

## The Fall 1044

### [Chapter 1044 - Karmic Debt](#)

"Well..." Ogras said, his voice trailing off as his perfect plan suddenly felt in need of revision.

Zac's voice had an unmistakable mix of disbelief and mirth, and Ogras couldn't blame him. The description of the Shifting Dreamgeist hadn't painted a vivid picture, but it paled to the real thing.

The Dreamgeist was only one meter tall, looking like an incredibly fat floating baby. A baby born from the unholy union of an ogre and a de-feathered rooster, having three tentacles instead of stubby little legs. The thing had thin purple eyes whose pupils moved independently of each other as it took in the surroundings and a wide, flat beak that seemed perpetually locked in a brainless smile.

It had no feathers or scales. It rather seemed to be born from the clouds that made up most of the Dream Shift. But the clouds were more condensed, like they had been crammed into a container too small a size. Its whole body shuddered and rippled like it would erupt at any moment. Altogether, it looked one part ugly and two parts stupid—a far cry from the intimidating creatures Ogras had first considered for the next layer of the [Spiritlock Physique].

"Won't you turn into that thing if you fight?" Zac said, looking at him askance.

"Not necessarily," Ogras coughed. "I can choose which aspects I use when activating the lock. Besides, I don't want this thing for its appearance. I want it for its affinities and Bloodline Talent. I walk the path of the Illusory Shade, but my affinity to the Peak of Fantasy will hold me back unless something changes.

"The two beasts provided by master drastically improved my affinity to Shadows, and the Dreamgeist's bloodline is far greater than both of them. Its Bloodline Talent is also a perfect match to my flag. Who cares what it looks like?"

Ogras normally wasn't one to share the details of his path, but what could he do? This odd bastard would ruin his good name if he didn't clarify things. A little bit of pillow talk and that obsidian-eyed vixen would have ammunition for the next couple of years.

"If you say so," Zac said, clearly holding back a laugh.

"Whatever," Ogras spat. "Just help me deal with its minions, and I'll do the rest. Be careful not to harm it."

That bastard Rez obviously had a plan with his soul-grafting experiment, even if his execution had been laughably crude. The Umbra had been an assassin, and he'd picked creatures useful for his own craft. The planeswalker was a shadow elemental who excelled at moving unseen. Its enemies were dead before they had a chance to realize someone was targeting them from the shadows.

The Umbric Recluse was a silent hunter, using shadows to bind and weaken their enemies. The moment its prey stepped out of the sun's protective rays, they were already doomed. Its unique shadow manipulation would allow an assassin to force an opening without so much as a Cosmic Energy ripple that could be exposed.

Both were useful, and things had worked out well in the end. Of course, that was no thanks to his dear master, who had never intended to leave a true inheritance. To do so would potentially have exposed

his techniques, and a paid dagger couldn't have that. So, the Towers of Myriad Dao was just filled with random things he'd picked up, along with a few mad ideas he had never dared try on himself.

But Ogras had no plans to come knocking at that bastard's door again. Rez had nothing of use, and Ogras wasn't interested in his teachings. If Ogras ever stepped into the Umbra's domain, it would be to snuff out the soul remnant for the same reason there was no true inheritance. Couldn't have some unreliable soul remnant know his secrets.

Either way, it was time for him to pave his own path.

He'd already acquired a new Cultivation Manual to replace the [Grey World Mudra] in exchange for 2 C-grade Nexus Coins and a supreme material he got with the numerology book. It could take him much further, and it better accommodated his new broader path. There were only two problems with it, apart from not having been fully tuned to his path just yet.

The first was its exceedingly high requirements when it came to affinity. He had passed the mark when it came to the Dao of Shadows, but his illusory affinity was not yet up to par. This Dreamgeist should solve that problem in one fell swoop.

The other problem was trickier; altering the method to suit his unique constitution. But he had already made good headway in that department. The manual should already be workable, providing greater cultivation speeds, multipliers, and energy circulation than [Grey World Mudra]. Any kinks he failed to work out could just be fixed with the final piece of his seal. Ogras could see his path widening, and the Shifting Dreamgeist was the key.

Suddenly, it didn't seem so ugly. It was almost a bit cute.

"Come here, you little rascal," Ogras grinned as a pulse shook the proverbial spirit lock hidden in his chest.

Pain wracked Ogras's body as it was remolded into an avatar based on his Ka'Zur Planeswalker and the Umbric Recluse. He hated this part, but it was hard to say no to the extra attributes that the transformation provided.

The Dreamgeist shrieked upon spotting the intruders, and a powerful purple glow radiated from its previously unfocused eyes. Its body faded, but the world suddenly turned black. A deathly swirl closed off the region while a pillar that elicited a primal dread rose from the ground. It was a good reminder. Most of the time, Zac seemed like an above-board and straightforward guy. Then he went and created something twisted like this. The guy had range.

The cage slowed down the Dreamgeist's shift but failed to cancel it. It was enough time for two shadowy tendrils to slap it away, leaving binding marks on its body. That was enough to tether the beast to the region, and the Dreamgeist seemed to have realized that fact. The whole cage flickered as hundreds of beasts appeared, each with a Hegemon's strength.

Ogras didn't bother with those things. The pillar behind him was already sending out a net of chains. The captured minions could shift in and out of reality after having been reforged by the Dreamgeist, but it was enough to keep them busy. Zac was already in the thick of it, chains and blades dancing around him as he contained the beast tide.

Leaving the Dreamgeist exposed. Its ability to capture beasts and turn them into illusory dreams under its control was terrifying, but its own combat ability wasn't anything special. With his buddy paving the path, the beast was ripe for the plucking.

"You can only blame yourself for being too talented. Who asked you to toy with a whole coalition on your own?"

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"I give," Thea panted, her heart full of reluctance.

"Don't look so glum. You're making great strides on your technique," Amanthi said as he removed his staff from her shoulder.

"Not enough to even leave a cut on your kasaya," Thea muttered as the two flew down to the ground.

"You're just a kid, and it takes time to build a temple that can withstand the test of the ages," Amanthi smiled. "Besides, your variegated background left you with some gaps that needed to be mended. You will improve even quicker now that you've found a more cohesive plan and some proper techniques."

Thea nodded. She had to admit the Sangha was treating her exceedingly well in her position as a 'guide.' The amount of resources provided for her cultivation was nothing short of shocking, and she was allowed to peruse the enormous repository in the spacefaring pagoda freely. Body Tempering, Soul Strengthening, Intent Molding, all kinds of magical methods and skills she didn't know existed.

All hers for the taking, should she desire them.

It had felt generous to the point it was beyond suspicious, and she hadn't dared touch anything for over a month. Thea still felt the whole situation surreal, but she had long since caved when it came to helping herself to the various amenities. There was obviously something weird going on, but she was just Thea Marshall, a random Early Hegemon with decent talent.

If the Buddhist Sangha wanted to deal with her, they easily could have. She'd seen them turn an unrepentant Monarch into a devout nun. What resistance could she possibly put up? And there wasn't much else to do on the ship than cultivate. Her 'job' barely took up any of her time, and if she had to listen to another debate on the Dharma between those insufferable monks, she'd go mad.

She couldn't believe these people could spend weeks discussing things like the Karmic relationship between a stalk of grass and a raindrop. Amanthi was one of the few people not driving her up the walls. As a Dharmic Guardian, his role seemed more like that of an elite soldier than a spiritual cultivator.

A bell suddenly tolled, and Thea looked up with a frown. So it was time.

"Just get it over with," Amanthi said.

"Why not just tell me what that thing is?" Thea frowned.

"It's out of my hands," Amanthi said. "I'm just here to swing my staff around. You'll have to convince the little arhats."

Thea grumbled as the two walked to the top level of the multistoried pagoda. It was fifty meters across, and the myriad stars of the cosmos were on full display above. Sixteen young monks and nuns were already sitting around the golden array in the middle. A few looked over with kind smiles, but most ignored her existence. They seemed fully consumed by intoning one scripture or another, having closed off their surroundings.

"Benefactor, we hope you can light up the path once more," a nun said as Thea walked over.

Thea looked at the golden array that hummed with vigor. It exuded mysterious ripples, like it held the universe within. Thea couldn't stop a pang of desire as she looked at the intricate patterns. That feeling of stepping onto the array was indescribable. Of suddenly feeling connected to all creation, being one with the cosmos. But it was a false sensation, and she was filled with greater reluctance every time she was brought back to reality.

She didn't know why, but today was the day. Years had passed, and she'd finally reached her limit.

"No," Thea slowly said.

Her volume was low, but it felt like her rejection shook the whole hall. The silent chanting stopped, and sixteen pairs of eyes locked onto her.

"No?" the nun repeated, looking up at her with confusion.

"No, I won't," Thea said, taking a step back. "I'm not stepping into that thing again until you tell me what's going on. This weird cult shit has gone on long enough."

"I assure you the array is perfectly safe," Amanthi said from the side with a troubled look.

"I don't care. You people are way too suspicious. Why me? I know I'm not anyone special. I'm weaker than everyone here," Thea said, glaring at her sparring partner. "The only thing I can come up with is my background. My home planet, my—"

Thea stopped in her tracks. She couldn't call him her partner anymore. Over a decade had passed, and he thought she was dead.

"My loved ones," Thea continued. "I'm not stepping onto this goddamned thing again until I get some answers!"

"Benefactor's train of thought has merit," an unfamiliar voice echoed through the halls. "But it is but a part of the tapestry."

"You!" Thea said, her eyes wide with shock as she saw the new arrival.

"This poor monk didn't expect fate to bring him back to this region so soon," Abbot Everlasting Peace smiled.

"Well, it's safe to return now that Zac ran himself ragged to deal with the mess you left behind," Thea glared.

The abbot gave no rebuttal and only turned to the youthful monk sitting at the central position. His name was Crystallized Enlightenment, and the de-facto leader of his group as far as Thea could tell. She

didn't know much about him, though. He never joined the debates or made any move to converse with her. But his aura felt as vast as an ocean, bottomless and unfathomable. Just the thought of fighting him filled Thea with despair.

"This is not what we agreed upon," Crystallized Enlightenment said, his voice seemingly coming from both the future and the past.

A small frown of displeasure had appeared on his usually impassive face, and she felt a weak pull like reality was being twisted. The feeling filled her with dread, but a calming wind swept away the sensation of doom. It had only lasted a moment, but Thea's back was already slick with sweat.

"You said you wouldn't impede the search."

"This poor monk believes he is aiding it. Forcing fate will only steer us toward a sea of regret," Everlasting Peace said.

"Your attachment to your past life is an anchor," Crystallized Enlightenment muttered. "Karma binds you, clouds your judgment. The Dharma will forever elude you unless you free yourself."

"If this poor monk had severed Karma, he wouldn't be standing here," Everlasting Peace smiled. "That is not my path. Whatever Karma I create, be it good or evil, I shall bear to the end."

"Eh, why not just tell her?" Amanthi added from behind, his calm voice cutting through the tension. "Might even improve the outcome."

Crystallized Enlightenment said nothing. He only looked at Thea for a few seconds before closing his eyes. But Thea's heart beat in excitement. It felt like acquiescence.

"Benefactor, follow me," Everlasting Peace smiled.

"What's going on?" Thea asked after they entered a side chamber. "You're back? Why?"

"This poor monk was truly supposed to cut ties with Zecia. But great events are taking place, and fate brought me back," Abbot Everlasting Peace said. "Our mission is one piece of the puzzle."

"That doesn't explain anything."

The monk smiled and formed a mudra. A golden sigil appeared before him, and Thea gasped as hundreds of threads sprung from her body. Some were thick, others were so thin they were barely visible. A few filled her with dread and hatred, others warmth and longing. The latter mostly pointed in the same direction, stretching impossibly far.

It didn't take long to figure out they were her karmic threads, the intangible links to those who'd crossed her path over the years.

"Just as benefactor guessed, this all relates to that young man," Abbot Everlasting Peace nodded. "The Super Brother Man. Zachary Atwood, the ruler of the Atwood Empire."

"Atwood Empire?" Thea muttered with disbelief, a small smile spreading across her lips.

She could almost picture Zac's reluctant and anxious expression as he was pushed higher and higher on the Multiversal hierarchy. Was he still grumbling about all the missives that kept appearing on his doorsteps? Did he still sneak into the wilderness just to swing his axe around for a few days?

"How is he doing?" Thea asked. "Is he okay?"

"That man is a shining beacon of providence," Abbott Everlasting Peace said. "He has advanced by leaps and bounds, surviving great tribulations. He's ushered in an era of prosperity for Earth while steadily advancing on his path."

Thea took a steadying breath. So he was okay. Her thoughts were a confused mess. Earth had seemed so distant since she stepped foot on the Goldblade Continent. Now, it all came crashing back, and she suddenly found herself overwhelmed by longing.

"That young man triggered the whole chain of events that brought us together," Abbott Everlasting Peace continued, shaking his head like he still couldn't believe it. "That's what brought us to you."

Just like she thought.

"So those monks appearing before me on the Goldblade Continent wasn't a coincidence, huh?" Thea said, her voice dripping with sarcasm.

"Few things are coincidence. Fate and Karma binds us all," Everlasting Peace smiled. "In fact, my master had met benefactor Atwood shortly before meeting yourself."

"Your master?" Thea said, remembering Zac's description of Lord 84th. "I don't think I've met him?"

"This poor Monk is referring to His Eminence Three Virtues," the monk explained.

Thea's heart shuddered at the name. The scene of that chubby little monk dominating the Hallowed Mother still lived on in her mind. He could have squashed her like a bug if he'd wanted to. Yet, her most vivid memory was Three Virtues' shifty expression as he stole her treasures, all while talking about fate bringing them together. So that weirdo was Everlasting Peace's new master.

"Benefactor Atwood is like a stone dropped in a tranquil pond," the abbot continued. "His actions have created ripples of fate. For most, they are just that. Ripples. But with the right tools, with the right people, they can become a map."

"A map to what?" Thea asked.

"It is a long story."

"I have nothing but time."

The abbot smiled and slowly began unraveling the truth of the meandering journey she'd been on for years. She knew these monks weren't so free as to simply gallivant around in space for fun, but the truth far exceeded even her wildest dreams. Eight pillars of the System and Eternal Heritages from previous realities.

The Left Imperial Palace, nine outer courts. A trial for the younger generation, where the winner would be able to help their faction seize the main prize.

"And Zac triggered all that?" Thea asked with disbelief.

"His fate is like a mighty river," Abbot Everlasting Peace nodded.

"And how do I fit into all that?"

"You have an immensely powerful Karmic Link to him," Everlasting Peace said. "And there's Karmic Debt."

"He doesn't owe me anything," Thea frowned. "What happened between us was out of his hands."

"He doesn't feel that way," the abbot said. "Karma is a tricky thing. Perception can greatly affect its nature. He believes he is responsible for your fate, and thus Karma is sown."

Thea sighed. She could guess the thoughts running through his mind. Seeing his mother do something like that... It had to mess with your head. To carry that on your shoulders for years... she still couldn't believe Leandra Atwood could be so callous. Poor Kenzie, being stuck with that lunatic.

"The Boundless Sea Array allows you to use that link to harmonize with his fate. Benefactor Atwood is the originator of the event. Thus, he has some fate with every seal released into the Cosmos. We use that fact to pick up some pieces before they're dragged toward Zecia."

"So you're using my Karmic Link to steal Zac's opportunities?" Thea frowned.

"Not at all," Abbot Everlasting Peace rejected. "Hundreds of seals have been released, and our young friend is only fated for a fraction. Any more would do more harm than good. How many from our old home can withstand an event like this?"

That was obviously not the full truth. The monks weren't doing this out of benevolence. They wanted the Eternal Heritage, so they were doing everything possible to snatch as many tickets as possible. But she had to admit the monk was right. What could some earthlings accomplish if ancient factions were entering the fray, sending their most powerful centennials?

Even if Zac managed to provide the best opportunities and resources, so what? How could the Frontier compare to the Heartlands? She'd seen how vastly superior the Goldblade Continent was, and that was just a C-grade continent outside the System's purview.

The people of Earth hadn't even cultivated for two decades and were supposed to compete with people who had cultivated for over eighty? Going against people like Crystallized Insight? Even Zac would be in trouble, let alone everyone else. The thought alone made her sick with worry, and her thoughts rapidly spun.

"You're talking like you're trying to help, but you're just trying to sneak in the backdoor. Using me as the key," Thea concluded, looking at the abbot with an even stare. "Looks like nothing has changed. You guys really are a shameless bunch."

"We assure you, we have no designs on Benefactor Atwood. If anything, we have a good relationship. Furthermore, using the Boundless Fate Array leaves us with great Karmic debt to benefactor Atwood. To even out Karma, the Sanga will do its utmost in protecting him and his people inside," Everlasting Peace said. "The more people miss can guide into the trial, the better his position will be."

Thea tried to discern what was true and false on the abbot's face, but it was just as inscrutable as with all the other monks. Minutes passed, and Thea slowly reached a conclusion.

"I can continue to help you. But I will not step into that array until you agree with two of my conditions," Thea said. "One, every single one of you will swear a Dharmic oath in front of me that you will not target Zac or his followers."

"It will be done," Everlasting Peace said, and Thea felt he even looked quite happy with the proclamation.

"Secondly, I am getting one of those seals."