ventilation exit, the first he came across, was his second best choice.

Free from Saros' judging gaze, Jake didn't bother and black laser beams shot from his pupils, silently erasing the thick Voidsteel obstruction. Compared to his previous method, this was ineffably more efficient.

When Jake finally set foot inside the structure, a predator's smile slightly raised the corners of his lips.

The fox was in the henhouse.

Chapter 974: Next

The atmosphere was a stark departure from the ventilation shafts he had been navigating up until now.

Those were nothing but wide conduits of desolate black steel, designed and engineered for one purpose only: to evacuate and reabsorb potential energy surpluses when the Magnetic Resonator's Conversion Chamber was temporarily overwhelmed. Whether it was radiation or temperature, they were abnormally high in these passages.

In comparison, the well-lit, properly furnished room now laid bare before him was far more welcoming.

It was the same voidsteel cladding each wall and ceiling, as if countless tunnels and chambers had been carved into a colossal block of metal like an anthill.

However, the ornate decorations and opulent furniture made the place pleasantly habitable. Most Civilians and low-level Evolvers lived in conditions far worse than this.

Jake could affirm with certainty that he had finally arrived at the base where the Magnetic Resonator was operated. If any qualified personnel were working in this godforsaken place, this was where he had a good chance of encountering them.

Regrettably, spotting the dried blood splatters of various hues repainting the walls and the floor, he immediately discarded that thought. The Digestors had been there before him.

The absence of corpses or bones didn't unsettle him, but Xi remarked grimly,

[Digestors aren't typically the sort to leave blood traces behind. High-Rank Digestors may not be interested, but those that have recently spawned can't afford to be picky.]

Once this anomaly was mentioned, Jake could no longer ignore it and began to furrow his brows.

Was this a set-up? But to what end?

Following the blood trails passing through the door and disappearing into the corridor with his gaze, Jake suddenly considered a chilling possibility he dreaded above all.

"To coax us into rescuing potential survivors? Hence, encouraging us to voluntarily explore this base?" He muttered, reactivating his Cosmic Sight, but the walls here also hindered his mental sense.

Perhaps more effectively than on the outside. Until now, Jake had been led to believe that this interference was a property of the Voidsteel alone, but the fact his spiritual energy couldn't penetrate these walls even by a millimeter suggested something far more ominous.

[A Dungeon Digestor.] Xi declared ominously, stealing the words from his mouth. [It's worse than I thought.]

Jake gasped, then grew grim as he pondered this possibility. The more he thought about it, the more plausible it seemed.

His first encounter with a Dungeon Digestor was still fresh in his memory, and given the choice, he would never willingly step foot in one again.

"That explains why neither my mental sense nor my Oracle Scans can penetrate these walls." He acknowledged heavily.

[If it is indeed a Dungeon Digestor... No, forget what I said.] Xi retracted, knowing whatever she would say, he wouldn't abandon his friends.

She wanted to tell him that a Dungeon Digestor in such a place was almost impossible. Before settling somewhere, these creatures were harmless or nearly so Nexuses.

A Digestor like this shouldn't be able to establish itself in the heart of a Magnetic Resonator by itself. Someone probably smuggled it in here secretly.

Jake and Xi were one, so even without speaking, he knew very well what she was thinking. He also knew there was something else she wasn't telling him.

It was okay if this Nexus had been transported from the outside, through the Yellow Cube. But if this Dungeon Digestor was a local, given its possible affinity with space-time, they could fear the worst.

In the heat of the moment, Jake's instincts yelled retreat, but remembering that Lucia, Hade and Ulfar were also inside, he couldn't afford to falter.

The blood spattered across the ground could just as well belong to his comrades as to the facility's staff.

With a wave of his hand, he coalesced the blood into several hovering, vibrant orbs. His iris shimmered faintly as he inspected the bloody spheres, even going so far as to sample each by the tip of his finger.

This was an act unfathomable to the Jake of old, yet he tasted these alien sanguine drops without a second thought, as if it were the most natural course of action. Perhaps he didn't fully grasp the extent of his transformation, but Xi, in contrast, was all too aware of his metamorphosis.

Despite this, she had no intent to caution him. She desired his strength, his survival, regardless of the cost. Unbeknownst to her, she too had changed dramatically, her behavior and concerns having long since deviated from her intended algorithmic existence.

"This isn't their blood." Jake's voice resonated relief, had it been otherwise, he wouldn't know how to react. The fact that no Oracle Path worked here only further solidified the likelihood of a Dungeon Digestor.

'But I'm a kind of Digestor too. So maybe...'

Trusting in his Artifact Incarnation, he closed his eyes, formulating a wish in his mind. This was unlike his wristband, which followed his desires like a loyal canine. Here, he had no interface for assistance. His body itself was an Oracle Device.

Expecting an immediate failure, he was taken aback when as he funneled his willpower, spirit power, and even a portion of his soul power into his wish, he, without realizing it, catalyzed an unexpected phenomenon.

His intelligence, Spirit Body, and Soul Strength were not to be trifled with, Channeled and focused via mysterious and profound methods he did not comprehend, he was graced with unprecedented mental clarity.

When he reopened his eyes, they contained bottomless swirls of black and white lights that guided his path. In an unearthly trance, he confidently strode toward the door, as if he knew where he was heading.

Navigating the labyrinthine corridor, he turned left, then right without hesitation. Despite his trance-like state, his movements were unhurried; it required his full concentration, and his Grade 10 Energy was pushed to the brink.

The further he ventured, the more ordinary the base seemed. The infrastructure was intact, and every detail and appliance was preserved. It bore little resemblance to the first Dungeon Digestor he had explored. Either this one was far more mature and intelligent, or it was a newborn. The latter seemed the most plausible.

Hope had not yet flickered out!

His uninterrupted journey comforted his hypothesis. As he devoured miles of desolate corridors without encountering a single soul, the heavy burden compressing his chest since learning of Cekt's predicament finally lightened.

His breathing returned to normalcy.

"Still, why are there no enemies?" Jake's teeth grated in irritation as he ventured into yet another desolate hallway.

BANG!

Just as Jake started to believe that he might retrieve his comrades without a hitch, the cover of an air vent - similar to the one he'd sneaked in through earlier - burst off its mount, spewing out a stream of repulsive grey creatures.

Jake retreated with a casual leap to avoid getting crushed, and coldly observed the abominations spilling unceasingly into the narrow hallway, to the point where they were crushing each other.

These monstrous creatures, a grotesque fusion of a gorilla and a large feline, reared their ghastly form. Their bodies were a grisly mass of sinew and muscle, grayish and somewhat translucent as if lit from within.

Their eyes, those horrifying, silver orbs, glowed

with an eerie, unholy light, piercing the darkness around it. The creatures' beastly visage bore no skin, their grisly, bloody flesh exposed in raw and macabre detail. The grotesque fibers of their muscles glistened in the faint light, the horrific spectacle enough to freeze one's blood.

Every heaving breath they took caused ripples to move across their exposed flesh, the sight equally fascinating and horrifying. When it bared its teeth, each one sharp as a razor's edge, the sight was made more gruesome by the thick, silver blood that dripped from its mouth, staining the ground below.

Those that had been first to tumble into the hallway seemed to tire of being squashed by their kin as one of them managed to crawl out of the landing zone towards Jake. Morbid cracks and snaps echoed in the hallway as the creature reformed its broken bones and healed its wounds at a shocking pace. In less than a second, the monster was completely restored, sniffing the air and training its malicious gaze on its designated prey.

ROOOARRRR!

Its guttural growl echoed ominously through the silence, the raw, primal sound serving as a chilling reminder of the creature's hostility. Unfortunately, Jake was not afforded the luxury of admiring its vocal prowess for long.

With an awkward, jerky grace, the quadruped creature galloped towards him, covering the distance between them in the blink of an eye. The Digestor pounced at him, leaping into the air as if to tear out his throat.

Its thick, robust limbs, powerful enough to rip a tree from its roots, flashed their chitinous claws before his face. In the creature's eyes, Jake was already dead.

The monster anticipated seeing terror and despair on its victim's face, a delicacy it relished, but instead, a sneer of cold disdain twisted Jake's features.

SPLASH!

With a casual supersonic backhand that was impossible to dodge, the creature's head burst like overripe fruit, splattering the corridor. With chilling indifference, the architect of this carnage raised his gaze, locking onto the next victim while licking his lips.

"Next."

Chapter 975: Sinewshades

"Next!"

To make his entrance even more dazzling, Jake unleashed his mental pressure at full force, the air around him simmering with a palpable murderous intent. Despite the Digestors' infamous fearlessness, he expected at least a twitch or a startle. But instead, the monsters, struggling to their feet, swiveled their heads in his direction in unison.

Their chaotic trampling upon one another ceased. His single, intimidating command captured their attention entirely, making them oblivious to everything else.

As countless pairs of sinister silver orbs fixed upon him with a fierce hunger, Jake's countenance sobered. Yet, it was not out of fear. His thirst for slaughter and hunger was no less potent than theirs. However, unlike these creatures, he had to resist the urge to succumb to it.

"Now, we're talking." Jake snorted, seizing the initiative this time.

Stomping his foot on the ground, he lunged forward, disappearing from his initial position, only to reappear in front of the first monster struggling to its feet. His movement was so swift it generated a thunderous blast in his wake. Jake threw a casual punch forward, the resulting noise evoking the report of a rifle, momentarily overpowering the cacophony of beastly growls.

Before his fist even struck the creature's temple, oblivious to the lethal danger it was in, a shockwave crushed its skull into a bloody pulp. The shockwave didn't stop there; it continued, surging forth at supersonic speed, decimating everything in its path.

BANG!

A cylinder of vacuum, about two meters in diameter, purged the long corridor, atomizing all the piled-up Digestors unfortunate enough to be in its way. This was the result of a mere punch from Jake.

Retracting his fist with an indifferent expression, Jake looked down at the grotesque creatures shrieking and writhing in agony. The surviving Digestors lucky enough to be

closer to the walls had lost anything from a few limbs to their entire thorax. The most unfortunate had lost half their brains, as if cleaved by an ultra-sharp blade.

Not giving them a chance to regenerate, Jake narrowed his eyes, an invisible psychic wave closing in on the survivors like a vice. Their soul's spiritual spark was snuffed out instantly as their Spirit Bodies collapsed, ending their existence definitively.

Without that, those with intact brains did not perish, but the rest collapsed as if life's current had been cut, their grievous injuries continuing to regenerate visibly for quite a while.

Only after Jake waved his hand again, absorbing a surge of blood essence and life force, did their cellular activity cease completely.

On the whole, Jake had been surprised by these monsters, but these Digestors should not pose a lethal threat to his comrades.

[Most are between Rank 7 and 8.5.] Xi reported immediately after the skirmish. [As for their Body Stats, particularly their strength and constitution, they're significantly inferior to their Aether levels, only 3 to 10 times higher than that of an average earthling. Only their vitality is decent. This places them at the lower end of the Digestor power spectrum]

[They are failures. Botched evolutions.] Xi concluded, finishing her analysis.

Jake nodded, showing no surprise. It was within his expectations.

Rank 7 Digestors had an average Aether density of 2050 units, but their stats were often skewed in favor of the physical. The average of Rank 8 Digestors stood at 9600 units, making them formidable adversaries even for Fifth-Ordeal Evolvers.

But it was the derived attributes of their Body Stats and Spirit Body level that truly determined their threat level. As the average Fifth-Ordeal Evolver had physical strength around 500 points, these Digestors were indeed botched evolutions."

"If this is the best this Dungeon Digestor can throw at me, then there's nothing to fear." Jake said coolly.

Yet, he did not intend to underestimate them. Before setting off again, he first scanned one of the relatively intact corpses with his real bracelet this time, the Artifact Incarnation not allowing him to access the Oracle System's database.

Unexpectedly, his attempt to connect to the Oracle System failed immediately, reminding him how deeply Lure's death and the sabotage of the Aether Network would affect his everyday life.

Even so... Wasn't the degradation of the Aether Network a bit too fast? Aside from potentially being inside a Dungeon Digestor, the fact that it likely controlled the Magnetic Resonator probably had something to do with it.

It complicated things. Fortunately, he now had the Mirror World as a backup.

Copying all the information he could, he let Xi connect to the virtual dimension in his stead, waiting for her return. It wasn't as straightforward as with his bracelet, but a few seconds later, Xi returned with news.

Regrettably, from her silence and her stern mood, Jake guessed he wouldn't like her findings.

[I have a good, a bad, and a very bad news.] Xi began gravely, confirming his suspicion. [Which one would you like to hear first?]

Jake's eyelid twitched, but exhaling with resignation he sighed, "Doesn't matter."

Xi rolled her eyes, figuratively speaking, and revealed with utmost seriousness,

[The good news is that the Mirror World recognizes these creatures. These Digestors are known as Sinewshades and although their power varies greatly from one specimen to another, they have only one ability we need to worry about.]

"What a fitting name." Jake sneered. With their rotting, slightly translucent flesh exposed, the name indeed suited them. "And what is this ability? Don't tell me. Judging by their disgusting faces... I'd say poison? Or some kind of infection?"

[Bingo.] Xi confirmed without being upset at being outdone. Because the real shock came right after. [This leads me to the bad news. Sinewshades are considered a kind of zombie. Those we just faced are not naturally spawning Digestors, but living beings irreversibly infected. The bad news is that their claws, teeth, and bodily fluids carry this infectious agent. You must not let them scratch you or come into physical contact with their blood and saliva.]

Before even hearing the "very" bad news, Jake had already guessed what it was going to be, and his expression was as ugly as if he'd just eaten excrement thinking it was his favorite chocolate cake.

And alas, Xi didn't disappoint.

[The very bad news is that if they are not naturally spawning Digestors, we are dealing either with a virus or a Digestor capable of infecting and rallying other living beings to its cause. Unfortunately, from the bits of info I could gather in the Mirror World, there's a high chance we are dealing with the former case. Considering we are likely inside a Dungeon Digestor, it's nothing short of a catastrophe.]

Jake was intelligent and immediately grasped the implications. Dungeon Digestors had the primary ability to generate Digestors based on the DNA and Aether Code of its victims, or its own imagination and knowledge if necessary.

The type of Digestors a Dungeon Digestor produced was not fixed, but they quickly developed a certain style based on their personalities and experiences.

If the worst scenario was confirmed, then this immature Dungeon Digestor had specialized in creating Digestor Viruses. Such an enemy could neither be seen nor dodged. Only their immune system could offer resistance.

For the vast majority of Evolvers, especially lower-level ones, this was an internal process over which they had no control. Once infected, it was the end.

The only lever at their disposal was their Vitality and Constitution attributes. The higher these were, the more likely they were to resist the virus.

The problem was that fighting a virus was different from fighting a flesh-and-bone Digestor. Once defeated, the virus's remnants decayed not in the open air but within their bodies.

In other words, even if they successfully defended themselves from the virus after infection, their Corruption levels would still rise, the corrupted proteins of the virus being devoured by macrophages and then reabsorbed by their organisms.

Realising all this, an expression of horror darkened his face, and he cursed loudly,

"Fuck!"

Seized by a sense of urgency, Jake dashed forward like an artillery shell in the corridor carpeted with silver blood and grayish viscera. If before he just wanted to find his friends, now he had to get them out of here before it was too late.

For unlike him, if they were infected, it would almost certainly be the end.

On that thought, Jake, barely having launched into his sprint, ground to a sudden halt. With trepidation knotting his stomach, he scrutinized his status. A sigh of relief escaped his lips as he found his condition to be unaffected.

There appeared to be no sign of infection. Still, he sought Xi's opinion.

"Do you reckon the virus spreads through the air?"

[Unquestionably.] Came Xi's grave response. [You remain uninfected due to your phenomenal vitality and constitution, but it's merely a matter of time.]

Chapter 976: Nice Bluff

After minutes of breakneck running through the labyrinthine corridors of the Magnetic Resonator, the sinking realization that he was dealing with a Dungeon Digestor grew ever more acute. Regardless of his eidetic memory or his exceptional cognitive abilities, he seemed to be forever retracing his steps.

Even more unsettling, he had lost all sense of where he was in relation to the surface. The gravity here would frequently shift, thwarting any effort to distinguish up from down.

The gravity transitions were so smooth that Jake, without moving from his spot, could find himself upturned in mere seconds, unaware that the corridor had twisted a full 180 degrees around him.

Had he not run into one of the many drones he'd released to prevent him from getting lost, recording the shifting corridor with its onboard camera, he might have remained oblivious for a much longer period.

Evidently, the Dungeon Digestor didn't deem a robot no wider than a pollen grain as a threat. Since Jake wasn't around, it felt no need to act with subtlety to deceive him and could rearrange its corridors and conduits as it pleased.

That was its first mistake.

Jake's sole solace was that he hadn't been ambushed again by those revolting Sinewshades. Although he would've preferred it. It would at least have indicated he was on the right path.

"This fucker is messing with me," Jake seethed, his fist slamming into the nearby wall, leaving a deep indentation.

[There's no point in letting these Digestors rile you up this much,] Xi attempted to calm him. [Sure, this Dungeon Digestor is altering its layout to mislead and slow you down, but you could view it differently. The Digestor is afraid of you.]

Jake mulled over this possibility, admitting that his Oracle AI's argument held some merit. Otherwise, why go to such lengths to delay him, especially when it was closest to the Nexus that the Digestor was most formidable?

Perhaps it had other matters preventing it from dealing with him? A glimmer of hope briefly lit up his face.

Cekt? If his master was trapped here, it all made sense. As promising as a Dungeon Digestor establishing near a black hole might be, its space-time abilities couldn't be too

potent. Holding a full-fledged Rank 3 Aetherist captive must demand all its attention and the focus of the most dangerous Digestors under its control.

Of course, these were just his conjectures. Maybe he was heading straight into a trap himself. Nevertheless, he would rather believe that the Digestor feared him, rather than succumb to despair.

"Then, I'll give it even more reasons to fear me. I can't let it down, right?" Jake laughed ominously and broke into a sprint, his speed suddenly tripling.

From an aerial view, one would be awestruck by Jake's supersonic blur, traversing kilometers in mere heartbeats. His sonic boom was terrifying, each sharp turn made with such intensity, it seemed like he was ricocheting off the walls.

His footprints, sinking several inches into the metallic floor, were visible everywhere, and the corridor walls, victims of his passage, had all become slightly concave due to the shockwave's blast.

This time, Jake wouldn't blindly trust his senses and memory, having already acknowledged that it was a waste of time. The Magnetic Resonator's internal configuration changed so swiftly and smoothly, he always caught on too late.

Streaming from his sleeves, millions of mini drones, similar to the previous ones but a size smaller, buzzed silently and scattered in his wake, spreading through the steel corridors of the base like a swarm of gnats.

As Jake released such a large mass of drones, he tensed slightly, wary of the Dungeon Digestor's response. However, when nothing occurred after a while, a glint of mockery flashed across his eyes.

"Let's see how you'll toy with me now," Jake thought with frosty contempt.

These nanorobots were at the cutting edge of technology, even for someone like Hade, who came from a civilization that was far more technologically advanced than Earth. Their performance could not be explained by science alone; magic had a role in their creation.

Jake had developed these drones in his spare time. The power of knowledge combined with a cognitive prowess millions of times greater than that of a human had allowed him to churn out prototypes at a moment's inspiration.

He didn't intend to rely on long-distance coordination with these drones. These walls obstructed all forms of signals, be they electromagnetic or spiritual, with irrefutable efficiency.

In that case, he decided to use a decidedly old- school method of communication: the wired phone.

Once deployed, the mini-drones extended long cables, no thicker than bacteria but reaching lengths of several centimetres. These microscopic cables latched onto each other, creating a continuous line that branched at every turn.

All Jake had to do was connect his mind to the mother drone in his possession, which was directly linked to his bracelet, to view everything in real-time.

It didn't take long for him to catch the Dungeon Digester red-handed. Taking a step in one direction, he reappeared kilometers in the opposite one, charging right into the corridor that was just finishing its rearrangement.

The line formed by his drones snapped as the labyrinth altered its configuration, but it was a minor concern. Jake quickly deployed additional drones, renewing the cable's continuity and charting the new segment of the maze. If he stumbled into an already explored section, the dormant drone cable would notify him.

One could not ask for better marking under these shitty circumstances.

With Jake's blistering speed, the labyrinth's seemingly foolproof method of deception crumbled under the weight of his deductive reasoning and quick thinking. In less than a minute, he had already traversed a third of the distance to the Magnetic Resonator's heart.

Unfortunately for Jake, the Dungeon Digester wasn't entirely devoid of intellect. The moment Jake began a consistent march in the correct direction, it suspected foul play and promptly initiated a hunt for the cause.

When Jake finally sensed a vast, intricately hidden presence sweeping over him, he instantly knew the breather was over.

"Sixty-two seconds. Swift work," he grumbled, a ripple of annoyance flashing across his face.

However, a triumphant grin danced on his lips when he discovered the cable he was relentlessly unfurling was still intact. This revelation suggested that the Dungeon Digester had no psychic means of attacking physical matter, animate or otherwise. Had it been equipped with such a capability, Jake would have been eradicated by a mere flicker of thought from the enemy.

Yet, the Dungeon Digester was not entirely defenseless. In response to this conundrum, the behemoth did what it did best and commenced an overhaul of its entire internal architecture. It swiveled, reoriented, and sealed old and new corridors so rapidly that the drone cable was carved into millions of fragments within moments.

In less than five seconds, Jake found himself utterly blind and isolated, pondering why the Dungeon hadn't employed this tactic from the get-go to halt him. He would have undoubtedly suffered significantly more.

Nevertheless, as the tremors subsided and silence once again blanketed the labyrinth, Jake refrained from moving immediately, weighing his options. His brow furrowed in thought, but soon relaxed, and a serene smile inched its way onto his face.

"Nice bluff," Jake chuckled to himself.

At that moment, he felt the vast spiritual presence abruptly extinguish. He didn't know how, but he could sense its pain and frustration.

He didn't know what or who was responsible, but whatever was trying to restrain him here had paid a steep price for its action. Deep down, he hoped it was Cekt's doing.

If it was indeed Cekt, it only cemented his resolve to persist with his forceful infiltration.

Indeed, this time around, no corridor morphed as he recommenced his journey. Elated, Jake happily unfurled his drones in search of his allies. Unless it was a new ploy by the Dungeon Digestor to let his guard down, he was nearly certain that it would not resort to this strategy to impede him.

Indeed, a cacophony of encroaching growls and piercing whimpers confirmed his suspicions a few seconds later. Instead of assaulting him directly, they first targeted his drones, ruthlessly shredding them with savage claws and teeth.

The confrontation was now unavoidable.

The freshly deployed network of drones was utterly dismantled, with only a few lucky robots escaping the maw of destruction.

Jake could have kept releasing his drones, but his supply was not bottomless. Now that these monsters were so kindly thwarting his reconnaissance efforts, he had no choice but to greet them in person... to pay them back in kind...

Making use of his still intact cables, Jake reached one of the crime scenes in a heartbeat, and without a moment's hesitation, swooped down on one of these monster clusters like a raptor on the hunt, igniting a slaughter.

Chapter 977: Teaming Up

A moment later, the last skull of a Sinewshade splintered into fragments, spilling its contents over the cold, steel walls. Their original hue had long since become indiscernable.

Silver blood drenching him head to toe, Jake nonchalantly shook his arm to rid himself of the lingering brain matter clinging to his fingers. Unfazed by the carnage he had wrought, he waded calmly through the ankle-deep pool of blood and viscera toward his next destination.

"This should be the last of them," Jake mused, furrowing his brow. "Hopefully."

Xi understood exactly the underlying meaning of his final word.

[Those you just dispatched were stronger than the previous waves,] she confirmed, echoing his uncertain tone. [Barely, but the last three you took down were indeed Rank 9 Digestors.]

Jake's heart sank at Xi's confirmation. His observation had not been mere conjecture. These Sinewshades were indeed growing stronger as he journeyed deeper into the Magnetic Resonator.

Rank 9... Digestors at this level possessed an average Aether density about 34,280 points. Their physical attributes were at least four times stronger than their inferior Rank 8 counterparts.

This was because when the Aether density exceeded 10,000 units, organic matter not tempered by Aether could not endure higher densities without destabilization.

At lower levels, both Digestors and Evolvers could swiftly bolster their Body Stats by increasing their biomass. This would manifest as additional muscle mass, increased size, or greater tissue density.

This is why most Digestors, along with a majority of beasts with limited intelligence, experienced rapid growth in the initial stages of their evolution. Not only did it allow their bodies to accommodate more Aether, but as long as the power-to-weight ratio remained advantageous, there were only benefits to be gained.

In contrast, directly tempering the atoms of one's body with Aether was a more rewarding but patience-demanding method that required enduring significant suffering. If the bloodline was of a too low Grade, it could even be counterproductive as regeneration could not keep up with the damage caused by tempering.

"The strength of these Digestors is still insignificant," Jake stated, as if to reassure himself, before adding in a graver tone, "But that's only true for me. Statistically, these Sinewshades could pose a serious challenge to Sixth-Ordeal Evolvers. I'm not sure if Lucia and the others can handle that..."

Internally, he reckoned they should just barely manage, but this was merely his conjecture. Without witnessing their progress firsthand, he couldn't be certain.

And his real, unspoken concern was his strong suspicion that this wasn't all that the Dungeon Digestor had to offer. His intuition whispered that the Magnetic Resonator held far worse surprises in store.

Jake dismissed his gloomy thoughts from his mind and stated with resolve,

"Let's move on."

Still, subconsciously he glanced at his own Oracle Status to reassure himself. Only after reading the most recent figures did he manage to solidify the required confidence to continue the mission.

[Spirit Body level: 73>100]

[Species: Cosmic D Starfeyrves]

[Physique: Cosmic D Starfeyrves Body lvl1]

[Height: 2.00 meters]

[Weight: 78658kg> --]

[Soul Class: --]

[Strength: 7,219,968>14,083,200]

[Agility: 11,891,776>27,159,360]

[Constitution: 25,152,000>41,971,200]

[Vitality: 18,992,000>37,766,560]

[Intelligence: 115,200,000>118,502,400]

[Perception: 15,360,000>42,211,200]

[Extrasensory Perception: 8,160,000>55,545,600]

[Luck: 33,600>249,600]

[Aether Stats: 128,900>311,286]

[Energy: Grade 10]

These were his true stats, unfettered by comparisons. The numbers shown encapsulated the enhancements of his Soul Class, the level of his Spirit Body, and his Body stats. Jake had endured grueling trials to achieve such a state.

If the Oracle were non-existent, and he still dwelled on Earth as before, he might have easily passed for a deity among men.

After a certain point in evolution, progression became a painstaking endeavor. Even after a year of torturing himself in every possible manner to push his boundaries, doubling his stats had been a struggle. Nearly a third of these advancements could be attributed solely to his Spirit Body level.

However, it wasn't all unfavorable. The gift of intelligence granted by Jeanie's sacrifice had bestowed upon him such a cognitive edge that all related mental stats had greatly flourished.

Be it his Spirit Body, Perception, Extrasensory Perception, or his ability to manipulate Aether all had witnessed remarkable progress compared to his physical attributes. Even so, without exaggeration, it could be said that a single stat had singlehandedly hoisted all others upwards.

Of course, it was pointless to compare himself to ordinary Earthlings whose attributes ranged from 6 to 30. To the present Jake, they were no different from the insects crushed unknowingly underfoot while walking from one point to another.

Those he ought to compare himself to were the Evolvers eligible to face the same Ordeals as him, and naturally, any foes posing a threat.

With his aberrant attributes, wholly uncharacteristic for a post-Fourth Ordeal Evolver, Jake indeed had nothing to fear from the Sinewshades he had confronted thus far.

In fact, he was oblivious, but excluding the Aether stats and strictly considering his true attributes and Spirit Body level, most Oracle Guardians were inferior to him, including Saros.

Factoring in his bloodline, his varied skills, and all his trump cards, Jake had the confidence needed to venture alone into this Digestor infested trap.

'Keep underestimating me, fuckers! Jake thought to himself. 'I'll make you despair!

While Jake gradually descended deeper into the lair of the Dungeon Digestor, pushing it to increase its efforts and ingenuity to halt him, those he strived to rescue were surprisingly safe and sound.

Had he known this, he might not have been so anxious, nor would he have dirtied his hands so much to reach them at any cost.

Unfortunately, his fears were not unfounded, for this status quo was about to change.

"We've been going around in circles for bloody ages without encountering a soul! We are fucking lost!" Syrbarun spat out in frustration, aggressively tossing his helmet to the ground.

Zero points! The Vrusug couldn't see his test score, but no genius was needed to be certain of it.

Ever since they had entered this subterranean base, they hadn't encountered a single Digestor, nor had they found the Conversion Chamber where Aether was supposed to be produced. Without access to this Chamber, no Aether Cores could be made, hence no points!

'Fuck, fuck, fuck! I bet Epsilon is already cranking out Aether Cores like a drugged-up hen, Syrbarun continued to rant loudly as if he were alone, creating a spectacle without regard for their judging gazes.

"Please calm down, Syr," Nigel attempted to soothe him with a constipated grimace not much different from the near-breakdown Minotaur. "We're all in the same boat."

Siri remained silent and unreadable, leaving no one privy to her actual thoughts, while Lyra appeared sorrowful and frustrated. Her expression of disappointment was unlike the volatile Syrbarun's or the reserved Nigel's. Still, her silence and her faintly radiating aura spoke volumes about her emotional state.

Comparatively, the other trio accompanying them was far calmer. Not being Cekt's disciples yet, they had little to lose and viewed this expedition as a refreshing stroll.

However, Lucia and Ulfar were also nearing their tolerance limit. It wasn't the same kind of frustration and anxiety tied to the sensation of lagging unnecessarily behind as experienced by the other disciples, but more a profound boredom.

If Jake hadn't secretly warned them about numerous Digestors entering the funnel before them, they would've doubted, like the other disciples, whether there were any foes here at all.

"This place is strange," Lyra murmured apprehensively. "I have a bad feeling."

Hearing her voice tainted with worries, Syr and Nigel stopped bickering, a chill running down their spines. But a moment later, the Gorgonite flashed his most soothing smile and said,

"You have nothing to fear with us. Have you forgotten that it's Cekt who brought us here? I'm sure he sees everything. If we're lost, it's because we haven't yet passed his

test. We need to outsmart him. If killing monsters was all it took to become good Aetherists, any brute could do it."

"Nigel is right," Siri perfunctorily concurred. "If this is not an illusion, we need to team up and split to cover more ground at once."

"Excellent suggestion!" Syrbarun, who had barely calmed down, got excited again. "Let's do this! Let's form teams."

The other disciples, Lucia, and Ulfar looked at him, speechless.

"Weren't you the one who didn't want us to split up because you didn't want to face a Digestor alone?" Lucia joked, teasing him.

The Minotaur turned beet red, looked away, and mumbled in a barely audible voice, "No need to remind me. I just realized there's nothing to fear..."

"More like we haven't come across any Digestors," Siri mercilessly corrected.

"Shut up!"

Chapter 978: I Hope I'm Wrong

"Shall we split into teams, yes or no?!" Syrbarun barked, curtailing the discussion to avoid further embarrassment.

Ceasing her onslaught, the android cryptically studied him before conceding, "I vote yes."

"Fucking hypocrite!" The Vrusug spat, recognizing that they'd all relished his humiliation while sharing the same opinion. Damn, he loathed feeling like the weakest link...

Ulfar clamped his lips shut, restraining himself from hurling another snide comment. However, Lucia's eye roll-tinged with amusement-didn't go unnoticed.

As their eyes met, the minotaur read, "I know what you're thinking," in her gaze. His courage wilted at this realization, his demeanor reverting to one of meekness and submission.

As they prepared to divide into teams, Hade finally spoke up,

"I'm against the idea of splitting. No offense to Syr, but not all of you are warriors. What happens if these Digestors are simply waiting for us to separate so they can ambush us individually? Who do you think will be their first targets? Ulfar, Lucia, and I-the

formidable warriors-or you, who, despite your Aetherist abilities, can barely confront a Digestor without wetting your pants?"

A solemn silence chilled the corridor after the Fluid Grandmaster's harsh, yet truthful words. Right... what would happen if the Digestors were waiting for just that?

Suddenly, Lyra and Syrbarun were no longer so eager to part ways. After all, it was their lives at stake, though Cekt would probably not let them die in vain.

Despite their optimism, this was still a perilous trial. Fighting Digestors was never completely safe. Accidents happened all too easily.

Yet, the two remaining disciples remained remarkably composed. Just because they didn't relish a fight didn't mean they were cowards.

"I think we should still split up," Nigel finally declared after deep reflection. "Ulfar's luck has guided us so far, but clearly it's not enough anymore. Cekt must have taken measures to deprive us of this cheat code. Even if you refuse, I will go my own way. Fighting isn't my forte, but I managed to complete my first four Ordeals with a decent rating. If necessary, I can still put up a good fight."

Ulfar grumbled grumpily at the reminder of his unreliability from the rock-on-legs, but he didn't dispute it. It was absolutely true.

His luck had run dry since they'd entered the funnel. The random directions they chose had allowed for rapid progress at first, but they'd been going in circles for a while.

The truth was they were utterly lost, and it was partially his fault. The others had enough tact not to point this out, but he could feel their searing, reproachful stares, even though they tried their best to hide it.

Seeing Nigel's resolution, Hade briefly hesitated before deciding to share Jake's warning before their unplanned separation.

Naturally, they were indignant and offended that the trio had kept this critical information to themselves, but they couldn't truly blame them.

After all, they were still strangers only a few hours ago.

Yet, they weren't fools, and Nigel frowned as he realized the implication,

"Do you think someone's feeding our position to these Digestors? A traitor?"

"What?!" Lyra exclaimed, shocked, before hastily distancing herself from the other disciples, watching them as if they were wolves in sheep's clothing.

The reactions from the other disciples were no different. The possibility of a traitor cast their test in an entirely new light. Certainly, Cekt was powerful, but to influence the behavior of a horde of Digestors so easily seemed unlikely.

If their master was secretly providing their coordinates to these creatures, it would equate to betraying the interests of the Oracle and the Mirror Universe. Even as a training exercise, that seemed excessive.

"I didn't say that," Hade replied evenly. "It could be a Digestor with long-range detection abilities, or the result of a tracker, invisible to us but obvious to the Digestors that Cekt might have placed on one of us for testing purposes. Wherever these Digestors are, I am certain they are biding their time, waiting for a false step to attack. At the very least, they have one intelligent Digestor among them. It would be foolish to underestimate such an enemy.

"But, even after these revelations, if you still wish to separate into teams, I won't oppose it. But two teams at most. The first will be led by Lucia and Ulfar, and I'll take charge of the second to protect you and minimize risk. Any objections?"

It was the largest compromise he could make. By accepting this, he risked breaching the promise he had made to Jake. If things went sideways, only Lucia and Ulfar's lives would truly matter.

That's why he grouped them together. Having been prematurely eliminated from the Fourth Ordeal, his rewards were lesser than his two friends', and he hadn't benefited from that bonus year of training either.

For all he knew, Lucia and Ulfar might have become stronger than him. By placing them on the same team, he estimated minimal risk.

The other disciples discerned his intention and did not immediately object to being led by this trio of Evolvers who were not even Cekt's disciples.

Nigel was the first to accept his suggestion. For him, Cekt just wanted to force them to split up.

As long as they remained together, nothing would happen. Epsilon and Drakon must have suspected this or they wouldn't have separated with such enthusiasm.

"I agree," the Gorgonite declared calmly. "So, who will team up with whom?"

Not keeping them in suspense any longer, Hade announced, "Lucia, Ulfar, Syrbarun, and Siri will form the first team. Nigel, Lyra, and I will form the second. Given Nigel's claim of combat readiness, this is the most balanced division of power we can achieve."

Nigel nodded, uncomplaining. It suited him.

Syrbarun, however, grimaced bitterly upon learning of his teammates. Between the apathetic yet cutting Siri, the smirking Lucia, and the flippant and arrogant Ulfar, he couldn't have been dealt a worse hand.

From his small, ego-centric stature, the Vrusug failed to realise he was the one with the worst temperament among the four. Nevertheless, he submitted to the team assignments proposed by Hade without a fuss.

"If everyone's ready, let's stop wasting time and split up," Nigel growled impatiently.

"Not yet," Hade halted him. "First, we need to determine our method of contact. The Oracle System isn't reliable here. These Voidsteel walls block all networks."

"Ahh!"

Another reason came to mind, but he didn't dare voice it for fear of it becoming reality.

The group brainstormed swiftly, looking for an alternative. Soon, Nigel proposed a viable solution by materializing strange, colored gems the size of chicken eggs.

These devices could fly, record, transmit messages, and form a communication chain between them. Somehow, this method was similar to the one Jake used to deceive the Dungeon Digestor.

After familiarizing themselves with these devices, which were like mini clones of Nigel, Hade gave the green light, and the two teams began to split.

But as Lucia and Ulfar escorted their charges down another corridor, Hade's grim voice resonated in their minds, "Never drop your guard. I told the disciples that there's likely no traitor among us, but I didn't mean it. Too many shady things have happened since we arrived here. Coupled with Lure's recent death, I have a bad feeling."

Lucia and Ulfar were unsettled by his gravity, but they nodded subtly to signal they'd remain vigilant. As they left, they didn't notice the icy, probing gaze the Fluid Grandmaster cast on one of the disciples under their protection.

He hoped he hadn't made the wrong choice entrusting those two to them. Shaking off his worries, he reassured himself, 'No, I'm probably overthinking. By constantly being with my son and trying to discern the real him from the monster within, I think I've become paranoid...'

"Hade, we're just waiting on you," Lyra griped with her cute and slightly impatient voice, snapping him out of his thoughts. The Fluid Grandmaster forced a smile and regained his composure, then said, "Let's go."

Chasing after them as if nothing was amiss, his pupils narrowed when Lyra and Nigel turned their backs, locked onto the Gorgonite.

"I sincerely hope I'm wrong..."

Who said there could only be one traitor? Everything that breathed and didn't breathe was on his list of suspects.

Thirty minutes later, Jake breached the threshold of a laboratory awash in the silver lifeblood and remnants of Sinewshades.

An object, distinct in its lustrous metallic sheen from the blood-soaked wreckage, seized his attention. Jake had finally unearthed a trace of the elusive disciples he'd been tirelessly pursuing.

Regrettably, it was the sort of clue he wished he'd never found.

For the steel sphere, eerily human-like and encased in a smooth, glossy exterior akin to white plastic, strewn amidst a pool of blood and a tangle of wires, was no stranger to him...

As he cleared the dried blood from the white steel skull, his own blood curdled as he recognised a hauntingly familiar female face:

Siri.

Chapter 979: Descent Into Hell

Shaken to his core, Jake's eyes stretched wide as saucers, his arms trembling involuntarily as they held the lifeless skull of the android. Any hope he may have held for the safety of his friends, he now swept aside. He could not afford to deceive himself any longer.

'Such a damned foolish test... I should have never agreed to come here, let alone allow them to join me, Jake lamented darkly, seething with anger at his own negligence for surrendering to Lucia's whims.

Before he could berate himself further, Xi succinctly interjected,

[Siri is a fleshless android. That's why the Sinewshades ignored her remains. If I'm not mistaken, Delkron androids, in addition to their processors acting as brains, have a sort of chip resembling a small pearl where they store a backup of themselves. That's the closest thing to an Aether Soul Core for an artificial intelligence. Unless the enemy struck so swiftly that she didn't see it coming, her mind stands a good chance of still

being inside. Most AI's Soul Strength is their weak point due to their lack of emotion, but they've learned to cope.]

After Xi pointed out this detail, Jake regained a semblance of enthusiasm. He jammed two fingers into the unresponsive android's eye sockets as though holding a bowling ball, hastily apologizing,

"Sorry, Siri, but I don't know how else to access your chip."

It was the truth. Delkron androids' armor, similar in defense to Voidsteel or Silver Alloy against spiritual intrusions, blocked his attempts of communication with her pseudo-Soul Core. To interact with it, Jake first had to dismantle her skull to expose it.

Unfortunately for Siri, her anatomy was too advanced and flawless for Jake to crack open her head with a simple screwdriver. Her plasticized skin was smooth everywhere, without any crease or roughness to indicate where to begin causing the least possible damage.

Still with his fingers inserted into her eyes, he bent them slightly and pulled hard, ripping half her metallic skull off with a sharp tug. A tangle of integrated circuits, crystals, strange blackish goo, and other unknown cybernetic structures revealed themselves to him.

Others might have been fascinated or repulsed by the sight, but Jake had seen something similar when inspecting the first clone of Vhoskaud they had defeated. Their innards weren't exactly the same, but it was close enough.

"All right. So where's this chip?" Jake licked his lips impatiently, and rolling up his sleeves, he plunged his hands without further ado into Siri's "brain", using his telekinesis to avoid damaging anything in the process.

He probed for a few seconds, removing several structures no doubt essential, perhaps vital, to the cognitive functioning of a Delkron android, until his victorious shout resounded and pierced the silence.

"Found it!" Jake smiled, holding up before his face a microchip reminiscent of a SIM card, except it was no larger than a millimeter.

It floated amidst a thick layer of blackish gel, unattached and away from the other integrated circuits and crystals. He might have missed it if he hadn't had such a keen perception.

He wondered if Siri would hold a grudge against him for vandalizing her precious body, but he couldn't afford to think about that now. Bombarding the chip with his mental sense, he managed to establish a connection with the strange material after a few seconds.

"Who are you?!" A flat, emotionless female voice cried out in response to his intrusion.

Although Siri was a stranger to the breadth of human emotions, Jake was not fooled by her theatrics. Able to perceive the fluctuations of her aura, he promptly discerned the panic she was trying to conceal. He wasn't in the mood for jesting, thus he promptly reassured her,

"Ease your mind, Siri. It's me. Jake."

"Jake? How?" Siri exclaimed with delight laced with a smidgen of disbelief. It was, by far, the highlight of her day.

Only half an hour ago, she had mentally resigned to the prospect of languishing in this chip for eons. Even for an apathetic AI, it was an undesirable fate.

She was a creature of few words but keen observation. Given the recent events that had befallen her and her team, she had pieced together a fair idea of the trap they'd been ensnared in.

Suddenly recalling something, she inquired nervously, "My... body?"

Her deepest hope was that Jake had discovered some arcane method to reach out to her, but he was swift to disillusion her.

"What do you reckon? Sorry, but I'm no cyberneticist with a PhD in Delkron Androids. To locate your chip, I had to break a few eggs."

Whether Siri could genuinely feel sorrow was a question to Jake, but needing to ascertain her state, he felt compelled to soften the blow.

"Don't fret, it's just a shell. I saw what I needed to see, and I'll fabricate a finer one for you."

"You're lying!" Siri finally snapped, revealing her true colors.

"Hahaha... So, you can express anger after all." Jake chuckled awkwardly. "But I only lied halfway. Indeed, restoring your previous body to its former glory is beyond my capabilities... for now. However, I can conveniently offer you a temporary replacement. Flesh and bone, mind you. I can still make an android, but don't whine if you find the new vessel lacking."

Siri didn't reply immediately, mulling over his twin propositions. A few seconds later, she queried skeptically,

"Can you really transplant my consciousness into an organic body? You know us androids possess a soul different from yours. Just as your soul would struggle to

integrate into a computer network, it's challenging for me to inhabit an organic brain without damaging it. Our consciousnesses operate too differently."

Jake pursed his lips in silence, precisely aware of the conundrum she pointed out.

The brains of living beings were imperfect. Memorization required repetition and conscious effort, and accessing our memories wasn't as straightforward as opening a file. Performing multiple tasks simultaneously, calculating massive numbers, etc... were a cinch even for an aged computer, while the most gifted of humans found it impossible.

Aether, Soul Awakening, and various psychic enhancements were blurring these biological limitations to the point of obsolescence, but the fundamental disparity between organic lifeforms and androids remained.

Were Jake to place Siri's mind into a similar- quality body, the new brain would buckle under the strain. Under normal circumstances...

"Fortunately, you're in luck." Jake smiled cryptically. "Turns out, the bodies I create don't have that issue. The only catch is, they're bound to me. Until we find a new body that truly suits you, I can lend you one of mine."

Whether Jake was lying or not was a question Siri didn't bother with. Accepting his offer was preferable to wasting away, even if it left her temporarily at Jake's mercy.

"I accept."

"Very well. But how do I extract your mind from this chip? Should I break it?" Jake asked thoughtfully, stroking his chin.

"Absolutely not! Do you seek my permanent death?!" Siri blurted out in terror. Regaining her composure, she clarified, "Just implant the chip into the new body's brain, I'll handle the rest."

"Oh, you need to be plugged into a neuron. I see..." Jake understood, realizing that Siri's soul was currently existing as a stream of electricity. No wonder she was adamant about staying in the chip.

But before he could provide her much-desired new body... there was another priority. Dropping his jovial act, Jake turned grim and urgently inquired,

"Before I place you into your new body, tell me what happened. How are Lucia, Hade, and Ulfar?"

Siri instantly understood his reason for delaying her aid. His guarded tone revealed his suspicion towards her.

"Eh? Like Hade, you also suspect a traitor among us?" Siri marvelled, "No wonder you two are from the same faction. Unfortunately, the reason I ended up in this state is not so sinister. We were ambushed..."

Jake attentively listened to her recount how they decided to split into two teams to cover more ground despite Hade's warnings. He interrogated her multiple times, insisting on knowing who said what, when, and how. Thankfully, Siri was cooperative, sharing relevant video recordings.

She mentioned their shared suspicion that Cekt was trying to complicate their test. While plausible, their subsequent encounter proved they were unquestionably mistaken.

Then came the part where Siri's team separated from Hade's. Her companions were Syrbarun, Lucia, and Ulfar, and even Jake conceded that this group was likely the stronger of the two.

He couldn't entirely fault his friend for making this decision. With Ulfar and Lucia together, they should be able to handle one or two Rank 9 Sinewshades without much trouble.

The danger lurked elsewhere...

As he feared, their situation took a dire turn when the long-awaited Digestors finally sprung their ambush.

From that point on, it was a swift descent into hell.

Chapter 980: Look At Yourselfs

Earlier, on Lucia and Ulfar's team.

"Humph, can't say we're finding our way any easier since we've split up," Syrbarun declared, his tone thick with pessimism.

"Oh, do shut up, Syr," Siri rebuked curtly. "And instead of grumbling, how about helping us find a solution?"

"... The Vrusug responded, a picture of contrition, like a child caught in the midst of a naughty act.

"What worries me is the fact that no Digestors have attacked us yet," Lucia commented, idly swirling her sword as if to alleviate her boredom.

Speak of the devil, Ulfar halted abruptly, catching his comrades off-guard. Syrbarun, inattentive, bumped his head against Ulfar's back.

"Ouch... What's up, bro?" The minotaur grimaced, examining the horn that had taken the impact.

With a flabbergasted look, Ulfar turned to him before casting a displeased glance at the offending horn. 'Should be me asking that. Without my armor, I'd have been skewered...'

"What's going on, Ulfar?" Lucia asked, snapping the King of Beskyr out of his bemusement.

"I have a bad feeling about this direction. Only ill fortune awaits us there."

Siri and Syrbarun were skeptical of his confident assertion, but Lucia knew him well enough to heed Ulfar's intuition.

"Then, which path should we take?" She inquired earnestly.

Ulfar forced a wry smile and apologized, "That's the problem... No direction seems promising. It's as if a vice of misfortune has magically closed around us. Right here seems the safest."

Lucia and the others quickly scanned their surroundings and realized they were at a junction connecting eight different corridors.

By all logic, this was the most indefensible position during an attack, obliging them to guard eight directions instead of two. So why did Ulfar's instincts dictate that they stay in this vulnerable location?

Lucia pondered for a moment, her calm demeanor shifting to something more solemn as she comprehended the peculiarities of their location.

From one perspective, this place was a nightmare to defend, but on the flip side, each additional corridor offered another route of escape. Considering this, Lucia swiftly assessed Ulfar's position in relation to the entrances and deduced their likely escape route.

Simultaneously, she concluded that their chance to flee wouldn't be so easily grasped, considering Ulfar hadn't immediately retreated.

If they were attacked, they'd be swarmed from all directions.

"Brace yourselves for battle!" Lucia cried out, materializing a golden shield on her free arm.

Ulfar had already summoned his Fate Bow and nocked a handful of arrows. But being in a confined space, he couldn't use his explosive projectiles this time.

Syrbarun began to panic as the atmosphere abruptly changed. The ceiling tiles of the intersecting corridors began to drum loudly, as if trampled by heavy footsteps.

Seeing the steel ceiling deform with each step of whatever moved within, the minotaur started sweating profusely. Siri slapped his thick, bull-headed skull and scolded, "Stop freaking out and suit up. You're supposed to be a mech suit expert. Prove it!"

Shaken from his paralyzed state, Syrbarun hastily thanked the android and summoned his Iron Man-like armor with a thought.

"Pretty cool," Ulfar muttered enviously. He made a mental note for his next shopping spree on the Oracle Store.

BANG!

Their enemies didn't grant them further time for armor admiration. Choosing that moment to collapse the ceiling above them, a torrent of grotesque, skinless creatures descended upon them.

"Damn! They're clever!" Lucia cursed, reflexively hoisting her shield overhead as if an umbrella against the downpour of beasts, her sword moving even faster to cleave two monsters in twain.

A shower of silvery blood splattered across her shield, coursing along the edges without marring the rest of her armor. Despite this, a few stray droplets eventually found their mark, speckling her as she spun and landed a kick squarely in the face of a particularly audacious Digestor.

"And they're quick!" Ulfar bellowed in frustration, thwarting two Sinewshades with the shaft of his bow, their drool-covered fangs snapping shut against it.

The venomous slobber soaking his bowstring released a corrosive smoke on contact with his gauntlet, compelling the King of Beskyr to retract his bow and summon his trusty sword, Death Embrace, instead.

In a heartbeat, Lucia and Ulfar's blades danced hundreds of times, shredding any Digestor daring enough to take them as prey. Surmounting their initial shock, Syrbarun and Siri proved equally potent, opening fire relentlessly on the monsters swarming from every corridor.

Siri even conjured a monstrous plasma Gatling gun, a cumbersome three-meter-long firearm that deafened the surroundings with its discharge-six thousand white plasma

rounds per second. She quickly manifested a second, managing to single-handedly defend the entrance to two corridors.

Determined not to be outdone, with his test score at stake, Syrbarun gritted his teeth and activated his mech suit's auto-targeting laser cannons. His efficacy paled in comparison to Siri's, but each blast was a deadly headshot.

The drawback, however, was that his blaster shots were barely enough to pierce the creatures' skulls. At best, he managed to scorch their forehead flesh and occasionally blind them.

Realizing that targeting their eyes was far more effective, he recalibrated his aim and redoubled his efforts.

The battle felt interminable, but eventually the stream of foes dwindled, allowing them a moment's respite. Wiping sweat and blood from her brow, Lucia tossed her shield aside and exhaled a relieved sigh.

"Phew! That was intense. I take back what I said. I'd prefer we continue our peaceful hike rather than cross swords with these hideous things again."

"I concur..." Siri agreed impassively, noting the amount of ammunition wasted in the brief skirmish. She dreaded to think how her finances would suffer if they endured two or three more such encounters.

"Is everyone alright?" Ulfar asked sternly, inspecting everyone's condition, Lucia included. It was unusual for him to be so serious.

"What's going on?" Lucia questioned.

Instead of responding immediately, he took a step back, particularly from Lucia, and with a solemn look said, "Look at yourselves, and then at me. Notice anything?"

When he pointed it out, their expressions shifted, especially Lucia's. She was the only one not wearing a helmet or gloves.

"Holy shit! Why are we all covered in blood and guts except for you? Were you hiding somewhere while we fought or what?" Syrbarun snarled playfully.

Of course, he was joking. Everyone had seen that the fortunate warrior had felled at least a third of the enemies. Though less than Lucia, who had eliminated more than half single-handedly.

Knowing Ulfar well, the Myrmidian princess caught on,

"Is that why you were taking so long to kill them? Dodging so as not to get splashed by their fluids? Your instincts whispering warnings again?"

"I'm afraid so." The King of Beskyr conceded, a regretful expression on his face. "I didn't realize it in the heat of the moment, but I'm certain there's something wrong with these fluids. Even the air around us feels off. It was only after equipping my helmet and activating its internal breathing system that my discomfort lessened a bit.

"Check your Oracle Status." Siri urged coldly.

Seeing that her companions kept their distance as if she were contagious, Lucia huffed in annoyance but complied. With apprehension, she checked her status, sighing in relief,

"Told you. Everything is fine. Business as usual."

"Are you sure?" Ulfar frowned. "May I take a look?"

Lucia felt slighted that her longtime friend doubted her word, but she understood his reasons. "Be my guest..." She grumbled, sending him her latest status.

After scrutinizing it, the warrior admitted, a look of evident confusion on his face, "Everything seems... okay."

"Should we then continue our exploration?" Siri suggested calmly.

Syrbarun wasn't too keen, but neither did he want to abandon the test. They then turned to Ulfar, their risk assessor, to gauge his opinion.

Ulfar longed to tell them that danger had been averted, that they could press on with their exploration without concern, but his countenance betrayed only grim resolve.

"I fear you're all a touch too sanguine," he intoned ominously. "It's not over yet."

As if to underscore his words, the twisted steel plates of the eight corridors resumed their unsettling groaning. Almost immediately after, the ground beneath their feet, even the walls themselves, started to shudder in an eerie cadence, heralding the arrival of a horde of beasts far grander than the last.

Just when it seemed the circumstances could hardly grow worse, terrifying Aetheric auras burst forth from the depths of each corridor, a chilling reminder of their precarious position. The Digestors were but toying with them, much like a cat amused by a cornered mouse.

Their battle to the death against the Sinewshades was just beginning.

Chapter 981: Lucia Is Sick

A few minutes later.

"Damn it! How many more of these bloody vermin do we need to slaughter before they leave us be?" Lucia raged, her boot violently squishing the brain of yet another Sinewshade.

These Sinewshades bore little resemblance to their predecessors. They had grown larger, stretching up to three meters long, and even when hunched on all fours, they appeared almost as massive as bears with their bulging, oozing musculature.

Severing their heads was no longer a solution. Even dismembered, they didn't perish but posed the risk of an errant bite if one's foot landed in the wrong place.

Their regeneration was formidable; any injury not dealing with their brains was rendered null and void within a second.

They were also much tougher. The laser turrets mounted on Syrbarun's shoulders couldn't even burn the flesh on their foreheads, and blinding them by aiming at their eyes became increasingly challenging.

These upgraded Digestors were now managing to blink or duck at just the right time. Siri's plasma guns hardly fared better.

Above all else... they were strong and fast!

"Oh no, fuck! I'm going to die!" Syrbarun panicked as a pack of Sinewshades dodged his automated fire by skittering, leaping, and galloping along the walls and ceiling.

Less than four meters away, the minotaur watched in horror as the six monsters lunged at him like starving lions on a poor wildebeest. Believing his end was near, he closed his eyes, praying his mechanical suit would hold up.

Slash, slash!

A warm flow of blood splattered his armor, and when he opened his eyes, he saw only darkness. It took a brief moment of bafflement for him to realize that his visor was smeared with enemy blood. Swiftly wiping it away with the back of his gauntlet, he saw the remains of his assailants strewn across the floor, their bodies cleaved with uncanny symmetry.

Lucia continued to slay the other monsters that rushed in, wielding her sword with virtuoso skill and displaying a supernatural strength and speed that seemed to only escalate. A battle at this level had long surpassed what a non combatant Evolver like Syrbarun could comprehend.

"Are you planning to die here daydreaming, or are you going to snap out of it?!" Lucia barked, nailing a Sinewshade's chin into the metal floor with a savage downward elbow strike.

With another swift punch, she smashed another of these degenerate creatures into the wall to her left, its head bursting like a water balloon thrown from the twentieth floor. She then snatched the leg of a third, pivoting on her heel with perfect technique, and launched it with all her might as though it were a bowling ball, achieving a magnificent strike.

Just as she was preparing to come to Siri's aid, who was beginning to be overwhelmed, a slight dizziness caused her to momentarily falter. It was so fleeting that no one but Ulfar noticed it. Seeing this, his feeling of unease in her presence slightly intensified, and he knew that what he feared was on the brink of happening.

"Lucia, don't overexert yourself. Let me deal with these small fry," he declared sternly, his attitude contrasting with his usual nonchalance.

Instead of complying, Lucia's dark golden eyes emitted a bright glow, and an aura of dark gold, matching her eyes, began to radiate from her body and her sword, forming a thin layer of sacred light.

"I can still fight!"

Ulfar's facial muscles twitched with a fed-up expression, seeing that his good intentions had been completely ignored. "These stubborn Myrmidians... Always feeling belittled the moment someone offers a helping hand.'

However, this time he could not yield to the young woman's whims. She didn't realize it, but she was certainly not in her usual state.

Siri and Syrbarun, who were too low-level to notice, couldn't see that she was slower than usual, while their enemies were growing stronger. With the synergy of her Neithnikidian Bloodline and her Divine Princess of Victory Soul Class boosting her combat prowess proportionally to her thirst for victory and the number of victories accumulated, she should have continued to grow fiercer as she decimated her enemies, chaining kill after kill.

Instead, she was barely faster than him. Not that he was slow in the first place. Ulfar had his own methods of enhancing his physical performances, like potions from his Witcher Bloodline, Wind Spells, and other reinforcement enchantments.

But he knew his limitations better than anyone. His forte had never been speed. In a one-on-one battle, deprived of any tricks, and without his luck, he had never been a match for Lucia.

"Believe in me, Ulfar," Lucia growled telepathically, sensing his worried gaze. "I won't fall that easily."

Where he was mistaken was that she was fully aware of her symptoms' progression. She was underperforming, and although she tried to compensate with her various abilities, this overwhelming sense of weakness was only gaining ground.

'At this rate...' A shiver of foreboding ran down her spine, imagining that if her symptoms continued to worsen, it would only be a few more minutes before she passed out.

Gritting her teeth in frustration as she parried the attacks of three Rank 9 Sinewshades, even more massive than their predecessors, the long flexible tail of one of them sneakily whipped her back, wrapping around her waist.

She snorted at the futile tactic, grabbing the monster's tail without looking with her free hand, the arm bearing her shield. Continuing to grasp the creature's appendage with an iron grip, she knocked out the three Digestors in front of her with supersonic pommel strikes, sending them with shattered skulls in the opposite direction.

The Sinewshade's tail remained in Lucia's grip, severed from the rest of its body. With an audacious grin, she used it to thrash another lurking cluster of the beasts who'd had the arrogance to hang around the fringes, thinking to profit from the bold efforts of their kin.

After lashing several dozens of the Sinewshades into submission, Lucia let out a victory roar akin to that of a feral beast. Ulfar, who had been growing increasingly anxious, relaxed at the sight of her enduring vitality.

"Use this respite to heal," the King of Beskyr commanded, grabbing her by the nape without awaiting her consent and placing her behind him, back against the wall with Syrbarun and Siri.

Ulfar was now defending the eight corridors and his three companions alone, his lone figure curiously steadfast against the steadily increasing horde of Digestors pouring into the intersection, despite the dozens he was felling each second.

These were Rank 9 Sinewshades, not the weak Rank 8s of the first wave. It was in these moments that one could truly witness the miracle of his supernatural luck in action.

Before reaching him to claw or bite, these monsters would often meet their demise in peculiar ways - tripping, stumbling, accidentally biting their kin, and so on. It was eerie yet fascinating to witness.

Those who directly targeted him and managed to get within striking distance sometimes froze inexplicably, as if suffering a heart attack or stroke.

At this stage, his luck had surpassed what science could reasonably explain, no probability could account for these events that played out in his favor.

But even when one of these monsters miraculously landed an attack without missing, it had to contend with his sword, Death Embrace.

There was a reason why Ulfar had been so reluctant to use it in his friendly duel against Jake back then. Even a minor graze from its blade held a slim chance of causing instant death.

In the hands of another Evolver, such a weapon would have been too unreliable, but in Ulfar's grasp, his sword was as lethal as the scythe of the Reaper.

Knowing that Ulfar had the situation under control, Lucia ceased her stubborn struggle and focused on healing as he had asked. Channeling her Vitality Aether, she worked to circulate it as efficiently as possible through her body to boost her cellular metabolism.

She even converted a portion of her Aether Storage into Vitality Aether, using it to boost her Aether stat to levels far beyond usual. As long as her mental fortitude held strong, she could maintain this heightened state of vitality for a while.

No one could blame her. Whether it was Ulfar, Gerulf, Hade, or even Jake not too long ago, lacking proper magic, this was the closest they had to a Healing Spell at their disposal.

Unfortunately, this time it backfired. No sooner had the additional Vitality Aether permeated her cells than she was seized by a fit of vertigo and began to cough up blood. A startling amount of blood.

Siri and Syrbarun, who were standing right beside her, recoiled at the sight, swiftly backing away as her skin started to peel off her flesh, falling away in long, gruesome strips.

Siri's android eyes flashed as she rapidly computed the unfolding situation. She barely had time to open her mouth to warn Ulfar when a red, blurring blade sped past her eyes at a frantic pace, severing all connection with the rest of her body.

Her head rolled to the ground, and while her processor was still active, her rapidly dimming eyes watched a new Sinewshade, clad in armor with long golden hair, viciously raking Ulfar's back with a savage claw.

Chapter 982: He'll Still Have Me

"... And that, essentially, is what happened," Siri concluded on a somber note.

A palpable silence followed the end of her tale. Jake stood frozen before her, fists clenched tight, his expression as icy and terrifying as a winter tempest. His face was so pale with fury that the android could only be grateful for its lack of eyes.

Eventually, Jake snapped out of his stupor, exhaling deeply as he unfurled his fists. With an effort that seemed colossal, he forced himself to ask in a voice as neutral and even as he could manage, "Is that it? You don't know what happened next?"

Even though the android was incapable of empathy in the strictest sense, she had learned to distinguish the subtle nuances of emotions. Jake, who had just posed a question, was undoubtedly affected by the news.

However, where others might have responded with despair or desolation, all she could perceive in his barely restrained voice was a simmering rage teeming with spite, all directed at the culprits.

Painfully aware that her potential restoration depended on her savior keeping his sanity, Siri carefully reviewed her last fragments of memory. Then, with a hint of hesitation, she began,

"I hid my consciousness in my motherboard to erase my presence completely, hoping to keep those Sinewshades from showing too much interest in my remains. After Ulfar was slashed by Lucia, my memories are hazy at best, except that Lucia did not continue her assault on him. I am truly sorry."

"My senses were limited, but I do remember another oppressive aura emerging from one of the corridors. I am fairly certain it was a Digestor, but the malevolence and cruelty radiating from it momentarily distracted Lucia from Ulfar. Maybe the presence of a greater threat allowed her to regain her senses, or perhaps her combat instincts drove her to fight it. I cannot be certain. But one thing I am sure of is that Ulfar did not attempt to save her. Instead, he made a decisive escape, dragging Syrbarun with him. The passage they chose was opposite from Lucia and the new enemy presence, as well as the entrance he had been defending since the onset of the battle. Quite the lucky streak, wouldn't you say?"

Jake seemed to calm down after hearing these additional details. Ulfar had managed to escape, indicating that his luck hadn't yet abandoned him.

However, according to Siri's account, the King of Beskyr's luck was dwindling as they delved deeper into the Magnetic Resonator. Who knew how long it would keep him alive before it failed him fatally.

Out of precaution, he checked his own Luck Attribute but found nothing unusual in his Aether, Spirit Body, or Physical Body.

'It appears the adaptive abilities of my bloodline haven't been overwhelmed yet, he reasoned inwardly. 'Or perhaps the Dungeon Digester itself emits a counter-power that neutralizes the expected effects of luck to a certain extent.

[Speaking of your bloodline...] Xi gloomily brought up, deciding to broach the dreaded subject.

'What about it?'

[Don't you find anything odd about what happened to Lucia? Thanks to the Faction Skill, she also has your Cosmic D Starfeyrves Body, albeit a weakened version. Her body should also be able to adapt to this virus. Unless we've greatly underestimated the virulence of this pathogen, she shouldn't have fallen so quickly.]

Jake stiffened as Xi pointed out this unsettling detail. His brows furrowed in thought, seeking a plausible explanation, and soon a reasonable hypothesis formed. The more he contemplated it, the more he felt confident in his deduction.

""The Faction Skill may grant them the benefits of the Cosmic Starfeyrves Body, but that does not imply they truly possess it," Jake shared his deductions with Xi, who agreed. "Their DNA likely remains largely unaltered. The changes aren't as profound as the original ability would suggest."

[Hmm... if that's true, it means that once the virus has found its way into their DNA, there's no going back. The Cosmic Starfeyrves Body, granted by the Skill Faction, acknowledges the virus's coding DNA as part of them.] Xi elaborated on her initial reasoning, her voice bearing a serious tone. [It's the reverse of your case. Unlike Lucia, your DNA will fight tooth and nail to incorporate that of the Virus, even after your immune system fails to fend it off. Lucia's mistake was in relying on her vitality to heal. In her belief that she was boosting her immune system, she was actually hastening the virus's replication speed, since her DNA had already been compromised.]

"The real question," Jake interjected, "is whether Lucia can still be saved. It would break my heart to put her down."

[...]

Xi didn't have the heart to lie for the sake of comforting him. Sensing his dark mood transforming into a maelstrom of wrath and madness, tinged with a chilling killing intent, she knew that the truth would be more harmful than advantageous at this moment.

So, with a soothing, tender voice, she responded,

[I can't guarantee if you can save her now. But the Mirror Universe is vast, and what lies beyond even vaster. As long as it's conceptually imaginable, then it's definitely achievable.]

Upon hearing this sugar-coated untruth, Jake chuckled sadly.

"I know you are lying... but thank you. For everything."

He was no longer a naive greenhorn. Even if he managed to restore Lucia to her original state, her Corruption level would never be within the safety threshold. She would become one of the Corrupted.

Despite the risk, he still intended to save her. Or, at least, avenge her if need be.

As his mind finally found the light amidst the darkness, his face hardened, a sinister glow burning in his pupils. His gaze fell coldly, unknowingly, upon the Dungeon Digestor's Nexus hundreds of kilometers below.

"I only wished to protect my friends, but now, I come to take your life," Jake stated, his voice seemingly calm on the surface, but beneath, something far more ominous threatened to rise.

A devouring, entropic hunger.

"I WILL DEVOUR YOU ALL! VIRUSES, DIGESTORS, DUNGEONS! AS LONG AS YOU ENTER MY STOMACH, YOU WILL BE MY PREY!"

As his fiery roar of hatred erupted from his mouth, it came from the depths of his heart. A dark spiritual shockwave, akin to the black hole they orbited, spread at superluminal speed around him, penetrating the supposedly impenetrable Voidsteel walls of the Dungeon Digestor.

In that instant, Jake manifested for the first time the immense power of his spirit, rivaling that of an Oracle Guardian, fusing killing intent and True Will of Destruction. Only such murderous rage, such an impulse to obliterate his enemies, could achieve this.

This was the kind of emotion a typical Digestor constantly felt, its mind perpetually twisted by its degenerate instincts over which they had no control. No wonder the True Will of Destruction was so spontaneous for them.

But for an Evolver like Jake, it usually meant something else. He had become one of the Corrupted, his mind irreversibly corroded by Corruption.

It wasn't that an Evolver could not awaken their True Will of Destruction through training, but never would their soul entirely synchronize to conjure such a malevolent intent. It was because channeling their entire Soul Strength, and thereby all of their Soul Power, would mean that destruction had become the very definition of their existence. Their *raison d'être*. In other words, a True Will of Self.

Wherever this spiritual ripple traveled, the walls began to twist and groan as if in agony. The presence that had imbued them all this time retreated instantaneously, beating a hasty retreat. This subtle change surprised Xi far more than it did Jake.

"AAAAHHHH, stop, I beg of you! You are going to kill me!"

Siri's terrified cry of pain did not, unfortunately, take long to echo next, emanating from her electronic chip, still clutched in Jake's fingers. The destructive wave had also struck it, and the chip, thought to be impervious to psychic intrusions, had begun to disintegrate, directly corroding the android's soul within.

[Jake, stop.] Xi uttered calmly, aware more than anyone that he hadn't lost his mind yet.

Jake persisted for one more endless second before reluctantly retracting his aura. With a snort, he finally shifted his gaze from where he thought the Nexus hid and finally noticed the state of Siri's chip.

"Oops, sorry," he instantly apologized, scratching his head in embarrassment as if nothing had happened, but only Xi knew how much he was holding back.

Inside the Spirit Dimension, a dull monochromatic psychic space where Jake housed his various fairy spirits, Xi slumped onto a couch conjured from Spirit Energy with Jeanie in her lap and sighed mournfully.

"The old Jake no longer exists. I do not know what to think. On one hand, I am happy, because it means he won't let himself be chained by his limiting moral thoughts. But on the other, I am also very sad. There was a charm to the introverted, inferiority-complex-ridden Jake who distrusted everyone. But that's the way it is. Evolvers have to grow up sooner or later. Right, Jeanie?"

"Mmmm," The little fairy hummed cheerfully. "Even if he changes, he'll still have us."

Xi tightened her grip around the waist of the little fairy on her lap as if to reassure herself, then answered with a beaming smile, "You're absolutely right. Even if the Oracle dies and the entire Mirror Universe abandons him, he'll still have me."

Chapter 983: I'll Make You Regret

"Did you notice anything strange or suspicious?" Jake asked Siri for the last time before tending to the replacement body he had promised her.

The android, still reeling from the unwarranted attack against her soul, took a moment to register that he was speaking to her. But when she did, she answered in a measured tone, "Like what?"

"Like how Lucia managed to wound Ulfar." Jake's eyes narrowed ominously as he said this. "Even when ambushed, his perception and reaction time are almost as good as hers, and luck isn't something that a direct physical attack can easily thwart."

The android mused over the question for a short while before responding, "Lucia was... too fast for me. I thought my processor was quick enough to track her movements, but when she beheaded me, then attacked Ulfar in an instant, it was as if she... teleported?"

Jake grimaced at this. Lucia likely had the Oracle Teleport Skill, and perhaps even a rudimentary Blink Spell or Dashing Skill that she had acquired at a bargain to compensate for her lack of mobility.

'Xi, show me the recording provided by Siri. In full, this time.'

[Right away.]

Siri may not have had sufficient sight and reaction time to clearly see Lucia's movements, but for him, it was as simple as saying hello. Replaying the final scene where Lucia had degenerated into a Sinewshade, he scrutinized every change with intense concentration, looking for the slightest discrepancy.

It only took a fraction of a millisecond of careful observation for him to find what was amiss. Even Siri had fallen victim to a peculiar phenomenon. Not that it would have made any difference.

In the video footage recorded from Siri's perspective, slowed thousands of times when viewed through Jake's eyes, he saw Lucia's scarlet gladius sword slowly approach the android's throat at a snail's pace.

Tracking the speed of her blade, Jake, still in this heightened state of awareness, expected to wait a good "minute" before the sharp weapon reached its target.

Except halfway to its destination, Lucia's position, her arm, and her sword abruptly shifted, her blade reappearing past Siri's neck, the robot's eyes not even having registered that it had just been beheaded.

This wasn't teleportation, Jake realized immediately with a shocked expression. It was as if Lucia had directly traveled into the future. Even if he had been in Siri's place, he doubted he could have done better given his current understanding of this evil sorcery.

Having finally identified what he was looking for, Jake quickly found a similar occurrence just before Ulfar's back was in turn slashed. The King of Beskyr hadn't yet been forsaken by his luck, and Sinewshade Lucia seemed well on her way to missing her target if this inexplicable miracle hadn't skewed the odds.

Nevertheless, thanks to his outrageous luck, Ulfar had gotten off with a moderately deep scratch along his back, his head remaining on his shoulders for now. Including the thickness of his armor, he was barely grazed.

However, the shock on his face mirrored Jake's. Clearly, he too was unable to comprehend what had transpired. Yet, his experience shone through in this precarious moment, as understanding that he could not respond to such an untraceable assault, he had decisively chosen to flee, carrying a terrified and confused Syrbarun with him.

Now that Jake had identified two of these phenomena that had sabotaged his companions' survival chances, he didn't stop there. Having a hunch he could have done without, he combed through the rest of their fight against the Sinewshades, looking for disturbances of the same ilk.

Against all odds, and much to his dismay, he discovered an abundance of them. Indeed, nearly all instances where Lucia found herself in a precarious situation could be attributed to these temporal anomalies.

These phenomena had been subtle at the outset, almost undetectable amidst the tumult of battle, yet they grew progressively more deliberate and apparent as the conflict wore on. By the end, neither Lucia nor Ulfar could defend themselves whenever one of these disturbances interfered.

"But why?" Jake frowned. "What's the source of these disruptions? The Dungeon Digestor itself?"

He wasn't entirely convinced. It was because he was almost certain that the creature currently had little energy or attention to spare for them. That was why it sent its minions to slow them down.

Another piece of evidence supporting his theory was that this overpowered ability had not been used against him, even when it could have decisively tipped the scales on several occasions. This implied that someone or something was the trigger.

Siri's recording didn't show it, but she had mentioned a final aura of astounding power and malice appearing towards the end of their battle. For now, this was the primary suspect.

Much to his regret, however, it was not the only one...

[Take a look at Syrbarun's hands.] Xi suddenly instructed, zooming in on the fear-stricken minotaur at the moment Siri was beheaded.

Jake complied, disregarding the tear-streaked, pallid face of the Vrusug to focus on the hands in question. Almost immediately afterward, his eyes bulged in surprise.

"I can't see them!" He blurted out, suddenly covered in goosebumps.

[And that's not all. Take a look at these other images.] Xi swiftly showed him more clips.

These frames captured Syrbarun at different moments of the battle. Specifically, the moments when one of these temporal anomalies had tampered with the course of their fights.

Siri rarely had the chance to pay attention to the minotaur during the fight, being too busy defending her own corridor. Nonetheless, he appeared within the periphery of her vision on many occasions.

And that's where the real issue lay. Every time the anomaly struck, Syrbarun's hands were out of sight. By triangulating the positions of his other companions at these moments, Jake quickly reached the unsettling conclusion that none of them could see the Vrusug's hands during these critical moments. A coincidence? Jake snorted. Only a naive or foolish individual would be duped by such a string of inconsistencies.

He had suspected the presence of a traitor among Cekt's disciples from the start. Now, armed with compelling evidence, he needed no further confirmation.

The remaining question was to determine the traitor's motive. Cekt had tested them for Corruption, and he was certain that Syrbarun was neither a Digestor Trojan nor Corrupted.

He shared his suspicions with Siri, then asked, "How long have you known Syr? What do you know about him?"

Siri found it hard to believe that the hotheaded, yet good-hearted, minotaur was responsible for all the tragedies befalling them. Despite her skepticism, she strived to answer truthfully.

"Not much, really," Siri admitted with a note of apology in her voice. "I've known him for about a year, and we've generally got along. I can be cold, even harsh with him, but I'm like that with everyone. As for his past, I know Cekt took him in because he begged him to, but the truth is he admired his grit. Vrusugs are usually quite dim, naive to a point of sin. Some advanced civilizations even raise them like cattle, their meat tasting like prime beef but hundreds of times more nutritious. Their limited intelligence usually

doesn't allow them to progress beyond the Bronze Age without external aid, and that's the excuse these civilizations use to deprive them of their rights and exploit them for their flesh. In the Mirror Universe, they're seen as fit only for grazing. Just like how Nawai women are treated as sex slaves or playthings for power-lusting Evolvers."

"Syrbarun is an exception among his kin. He's so smart for a member of his species that he's painfully aware of his people's plight. He told me often of his attempts to change things, to educate his people and the younger generation, but all he faced was a wall of obtuseness. Ultimately, he became an outcast among his own and left to settle elsewhere, where his intellect might be appreciated. Regrettably, that didn't go well either. Some sought to exploit his kindness, others desired to hunt him, thinking his flesh must carry special properties that made him so intelligent."

"Cekt took him in while casually visiting his workshop, located in one of the most secluded cities in the Oracle Playground. I don't know much beyond that. Syrbarun must have managed to convince him somehow, and our master took a liking to him. That's the story he always tells, so I know there's an underlying inferiority complex, because he always says he's the only disciple Cekt didn't pick for his talent."

"Despite this, I can assure you he's always tried his hardest to earn his place. He might not have our talent, he might not be the strongest, and he might be a bit slow on the uptake... But he's a good guy. I can't imagine him being a traitor."

Jake remained contemplative for a long time after listening to this short biography of Syrbarun. Despite his jovial exterior, the Vrusug hadn't had an easy life...

And that was precisely why he was suspicious. With the same thought in mind, Xi and he wisely kept their disdain to themselves. But the glint of hostility flashing in Jake's eyes spoke volumes.

'If it is indeed you, the traitor behind what's happened to Lucia... don't let me get my hands on you. I'll make you regret betraying us.'

Chapter 984: A Normal Skin Color

As fervent as his rage might have been, Jake knew all too well that no declaration or threat would amount to anything in the absence of the man at its focus. Time, relentless and unforgiving, continued its steady march, and the prognosis for the disciples and his companions grew ever more uncertain.

Shoving aside the cloud of his dark thoughts, Jake addressed Siri, which had just recovered from the accidental psychic assault on her electronic chip, with a growl. "I ask you one last time: android or organic for your replacement vessel? Either way, it's only temporary."

Without missing a beat, Siri responded with resolution, "I stand by my choice. If you affirm that the organic body you can lend me can support my consciousness, then I will trust you on this matter."

"Very well. Any specific requests regarding your future appearance?"

Siri seemed to hesitate for a moment over this dilemma. Sensing Jake's impatient gaze, she eventually murmured, "The same as before?"

Jake gave an indifferent nod and stated matter-of-factly, "A girl, then. Same skin color too? The white plastic finish of the Delkron androids isn't very natural on humans, but it's within my capabilities."

Siri stiffened within her electronic chip but clarified eventually, "A normal skin color."

Jake clicked his tongue in disapproval. Considering the ivory plastic of her previous form, was she referring to a white skin as 'normal'? Fortunately, they were far from any anti-racism activists, or such a request would have surely sparked an uproar.

"Give me a moment," he grumbled, rolling his eyes.

The process was rather straightforward. Jake materialized some of the stored biomass, conveniently stashed away in another dimensional space bound to himself. This was somewhat similar to the Spirit Dimension dedicated to his fairy spirits, but not quite the same.

Although the anchoring and creation process were somewhat similar, the former relied only on his understanding of space and a sufficient energy supply. In contrast, the latter came into being as soon as he obtained his Cosmic D Starfeyrves Bloodline and existed somewhere in the deep recesses of his Sea of Consciousness.

This Sea of Consciousness was, in a way, the tip of the iceberg that represented his soul and his last line of defense. Psychiatrically speaking, it could be described as his subconscious mind, those 90% of the brain over which he had no control.

At least, not until a year ago.

Evolvers with strong soul cultivation could also control their Sea of Consciousness as an independent dimension within their Spirit Body, but this was rare at his stage, except for a few special species.

The challenge in controlling this Sea of Consciousness, besides the high spirit requirements, was its location at the junction between the submerged, inscrutable soul, and the perceptible, controllable Spirit Body.

A further obstacle was that the building blocks of this realm were a hybrid blend of Soul Power and Spirit Energy. Soul Power wasn't something consciously controllable.

At most, an Evolver could indirectly wield it by, for example, diligently developing their True Will. That's why his Spirit Dimension was so precious.

As soon as he obtained this ability, he became capable of using this hybrid of Soul and Spirit Power to create a livable environment for his Familiars. His only limit was his imagination, and with his current mental strength, the possibilities were vast.

In this realm, Jake was akin to a god, and any overconfident foe who dared cross him here would soon regret it.

Whether it was Jeanie, Trash Runt, or even Xi, they spent most of their time munching on popcorn, engrossed in the live broadcast of Jake's existence, streaming 24/7.

"Oh? Jake is crafting a body for someone other than us?" A chubby faerie spirit bearing a disturbing resemblance to a demonic cherub squawked in glee, staring at the orb of biomass that their creator had summoned out of the blue. "Isn't he afraid she'll run off with it? Unlike us, her life isn't tied to his."

"Quiet, Zephyr." Jeanie rebuked him, her voice adorable yet stern, her plump fists resting on her hips. "Jake knows what he's doing. As easily as he can bestow life, he can also take it back."

Electrical tension surged between the two rival fairies, glowering at each other. It was far from the first time such an exchange had occurred, and the other faerie spirits carried on as if nothing was out of the ordinary.

Trash Runt, silently seated to the left of Xi on the sofa woven from spiritual energy, let out a weary sigh, "I'd kill for a spare body like that android."

Xi cast him a look of bitter empathy, knowing well his longing. "You were supposed to be dead. It's better than nothing. And despite your complaints, you do possess a body of your own. You faerie spirits can live independently of Jake if he so wishes. If he keeps you within him now, it's for your protection. Your spirits are quite weak at present, except for Jeanie. Feast on the energy the Spirit Dimension provides, and soon, I promise, you'll roam freely without being a liability to him."

While Xi comforted and educated the dispirited faeries, confined within the Spirit Dimension and assuming the role of an elder sister, Jake completed his work on the new body.

At first glance, one might think he was shaping a mass of liquefied flesh with his telekinesis, molding a human body as one would with clay, but the process was far more complex.

At each step, Jake would execute a myriad of DNA modifications in the cells, placing certain restrictions to ensure the body wouldn't be too powerful or slip from his control. Altering the DNA of this biomass, originating from his own cells, was necessary to prevent Siri from becoming a mere clone of him.

With his Life Manipulation and advanced biological knowledge, Jake could have easily created a new body by accelerating the embryonic process from a single modified stem cell. Had he proceeded in this manner, he would have saved time.

The downside was that the new body would have been fucking weak. Despite identical DNA and Aether Code to his own, the final stats would be like night and day.

This was due to the tremendous amount of Aether needed to increase the density and compression of his Aether Code. On top of that, the fulfillment of stringent conditions unique to his bloodline was required to achieve this. Although his bloodline was an above-Grade 10 enigma with more flexible maturation conditions, it was nonetheless a lengthy process.

This is also why many prodigious Evolvers with near-resurrection regeneration avoided serious injuries. If they lost a limb during combat, they typically did everything in their power to recover the lost part.

Otherwise, while the healing might appear complete on the surface, weeks or months of effort spent cultivating their bloodline and body would be wasted. This same constraint limited Blood Essence production and made the acquisition of high-Grade bloodlines so expensive.

Jake had partially solved this limiting factor with his Grade 10 Energy and the adaptive properties of his new bloodline. His Aether Code and cells recovered terrifyingly fast, even after dozens of consecutive mitoses.

Through experimentation on his own body, enduring countless mortal injuries during his Ordeals, he had discovered his strength would not regress immediately after fully regenerating his body from being disintegrated.

Even when he was still a Myrtharian, it generally took two or three complete destructions of his body in quick succession for significant weakening to take lasting effect.

The problem was, during high-intensity combat, where thousands of obliterating blows could be landed in a second, getting nearly annihilated multiple times in a flash was quite feasible.

Keeping this fact in mind, Jake had practiced his Life Manipulation in his spare time by playing with his own cells, forcing them to divide and altering their genome in various ways.

Initially, he couldn't control how much Aether the new cells stole from the original cells post-division. It was a 50/50 split. But over time, he honed his senses and could now finely tune how much Aether the old cells would transfer to the new.

This was crucial for his future plans, or creating a body for each new Familiar would drastically weaken him, though the new Familiar would gain strength very close to his own.

During his experiments, Jake also discovered why he could regenerate his body several times before seeing his Body Stats and bloodline level decline. In essence, all bloodlines of Grade 4 or higher with more than one level possessed the ability in their Aether Code to store Aether.

Under normal circumstances, this reserve energy would be used for the next advancement when conditions were met, but in emergencies, it allowed Evolvers to maintain their combat strength.

When he was a Gold Myrtharian, this limit was three near-total body destructions. If he exceeded this limit, days or even months of seclusion in an optimal environment would be required to regain his initial strength.

Now that Jake was a Cosmic D Starfeyrves, this limit was 16, and he recovered unaided by any environment in less than two hours.

Chapter 985: Straight To The Nexus

Barely a minute later, a naked female body, generously curved yet harmoniously proportioned, stood motionless before Jake, her eyes opened wide, void of any emotion. She was an empty shell.

Her skin was flawless and pale, smooth as the finest porcelain, with jet-black hair cascading just above her shoulders. This cold beauty could make men's heads turn merely by existing. Regrettably, her future occupant had no sexual or emotional interest in the opposite sex.

"So, what do you think of your new physical form?" Jake chuckled with feigned arrogance. "Not bad, right?"

Before responding, Siri cautiously extended her mental senses from her electronic chip to explore her immediate surroundings, and was astounded to come face to face with a young woman of flesh and blood, matching her previous appearance detail for detail.

Of course, the skin of this new iteration no longer bore the distinctive white plastic look of Delkron androids. The skin was pale, but it was a healthy, natural pallor, accompanied by a slight blush on the cheeks and full, red lips.

Beyond these changes, every minute detail was exquisite, from her high-arched, haughty eyebrows to the rebellious lock of hair flicked over her right eye. Out of sheer scientific curiosity, she also inspected her "voluptuous" and perked-up breasts, as well as her genitalia.

"These gelatinous masses are for nursing, correct?" Siri commented flatly. "They're an unnecessary vulnerability, hindering my movements. Remove them."

If Jake had been drinking, he would've certainly choked upon hearing her scandalous indifference. The hilarious laughter from Xi, Jeanie, and the other fairy spirits in his mind promptly added to his embarrassment, creating a symphony of infuriating giggles.

'Shut up!' Jake bellowed inside his head, but the laughter from Xi and the other fairies only became more uncontrollable.

[Sorry, but it's just too funny.] Xi laughed, struggling to catch her breath. [So much passion put into faithfully reproducing this android's two "assets," only for such a tepid reaction. At least, she didn't call you a pervert... I suppose you're not so bad off.]

Jake's lips twitched in annoyance, but in the end, he answered Siri's request impassively, "I can."

He didn't even bother to argue that it was a mistake, for fear of being wrongly perceived as a breast-obsessed man.

After all, all sizes and all tastes existed in this vast world. Flat-chested was okay, and big-breasted was okay too. As long as everyone was happy.

With a snap of his fingers, her bountiful chest deflated like two inflatables punctured by a needle.

"Any other criticism to mention?" Jake rolled his eyes, impatiently.

He thought he was done, but Siri questioned, oblivious to the concept of priorities, "And the holes below... They're for urination and reproduction, correct? Useless. You can remove those too."

That was all it took for Jake's patience to hit its limit. It was troublesome enough to create a body on demand, and he had no intention of retraining as a cosmetic surgeon to satisfy the crap tastes of an apathetic android.

"Does it hinder you?" Jake retorted coldly.

Siri seriously pondered over the question, then shamelessly admitted, "No."

"So what's the problem? If you don't want to use it, don't. Or next time you complain, I'll remove your hair, your eyebrows, your nose, your teeth, and everything else that isn't essential for functioning. We'll see then if your new body still suits you."

"I...I am content with this new form. No need for further alterations."

"See? That wasn't so hard," Jake derided mercilessly, his inner voice filled with scathing mockery. 'These androids, all fucking hypocrites.'

All that was left was to transfer Siri's consciousness to her new body. For this, Jake directly teleported the chip containing the android's electric soul into its new host, connecting it to a set of neurons designed specifically for this purpose.

The effect was instantaneous. The woman's empty gray eyes lit up with a bluish hue upon activation, and a confused, distinctly human expression soon replaced her rigid neutrality.

"How do you feel?" Jake asked conscientiously. It wasn't merely for post-purchase service but also to gather data for his future research.

"It feels weird..." Siri murmured with an unstable voice, closing her eyes tightly as if trying to sense the air or taste her own saliva. "There's so much information to process. Your so-called emotional and sensory overload slows data processing considerably. I now understand why you, organic lifeforms, are so irrational."

"Let me know if you want to go back to being an android," Jake snorted. "But it'll have to wait. I've already wasted too much time creating this new body for you."

In reality, the entire process—his interrogations, his musing, and the creation of the replacement body—took barely a minute and a half. It was the crafting of Siri's customized body that had taken the most time; the rest was nothing but a high-speed telepathic conversation between two highly advanced entities.

However, a wasted minute and a half was more than enough to turn him livid from worry. Every second that slipped away reduced his chances of saving Lucia and the others.

"I must go."

"Wait!" Siri halted him by gripping his shoulder.

"What now?"

"Don't leave me behind." She veered off, her gaze shifting away, not even understanding why she felt so flustered.

Was it the fear that her body, now flesh and blood, was an attractive prey for the Digestors?

Anticipating her mental distress, Jake spoke in a calm tone, "Believe it or not, you're safer in this new body than the old one."

It took a moment for Siri to grasp his implication. But after recovering the bracelet from her previous body and opening her Oracle Status, a shocked and disbelieving cry escaped involuntarily from her lips.

'How is this possible... I'm at least a hundred, no, a thousand times stronger than before!'

No kidding! This custom-made clone might not have such a dense biomass as the original, but it was comparable in quality. This was because Jake reserved this biomass for emergency care for himself or his familiars.

Not only did she have his overpowered Bloodline, but she also possessed a weak Energy Body.

'With this... I can fight!'

Jake read the resurgence of confidence and resolve in Siri's eyes and heaved a sigh of relief, knowing she wouldn't be a hindrance in the battles to come.

"Let's move."

This time, the android didn't stop him. She ran on his heels without any complaint. Just from her rigid grin, one could tell she was eager for the fight.

As for Jake, his thoughts were already focused elsewhere. As soon as he turned his back on Siri, his expression darkened, foreshadowing an unprecedented slaughter.

In a few strides, his body accelerated exponentially, becoming a blurred projectile impossible to track with the naked eye. Siri tried as hard as she could to keep up, but was shocked to discover that even with her new muscles, she struggled to keep pace.

Soon, an intersection like hundreds before that had slowed Jake came into his view. He should have made a sharp 90-degree turn like before, but this time his face remained icy as he barreled forward.

"SCRAM!"

Siri might have wondered at whom he was shouting, but Jake clearly saw the omnipresent, diffuse presence around him recoil just before it was struck by his Destruction True Will-infused yell. Apparently, even a Rank 13 Dungeon Digestor couldn't withstand such vicious and sinister energy without consequence.

BANG!

Jake's Voidsteel-clad fist collided with the steel wall before him with the ferocity of a meteor, the black shockwave saturated with destructive energy chipping away at its surface as if someone had just set fire to a sheet of paper.

The kinetic energy released upon impact was instantly reabsorbed by his cells, compressed, and then redirected to fuel the next punch. A surge of Cosmic Force, potent enough to level a small mountain, propelled his elbow forward, further amplifying the impending strike.

In tandem with his aura of destruction, it took no more than this for the wall to explode into fragments, torn asunder like a mere curtain. The ensuing chaos, a symphony of devastation, echoed in the hollow space beyond, leaving no corner untouched.

From the moment the Dungeon Digestor decided to give up territory, the Voidsteel walls no longer belonged to it. And in his current state, Jake could easily demolish them.

From now on, Jake would fly straight to the Nexus, ignoring all obstacles in his path.

Chapter 986: Despair

At nearly the same instant Jake decided to take matters seriously, a man, covered in blood – predominantly his own, was fleeing with all the desperation of a hunted creature.

His once handsome face was pallid, beaded with sweat, his gaze wild. Every now and then, he would cast a fleeting glance over his shoulder, his expression momentarily relaxing with relief each time he confirmed he wasn't being pursued.

The man teetering on the brink of despair was none other than Sigmar Aelsinire, also known as Hade.

Whenever his thoughts strayed back to the events of just minutes prior, a chill would ripple down his spine, cold sweat prickling his flesh.

'I felt it coming, but those traitors still managed to catch me off guard.' With a shake of his head, exuding an air of bitterness and disillusionment, he cautiously circulated his Vitality Aether to heal his injuries.

However, judging by the continuous flow of tainted blood from the gaping wound in his stomach, his efforts weren't proving successful. Thankfully, he hadn't made the same mistake as Lucia.

His past in a scientifically advanced world had alerted him to the danger in time. At the first sign of symptoms, he had stopped indiscriminately circulating his Aether, individually manipulating his killer immune cells to produce antibodies, and triggering self-destruction in the cells infected by the virus.

This required an extremely precise control of his Aether and terrifying perception, but due to his swift reaction, he had temporarily stemmed the virus's progress in his body.

Unluckily, it also came with a wicked catch. The gaping wound in his stomach, the very source of his contamination, could not regenerate properly without risking upsetting the delicate equilibrium he had painstakingly established.

Furthermore, something about that gruesome wound interfered with his mental sense, preventing him from precisely controlling his Aether in the injured area. If he rashly used his Aether to boost the metabolism of cells in that area, he would likely be playing into the virus's hands.

'How did things go so terribly wrong...?' Hade sighed in trepidation, his words cut short by a violent bout of bloody coughing, temporarily shattering his stealth.

Thud, thud, thud!

Shrrrrriii!

The monsters he thought he had painfully shaken off returned instantly, like a swarm of piranhas, their heavy footsteps distorting the metal ceiling of the ventilation ducts they were moving in.

BANG!

Suddenly, the corridor ceiling where he was fleeing collapsed without warning, forcing him to skid to a halt. Hade's pupils narrowed in focus and with a swift left-right sweep of his hand as if swatting a fly, the Sinewshades regurgitated by the vent were telekinetically smashed into the corresponding walls, opening a narrow passageway.

Daring not to slacken his pace, Hade swiftly ventured into the breach, a supersonic boom squashing the less robust monsters gunning for him against the corridor walls like insignificant bugs.

For an infinitesimal moment, the former Fluid Grandmaster believed he might escape their confinement circle again, but no sooner had he passed the cumbersome

Sinewshades than two familiar humanoid figures appeared at the end of the corridor, blocking his path.

Recognizing them, despair washed over his spirit, although on the surface, he managed to maintain his sternest stoic facade.

"Drakon and Epsilon," Hade spat out, his body bracing for the imminent deathly clash.

He pronounced their names with such bitterness, but whether they were still the same two disciples of Cekt he had met a few hours earlier was up for debate.

At first glance, their appearances hadn't changed much, if at all in Epsilon's case, who was still a blurred cloud of energy in a roughly human outline. The only significant alteration was Drakon's eyes. The once ruby irises laced with golden veining had taken on a grey hue, his slit pupils pulsating with an eerie silver glow.

The Draconian had lost a few of his scales, his blood-red flesh visible underneath, but his body held up much better than Lucia and the other virus victims. Perhaps, this was owed to his draconic bloodline, renowned for its formidable physical attributes.

By contrast, their auras were almost unrecognizable. No matter how Hade perceived it, the energy surrounding them undeniably reminded him of a Digestor's aura. If he closed his eyes and relied solely on his mental sense to distinguish them, he would likely be unable to tell the difference between the two disciples and the relentless monstrous creatures chasing him.

Were they traitors? Or had they fallen into a trap like him? Indeed, this uncertainty was the primary reason Hade was in such a pitiful condition.

He dared not fight with all his might for fear of unjustly killing them. But as the situation continued to deteriorate, it seemed his hesitation might soon cost him his life.

Upon this realization, Hade's expression hardened, a resigned severity erasing any remaining traces of sympathy and hesitation on his face.

As if to remind him that he should have made up his mind much earlier rather than waver in indecision, a horribly high-pitched, ultrasonic sound suddenly echoed down the corridor where he was cornered. The sound originated from somewhere behind him, and the menacing thud of grating footsteps followed it, making him realize that what he feared had happened.

The orchestrator of this masquerade had caught up with him.

"There's no use in running," Nigel voiced sardonically in his inhuman, gravelly tone. "I admire your tenacity and bravery, I really do. That's why I'm asking you to cease this

pointless resistance while you still can. If you comply, I promise to keep these Sinewshades off you."

"Why should I trust a traitor who's just betrayed his co-disciples?" Hade sneered disdainfully in response.

He had no intention of revealing the Gorgonite's wrongdoings, but this conversation was the perfect ruse to buy him time while he racked his brain for a solution. The mineral alien wasn't fooled by his act, but strangely, he chose to play along.

"You're right to distrust me," Nigel chuckled amusedly, spreading his arms grandiosely. "Why would I make such a promise to an enemy who might backstab me at the slightest opportunity? Simple. Even if I do nothing, it's too late for you. You're already infected, so I only need to wait, and you will join my ranks on your own. The only reason I didn't let you escape is because I'm exceptionally cautious. Rather than give you a chance to purge the virus from your body, I chose to keep you busy. But now that I'm here speaking to you, it only means one thing: It's already too late for you. You can't turn the tide."

Hade's heart chilled hearing these words. Somewhere deep within, he knew the Gorgonite wasn't lying. He could feel in his very bones that his immune system was losing the battle.

"Where does this virus come from?" he questioned coldly. Doomed as he was, he decided to gather some information to satiate his curiosity. "I've lived a long time and consider myself a scholar, but I've never seen a virus this aggressive."

Instead of answering, the high-frequency sound that Hade had begun to loathe sounded again, and this time he managed to see the urchin-like silver spongy device in Nigel's palm that he had just pressed.

As soon as the piercing sound was emitted, the heavy footfalls of the massing Sinewshades echoed from all directions, setting his skin crawling. Simultaneously, Drakon advanced towards him, brandishing a heavy lance menacingly, while Epsilon raised his hands, freezing the surrounding Aether, an invisible yet very present domain expanding rapidly from the ethereal being as the epicenter.

This ultimate combo of raw strength and supreme control of Aether and energy had overwhelmed all of Hade's offensive and defensive tactics.

Faced with the unstoppable pairing, he had found himself with no other recourse but to beat a hasty retreat, his tail tucked between his legs. It was an aberrant Digestor, distinct from the rest, that had grievously wounded him at the worst possible moment, when he was at his most vulnerable.

To his relief, that nightmare spawn was not present. Otherwise, he would've given up on the spot.

Inside Epsilon's domain, the Fluid Grandmaster could not employ any of his lethal techniques based on his manipulation of Aether or energy in general, be it his telekinesis, his hybrid black lightsaber techniques, or his Zero-Aether-Density domain that had troubled Ael and Felphi in his Fourth Ordeal.

Trapped within, the once formidable warrior was now just a man, his mighty mind rendered futile, his Body Stats nothing more than adequate. Against common Evolvers, such capabilities might have sufficed. But when pitted against an Oracle Knight of Drakon's caliber, a master of close combat?

It was simply suicide.

Chapter 987: Checkmate

"Surrender. You know you can't win against us," Nigel taunted, laying out his final ultimatum. "You're in checkmate, and you know it."

Hade's gaze darted left and right, keeping a wary eye on his many foes. Yet, despite his desperate situation, his eyes betrayed no sign of surrender. The previously congenial demeanor of the Gorgonite faded, seeing that the human wasn't ready to accept his offer.

"Do it," Nigel commanded, his voice resonating as deeply as an earthquake.

The Gorgonite squeezed the silvery, sponge-like sea urchin in his grasp, and the same shrill, harrowing sound that Hade had heard earlier echoed once more in the corridor. Hearing this sound, Epsilon and Drakon, who had been standing still with vacant eyes, jerked erratically as if struck by an electric shock.

This scene held a sense of déjà vu for Hade, and as he watched their grey eyes roll in their sockets independently before locking onto him, his heart froze in his chest.

'I can't let them attack first,' he realized, drawing his black lightsaber.

Epsilon controlled the surrounding Aether, but Hade was not entirely powerless as he had escaped the first time. He wouldn't make the same mistake as their first encounter either. Instead of attacking Epsilon in a futile attempt to disrupt the Anti-Aether domain, he decisively charged at Drakon.

Nigel smirked, seeing his new strategy. He understood why the human made this choice, but it was a foolish one nonetheless.

'I was worried he might escape again, but it seems I fretted needlessly.'

In Nigel's mind, the outcome of the battle was already decided. However, his jewel-like hexagonal eyes nearly bulged from their sockets when a point-blank Force Push, inspired by Asfrid, sent Drakon crashing into the opposite wall like a bullet.

Hade gave Nigel the finger without turning back. Before Drakon could extract himself from the wall, the Fluid Grandmaster dashed past him, swiftly turning left without asking for permission.

"Sigh... How futile... Catch him," Nigel dismissed scornfully, squeezing the silver urchin in his hand.

The shrill sound was emitted in rapid bursts, and the two zombified disciples of Cekt obediently set off in pursuit of the veteran. Hade, having heard the Gorgonite and recognizing his condescension, knew he wasn't out of danger yet.

'How on earth am I supposed to find Jake if my Oracle Paths don't work?' the Fluid Grandmaster cursed when a sudden coughing fit cut his breath in half.

Just as he began to distance himself from his pursuers, paralyzing pain radiating throughout his nervous system forced him to halt. His trembling legs gave way for a few brief milliseconds—an equivalent of signing his death warrant against such foes.

His vision had barely stabilized when he noticed a puddle of tainted blood at his feet, his once red blood ominously turning grey. Before he could be alarmed by the rapid deterioration of his symptoms, he spotted the shadow of Drakon's barbed, scaled red tail looming over him.

Without a moment to think, he instinctively dodged with a roll to the side, blindly swinging his lightsaber overhead, hoping to hit something.

VRRRRMM!

A shower of sparks and a faint burnt scent filled the air when his black light blade met the predator's tail, but alas, Hade didn't hear the pain-filled roar he was hoping for.

The tail that had just smashed into the ground at his former position whipped through the air horizontally, its speed shifting from 0 to multiples of the speed of sound after traveling only a few millimeters.

"Shit!" Hade barely parried with his lightsaber, but the force of the blow slammed him into the wall behind him.

At the same moment, a sense of imminent deadly danger gripped him and he jerked his head forward without thinking to dodge a white beam concentrated from Epsilon's

outstretched index finger. Hade cursed his rotten luck for having to face such a formidable pair.

One was already too many.

Swoosh!

The third blow from Drakon was already coming, this time in the form of a diagonal claw swipe that, if it found its mark, would sever his torso from right shoulder to left hip. Knowing his lightsaber wouldn't be enough, he tried another Force Push, but his heart sank when nothing happened.

Hade didn't need to ponder long to realize that Epsilom had already corrected the flaw in his previous Anti-Aether domain. Now, even spiritual energy was prohibited.

At least, that which wasn't truly under his control. Even cornered thus, he didn't surrender and opened the gates of the only source of energy that no power could snatch from him: Soul Power.

In other words, True Will.

"True Will of Stability," Hade declared mentally, his bloodshot eyes igniting, emitting a mesmerizing radiance.

This was the ultimate move he had developed to counter the otherwise unstoppable divine powers of Felphi. He hadn't expected to resort to it again so soon under these circumstances. He doubted it would work against Epsilom's magic, but somehow it did the trick.

What is part of me, cannot be changed against my will. That was roughly how Hade defined this True Will Move.

Contrary to what Felphi believed, it wasn't an Anti-Disruption specifically designed to counter her, but an unyielding will to remain unaffected regardless of the hostile forces.

Something he hadn't foreseen occurred as soon as he mobilized his Soul Power through his True Will.

First, his injuries stopped worsening and his symptoms stabilized. The progression of the virus also halted, but with his mental sense, he could tell it was just a temporary truce. It was as if someone had hit pause in a video game.

The virus was still there. It was merely a temporary ceasefire. Had he known, he would have used this move right from the start before letting his condition deteriorate this far.

'If I had known my True Will had such a wide range of applications, I wouldn't have rationed it so much,' Hade thought grimly, vowing to scrutinize his new move in-depth if he survived this hell.

The other effect, however, one he did anticipate from his True Will of Stability, was that he regained control of his Spirit Energy within about a meter radius of his body. Beyond that, the Soul Power permeating his Spirit Body became too diffuse to resist Epsilon's superior control.

As soon as he regained some semblance of control over his energy, Hade activated a psychic shield in the nick of time, just in time to stop the plasma breath that Drakon spat at him from his gaping maw at point-blank range.

Undeterred, Hade stepped forward and, wrapping his black lightsaber in a dense repulsive force field compressing all the Sharpening Aether he could channel, he slashed down from top to bottom, slicing the white plasma jet in half, followed by the torso of the Draconian.

A spray of broken and half-melted scales shot into the air like shrapnel, but Hade calmly deflected them with his telekinesis and saber.

He should have been satisfied to finally deliver a lethal blow, but the heavy sensation in his numb arm spoiled his triumphant look. His lightsaber had only penetrated a few millimeters into the dragon's flesh.

Casting a glance at the wound he'd just inflicted on his adversary, the remaining sliver of hope he'd harbored to survive evaporated completely. Drakon had already healed.

"Fuc—"

Hade didn't even have time to lament before the Draconian's tail coiled at a lightning speed around his neck, and in the next instant his head was brutally smashed against the ground, shattering into pieces against the Voidsteel floor.

The valiant but brief resistance he had managed to put up relying on his True Will of Stability was ruined with one tail strike from Drakon, the devastating head blow disrupting his concentration.

This was the difference between a true Oracle Knight, even zombified, and him, a Fourth Ordeal finalist who perished before he could claim the highest rewards the victors were entitled to.

His Spirit Body level and Soul Strength, which were his greatest advantages, were rendered useless due to his physical condition.

With his brain scattered into tiny pieces in his field of vision, Hade lay paralyzed on the ground. Because of the virus, he couldn't risk regeneration, and it was now turning against him.

Feeling that he was on the brink of falling into a deep coma, the Fluid Grandmaster resorted to the only option left: He abandoned his mortal coil.

Shrouding his Spirit Body with his mental sense, an ethereal, invisible Hade exploded out of his infected carcass and shot above Drakon's head, hoping to slip through the net.

He had staked everything on this last-ditch escape, suppressing his spiritual fluctuations to the minimum, hoping that these two zombified disciples were no longer capable of properly using their mental sense.

Shooting past the Draconian without any reaction from him, Hade's figurative heart throbbed with excitement. His hypothesis was correct! These zombies were but a shadow of their former selves.

Just as he was about to truly shake them off for good, Hade distantly heard the piercing sound ring out again behind him. Almost simultaneously, the creature responsible for his injuries during the initial ambush appeared before him.

The Fluid Grandmaster had no time to think, let alone fear. On the contrary, facing his inevitable end, a resigned smile graced his face, the image of his son Nylreg floating before his eyes as his consciousness plunged into eternal oblivion.

Chapter 988: Scandalous Luck

BOOOOOM!

Jake, who had been relentlessly boring through walls of Voidsteel for over a quarter of an hour with gratifying success, abruptly halted his path of destruction, his gaze narrowing.

"Why do I have such a foreboding feeling?" he muttered, tension etched across his features. "I feel as though I'm on the verge of losing something invaluable."

A pang of helplessness echoed within him as he took stock of the deserted steel corridor where he stood. The imposing but restrained presence of the Dungeon Digester had long since receded, leaving him to the unnerving illusion of solitude. Even the Sinewshades had ceased their pestering.

"Have I unwittingly fallen into the enemy's ploy after all?" Jake questioned his course of action, despite the trail of thousands of punctured walls behind him standing testament to his achievements.

If one were to line up all the perforated walls and peek through the last opening, they would see an abyss, the tunnel in Jake's wake stretching for over a thousand kilometers.

[It's not as though you had better alternatives,] Xi consoled him calmly. [If you deploy a mass destruction technique capable of significantly damaging a Dungeon Digestor, you won't escape unscathed. Moreover, even though the Digestors have seized control, it remains a Magnetic Resonator belonging to the Oracle, or possibly Oros. If it's compromised, can you afford the fallout? Beyond that, you're already giving your all. You might not have noticed, but as we get closer to the core, the Voidsteel becomes increasingly difficult to penetrate. The content of Horizon Hardstone has risen significantly compared to the walls closer to the surface. Such hardness is akin to the barrier isolating the Conversion Chamber from the rest of the funnel when it's deactivated. This is a good sign. It indicates we're nearing our objective.]

Reassured by his AI's logical arguments, Jake regained his composure.

"You're right. The fact that this Dungeon Digestor isn't even attempting to resist anymore proves it's admitted defeat. It fears me," he conceded calmly, his brow furrowing immediately after. "Unfortunately, that's precisely what concerns me. Dungeon Digestors are not supposed to be such pushovers.

"We should hurry."

[Hmmm.]

Jake extended his palms before him and the air suddenly warped, folding in upon itself like a crumpled piece of paper. When the distortion reached a sufficient threshold, the space locally collapsed, and a long, slender black spatial rift tore through reality.

"Spatial Blade," Jake thought grimly.

After experimenting with various methods, he had concluded that his Space Manipulation, combined with his Cosmic Force, was by far the most efficient way to assail a material as tough as Voidsteel.

Despite all his training and high intelligence, Jake wasn't yet adept with this element, the physical laws pertaining to space-time being notoriously difficult to fully comprehend. Surface understanding, purely theoretical, posed no challenge, but grasping the fabric of space-time itself continued to elude him.

As proud as he was, he had to concede that his Extrasensory Perception was still lacking. Had he not unlocked the Space Manipulation ability thanks to his bloodline, he might not have been able to dabble with it for a long time, except by using pre-set Space Spells like his Teleport Skill.

For the same reason, Jake could only employ these Spatial Blades in this rudimentary manner, clumsily projecting them in the desired direction. If he attempted to combine it with a sword or close-combat technique, it was likely he, not his target, would end up obliterated.

Thank heavens, his fledgling mastery of Space was adequate enough to meet his objective. The conjured Spatial Blade quickly drifted away from him in utter silence and without causing any ripples in its wake.

When it met the Voidsteel wall, enhanced with Horizon Hardstone, the structure shattered as though someone had smashed a mirror's screen under the warping effect. As for the section of the wall that directly interfaced with the Spatial Blade, it vanished without a sound, as if it had never existed.

The Dungeon Digestor's diffuse consciousness, who maintained a cautious distance from him, wisely refrained from approaching the dark blade too closely. Its Digestor instinct, which was nothing more than pure common sense in this case, was warning it that touching this entity with its Spirit Body would not bode well.

A sleek ovular gap that mimicked the contours of the Spatial Blade promptly appeared before Jake, piercing a dozen more walls separated by several hundred meters each before closing due to energy exhaustion.

Presently, his Space Manipulation only allowed him to influence space within a few meters. Once launched, the Spatial Blades he created were no longer under his control. Neither did he know how to supply them with the required energy over long distances to sustain their activity.

As before, Jake dived headfirst into the created abyss. Stomping the ground, his figure blurred only to reappear several kilometers away at the exit of the last torn wall.

Upon landing, he swept his surroundings with his mental sense, as was his custom. However, instead of being the sole living presence as he had expected, he tensed when he sensed a familiar yet somewhat different presence nearing him.

The scent of tainted blood instantly assaulted his nostrils. As Jake cautiously turned towards the intruder, a human figure, horribly disfigured, entered his line of sight.

The man had neither hair nor skin, as if he had been flayed alive. His bloody flesh was fully exposed, and simply imagining what he must feel when it made contact with the air, Jake surmised he was enduring agonizing pain.

Though this grotesque appearance was entirely unfamiliar, a chill descended upon Jake's heart as he recognized the newcomer's armor.

"Ulfar."

The recognizable slit orange eyes of the King of Beskyr, haggard and disoriented, rested their gaze upon Jake at the sound of his voice. Recognizing his handsome, comforting silhouette, a look of relief softened the agonizing features of his friend, at his wit's end.

"Thank Beskyr, my luck hasn't abandoned me yet," Ulfar murmured, collapsing to his knees before him.

The next second, his eyes rolled back into his head, showing their whites, and without any warning, the man began screaming in agony, squirming in pain like a seizing epileptic.

Simultaneously, Jake's ears picked up a bizarre, high-pitched sound, vaguely reminiscent of an ultrasonic whistle. He then noticed that Ulfar wasn't alone—numerous Aetheric signatures, densely packed together, were quickly closing in on their position.

Unfazed, Jake snorted and released his own spiritual pressure. The moment his psychic shockwave, tinged with his Destruction True Will and killing intent, washed over them, the monsters shrieked and hastily retreated, confirming his theory that whoever was behind this wasn't ready to tangle with him yet.

"Saving the best for last, eh?" Jake spat in contempt as he watched a horde of Sinewshades, more numerous and stronger than any he had slaughtered until now, vanish down the corridor from which Ulfar had arrived.

Observing them from afar, his eyes dangerously narrowed when he spotted among the Sinewshades a creature crowned with a sinfully familiar blonde mane. His heart skipped a beat at the horrifying possibility, his formerly composed face becoming aghast.

The creature still had some intact armor pieces on her, cruelly crushing his faint hope that it wasn't her.

"Lucia," Jake called out, feeling for the first time an immense emptiness in his chest as though someone had just ripped out his heart.

"AAAAARRRRRGHH!"

Ulfar's ear-piercing scream at his feet snapped him out of his daze, and he promptly refocused on his critically wounded friend.

'I don't know if Lucia can still be saved, but it's not too late for Ulfar,' Jake smacked his cheeks twice with both hands to regain his composure and promptly scanned the writhing man with his mental sense.

"Ugh?" Jake was taken aback by the result.

It was a miracle that Ulfar hadn't already turned into a monster. The virus was omnipresent in his body, but inexplicably it struggled to infiltrate his DNA. Each time it was on the brink of success, something caused it to miss its target, making it lose its way in the interstitial tissue between his cells.

When the virus did manage to integrate itself into his DNA, it was then Ulfar's coding enzymes themselves that faltered, refusing to transcribe the virus's DNA. Without the host's enzymes' help, the virus couldn't reproduce and was harmless.

From this brief observation, Jake understood how Ulfar had resisted the virus's propagation until now.

Yet again, his luck was nothing short of scandalous.

Chapter 989: Life and Death

Unfortunately, it seemed that this time, the virus had met its match. The rampant spread of the virus within Ulfar's body could no longer be curbed by mere strokes of luck.

Jake observed Ulfar's immune system rapidly losing the internal struggle that had started with the warrior's blood-curdling scream. Initially, he suspected that the level of infection had crossed an irreversible threshold, but his opinion changed when he checked his friend's Oracle Status.

Ulfar's luck, whether his Body Luck or corresponding Aether stat, had plummeted into the negatives. The King of Beskyr had lost his guardian angel that had been with him since birth! Jake had noticed that his own luck had been largely inoperative since he entered the Magnetic Resonator. He attributed this to some sort of countermeasure by the Dungeon Digestor.

After all, they were technically within its body, and despite its seeming cowardice, the colossal creature was at least a Rank 13 Digestor. Its ability to tamper with their luck did not seem so inconceivable.

However, this didn't suffice to explain the severe inversion of Ulfar's luck. Another Evolver might not have recognized such a symptom, but this wasn't the first time Jake had witnessed such a phenomenon. Ulfar was cursed!

And if his hunch was right, Ulfar had been cursed by none other than himself! Or rather, he had overdrafted his own luck to survive until now.

Jake knew that it was one of the core abilities of the Beskyrian Bloodline. The Beskyrians could literally manipulate their luck to satisfy their desires, but they could also sacrifice it to maximize their success chances. When this sacrifice exceeded a certain limit, or all their Luck Aether was spent, they then entered a period of vulnerability.

In that case, they would soon suffer a backlash, otherwise known as the Curse of Misfortune. Regardless of their Luck Stats, they would turn negative for a while.

This was an ability that Jake greatly envied. Thanks to Tim's Blood Essence, Jake also possessed the Body of Luck, which grew in tandem with his other body attributes. However, unlike most Beskyrians, he couldn't harness it.

He had tried time and time again. It wasn't a problem of will, but rather of Perception. Perhaps even more so than with his Space Manipulation.

Luck was an intangible concept, perhaps even nonexistent from the perspective of science and the most skeptical. His extrasensory perception, high as it was, struggled to detect the presence of something most didn't even believe in.

It was a kind of abstract power, like his new Life Element. Since he had awakened it, he could quantify/transmute an individual's vitality and lifespan into Lifeforce, Life Aura, or Life Energy, but for other Evolvers not versed in this element, this conceptual life energy didn't really exist.

The only thing they could truly perceive were its tangible effects on them and the environment. It was the same with luck. Jake knew it helped and guided him passively in each of his actions, but he didn't know to what extent it saved his skin, offered him new opportunities, or facilitated what he undertook.

Regardless, the fact was that Ulfar had finally run out of luck. "That explains why he's in this state. If I'm not mistaken, he must have risked everything either to escape alive from his enemies or to find me before they caught up with him," Jake concluded thoughtfully, not hiding his admiration for the warrior.

The King of Beskyr was a notorious rake, indolent and self-serving, yet he was reliable when it mattered most. "Since you've labored so fiercely to stand before me in the flesh, allow yourself to be healed," Jake muttered, a finger placed upon his forehead.

A surge of Lifeforce shot straight into Ulfar's brow, his body convulsing as if subjected to a shocking voltage. "Don't do this! It won't work!" Siri, who had remained hushed until now, erupted in sudden horror upon seeing this cascade of life energy purer than her own Vitality Aether flood into Ulfar's body.

In her mind's eye, she was replaying the calamity that had befallen Lucia when she had mistakenly circulated her Green Aether into her own body, intending to expedite the healing process.

She wanted to stop Jake, but it was already too late. As she prepared herself to witness Ulfar's metamorphosis into a Sinewshade any moment now, something utterly at odds with her prophecy transpired.

The white beam of invigorating energy twisted abruptly into a sullied black, as if the original holy light had been tainted by the vilest miasma of anti-life. Upon contact with this ashen-gray luminescence, Ulfar's every crevice of his body unleashed billows of black dust smoke, taking her by surprise.

Momentarily, Siri assumed this was merely the result of the black beam's interaction with the wounded man's flesh, and she wasn't entirely mistaken.

Indeed, an interaction took place. But upon contact, the virus-infected cells had instantly withered, disintegrating after being drained of all vitality. This black smoke was all that remained.

"Life and Death are two sides of the same coin," Jake clarified aloud, dispelling the android's confusion.

Siri's mind reeled at his words, inching closer to believing there was nothing beyond this man's reach. Could the difference between two Evolvers truly be so vast?

Life was outrageously unfair! Well, she wasn't exactly alive, being a humble android and all. Wait! Not anymore...

"Are you a necromancer?" she asked, flabbergasted.

"Make no mistake," Jake rejected outright. "Anyone with the power to manipulate life can indirectly wield death. It's as simple as draining their vital energy, and that's it. They're dead."

"But that's not exactly what you're doing," Siri contested steadfastly. "This black beam is not life energy for sure. It's death!"

This time, Jake didn't deny but simply flashed her an eerie smile. "You're right. It is indeed the Death Element. My bloodline allows me to adapt to anything and everything. I accidentally consumed an Undead in the past. Once my understanding of Life reached a certain mastery, reversing the concept came naturally. A similar process helped me grasp the concept of Cold. Except back then, the path was a lot more arduous, hehe."

Siri absorbed his nonsense, her mind numb, no longer seeking to debate. It all sounded so simple when he put it that way, but she knew that whatever method he employed, she couldn't mimic it.

As for who the Undead was that Jake had accidentally consumed? It was, of course, Trash Runt. Trash Runt had been slain and turned into an Undead by Vhoskaud's powers during the Fourth Ordeal. Jake had stored his corpse in his Space Storage until everything inside was digested during his evolution.

On reflection... Trash Runt had originally been a Leprechaun, a creature from Irish folklore associated with good fortune. Perhaps he had other ways of using his luck. He just hadn't realized them yet.

However, after mere seconds, both Siri and Jake noticed a problem. Jake's Death Energy had done its job, but Ulfar's carcass at his feet was now nothing but a skeleton riddled with holes and fissures, on the brink of crumbling at any moment.

"Well, at least the virus is purged, I guess," Jake quipped with a wry smile while inspecting his handiwork. It wasn't his fault that more than 95% of the Beskyrian's cells were infected.

Before injecting some of his vitality into his friend's body, Jake observed with slight surprise that the gashes on Ulfar's back had somehow held firm, the rotten flesh in question not disintegrating with the rest. Flaps of skin and tissue floated in thin air at their expected positions, as if anchored to his Spirit body rather than his physical shell.

"Now this is problematic," Jake murmured, lips pursed in dissatisfaction at this unexpected twist. "Anyway, I should first assist him in regenerating the rest of his body before he crumbles in my hands."

Unlike Lucia, Jake had superior control over his Aether, high perception, and an understanding of human biology that was up to the task. He quickly circulated his Life Energy in Ulfar's body, ensuring it never made contact with the virus.

The situation was currently more precarious due to the misfortune curse that the Beskyrian was suffering from. On numerous occasions, Jake was distracted and nearly lost control of his Life Energy, which, each time, tried to merge with the virus during these improbable moments of inattention.

Fortunately, his luck was also quite high. He couldn't control it like Ulfar, but it provided him relative immunity against the latter.

In the end, after a few minutes, Jake managed to heal his companion's body enough to bring it back to a state similar to when Lucia had just scratched him.

Now, the final task was to figure out how to permanently rid him of this virus.

Chapter 990: I won't Do it Again

For the task at hand, Jake considered various approaches. One option was the direct and violent route of severing the remaining infected flesh, including a corresponding portion of the Spirit Body. However, Jake preferred to avoid this method as it could lead to unpredictable consequences, ranging from transient amnesia to permanent memory loss or personality shifts. Not everyone possessed a Grade 10 Energy Spirit Body and Soul like him, which allowed for a relatively swift recovery from otherwise irreversible injuries. Furthermore, only a few bloodlines had the innate ability to regenerate a Spirit Body, let alone a severely damaged Soul. The regenerative abilities of Digestors, who spontaneously originated from Aether, were highly envied, yet the origin of their existence remained a mystery.

Another option involved Soul Cultivation Techniques, similar to those found in fictional works about Ghost Cultivators. These techniques could potentially heal a damaged Spirit Body or Soul. Although Jake had never encountered such techniques himself, he knew they existed, having seen several listed at exorbitant prices in the Oracle Store. Alternatively, external aids such as potions, pills, medicines, herbs, or ingredients with spirit-revitalizing properties could be used to restore a damaged soul. However, such ingredients were rare, and the recipes and technologies involved in creating the corresponding potions and pills were fiercely guarded by their possessors.

In this situation, the direct and violent method was ruled out, leaving the gentler option: a vaccine or, in its absence, the injection of an antibody serum. However, Jake faced a problem - he had neither of these solutions.

"If given enough time, I might have been able to research a vaccine based on this virus, but I have a feeling it wouldn't have gone smoothly," Jake said with a wry smile, realizing the bitter truth of what he would have to do to save Ulfar.

[You don't mean to tell me you plan to voluntarily inject the virus and let it run free until your lymphocytes recognize the threat?] Xi critiqued, her tone a mix of reproach and disbelief.

Aware of her legitimate concerns, Jake replied undeterred, "If you already know, why ask? Don't overthink it. What's the worst that could happen? Become a Digestor? I already am one..."

Unamused, Xi retorted in an aggrieved voice, [Become a Sinewshade? In case you hadn't noticed, not all Digestors are created equal...]

Jake shivered at her reminder but ultimately said, "I'll be fine. Just trust me. As always."

[...]

Jake's lips curved, knowing he had gained her implicit agreement. Determined, he crouched next to the unconscious Ulfar and flipped him onto his stomach to access the purulent lacerations on his back. Ignoring his revulsion, he traced his Cosmic Force-laden index finger down his friend's back, carving out several small samples of infected flesh. Following this, he thrust the same claw, wrapped in a faint force field, into his wrist, slashing it open.

Without regret, Jake then injected the harvested samples into his bloodstream and waited for the first symptoms to manifest. As expected, his resistance to the virus was much stronger than that of his comrades'. Not only were his Constitution and Vitality vastly superior, but he also possessed the true Cosmic D Starfeyrves Body, as well as the Starfeyrves Spirit Body and Soul.

Jake had grossly underestimated the resilience of his own body against this virus, and when his wrist healed perfectly within the blink of an eye, he grimaced with a sense of bitterness. A quick glimpse into his Oracle Status confirmed that the virus had been instantly purged from his system.

"Damn... At this rate, I'll never be able to naturally develop antibodies," Jake mused with a rueful laugh. Although his companions might have envied his situation, he was determined to become infected like them. If the virus was vanquished before it even became a threat, how could he save them?

For those uninitiated in immunology, the immune system is comprised of various units, commonly referred to as white blood cells, with macrophages and lymphocytes being the most well-known. Macrophages acted as the body's default police force, devouring any unauthorized foreign bodies on sight. Lymphocytes, on the other hand, served as strategists or scientists, devising specific weapons against these foreign bodies when the macrophages were overwhelmed.

Developing targeted countermeasures, known as antibodies, required time for the lymphocytes. Once developed, these antibodies could be quickly mobilized in the future at the first recurrence of the virus, which was the goal of vaccines. However, in Jake's case, his macrophages had no trouble handling the virus. It was like having a single policeman armed with only a humble baton quelling a rebellion alone, rendering the need for researchers to develop a nuclear bomb unnecessary.

Jake's immune system was simply too robust.

"I'll have to take direct control of my immune system to prevent it from doing its job," Jake's brows twitched at the realization that he would have to slit his wrist again.

With the knowledge from his previous experience, he expertly extracted new samples, eliciting a groan from the King of Beskyr, then injected the contents into his veins with an expression as flat as a calm sea.

This time, he gave his white blood cells no chance to display their capabilities. Like a general, he commanded his troops to ignore the invader and beat a strategic retreat.

Thankfully, his Agility (Body Control) and Perception were high enough to handle this situation. He didn't even need to resort to his telekinesis.

Intrigued as a child watching a colony of ants go about their business, Jake watched with interest as the virus managed to penetrate the core of his cells with ease, but his face fell when he saw the virus exiting them without any repercussions.

"Damn, I forgot about my luck stat," Jake cursed inwardly, observing how an array of improbable micro-events was preventing the virus within him from achieving its purpose.

[Be patient.] Xi chided, holding back her laughter. [If even Ulfar was infected, you don't have to worry.]

Jake wanted to remind her that Ulfar only ended up in this state after overdrafting his luck, but he held back upon seeing a luckier virus sample successfully integrating into his DNA.

Impatient, he observed the enzyme responsible for reading his DNA with restrained excitement and nearly let out a cry of joy when, after a myriad of failures, the virus managed to replicate. This was only because Jake had allowed it to do so all along, even personally controlling his enzymes to guarantee the result.

With this initial success, Jake replicated the same process in his other cells, literally assisting the virus in the conquest of his body. It was likely the first time in human history someone deliberately sought to fall ill with a zombie virus without a cure.

Regardless, where there's a will, there's a way. After a few minutes, Jake coughed up his first gout of tainted blood with a sense of exhilarating satisfaction.

"At last!"

The truth was, the antibodies had been ready for a long time. He had merely allowed his symptoms to worsen intentionally to ensure his antibodies could not only defeat the virus but also reverse the damage already inflicted.

His goal was not only to save Ulfar but also Lucia and the other disciples.

[You're taking unnecessary risks.] Xi admonished him without a trace of humor this time. She was visibly upset, and rightly so. [What if your antibodies fail? Does Lucia's life really mean more than yours? What am I supposed to do if you die? Follow you to your grave? Become a Sinewshade too?]

Jake grew solemn at his AI's complaints. His actions were indeed risky. He was nearly 100% confident everything would go as planned, hence his stoicism. But from the perspective of those who cared about him, it merely looked like recklessness and a suicidal act.

"I'm sorry, Xi. I won't do it again."

[Hmmm. As long as you understand your mistakes.] Xi hummed in a pacified tone.

With the issue settled, Jake let his symptoms deteriorate even further, until his skin began to peel away in flakes, revealing the vermilion flesh beneath.

At this stage, murderous impulses and a familiar hunger began to torment him, and his vision started to blur, as his cognitive abilities rapidly deteriorated. It would take more than that to make him forget who he was, but it was a sign that the infection had reached not only his brain but also his Spirit Body.

Odd, disconcerting things began to happen beyond this stage, making him rethink his understanding of the virus.

"Alright, it's enough," Jake decided suddenly, feeling that he had seen enough.

With a single thought, he unleashed all the antibodies his lymphocytes had been continuously producing as if breaking a dam. The result was immediate.

A lightning-fast counterattack and a total victory!

If it wasn't for the remnants of skin and tainted blood at his feet, one might have thought he had rewound time with a snap of his fingers. He was completely healed.

With the matter of the antibodies settled, the next steps were child's play. Having extracted his own antibodies to create a standardized serum - one Ulfar's body wouldn't reject - he injected it without hesitation into the heart of his companion's infected wounds, standing back to let the magic unfold.

A few heartbeats later, the purulent slashes ceased their oozing. The wounds then began to close, his back transforming into a canvas of smooth, flawless skin once more.

Chapter 991: Now We Have A Real Problem

The moment his final wound knit itself shut, Ulfar's eyes burst open like trapdoors in the night. Surprised and disoriented, he reached instinctively for his groin, releasing a sigh filled with the authenticity of relief as he discovered that his manhood hadn't gone the way of his old skin.

Jake, witnessing this absurdity, rolled his eyes, then greeted him, "Welcome back to the land of the living, Ulfar. How are you feeling?"

The Beskyrian's face creased in contemplation, his expression heavy. "Honestly... I feel strangely good. That's the problem." He responded after a moment's hesitation.

"Explain," Jake pressed.

"Fearless. Confident. At peace," Ulfar supplied.

Jake didn't like the sound of this. "And...?" he prodded, bracing himself for the worst.

Ulfar deliberated for another second, stroking his chin thoughtfully before admitting, "Hungry. Or angry. Maybe both."

Jake's fears were confirmed. "You're Corrupted," he stated matter-of-factly, maintaining a calm demeanor for his freshly healed friend's sake.

Ulfar forced a sardonic smile onto his face, but the light in his eyes had noticeably dimmed. His expression soon soured into something resembling a bulldog gnawing on a wasp. "It's that bad, isn't it?" The King of Beskyr grimaced.

"I'm afraid so," Jake didn't sugarcoat. Honesty was a currency he valued highly amongst his friends. They weren't children after all.

"Still, I feel fine. I can distinguish between the Corruption and my own self. I'll just eat more meat, work out a little harder every day to vent my aggression. Sex with my wives could be a solution too," Ulfar rationalized, a lascivious grin spreading across his face at the thought of Nyx and Eris attending to him together.

Jake's forehead pulsed with a vein at his friend's unsettling smile. He shouldn't have worried about this debauchee. Ulfar might have lost his harem from his former planet as the King of Beskyr, but he was clearly on track to rebuild it here. Besides Nyx and Eris, the Beskyrian had brought back with him two other conquests from his fourth Ordeal.

His love life was thriving, but sadly, Jake was about to burst his bubble. In line with his motto, he didn't believe in coddling his companions. "Whatever you're fantasizing about, forget it," Jake berated, a stern expression on his face. "We can't jump the gun until we know how far your Corruption has advanced."

A pallor swept over Ulfar as he remembered what happened when Corruption exceeded 50% in most individuals. Jake, seeing the understanding dawn on his friend's face, nodded in confirmation.

"Exactly. Corruption isn't all that dangerous as long as you're around Digestors or other Corrupted. If Siri and I were ordinary Evolvers, who knows what would have happened? You might already be trying to kill us, driven by a relentless bloodlust."

Ulfar turned a shade paler, his eyes wide with the realization of a very likely possibility. He hadn't even made a comment about Siri's new alluring form.

"What will we do if that's the case?" he asked somberly. As Jake was about to answer, Ulfar cut him off, "No, that's not important right now. You should know that they got Lucia and Hade. We've been betrayed."

Jake's heart lurched upon discovering that Hade, too, had fallen prey to the enemy. Earlier, among these Sinewshades, he had only recognized Lucia.

"Are you entirely certain about Hade?" He asked grimly, his voice a steady undercurrent of controlled panic. "According to Siri's records, you weren't on the same team. Can you confirm your claim?"

"I can't..." Ulfar admitted reluctantly. "I fled before I could verify his fate. However, among those who assailed me during my escape were Rigel, Epsilon, and Drakon. Hade and Lyra were conspicuously absent. If they didn't manage to escape, then they're either dead or infected by the Sinewshades."

"May I see your records from the last few hours?" Jake asked, his manner courteous.

"Sure."

Having nothing to hide, Ulfar transferred the contents of his bracelet's log from the past 24 hours. Jake bypassed the part following their return from Ordeal, focusing on the section starting with Ulfar's entrance into the vortex.

While viewing the lengthy video recording as Ulfar recounted his experiences, Jake swiftly pieced together a comprehensive understanding of the events by cross-referencing Siri's version. The silver lining was that both accounts corroborated each other, largely eliminating the possibility of either being a traitorous deceiver.

However, the gloomier truth was that the likelihood of Hade having survived was indeed close to nil. When the Fluid Grandmaster had been caught in a pincer attack for the second time by Epsilon, Drakon, and Nigel, Ulfar had been nearby.

He himself had been fleeing Syrbarun, Lucia, and the other Sinewshades hot on his heels. His initial impulse had been to warn Hade and the others before succumbing to despair and taking flight.

He had nearly reached Hade when a surge of unprecedented danger urged him to retreat.

The experience had been abrupt, giving Ulfar scant time to think. All he knew was that a microsecond longer and he would have met the same fate as Hade.

Jake's expression grew solemn after viewing his friend's video recording. One of the final clips showed Hade's body sprawled at a distance in a pool of his own blood, his brain matter splattered on the

ground.

The clip was brief, but his honed senses had captured his comrade's Spirit Body shooting out from his unsalvageable carcass. The sight was even more fleeting, but Jake had also glimpsed the entity that had ensnared Hade in his spirit form.

The creature was blurry, its speed remarkable, but the fuzziness was more due to its indistinct appearance than velocity. Unlike Ulfar, Jake initially felt no apprehension as he sized up the unknown monster.

However, his expression changed upon seeing Hade's frozen face at the moment of capture.

At first, he thought the creature had used some kind of mind freeze spell to petrify his friend, but using his Lucid Aetherdreamer vision, Jake observed something that made his skin crawl.

The currents of Aether around Hade had slowed to a crawl, including those corresponding to light emissions. It wasn't a spell preventing him from moving, but time was passing so slowly in his vicinity that he appeared immobile.

"Now we have a real problem," Jake said, a bitter, hollow laugh escaping his lips. 'Xi, do you know what it is?'

[I am not sure... Wait a moment.] Xi didn't respond immediately, instead accessing the available archives.

Fortunately, after connecting to the Mirror World for information on the Sinewshades, Xi had anticipated such a scenario and had already downloaded all data related to Digestors spawning near black holes. She didn't take long to find several matching descriptions. After further screening, Xi managed to narrow down the potential candidates to one particular category of Digestor: The Voidshifters. Or in this case, its humanoid variant.

[Voidshifter - Humanoid Variant: Belongs to a sub-category of Space Digestors and Void Digestors. It stands taller than an average human, its silhouette a distorted reflection of the human form. In terms of

abilities, these Digestors are attuned with Time, Void, and Space. Little is known about them, except that they are born under extreme conditions where the physical laws involving these three elements

behave abnormally enough to affect the ambient Aether. These three concepts are among the most difficult to understand and master, and as a result, all Voidshifters, regardless of their morphology, are extremely intelligent.

Given their nature and the environment in which they thrive, they are less subject to their instincts than other Digestors, with their individuality outweighing their sense of group belonging. What they think and feel is an enigma as very few have had the chance to communicate with one. Their behavior varies greatly from one Voidshifter to another, from indifference to sight-based attack, but it is highly recommended to not provoke them. Even if confrontation is inevitable, absolutely avoid close combat unless you're prepared to squander months, if not years of your life.

As for their strength, Voidshifters are born at least as Rank 6 Digestors, and their humanoid variant is considered one of their most promising evolutions, with the potential to reach the apex of their food chain.

Many Digestors at the pinnacle of their hierarchy, who are now treated as absolute apocalyptic threats across all Mirror Universes, carry the bloodline of a Voidshifter in their genome, whether they were born that way or devoured one. Digestors are not beyond hunting their own kind in pursuit of optimal evolution, making newborn Voidshifters vulnerable prey and solitary creatures.]

Chapter 992: I've Bitten My Tongue Again

"I'd bet my boots that one or more of those creatures is what's holding Cekt back." Jake voiced aloud, an air of revelation dancing in his eyes. "It would explain the temporal distortion." Yet, in an unexpected twist, Xi didn't share his confidence; her doubts echoing within his mind due to their soul connection.

"Xi?"

[It's nothing.] She reassured him with her soothing voice, but he could feel her lingering worry. [I hope I am wrong. Even if I am right, it is already too late, anyway.]

Jake gave her the space she needed, sensing where her fears might be rooted.

Their optimistic hypotheses only held water if they underestimated the Dungeon Digestor that had claimed the Magnetic Resonator for itself. So far, the creature's performance had been disappointing, seemingly validating their assumptions. But this could just be a trap.

Had they been snared by the enemy's ploy from the very beginning, their strings plucked by a puppet master?

THUD, THUD, THUD!

As if the Dungeon Digestor sought to confirm Jake's suspicions, he, Siri, and Ulfar turned around with a start, hearts pounding in their chests as the ground shook beneath the heavy footfalls of an approach. The newcomer's entrance was as subtle as a thunderstorm - the silhouette of a muscular, four-armed behemoth impossible to forget.

A blink of an eye later, the towering figure of Saros, standing well over four meters tall, skidded to a halt before them, scrutinizing them from a height with a reproachful gaze.

"I finally caught up with you, hehe," the Oracle Guardian chuckled, but the fury in his bloodshot eyes and the throbbing vein along his temple betrayed his apparent delight.

This was the first time he had failed so miserably in one of his missions. Being duped and outwitted by a post-Fourth-Ordeal Player, even if it was an Oracle Knight, was a humiliation that would likely haunt him for a long time.

Worse, it was a blot on his record that could never be erased. The Oracle System archived everything, and even though they were currently offline, it would update immediately once they reconnected. His superiors would instantly be informed of his blunder, and there would go his next promotion!

"Jake, you owe me an ex-" Saros began, his voice laced with heated fury, but Jake cut him off with an icy stare.

"Easy, big guy. It's not your fault. You couldn't have stopped this. But we have more urgent priorities. How did you find us? Were you attacked on your way?"

Saros, who was ready to unleash his pent-up frustrations, was taken aback by the barrage of unexpected questions. What the heck was he talking about?

However, the seriousness on their faces suggested that things were not as they seemed. On closer reflection, his journey had been largely uneventful, other than wandering the funnel for a long time before suddenly finding a path large enough for his massive body.

He had been so elated at finally finding an exit that he had not given it a second thought, diving straight in. Once inside, he found himself in a long, straight, dull corridor with no complex intersections to choose from.

With only one way to go and his high stats, it had taken him just a few minutes before Jake and the others appeared before him. He had been relieved that all ended well, but perhaps he had celebrated prematurely.

Sensing something was amiss, a shiver of foreboding ran down his spine, and he opened his mouth to...

"I-"

SHRRRRRRRR!

The noise that filled the air wasn't the screeching wail of a Digestor, but a metallic grinding--steel gnashing against steel.

Jake, Saros, and the rest spun around, their faces slack with astonishment. The passage from which the Oracle Guardian had emerged was abruptly contracting, its metallic structure briefly seeming to return to a state of fluid malleability.

If this was the only trick in play, Jake would have deemed it a Dungeon Digestor's ploy to cut off their retreat. But when the corridors from which he and Ulfar had emerged closed in a similarly magical fashion, their hearts plummeted.

"Is it trying to trap us here?" Jake mused, furrowing his brow in deep contemplation.

If so, to what end? The Dungeon Digestor surely knew of his ways to forcefully carve a path. It wasn't as if simply sealing off the exits was enough to trap him.

He was soon granted an answer to his questions, much to his chagrin.

The ground, which Jake had until now believed to be level or, at the very least, aligned with gravity, abruptly inclined downward until it was nearly vertical.

Unfazed, Jake remained upright, arms folded, as though his feet bore the adhesive hairs of a spider. But Ulfar, still grappling with his curse of misfortune, was flung headfirst into the opposite wall as though catapulted. If not for Saros, who snagged him by the scruff of his neck, who could say what fate might have befallen him.

This was no laughing matter. A simple fall could hardly kill an Evolver of Ulfar's caliber, even when cursed. Yet, seeing the metallic waves recede from the spot where Ulfar was poised to crash, Jake's eyes narrowed, acknowledging the near-fatal escape his friend had just made.

The newly formed corridor led straight to the Conversion Chamber, the very place where the Magnetic Field Disruptor was located...

How did Jake know this? Because the corridor had appeared right beneath the one Saros had come through.

From its angle... It was clear. This new pathway could only lead to the Conversion Chamber.

But why now? And how could this have been Ulfar's death sentence had he fallen in? Jake and the others racked their brains for answers, but when they were engulfed by the most monstrous magnetic field they had ever encountered, comprehension dawned on them.

Had Siri still possessed her former android body, an EMP of this magnitude would have most likely fried her old circuits. For the first time, she was happy to have swapped bodies.

"Fuck you, Ulfar! Can't you keep your goddamn curse to yourself?!" Jake spewed out, his voice a cocktail of frustration and incredulity.

"Damn it! Do you think I chose this fate?!" Ulfar roared back, his face reddened and bloated with rage. He had never felt so wronged.

"Fuck! By Beskyr's bow, I've bitten my tongue again!"

Witnessing the once dignified and majestic King of Beskyr squeal in pain, blood trickling from a bitten tongue, Jake momentarily forgot the biting retorts he had prepared, pity taking their place.

"..."

"Guys!" Saros interjected, anxiety lacing his voice. "Sort out your issues later. We have a far more pressing problem."

The Oracle Guardian had already installed a broad spherical steel shield to block the entrance of the corridor leading to the Conversion Chamber, but within milliseconds its surface was already glowing a scorching red.

Jake and Ulfar froze, desperately trying to remember what followed the activation of the Magnetic Field Disruptor. Jake wasn't fearful of a magnetic field of such intensity, but he knew this was just the beginning!

A sudden lurch, followed by a swift jerk to their right, made it clear that the Magnetic Resonator had made a swerve, drawing nearer to the black hole's event horizon.

"Oh no..." The color drained from their faces, their expressions turning ashen, Saros included.

After the magnetic field's activation by the Magnetic Field Disruptor, there was the clash with the black hole's magnetic field-hence its moniker. And logically what came next was...

BOOOOOOM!

The plasma storm!

If Saros's shield, a Silver Aether Artifact, was already red-hot from a mere magnetic field, they could only imagine the aftermath when the blast from such an energy storm would spill into the corridor behind.

Instant annihilation!

Suddenly, the fact that the exits had closed around them became chillingly clear. It was indeed a trap.

The Dungeon Digestor had laid its cards on the table, turning the room they were grouped in into their tomb.

Following the first explosion, a second, even louder one resounded, and the sight of the Silver-Aether Artifact glowing white-hot before starting to evaporate sent shivers down their spines.

"BRACE YOURSELVES!" Saros bellowed, taking refuge beneath his own energy shield without a care for the others.

What remained of the round shield blocking the corridor, once a precious Silver Aether Artifact, completely vaporized, and a flash of blinding white light swallowed their sight.

Chapter 993: Whoever Did This, You're Dead

As the approaching plasma blast threatened to scorch his retina, Jake's pupils failed to constrict. Rather than surrender to panic, his mental sense enveloped Siri and Ulfar without their consent. Their spirit strength was too feeble to resist his influence, so he promptly teleported them into his Inner Space Dimension.

This was the place where he kept all his reserves of biomass. It was a realm that could support life without draining vitality.

"Apologies, mates, but you'll thank me later." His telepathic apology faded into the darkness, leaving them with tons of unexplained biomass.

"What the h-" Ulfar began to protest, but Jake's consciousness had already withdrawn.

It was then that a sharp, unbearable pain radiated through Ulfar's left arm, wrenching an agonized groan from him. He realized that in being moved to this unknown place, he had lost an arm in the process.

The result of a spatial distortion. But what were the odds of such an accident happening when Jake had perfect control of his abilities?

Practically zero...

"Aaaaaarrgh! Damn my rotten luck!"

As Ulfar cursed his fate with all his might, oblivious to his fellow captive Siri, who was watching his spectacle with a fed-up face, Jake had already forgotten about them. His attention was wholly consumed by possibly the most perilous situation of his brief existence.

The plasma blast was now only a few centimeters away, moving at several tens of kilometers per second.

At that instant, Jake's instincts outpaced even his reflexes and reason. His dormant cells surged into hyperactivity well before the reason. His dormant cells surged into hyperactivity well before the heat blast arrived, responding to the intense electromagnetic radiations.

In a millionth of a second, his skin vitrified, transforming into perfect crystal prisms to refract the light in all directions. The surrounding Voidsteel walls were immediately bathed in the redirected rays, and the embedded Aether Arrays activated automatically to dissipate the threat.

But that was only the beginning, and a millionth of a second later, the plasma blast finally hit Jake. He reflexively raised his hands in front of him, his body already enveloped in an exquisite armor of black chitin scales based on Voidsteel. A thick halo of Cosmic Force radiated from his body, forming a protective vacuum sphere around him.

BANG!

The plasma tsunami crashed against his defensive force field, propelling him and the shielded Jake against the Voidsteel wall behind at a speed surpassing dozens of times the speed of sound.

From Jake's perspective, it was as if he was a spaceship abruptly entering hyperspace, except he was being violently thrown backward. Cocooned within his Cosmic Force halo and chitin armor, he felt nothing.

However, he heard the Voidsteel wall squeal as it distorted to form a deep crater behind him as he crashed into it, something he couldn't achieve with brute force alone.

"Ouch..." Jake winced, having heard his neck crack under the impact. Thankfully, nothing was broken.

Yet, he didn't rejoice, having anticipated surviving the collision with the initial superheated plasma wave. If he didn't have a precise understanding of his physical and mental prowess with his cognitive faculties, all his intelligence points would have been a waste.

With his current Force, Agility, and Constitution, Jake could achieve running speeds of several hundred kilometers per second on Earth without breaking a sweat. This wasn't about reaching such velocity in outer space but in Earth's atmosphere, where friction forces would increase exponentially with his speed.

At such a speed, the air was like an indestructible wall, and Jake could still smash through it.

Even though the Aether density here was amplified, reinforcing the physical laws, this plasma storm was too sluggish to cause him any harm. Not after he'd established all his defensive measures.

The danger was elsewhere.

"It's getting hot," Jake's facial muscles gave a telltale twitch as his halo of Cosmic Force destabilized, the corridor funneling an ever-increasing torrent of chaotic plasma into their confined space.

Despite his protective force field, designed to completely arrest the external plasma storm, Jake found the light increasingly blinding to the point of squinting his eyes. An absolutely unfavorable sign.

Observing his halo of Cosmic Force begin to flicker and crackle, then blink erratically, Jake grimaced. His protective force wouldn't last much longer.

'I still have some time, but I need a more permanent solution.' Jake grimly calculated in his head, taking into account the rising plasma temperature in the room.

Temperature increase meant more molecular agitation and radiation. This agitation was nothing more than kinetic energy, and his heat resistance unfortunately didn't extend as effectively to his Cosmic Force. If it exceeded a certain limit, space would collapse.

Moreover, his Cosmic Force was mind-controlled, and even if he could command it from a distance through a strand of spiritual energy without risking harm, maintaining his telekinesis would become increasingly challenging as the chaotic forces surged.

It was easy to forget, but the Spirit Body and Soul were by default far more vulnerable to energy sources like electricity, radiation, or heat. Anything could destabilize them, especially at lower levels. This was why the existence of the soul, as defined by the Oracle System, was deemed impossible on earth.

However, Jake's Spirit Body and Soul were exceptions compared to most other Evolvers, with the Cosmic Attribute and his adaptive abilities even transferring to them.

From this, Jake estimated he could endure for another minute or two, granting him enough time to devise a solution.

Which was why, shortly after, Jake's eyes almost bulged from their sockets when, without any forewarning, the plasma wall slammed against his face with a temperature, radiance, and velocity that far outstripped his predictions... by several minutes!

The temporal inconsistencies in Siri's recording, where Ulfar and Lucia were mysteriously bested, sprang to his mind, but it was already too late. The wall of white light swallowed him, searing his retinas, and then everything went dark as his body embedded in the Voidsteel wall was flattened like a pancake.

Despite his daze and pain, Jake didn't lose consciousness. A powerful surge of life force welled up from the depths of his cells to repair the damage. The biomass stockpiled in his inner Space Dimension was automatically siphoned off, replacing his blood, flesh, and bones that were too damaged to recover in time.

Without any conscious intent, his sufficiently intact cells also began to voraciously absorb the chaotic energy of the plasma storm, nearly imploding before abruptly emitting it as chilled energy.

The key power of his Cosmic D Starfeyrves Bloodline finally came into play.

A pale blue halo of sheer cold emanated from his being, freezing the plasma storm that was melting his tissues with unrivaled ferocity.

A pale blue halo of sheer cold emanated from his being, freezing the plasma storm that was melting his tissues with unrivaled ferocity.

Whether it was the Grade 10 Energy of his body, mind, or soul, all were operating at full capacity, drawing astronomical quantities of pure Aether from some unknown source, sustaining this terrifying Ice Spell.

The pain receded, becoming manageable, and Jake opened his eyes, the silver-black vortexes within instinctively retaliating with a beam of destructive darkness, obliterating the frozen plasma in front of him over several tens of meters, wiping it from existence.

Still a bit dazed, Jake extricated himself from the Voidsteel crater with a grimace of pain while his chitinous armor regenerated visibly.

His appearance and aura had changed, emitting a frosty chill capable of freezing even a star.

It was the pinnacle that his Heat-Cold Manipulation could reach: converting one into the other, and vice versa. Jake didn't claim to have reached such a level, but his bloodline had achieved this feat by itself.

His Adaptation Power demonstrated once again how unfathomably potent it could be.

Discovering the frozen plasma tsunami around him, Jake was the first to be flabbergasted, his mouth agape in disbelief. However, his vigilance quickly returned upon noticing the frozen plasma already beginning to glow and evaporate, indicating the plasma storm on the other side was still escalating.

Now, Jake knew what he had to do and swiftly waved his hand to summon a Spatial Blade into the severely damaged Voidsteel wall behind him, making his escape.

But once again, barely had the thought surfaced, the view before his eyes shifted, replaced by a plasma blast to his face hotter than the last. Before he could even register the pain, Jake immediately realized he was victim to another temporal distortion messing with his senses. As he was once more flattened, then reduced to a bubbling paste against the Voidsteel surface, he roared furiously,

"Whoever did this, you're DEAD, motherfucker!"