

Oracle 801

Chapter 801 I'm Glad To See You Too

Once Craig recovered from his earlier flight and landing, the two men could finally focus on the ice palace before them.

It was a magnificent crystalline structure with an unearthly charm, but the cold radiating from its walls constantly ruined that first favorable impression. The architecture and finishing touches were exquisite with beautiful ice sculptures representing various, alas, all too familiar creatures.

"Is it me or does that gargoyle look like a Digestor..." Craig cleared his throat uncomfortably.

"Yep, it's the spitting image of a Rank 4." Jake grumbled with a wince.

Apparently since their separation, Ruby had decided to dabble in art. Her artistic influences were... very conspicuous.

The duo trudged resolutely toward the entrance of the palace, and with the first step a searing chill shot through their boots, creeping up through their bodies and freezing their legs in place. Jake discharged a blast of searing heat and pulled his boot free with ease.

At the same time, Craig drew an Aether Symbol in the air with great panache, and after casting it on himself, his body became covered in a fiery halo of flame that repelled the biting cold that had already completely frozen over half his chest. Soon the ice melted away and the blood began to flow normally through his aching limbs.

"You're an Aetherist." Jake commented with unfeigned amazement.

The chubby Player scratched his head in embarrassment and coughed,

"Well, I guess I'm one. Just a beginner though. The army trained me for this purpose because as a kid I didn't like fighting and I had a talent for drawing and memorizing, but many things have changed since..."

"Since you were a kid?" Jake picked up with a raised eyebrow. "You mean the Earth Union determines what kind of Evolvers you'll become in your stead?"

It was now Craig's turn to wince.

"Yes and no. After the False World War in 2084, the Earth government was unified and they created the Prodigies program that you may have indirectly heard about. The virtual video game Trial Worlds was supposed to screen exceptional talents who would be groomed into the next generation of super-soldiers, preferably loyal to the Earth Union.

"In 2089 I was 8 years old and my 219th place in the world rankings got me spotted early on and they made an offer to the orphanage where I lived that they couldn't refuse. Officially, I grew up as a ward of the state with other prodigies selected like me. Some were recruited from Trial Worlds, others were the children of influential generals and politicians. There were also some sons of billionaires. The program is called Prodigies, but only a tad more than half actually fit that definition.

"We were taken to a secret military base somewhere in Antarctica and given additional tests including IQ, physical, artistic, creative, psychological prowess and so on. In their records, I am a type A genius, high intellectual and emotional quotient, photographic and sensory-motor memory, perfect hand-eye coordination and excellent dexterity. Basically, I can draw anything I see and can easily imitate a technique or movement."

"That doesn't sound too bad." Jake said as he began to advance towards the palace again.

Craig cast a few more Aether Spells to solidify his heat aura and ran after the Myrtharian to keep up with him. Once he was next to Jake, he sheepishly admitted,

"It wasn't so bad... At first. I was placed in a group of about 100 kids my age of all nationalities and we soon became friends. That's where I became friends with Ryo and the other members of the team.

"As a kid I wanted to be a boxer. When they started to train us in martial arts and I became a little less cowardly, I started to hate all the boring lessons that were being imposed on me. I drew weird symbols until my hands bled, and was even forced to learn alien languages like Oraclean and all sorts of theories about the Aether and other forms of energy flourishing in the Mirror Universe. As you can guess, it was the content of the Novice Aether Manipulation Manual.

"This is where I really got to know Ruby. She was the only child in my group to take these lessons with me. As a child, because of her disabilities, she didn't talk to many people and many wondered what she was even doing here. Because the person in charge of the project was her aunt, Colonel Hale, she was never picked on. But even then, Ruby was an amazing girl. I've never met anyone so kind and caring. She was funny, she was bubbly, she knew how to console us when we were sad and she always smiled.

"If you would have known her like I and the others did, you would understand why we cared so much about her."

Jake had a hard time reconciling the current Ruby with the one Craig described. The flashback of his first meeting with the white-haired woman popped up in his mind and for a brief moment he could picture such a person.

But soon another memory took its place, the one where she emotionlessly stripped him after he risked his life to save her because of a goddamn Ordeal Mission. While her beauty was now borderline angelic, she looked more hideous and repulsive to him than ever.

"From what you say," Jake resumed with a puzzled look. "I don't feel like you were forced to become a certain type of Evolver. You had to learn more things than the others, but your general training was the same as theirs. I'd be more inclined to say that they were the discriminated kids."

Craig did not respond directly. They had reached the entrance to the palace and the cold radiating from it was such that he was forced to weave several more Fire Spells to endure the icy sensation seeping into his bones. Jake released more heat and the ice was vaporized around him, a plasma sphere separating him from the surrounding cold.

"Aye, that's cool." The coated Player sighed enviously as he looked at the tiny halo of heat coating his hands. "To answer your question, that was true until our First Ordeal a little over a year ago. We are contract soldiers and must surrender all of our Ordeal rewards to the Earth Union. Therefore, with the

exception of the special rewards the Ordeals sometimes grant us, no we have no control over our future.

"I consider myself lucky. An Aetherist Brawler with a Djinn Bloodline doesn't sound too bad."

"Djinn Bloodline?"

"Remember the weird alien with the pink-haired chick who hung out with you during our Second Ordeal? The one who spent all his time sleeping, but miraculously always came out on top? Well, my bloodline looks a little like his... only not nearly as good."

"Which means?" Jake asked curiously.

"Basically, I'm just a support. My power has a wide range of applications, but I can only use it to grant the wishes of the person in possession of my 'lamp' and never more than three wishes. In theory, I can free myself from the lamp if the person wishes to free me, but the army follows strict protocols to prevent this from happening. In our team, Alef and Wang, our superiors and instructors alternate with my lamp. After three wishes, Wang takes back the lamp and vice versa. This is one of the loopholes in my bloodline. The sad thing about this is that my bloodline evolves by making as many wishes as possible so I'm screwed..."

"Why are you telling me all this? Aren't you afraid I'll steal your instructor's lamp?" Jake couldn't figure out what he was getting at.

Just as Craig was about to give him his answer, both men suddenly dove to the ground.

BANG!

The ice floor imploded, releasing a blast of negative energy, and their body temperatures instantly dropped below zero.

Jake's cells felt a life-threatening danger, his internal furnace kicked in and veins of lava more blinding than the sun shone through his skin. His temperature soared and he regained his ability to move just in time to block a monstrous claw with his adamantium-covered forehead.

SCREEEECH!

The silver claw scraped against the metal and Jake took the opportunity to grab its arm and swing the monster it belonged to over its head in a jiu-jitsu-like grip. The creature smashed into the ice floor, long cracks embrittling the entire palace.

Jake didn't hesitate for a second and summoned the God Slayer Katana, then grabbing the hilt with both hands he pointed the blade at the ground and impaled the monster's brain.

The silver chitin plates that made the creature unrecognizable peeled away one by one, and a humanoid Digestor that vaguely resembled Ruby revealed itself to him. As soon as their eyes met, she hissed at him and spat a laser of ice at point blank range.

Jake opened his mouth and responded with his own beam, a mixture of light, plasma and lightning heated to several hundred thousand degrees. The monster's frozen laser was snuffed out instantly and a steaming hole replaced the lower half of Ruby's face.

"Don't say it." Jake chuckled. "I'm glad to see you too."

Chapter 802 who Am I?

Before Ruby's head could regenerate, he grabbed her left shoulder with an iron grip to keep her from toppling over, and then struck Ruby's right temple with the sharp edge of his other hand, the impact distorting the air across several meters and releasing a violent shock wave. The young woman's head slammed against her shoulder and taking advantage of the momentary dizziness he began to incant numerous Aether Spells.

Within seconds, dozens of weakening, slowing, and sleeping spells hit the creature and Ruby began to waver, her heavy eyelids threatening to close at any moment. Not stopping there, Jake disarticulated every single one of her joints with wicked meticulousness, then shattered every one of her bones before nailing her to the ice floor with his God Slayer Katana.

The Digestor roared hatefully at him, her jaw hanging limply in the air as her mandible rapidly regrew itself. Aware that he didn't have much time, Jake channeled his willpower and carved into Ruby's flesh the Words of Power that he hoped from the bottom of his heart would make a difference.

"I Am Not A Digestor."

At that moment, the Ruby-like monster began to convulse, her amethyst eye bulging as it emitted an eerie purple light. Her grayish, slightly translucent skin regained a springy, slightly tanned texture.

'It works!' Jake grinned as he saw the young woman resurface completely naked before him.

But when he believed to have definitively solved the problem, a wrenching headache wracked his brain, a pain beyond imagination radiating throughout his Spirit Body and welling up from the depths of his Soul. Jake immediately fell to his knees, both hands weakly grasping his skull with a wince of agony.

Suddenly the situation was reversed and now it was not one but two people, a man and a woman, convulsing on the floor, squirming like worms thrown into a pot of boiling water.

Jake tried to refocus his attention, to remember who he was, but all he could make out was that his Spirit Body and Soul were clashing fiercely against a spiritual entity even more feral than himself. With each clash, a portion of his spiritual energy was consumed and he could feel some invasive power seeping into his soul and affecting his emotions.

Soon his own skin turned gray and an urge to devour everything, to destroy this unholy world began to cloud his thoughts, quickly engulfing his mind, rewriting his sense of reality.

Jake, who had been writhing on the ground, began to pull himself up, the Miniaturization Spell fading away to reveal a gray titan over 20 feet tall. Adamantium and Chitin began to coat his skin, the two materials fusing to form a sinister armor of spikes, horns and sharp edges.

Bloodline Ignition self-activated to resist this mutation, and a Myrtharian Digestor, an abomination that should not have appeared on a planet like Quanoth, began to flicker at an uncanny frequency, flashes of light and heat pulsing non-stop from its flaming veins.

Then, the humanoid creature stopped shaking and sniffed the air. Following the intoxicating scent that whetted its appetite and hatred, its galactic eyes focused on a recently thawed black man.

Craig, who had struggled to free himself from the ice, met Jake's gaze and his heart skipped a beat.

"Fuck. I'm dead."

Prepared to confront Ruby, the chubby Player summoned a strange shotgun whose tapered shape vaguely recalled that of a fishing pole and opened fire. A bullet made of an unfamiliar metal shot out of the gun's barrel, but Jake easily caught it with two fingers.

"Hehe, good idea but you would have been better off dodging."

BANG!

A steel fiber net shot out from the tiny projectile in all directions and Jake was pinned to the ground with Ruby, the end of the net piercing the ground to reconnect from beneath them. Craig pressed another button on his shotgun and the net instantly retracted and the two prisoners trapped inside were squeezed together belly to belly.

The steel net that not even Jake's bloodline could control or break sank into his skin, cutting into the silver Adamantium and chitin alloy like butter. A flash of pain, much more down to earth this time, assailed his senses and the monster regained some semblance of lucidity.

Sensing danger, Jake's survival instinct kicked in and he let out a roar of defiance,

"NO! I will not let a fucking Corruption dictate who I am!"

Gathering what little consciousness he had recovered, he brought out the Spirit Shell in his right hand and called out for help.

It was an act of desperation, he had no way of knowing if it would work from such a distance. But it did. Someone heard his call.

Asfrid, who was in the middle of a briefing with the faction leaders of Laudarkvik, stiffened in her seat and without bothering to understand projected all her energy into the artifact. The other Eltarians didn't hesitate either and threw all their spiritual energy not at Jake, but at Asfrid.

Hade and the others didn't know what was going on, but when they sensed her restlessness, they knew it was urgent, and they in turn poured their own mental energy into their Spirit Shell.

Asfrid's Spirit Body level skyrocketed, surpassing that of the vast majority of Quanoth natives in the blink of an eye, and with this heightened awareness she then projected her Soul in Jake's direction.

Jake, who felt his consciousness about to fade again, was suddenly buffeted by a torrent of welcome spiritual energy and his True Will, which was rapidly losing ground to the Corruption, suddenly received an uninterrupted stream of nourishment.

Asfrid merged her Soul with him and Jake's Spirit Body level rose in turn, becoming hundreds of times more powerful than before. His human intelligence and composure returned like a boomerang and he decisively activated his Oracle Shield.

His gray skin turned pale bronze and like Ruby the moment before, the chitin covering his skin crumbled away from his body like dead skin. The fire in his galactic eyes kept the same sharpness, but it was no longer the gaze of a ferocious beast living only for destruction.

But the most glaring miracle was something else. Ruby, who had already transformed back into a Digestor, immediately reverted to human form. Even her eye, with its amethyst iris, changed color, becoming deep-marine blue like its neighbor.

Craig, who had watched the scene with bated breath, didn't dare call the net back, unable to determine if it was another trap. The Digestors' deviousness was not well known, but what he did know was that these monsters had not become the Mirror Universe's arch nemeses without reason.

"You can call your net back." Jake rolled his eyes with a groan. "Don't worry, I'm back to my old self. I don't feel like eating humans anymore."

"I- Who am I?" Ruby murmured weakly, her shocked face screaming confusion and incomprehension.

Craig froze.

"Ruby? Is that really you?" He asked, blushing slightly.

Then Jake and Ruby noticed they were completely naked. The chubby Player was not gay and it was obviously not Jake's fault that he was acting embarrassed. Noticing where her teammate's gaze roamed, the young woman remained inexpressive, but a tight fitting uniform like Craig's covered her body.

Jake grunted and his muscular body also disappeared under a suit of Adamantium armor conjured with a single thought. The mind merge with Asfrid was not over and his Soul was so powerful at that moment that every one of his thoughts slightly affected the reality around him.

His Extrasensory Perception was also magnified and he had an acute awareness of what was going on in his Spirit Body and Soul like never before. This was why he knew at once that he had not really eradicated Ruby's Digestor half.

The clash between their wills was still going on, but the Digestor half-Soul had been pushed to its limits, contracting its essence to the extreme, becoming dense to the point of being virtually indestructible. The Words of Power etched into Ruby's skin were no longer potent enough to erode it.

Jake obviously couldn't maintain this status quo indefinitely. For he could sense another problem and so could Craig.

Ruby was gazing at the ice palace around them with a childlike curiosity, as if she were discovering this place for the first time. With his current senses, Jake had no trouble identifying the root of the problem.

She was missing half her Soul and with it, half her memories. It seemed Ruby hadn't lied. She couldn't erase her Digestor nature. Because that would mean annihilating herself.

But more importantly, as long as his Words of Power were in effect, the Corruption would worm its merry way into his soul in a way he couldn't fathom. It was as if it could flow upstream from his True Will as if it were a mere river and then automatically contaminate the source.

Jake had no way to defend himself and could only watch as the lake of consciousness representing his Soul and Spirit Body gradually corrupted, as if it were being filled with ink.

Before the damage became unsalvageable, with a sigh of regret he turned off the Soul Class Spell.

Chapter 803 A Little Too Zen

March 3, 2092, in a secret military base somewhere in Antarctica.

"Ruby, are you ready for your lesson? A dry, authoritative voice jolted a crippled little girl awake.

Recognizing the voice, the girl began to tremble in fear, although it was hard to tell the difference from the tremors caused by her muscular dystrophy. With what little strength she was able to muster, she yanked the quilt over her and curled up into a ball underneath.

Unfortunately, that didn't stop the clatter of pumps on the floor from drawing closer. An exasperated sigh sounded just above her, a few inches from her nightstand.

"No need to hide, I know where you are." Phoebe Hale dully pulled down the bedspread, exposing the terrified kid in her pajamas.

Anyone who looked at the child would have only seen a hideous, misshapen, sickly runt, but a loving, albeit slightly worried smile softened the face of the young woman in uniform.

The handicapped girl and the good-looking military woman in uniform looked blatantly alike, like two sisters if one ignored the child's bone deformities and thinness. Outsiders would see it as a family bond of mother and daughter, but the one Ruby called her aunt knew it wasn't so.

She had 'seen' what Ruby looked like when she was born and she knew her origins. She wasn't sure before, but as time went on she became convinced that the girl was subconsciously trying to look like her. Literally.

"I don't want to go Aunt Hale! They'll still... look at me funny." Ruby sobbed, hiding her head under her pillow.

"Tsk, stop pretending. Of course they look at you funny!" Phoebe rolled her eyes as she lifted her by the armpits and dropped her into the tub. "And don't forget to call me Captain Hale in public. The other students will end up thinking I'm playing favorites."

Little Ruby stuck out her tongue as she allowed herself to be undressed by the young woman. Aunt Hale, who was not at the time a cruel and dreaded colonel of New Earth, began to scrub her body vigorously with soap and a washcloth, and the girl let herself be shampooed unabashedly.

This had been her daily routine for as long as she could remember. Even going to the bathroom... it was complicated. Thinking about the mockery the other kids would throw at her when Phoebe's back was turned, she began to tear up against her will, but the water of the shower covered her sadness.

A few minutes later, dried off and dressed, the Captain in the medal-studded uniform exclaimed,

"There you go, all dressed up to go to school."

"It's not really a school..." Ruby pouted crankily, but it sounded more like a sneer.

"You have classes, there are students your age and there are teachers. If that's not a school I don't know what is." Phoebe flicked her head.

"Ouch!" The little girl squealed with a falsely hurt look on her face. "On TV, the teachers are never in military uniforms."

"Eeeeeexcept when it's a military school. In a military base." The young captain countered in a tone that brooked no argument.

"Hmmp!"

"Don't complain. How many schools let you play video games all day?" Phoebe ruffled her hair affectionately.

"None, but it's ALWAYS the same game! And you always end up dying in excruciating pain!" Ruby protested. "Did anyone even finish this Eighth Ordeal once? I can never get past it!"

"And that's why you have to keep going to school. Make friends. Learn to cooperate." The soldier lectured her patiently.

"Why?" The girl questioned. "I'm good on my own! I'm doing better than the whole class at Trial Worlds!"

"First of all you are only third out of the 100 Prodigies under my supervision. Aaaaaand you are in a friggin' wheelchair. Don't forget it."

The child's face immediately grew somber.

"Thank you for reminding me... That I can't do anything by myself."

Phoebe sighed, a heart-wrenching feeling squeezing her chest.

"I'm sorry, Ruby." She apologized, giving her a hug. "You know I didn't mean any harm."

"I know..." The kid grumbled.

"No you don't understand. You may not be able to do anything on your own for now, and someday I promise you'll be able to do all these things on your own. But trust me. There will always be something you can't do alone. Everyone always needs someone. If one day you feel overwhelmed, if you feel yourself drowning, don't forget that you are not alone."

The girl's amethyst eye faintly flashed at these words and the young woman recoiled abruptly. Neither Ruby nor Phoebe made any comment, but the soldier saw the child's hurt expression. Sighing again, she forced herself to smile buoyantly and said,

"Well, shall we go to that school?"

In the present.

Ruby painfully opened her eyes and gazed up at the high ceiling of ice above her. She felt as if she had been through a long dream, or rather an endless nightmare with no way out.

The storm of rage and hatred against everything that had been plaguing her incessantly had retreated, muted by an irrepressible force. Alas, that force had ebbed away and slowly she could feel those alien emotions creeping back into her. But unlike before, their intensity was negligible and she could easily appreciate their significance.

For now.

Being lucid and calm again for the first time in ages, she replayed the events of the last months and years and realized how much harm she had done. She felt an unbearable guilt, but strangely she embraced this pain in her chest, happy to be able to feel it again.

The young woman turned her head and suddenly noticed the presence of the two men beside her. The first, a little chubby and with a worried face, the other handsome and... unsympathetic.

Craig and Jake.

When she saw them, she remembered her aunt's words.

"Don't forget you're not alone."

For a brief moment, the time of a fleeting thought, she wanted to believe it. She was overwhelmed by the same instinct that a drowning man has when he sees a buoy or a lifeboat. This impulse to cling with all her strength to anything that could bring her hope, however small and vain.

But very quickly, this thought disappeared, replaced by an irrepressible and unconditional hatred towards the two humans who were staring at her. She even wanted to... eat them.

The magnitude of this hostility was still low, but the two men watching her every move felt it distinctly, their hairs bristling in alarm.

"Here we go again." Jake growled as he prepared to knock her out at the slightest sign of transformation.

With unspoken agreement, the two budding Aetherists began to weave a flurry of Placating Spells. Neither of them were well versed in Spirit Magic, and all mind-related spells had always been extremely complex, far more so than any other spell.

As a result, their spells were rudimentary and crude. Their Placating Spells would placate... everything. After her body was covered in Aether Symbols, Ruby found herself completely neurasthenic. It was beyond apathy. An emotional blankness that was beyond words, yet restful.

And yet, even then she could still feel a hint of anger threatening to flare up at the slightest lapse.

Craig groaned,

"It doesn't work. Unless we stay here until the end of time to sustain the Aether flow, the spell will eventually end."

"I can see that..." Jake winced as he shifted into high gear.

He was usually reluctant to tap into his "wealth", but this time he decided to make an exception. Mainly because he hadn't gone to too much trouble to obtain it.

An Aether Core from his collection appeared above his palm and he began to carefully draw new Aether Symbols intertwined around this foundation. The Aether Core would become the power source for the spell.

He then used his Soul Class Skill Aether Compression to miniaturize the symbol and inserted it into Ruby's Spirit Body, using the prerogatives of the Slave Contract to prevent her from resisting.

Aiming for someone's Soul was difficult when the target was expecting it. It could become as tiny and elusive as a Divinity and looking for the Soul in the middle of the Spirit Body was like looking for a needle in a haystack.

However, it was different when an Evolver merged its consciousness with its Spirit Body to spread its mental sense, for example. Ruby was unable to disobey, so all he had to do was insert the Aether Symbol into her Spirit Body to reach her Soul.

The lingering hatred was immediately quenched and for the first time in at least three Ordeals, Ruby finally felt Zen.

A little too Zen.

Chapter 804 This Will Be Our Priority

The trio returned to Laudarkvik in the middle of the night. Craig briefed Ruby on the trip home about their team's situation and the other New Earth units deployed on Quanoth, but the young woman remained silent all along. Realising that he was talking in vain, her childhood friend sighed tiredly and stopped bothering her.

As they landed, two figures teleported in front of them. Jake recognized Asfrid and Hade.

"By Eltar's beard! You're okay!" The Eltarian exclaimed with relief. "When you called for help via the Spirit Shell I thought I had acted too late."

"No you were right on time." Jake smiled, but it didn't reach his eyes.

He had nearly died this time. Not literally, but it would have been much worse. In fact, he hadn't really escaped unscathed. And regrettably, those who had helped him either... Displaying a very grave expression, he asked Asfrid with a worried tone,

"Do you and the other Myrtharian Nerds in the base feel strange or have you been behaving in an unusual way?"

Asfrid frowned and shook her head, but Hade responded differently.

"Corruption?"

"Corruption." Jake replied sourly, pointing at Ruby with his eyes. "She's a Digestor Trojan, like your son Nylreg."

The former Fluid Grandmaster's eyes widened sharply as he stared at the young woman, a faint light glowing from his pupils. He immediately noticed her jaded face, drooping eyelids and sluggish body language.

"How did you sedate her? Aether Spells?"

The simple fact that Ruby wasn't responsive when spoken of told Hade everything he wanted to know.

"You suppressed all her emotions." He nodded to himself. "This is not the way to go but it will do for now."

The dark-haired youth's eyes moistened unaware as he watched the listless woman. Her presence brought back the memory of his utter failure in saving his son. Making a decision, he declared with resolve,

"I will do my best to help her."

"But you won't be alone this time. Treating or at least curbing the unwanted symptoms of her Digestor nature will be one of my priorities." Jake promised before turning grim again.

Seeing Craig's face melt into gratitude, he immediately dampened his spirits.

"I'm not doing it for you, or for Ruby." He stated flatly. " While trying to help her, the Corruption infected many of my comrades. I almost lost my mind and now I have to deal with emotions I have no control over. I'll be okay this time, but what if something like this happens again?"

"I finally realized that Corruption is a serious threat. If I can't get rid of it, then I have to find a way to live with it without becoming a mindless beast motivated only by hatred, hunger and bloodlust.

Asfrid had also completed her Third Ordeal, she had undergone a similar experience and immediately understood the full extent of the danger. She closed her eyes and went into a deep meditative trance to probe the changes in her own Soul. A pure-blooded Eltarian could accomplish this kind of feat.

When she opened her eyes again a few minutes later, her face was stern and she said,

"I will help you too."

"Me too!" Craig exclaimed. "Don't underestimate me, I'm a Novice Aetherist too." He added, flexing his biceps.

Ironically, the only one who was completely unaffected by their enthusiasm was the main person involved. Jake's Placating Spell was working like a charm.

"Asfrid, I'll let you check the condition of the Myrtharian Nerds who lent me their spiritual energy a few hours earlier." Jake sloppily gave her the unglamorous task of fixing his mess, but the Eltarian accepted the order without batting an eye.

" I'm on it. Ah, now that I think about it, I have another piece of news to report. Two in fact. Lucia left the base after your public speech with some elite Myrmidians to meet the Beskyrians and Tim in front of Celestial City. She'll use the opportunity to scout and identify any dangers that await us on the upcoming migration."

Jake nodded. Lucia had vaguely mentioned the topic the day before and Tim was indeed in trouble. Recently he had run out of luck and was about to be flushed out of his hiding place.

In the last few days, powerful natives, mythical creatures and Player factions had begun to cluster around the Celestial City and the skirmishes and clashes had increased in number and intensity. The toll of deaths each day was staggering, many being collateral victims like Tim who were just hiding in the wrong place.

"And the second news?" He inquired.

"Your cat Crunch found something interesting. It could be useful to us. He'll arrive in two days with cough, Lord Phenix..." Asfrid cleared her throat after her final words to cover up all the loathing she held for this insolent turkey.

The bird's impertinence had driven her mad over the past year. The number of times she had threatened to roast him on a spit was in the thousands. And despite her threats, the bird continued to take the piss out of her, pulling pranks and misbehaving...

"Crunch found something I might be interested in, uh?" Jake could hardly believe it, but Asfrid's confidence had piqued his interest.

Seeing that the deadpan woman intended to keep the suspense until the end, he did not insist and wished her a good night. After parting ways with Asfrid, Jake, Ruby, Craig, and Hade walked together to the Fluid Grandmaster's quarters.

"What about the other soldiers from New Earth?" Craig asked uneasily. "I don't feel like Ruby is a reliable ally right now..."

Jake rolled his eyes but after exchanging a look with Hade he said,

"They can join us but they will have to follow my orders or that of my officers. They can participate in the decision making, but the final decision is mine.

Craig hesitated, pondering the merits of his offer, but after a few seconds he answered,

"I'll relay your suggestion to my teammates. We'll see what they think."

"As you wish." Jake shrugged.

Once inside Hade's portable fortress, no one took a break and they went to the Fluid Grandmaster's workshop. Jake had only been here once in the past few days, not that it would have made any difference.

The 100-square-meter workshop was filled with all sorts of futuristic technology belonging to the Consortium and the Six Brotherhoods of his home world. Some of it had been made afterwards, as evidenced by the pile of Aether Fluid Artifacts strewn around.

Hade accessed a computer, entered his code and plugged in his bracelet. After that, he transferred all the downloaded data to Jake. Scrolling quickly through the contents, the Myrtharian was stunned when he discovered that the data included all the knowledge of his native world. It was an incredibly generous gift.

Seeing Jake's suspicious look, Hade calmly explained,

"I should have done this a long time ago. I just didn't know at the time if I could trust you. Anyway, no one else was competent in this field and I could take on this role alone. Now, I admit I could use an assistant or two..."

"So why now?"

"Have you forgotten already?" Hade chuckled as he showed him one of the many black spheres he had churned out over the past two weeks. "You want to help this woman to find a cure for Corruption with my expertise. But I don't have the time. You've already given me another priority task.

"But I still want to help. As you can guess, it's a very important concern of mine. So, here we go. With your intelligence and your Aetherist skills I'm sure you'll find a solution. You have a Silver Blacksmith Soul Glyph too, right? You'll do fine."

Jake was not at all convinced by the Fluid Grandmaster's arguments. Yes, he was pretty good at blacksmithing, but that was just to make rudimentary weapons like armor or swords. The only reason he could create Advanced Aether Artifacts was because of his two Soul Classes.

Hade knew full well that he wasn't interested in cramming all that knowledge down his throat, but he felt that Ruby's condition and the inadvertent Corruption of the Myrtharian Nerds was a perfect excuse to coerce Jake into it.

Perfectly clear on the shrewd Player's intentions, Jake's lips twitched but he had no choice but to accept the gift.

"I'll leave it up to you to decide if you want to share this knowledge with others." Hade winked at him, referring to Craig. Despite his willingness to help Ruby, the chubby Player was in a different faction.

"Oh and by the way!" He suddenly remembered.

"What?" Jake grunted.

"I still need plenty of magic metal. Don't forget to keep producing what I need."

"Sure..."

Chapter 805 Jake's Theory

In the end, Jake stayed only a few hours in Hade's workshop. Soon the harsh realities of his physiology set in.

To mass produce Adamantium and other magical metals, he needed to eat a lot. A LOT.

If that was the only constraint he could have had it delivered to him, but his past mistakes had taught him a lesson. This time there was no way he was going to sabotage the future growth of his Bloodline.

To evolve optimally, his Gold Myrtharian Bloodline needed a 'balanced' diet. Lightning, heat, radiation, magnetism, gravity, earth and metal with the greatest possible diversity and in equal energetic proportions.

To be entirely fair, no place on Quanoth could provide such an environment in ideal proportions. In the meantime, he had to make do with his underground base and the Purgatory to get what he needed.

The initial cave connected to a magma chamber was already spacious to begin with, but after several months its dimensions had been multiplied dozens of times. Jake's stomach was a bottomless pit and gorging on magma was not nearly enough.

His Aether Sun Cores weren't doing the mountain and forest on the surface any good either. The local temperature had risen at least ten degrees in the last few weeks and on some of the rocks at the surface it was already possible to cook eggs just by putting them on.

Worse, the walls of the cave and magma chamber had begun to melt, which contributed to accelerate the expansion of the cave. If this continued, the very integrity of the structure would be threatened and the risk that the entire mountain and valley would collapse was very real. To avoid an unforeseen accident, he had been compelled to activate a small Purgatory Realm to isolate himself completely.

The time for migration had come.

BANG! BANG!

In a Purgatory barely larger than a basketball court, a scene worthy of Hephaestus, the ancient Greek blacksmith god, was playing out right now. A man physically shaped like a Greek god, except for his crotch, was furiously hammering an Orichalcum ingot, the initial block of metal having already been compressed at least a hundred times from its original size.

The magical brass had begun to glow mesmerizingly and its density and hardness had long since surpassed that of Adamantium.

Simultaneously, lightning was relentlessly striking his body, shooting down from the artificial clouds generated by the Bronze Aether Artifact. A tight ring of Aether Sun Cores unleashed their fiery rays on Jake's glowing body, supplying him with power beyond comprehension.

Too much power, in fact.

His skin was continually blistering, sometimes even melting until his steel muscles and Adamantium bones were exposed beneath. With his free hand, Jake was using his telekinesis to guide tons of rock and metal into his mouth, inhaling them in a steady rhythm without ever breaking expression or pausing.

Bang! Bang! BAAANG!

Jake hammered one last time with his Adamantium-covered fist and inspected his work. His face twitched with displeasure, then he tossed the ingot into a pile of discarded identical ingots.

"Another failure..." He sighed wearily.

Next to this first pile, many neighboring piles contained ingots of different magical metals. They too glowed suspiciously, illuminating the Purgatory Dream with multicolored shimmers reminiscent of a legendary treasure vault.

The Myrtharian wasn't doing all this for naught. His Spirit Body was currently in the inner Purgatory Dream, the separate dimension that allowed him to undergo various trainings to earn the corresponding Soul Glyphs. His body was currently being remotely controlled by his consciousness through the Spirit Link created a few months earlier.

His mind was currently multitasking, separated into four distinct subconsciousnesses. This was the first time he had used his Eltarian abilities so extensively. Before his bloodline evolved, splitting his attention into two was his comfort zone, and three his limit. Now, splitting his mind into four was just exhausting, but not unbearable.

His first subconsciousness was controlling his physical body, producing the magical metals required by Hade while training and applying his new knowledge. Another was trying to become an Advanced Aether Blacksmith and obtain the corresponding Gold Blacksmith Soul Glyph. The third one was studying like a tireless zombie the huge amount of data generously given by the Fluid Grandmaster. Finally, the last one was studying and practicing his Aether Spells and more specifically Soul Spells.

"You should take a break." Ruby said joylessly as she casually swallowed the refined Orichalcum ingot he had just thrown away.

Jake thought he caught a hint of sarcasm in her voice and that was good news. It meant that his efforts of the past few days had not been in vain. She wasn't completely neurasthenic anymore, but that brought other drawbacks too.

"When can I get out of here? It's hot!" The young woman complained as she whimsically flailed her legs sitting atop the pile of bullion. "You don't have to worry, I won't kill anyone. I don't know what you and Craig are doing but it looks like it's working."

Jake stared her straight in the eye, then looked away.

"No, it doesn't." He smiled bitterly. "You may feel better, more at peace, but that's because you don't realize that we've been continually increasing the power of our spells to keep you that way. Your Digestor nature resists fiercely and every day it grows stronger. I can feel it feeding off the Aether from our spells to strengthen itself. The lvl 5 Aether Core that I used to power the Aether Symbol placed in your Spirit Body has already been polluted by your Corruption. Soon, this Aether Core will be a Digestor Aether Core..."

Ruby stood stumped. Of course she knew that! She was just too happy to feel like herself, appeased. But deep down, she knew it wouldn't last.

In New Earth, she had met General Rob, the most powerful Evolver in the Earth Union, a few days before her Fourth Ordeal began. She had tried to attack him on sight, but as soon as she met his gaze, her rage had left her.

She had thought she was finally saved, but the Eight Ordeal Evolver had ushered her out of his office with a disappointed wave of his hand after scrutinizing her for a few seconds. At that moment, she had known it was all over for her. If even such a powerful Evolver thought her case was hopeless then it surely was.

She appreciated Jake and Craig's efforts and didn't want to look like an ingrate, but deep down she knew it was a waste of time.

"Yeah we're failing." Jake suddenly said, honestly acknowledging his ineptitude. "Hade tried to save his son for 150 years and he didn't succeed either. I'm not even sure my master Cekt could do it either. But that doesn't mean we can't succeed either."

"I have my theory about what Corruption is, but I'm afraid it won't appeal to many people. The more advanced an Aether Spell or Bloodline is, the smaller its Runes are. If I want, I can draw an Aether Symbol with other Aether Symbols."

To illustrate his point, Jake drew a huge Light Aether Symbol with only a few Runes. He then moved it in front of Ruby and using her mental sense she noticed that each Aether drawing was in fact a string of slightly different Aether Symbols.

"Look."

He activated the Aether Spell and instead of the expected white light, a pale blue light came out. Ruby thought she figured out where he was going with this, and she got a better idea of why he considered his failure almost certain.

"As you can see, the big Aether Symbol should have produced pure, white light." Jake explained grimly. "The small, slightly altered Aether Symbols that make it up code for blue light. As you can see, blue won out. This is the Principle of Incorporation, which also determines a Bloodline or Aether Spell's Grade."

"What's to say that the ambient pure Aether we use and are made up of isn't also made up of some kind of microscopic Aether Code that affects us? This could be what defines our belonging to the Mirror Universe. Like the common DNA of our cells that ensures that they don't attack each other. Except in the case of cancer, and autoimmune disorders, but that's another topic."

"But the Digestors are probably not native to the Mirror Universe. Following this logic, it wouldn't be a surprise if something in their Aether drove them to attack us. If these Runes are smaller than the smallest Aether Runes in the Mirror Universe, then the surrounding Aether becomes corrupted with no ability to resist."

"No Soul Spell I am able to cast can change this, since ultimately the Aether Runes leading to their creation are unable to reach the Corruption that affects you. I can affect your emotions, maybe even your DNA, but not the Corruption that causes all your symptoms."

"I would even say that by mixing your Aether with mine and the Mirror Universe's, you and the other Digestors are corrupting us little by little. It's hopeless."

Chapter 806 That's Not Good Enough

Ruby's heart sank upon hearing his conclusion, but contrary to what she anticipated Jake just laughed at himself with contempt and defiance,

"But in the end, it just means we're too weak. My master Cekt Mogusar told me about a legendary creature from System A0 named Wilderth, just like my last name. Its Bloodline is unofficially rated as Grade 17. What I retained was not the alleged invincibility of this creature, but that the Digestors leave it and the planets under its protection in peace. Corruption doesn't seem to have a hold on this Aether beast."

He stepped toward her and grabbed her shoulders, staring her straight in the eye,

"So don't give up. It's definitely possible to overcome the Corruption. Even if I'm wrong about everything, there's definitely a way. In the meantime, I'm going to focus on my Bloodline and Aether Spells and aim for that Grade 17 or get as close to it as I can.

"As for you, instead of focusing on how to outperform during your Ordeals, you'd be better off developing skills that promote your self-control, even if it's counterproductive in the short term and substantially changes your personality. You did the right thing with your Light Alf sub-bloodline, but I'm sure you can do much better. For starters, you'd better change that Fallen Angel Soul Class. That one will only hasten your downfall."

Ruby, who was calm and clear-headed, took his advice very seriously and teleported to the surface straight away.

"I'm going to Laudarkvik to change my Soul Class. I'll be back in an hour." She informed him succinctly via the Oracle Device.

Jake hesitated, but he accepted with one condition,

"Ask Asfrid to accompany you."

"Okay..."

Jake had the feeling that something was wrong but Ruby had already left. With a foreboding feeling, he contacted the Eltarian leader and expressed his concerns.

"Don't worry, if the Digestor manifests itself I'll send it back to sleep" She promised earnestly.

"Thank you, Asfrid. I don't know what I'll do without you."

"More unrewarding work." She grunted as she ended the discussion.

Jake then went back to forging, but several hours later he began to worry when he realized Ruby hadn't returned and he still hadn't heard from Asfrid. He first tried to contact Ruby, without success. He was puzzled when he found that he could no longer feel her presence. She was already extremely far away.

'Asfrid!'

He flew away like a blurred trail of light, splitting the rock and sky at several times the speed of sound. A few minutes later, he landed on the unrecognizable temple square where the Prophetic Stele was supposed to be. A 300 meter deep crater had scarred the area, the temple of Aurae being nothing but smoking ruins.

'What happened here?' His dumbfoundedness was matched only by his anger.

"Cough, cough!"

Jake heard the barely audible coughing of a woman at the bottom of the crater and as he approached he saw a shapeless mass of crushed flesh, blood and bone painfully regenerating. It was a miracle that the victim was still alive.

"Asfrid?"

"If you can still recognize me, I guess I'm not doing so bad..." She groaned with tremendous difficulty in articulation.

Jake smiled wryly and activated the Vitality Link Faction Skill to buy time. An uninjured Asfrid replaced the bloody lump of flesh, but his own body began to crack. The Adamantium in his bones creaked and his flesh was covered with bloody tears, but his body held together. Seconds later, his wounds healed and his bones became as hard and smooth as before.

"You, Gerulf and Rogen are truly freaks of nature." The exhausted woman sighed enviously."

"Well, from the rumors I've heard Drastan is practically unkillable with his Digitized body. It helps to have a Troll Bloodline." Jake awkwardly brushed off the compliment.

"Maybe..." She muttered thoughtfully. "After all I survived too, but only because I separated my Spirit Body in time. The Digitization could have killed me."

Getting to the heart of the matter, Jake became serious and asked,

"What happened?"

Sigh...

"An ambush by a coalition of Players and Demons. Not just any demons. All of them Spirit Mages or Players with Bloodlines delving into the mind. The Demon at their head was none other than Astraroth Thozuch. It seems that he had not said his last word when he fled from Laudarkvik. I don't know how they got this information, but they must have found out what Ruby really was.

"It only took a split second for everything to turn to shit. One-fucking-Wrath-Spell."

Jake clenched his teeth and fists in fury, an uncontrolled bloodlust threatening to overwhelm him. Who the culprits were wasn't hard to figure out.

Lost Divinities.

If one of Craig's teammates had been captured and tortured by this spiteful faction, the outcome was without question. This information could even have been inferred from the grilling of Carmin, Elduin and Bhammod.

"I underestimated them again." Jake spat coldly. "This is the last time."

This time it wasn't really his fault. Someone from Lost Divinities clearly had a higher Oracle Rank than he did. Ruby, by her Trojan Digestor nature was supposed to be immune to enemy predictions and Oracle Paths, but by suppressing the Digestor within her, the young woman had lost her immunity totem.

"And who caused your injuries? That crater?" Jake then asked.

"Ruby... She was about to switch Soul Classes when the Wrath Spell hit her. As you can see... She didn't take the expected Soul Class..."

"That's it, they made me angry." Jake said with an unfamiliar coldness "This time I'll wipe out every last one of them. Once I've fulfilled my end of the bargain with the people of Laudarkvik, I'll head to Celestial City to hunt them down with the volunteer Myrtharian Nerds."

"And I will fight by your side. I have a revenge to exact." Asfrid declared with an eerie killing intent. The moisture in the air clumped around her and a whirlwind of water condensed around her just from her ire.

Jake recalled that she was no longer just a powerful Eltarian, but also a Nereid, a lesser deity of the ocean. Asfrid felt responsible for the tragedy that had struck Laudarkvik and decided to stay behind to deal with the aftermath.

As for him, he returned somberly to his base and after reporting to Craig and Hade what had happened he shut himself up in his underground cave and began to forge furiously.

"What?! Ruby has joined the enemy! An ambush! Fuck you! SLAP!"

Jake recalled how the coated Player had slapped him in the face out of emotion. At the time, the urge to retaliate with a slap of his own had crossed his mind, but when he saw Ruby's teammate turn purplish while holding the broken hand that had just slapped him he deflated...

BANG! BANG! BANG!

Hammering furiously at an Adamantium bar while lightning and scorching rays from his Aether Sun Core rained down on him, Jake suddenly punched down on the Adamantium bar, the imprint of his fist denting the metal.

"FUCK! That's not good enough!" He fumed as he flung the useless ingot away.

The twelve Aether Sun Cores began to spin frantically around him, coming dangerously close to his body, and with the rush of heat and radiation, Jake roared with pain and anger and kicked the ground, propelling himself to the surface. The Aether Sun Cores followed his flight with a slight delay and soon he broke through the surface, the molten ground collapsing beneath him.

He kept flying up and soon he disappeared into the black storm clouds with a deafening supersonic boom.

Once inside the apocalyptic storm, Jake immediately felt the difference and split his body from his mind to let the lightning temper both his body and soul.

"RAAAAAAGGH!"

With the combination of this lightning and the radiation from his Aether Sun Cores at close range Jake's body and mind ignited and harrowing pain engulfed his whole soul. He immersed his mind in the Spirit Shell and requested for all the spiritual energy he could get.

His mental faculties expanded, and soon his Extrasensory Perception became strong enough to reach the ground more than ten kilometers below him. With his telekinesis having reached all-time highs, he began to terraform the mountain and the landscape below him, piling and merging rock upon rock to create a mountain high enough for him to stand on.

The process took only a few hours and the few Myrtharian Nerds still in the base watched with bulging eyes and mouth agape as the tallest mountain they had ever seen in their lives rose from the ground.

The process didn't stop there and Jake continued to enlarge his artificial mountain for three days in a row until it became a colossal behemoth more than 20 kilometers high. Meanwhile, the ever increasing lightning and radiation carried on destroying and reconstructing his body and mind as he refined his ingots.

Another three days later, he sensed that his companions were at their limit and he withdrew his mind from the Spirit Shell. In the palm of his hand, an Adamantium ingot as compressed as a marble glistened like a full moon.

"I did it."

Chapter 807 Forging New Artefacts

[Blacksmith Soul Glyph(Silver>Gold): Increases the attributes of any tool, weapon or armor forged by the bearer of this Glyph by 200%(100>200%). There is no such thing as failure in blacksmithing. Anything the smith forges can become an Aether Artifact.]

Under the influence of his enhanced cognitive abilities, Jake had not only completed his Blacksmithing training in the Inner Purgatory Dream, but had also combed through a good quarter of the knowledge and technology introduced in the data provided by Hade. It was like a rebirth.

Before today, he had never realized how ignorant he was and how this ignorance was a hindrance to his development. He could become the smartest, most gifted person in the Mirror Universe, but if it wasn't paired with diligent hard work he would never be more than one of many talented guys squandering their potential.

Since his arrival on B842, Jake had never considered himself lazy, especially considering his past history. But the repeated provocations of Lost Divinities and the sense of urgency and inadequacy had pushed him over the edge and he realized that he had always been far from doing his best.

Maybe he still wasn't.

His progress as a blacksmith and engineer was not the only noticeable change in him. He felt stronger, sharper than before and the Aether Sun Cores, though less than a meter away from him, struggled to scorch his skin and Spirit Body.

While consulting his Oracle Status, he noticed several things. First, his Aether and Body stats had all increased by about 15-20%. This increase was consistent and Jake began to realize that the balancing of his various stats was becoming a norm.

He didn't know if he should be happy about it or not. On the one hand he had no weaknesses, but on the other hand he had no strong points either.

Of course, if his friends could read his thoughts, they would probably call him a lot of names.

'What the hell dude? You're already much stronger than us and you're complaining about having ALL your stats too high?!

Yeah... That was the kind of reaction he would have received, but Jake didn't care what others thought. As long as there were people stronger than him out there, he would never be satisfied.

His Spirit Body level had also risen from lvl38 to 41 and his True Will had virtually doubled. Given the excruciating torture he had just subjected himself to, plus the inhuman mental effort he had just exerted to memorize and understand everything, it was... disappointing.

Raising his Spirit Body level seemed destined to be a lengthy process, unless he could find a way to improve the Eltarian part of his Bloodline. Now that he was an Aetherist, he knew it wasn't enough to just add an extra bit of Aether Code. He had to make room for that code first and that required a Bloodline compression, or in simpler terms increasing its Grade.

However, the most interesting changes were not in his stats, but in his skills:

[Magnetism Manipulation lvl1>2 : Derived from Metal Manipulation, you can control the magnetic fields around you with ease]

[Lightning Manipulation lvl 1>2 : Derived from Magnetism and Heat manipulation, you can now control lightning with ease]

[Lightning Tolerance lvl 1>2: Strongly increased tolerance to electricity. Ordinary electric shocks can no longer disrupt your nervous system and instead give you a boost in speed and reaction time]

This was the first time his Bloodline skills were upgraded without changing his Bloodline level. The slight lightning attribute of his Myrtharian Soul had also been raised to intermediate.

There was only one possible explanation. When his Bloodline gained these new affinities, his Aether Code and cells had begun to voraciously absorb these elements to strengthen themselves. Being behind in comparison to his other affinities and his body being much more resilient than before, it was normal that such a deficit would be caught up quickly.

In less than a year, his Lightning Manipulation would be on par with the rest. Instead of resting or stepping up his training, Jake closed his eyes and let himself drift into the plasma that had replaced the mountain top, which was continually battered by lightning and radiation.

A few hours later, he awoke from his nap with a sharp glint of determination in his eye. He held out his half-opened fist and the glistening Adamantium bead he had refined began to rise into the air, attracting like a magnet the other ingots discarded in the past few days.

The various ingots merged together, magically liquefying and quickly taking the form of a small, extremely dense hammer. Simultaneously, a steady stream of Aether Symbols and Words of Power crystallized in the air, all merging without exception with the emerging hammer.

When the hammer was still nothing but molten white-hot metal, Jake manipulated his own blood and let a drop of Blood Essence seep from his fingertip. The crimson drop floated up like a dandelion caught in a breeze and disintegrated into the blazing hammer.

With a thought, Jake removed the heat from the metal and an inconspicuous steel hammer landed in his hand.

[Advanced Aether Artifact: Myrtharian Blacksmith Hammer(bound to Jake): A sledgehammer of ordinary design but complemented by the numerous enchantments of a Rank 1 Rune Aetherist and Advanced Blacksmith.

Attributes : All stats +40%. Passive skill 1: Heavy: The hammer weighs virtually nothing to the wielder, but currently weighs 500 tons. Passive skill 2 : Adjustable size and mass within the limits of the compressed steel it is made of. Passive skill 3 : Collects part of the soul and Aether of the defeated, heat, lightning, earth, steel and radiation from its environment or the owner to repair itself, evolve, attack or accelerate the refinement of materials, but also to infuse these properties into forged objects. Passive skill 4 : Amplifies all techniques used through the hammer by 200%]

Jake chuckled jubilantly as he inspected the weapon's stats. He had intended to make a simple hammer to more efficiently forge future artifacts, but instead he had crafted a terrifying weapon with twice the attributes of his latest creation, the God-Slayer Myrtharian Katana.

He weighed the weapon, which seemed as light as a feather, but he was not fooled by this deceptive impression. As soon as he had grabbed the hammer, he had literally "sunk" into the mountain he was standing on. His fall had only stopped when he mobilized his telekinesis.

Jake raised his new hammer and then began to hammer once again at all the failed ingots he had produced in the previous days. In less than six hours, the whole thing had been raised to the standard of his finest Adamantium bead. These highly compressed ingots, stripped of all impurities, were referred to as Adamantium Essence by the Oracle System.

"Now all I need to do is forge myself some new equipment."

The first thing he did was to reforge his God Slayer Myrtharian Katana. He added so much Adamantium Essence into it that the end result was simply an abomination, a weapon of mass destruction. Even the Oracle System found the previous name inadequate and decided to rename it.

[Myrtharian God Slayer Broadsword (bound to Jake): A disturbingly heavy weapon forged at the cost of exorbitant amounts of Adamantium Essence and other precious magic metals. It has only three redeeming qualities: hard, heavy and sharp. However, the Blood Essence, Words of Power, and Aether Symbols added during its crafting have elevated this sword to a whole new level.

Attributes: All stats + 40%. Passive Skill 1: 200% more damage on Divinities and disrupts their faith energy gathering. Passive Skill 2: Amplifies all techniques used through the broadsword by 200%. Passive Skill 3: Collects part of the soul and Aether of the defeated, heat, lightning, earth, steel, and radiation from its environment to repair itself and evolve. Passive Skill 4: Its length and mass can be modified at will depending on the amount of metal available in the weapon's space storage. Passive skill 5: Heavy: The broadsword weighs virtually nothing to the wielder, but currently weighs 720 tons]

After his creation, Jake swung his new sword fiercely and a blade of superheated wind rent the black clouds for several kilometers, compressing the air so sharply that the stormy clouds briefly changed direction, altering the weather locally in unpredictable ways.

"I finally have a proper weapon." Jake grinned, exposing his translucent canines.

Over the next two days, he refashioned his entire suit of armor, from helmet to boots, and even found the leisure to forge several futuristic gadgets and accessories he could never have imagined a few weeks earlier.

The end result... turned out to be beyond his wildest expectations:

[Advanced Aether Artifact: Myrtharian Adamantium Armor Set (bound to Jake): An exquisite armor forged by a talented Rank 1 Aetherist and Advanced Blacksmith using astronomical amounts of Adamantium Essence and other magical metals. Each piece of the set is separately an Advanced Artifact, but the whole set nears the performance of some Bronze Artifacts. The set includes 15 pieces, namely the breastplate, leggings, boots, helmet, gauntlets, shoulder pads, belt, two earrings, a necklace, and 5 enchanted rings.

Total attributes: All stats +600%. Passive Skill 1: Heavy. The armor set weighs virtually nothing to the wearer, but currently weighs 1900 tons. Passive Skill 2: The wearer's affinity and absorption rate for Aether, spiritual energy, lightning, heat, plasma, Reiga, magnetism, metal, and earth are increased by 3000%. Passive Skill 3: Collects part of the soul and Aether of the defeated, heat, lightning, earth, steel and radiation from its environment to repair itself and evolve. Active Skill 1: Gravity Domain. The wearer can spend the energy accumulated in the Artifact to invoke a gravity domain that can reach up to 500 meters in radius. Inside, the gravity perceived by those deemed hostile by the wearer is multiplied up to 100 times. Active Skill 2: Myrtharian Ignition. By draining the energy of the Artifact, the wearer's bloodline is temporarily upgraded by one level (only works with Myrtharians). This skill puts a heavy strain on the wearer's body and should not exceed 5 minutes per day]

Chapter 808 I've Been Looking For You

Jake was still reeling from the armor he had just created. Hands shaking with anticipation, he donned each piece of equipment with deliberate slowness.

The armor was obsidian-black, hugging his every muscle. It was a mixture of thin plates and chainmail so delicate that its texture was almost like silk. The suit was stretchy, and snug, able to handle his sudden changes in size, but could also take a nuke at point-blank range.

To forge it, Jake had opted for an alloy consisting of 80% Adamantium, 10% Orichalcum, and 10% other precious magical materials to enrich the elemental properties of the artifact. The Adamantium was part of the reason for its hardness, but it was the interaction of all these other materials and Aether Runes that created the breathtaking end result.

For the first time since he had acquired this Oracle Skill, Jake had used his Portable Oracle Store to purchase a gram of Red Soul Stone and Green Soul Stone respectively at 200 times their normal price. Just like during his Second Ordeal, the Oracle Store referred to these two materials as Flintium and Naequat. These two materials were the basis for the second active skill of his armor, but also his second passive skill.

A gram of Flintium cost 100M Aether points, and 200M for Naequat, so 20B and 40B Aether points after conversion. It was a price that might seem excessive, but Jake had finally decided that what ultimately mattered was getting the final victory. And his Oracle Coach seemed to agree with him.

[Side Mission n°4: Save Laudarkvik's population from the Purge.]

[Side Mission n°5: Get your revenge against Lost Divinities.]

These were the two Ordeal Missions he had recently been issued. The irony was that the Oracle had not asked him to conquer Laudarkvik at the time, as if the Oracle did not think he could do it. Now that he had achieved the impossible, his objectives had been adjusted to reflect his new intentions and abilities.

The last mission had been assigned to him even more recently, when Ruby and Asfrid had been ambushed. The Oracle System at last had enough common decency to stop requesting him to "save his Soulmate", but that didn't stop it from finding more roundabout ways to phrase it...

Getting revenge on Lost Divinities was a vague term. The key idea was that he had to make them regret ever messing with him. That could mean defeating them, killing them, or ruining their designs on Quanoth, but it also suggested that he should undo, or even overcompensate for, any wrongs they had inflicted on him. It wasn't too far-fetched to imagine that saving Ruby or bringing her to her senses was part of it.

Unfortunately, he would soon learn that the emergence of this fifth Side Mission was no accident.

Jake finished donning his armor and the various passives in the set resonated with his body, increasing his stats and affinity for the elements related to his Bloodline. The molten rock beneath his feet, the caress of lightning and light, his own spiritual and Aetheric fluctuations were amplified by a factor of 30, adding to the increase in Perception brought on by the armor and an unseen vortex formed around him.

For those with sufficiently keen Extrasensory Perception they would have been able to see how lightning, the rock and metal forming the mountain, and light would break down into Elemental Aether before being automatically absorbed into his body, armor or broadsword. If Jake didn't limit the phenomenon, the entire area would eventually be drained of all electricity, heat, and light, and the 20km mountain he had erected would eventually dissolve entirely.

Floating in the air, Jake deployed his mental sense at maximum range and his Spirit Body expanded to encompass a full sphere of space about 65m in radius. It didn't sound like much, but such a sphere contained over a million cubic meters of space.

When he repeated the same exercise by focusing his mental sense in one direction, he managed to project his consciousness over 1,150 kilometers. And his abilities to understand and calculate had grown into something equally absurd. His mind no longer received support from his comrades through the Spirit Shell, but with his armor he was almost as powerful.

With his Perception becoming artificially a million times greater than that of a normal human (given Quanoth's Aether density), he could now clearly distinguish the X-shape of his chromosomes with as much clarity as if it were his hand a few inches from his face.

This kind of sensory experience combined with the proper cognitive faculties was just... mind-blowing.

Jake was about to climb back down from his stormy mountain when he suddenly became stiff.

"Mmm, I used up all the metal I promised to deliver to Hade. Duty first." He muttered quietly.

His eyes flared and the integrated circuit in his armor pulsed eerily. The mountain peak, lightning and heat formed a stream of purified matter and energy that was vacuumed up by Jake and his armor as if he had turned into an insatiable black hole. The mountain was disintegrating before his very eyes and the local temperature was dropping sharply.

The stormy black clouds turned to ice and began to plummet onto the mountain below. A literal hole in the sky appeared around Jake, an occurrence that South Quanoth had not witnessed in months.

As the Myrtharian gluttonously devoured everything around him, he lifted his palm and kilogram after kilogram of Adamantium Essence and other purified materials began to ooze out of his hand in an unbroken river that spiraled around him.

Indeed, Jake had tasted his own refined ingots and the metals he produced had also changed in quality. This was the exclusive benefit of a Gold Myrtharian. In less than an hour, half the mountain was disintegrated, but he had more than met his production quotas for the past and future days.

Satisfied, Jake lost interest in the frozen mountain and returned in a few supersonic bursts to his camp. Where once stood the mountain, there were no clouds for many kilometers around, and as he looked up, he could vaguely see the Mana Superstorm's multicolored lights quickly covering the planet.

His flamboyant arrival at the camp was immediately noticed. It was not every day that a comet of plasma and lightning drilled through the clouds, banishing the darkness and bathing them in its light.

He noticed that there were almost no tents left. Most of the Myrtharian Nerds were on missions, preparing for the impending migration.

Upon landing, Jake first visited Hade to give him the metal he had produced in the last few hours. The Aether Fluid Grandmaster's eyes narrowed as he perceived his friend's unfathomable aura. With his experience as an inventor, his focus immediately shifted to his armor.

"It seems... you didn't waste your time." Hade complimented sincerely. "Such armor must have been... expensive. How much Adamantium did you use?"

"About 1600 tons."

"As I though- WHAT DID YOU SAY?!" The black-haired man known for his trademark equanimity howled in shock as he took in the horrific amount of magic metal squandered.

"It was worth it." Jake justified himself laconically.

Hade stared at the metal tile and as he watched it crumble under the boots of Jake's armor, he could only capitulate.

"What about the metal I need?" He finally remembered. "I'm in no hurry, but you were the one who asked me to make these Portable Fortresses."

Jake dropped the tons of Adamantium Essence and other metals he had produced in the workshop, and Hade's expression widened to shock.

"Is that what I think it is?" He asked as he examined an Adamantium bead glistening tantalizingly.

"Yeah. The result of my latest progress. That's what I used for this armor."

Hade stood pensive for a moment, stiff-faced, then he uttered,

"If you can provide me with more, I should be able to do much better than Portable Fortresses. Let's go for a Spaceship."

Jake grinned devilishly,

"I was going to suggest that. But this time, I'll help design it."

Hade frowned, but with another lingering glance at his armor he accepted his help.

"Where is Craig by the way?" Jake remarked as he looked around the workshop for the chubby Player.

"Gone to find his teammates from New Earth. A few of them were in dire straits. I asked Immyr to escort him so he shouldn't have much to worry about even if it is an ambush of the caliber that caught Asfrid and Ruby last week."

Immyr was the name of his black dragon. Jake had never seen him in a combat situation, but from the Fluid Grandmaster's confident tone he shouldn't be too weak...

"And speaking of pets, your cat Crunch and your bird Lord Phenix have returned." Hade announced with a throbbing vein of annoyance on his forehead.

Speak of the devil and he shall appear.

The steel ceiling of Hade's underground workshop creaked and seconds later Crunch's huge, stupid head popped through the narrow doorway. As soon as his slitted yellow eyes locked on Jake, a cocky look appeared on the feline's face.

"Meow! Hey boss, I've been looking for you."

Chapter 809 We Have Another Little Problem,Boss

At the same time as Crunch spoke, while thrashing hard in an attempt to get his broad shoulders through, the nearby wall buckled inwards, the bump resembling a hooked beak...

Hade teleported in panic in front of the "bump" and hit the wall with a fierce palm strike. The wall returned to its original shape and a squeak of pain echoed from the other side. Immediately afterwards, bumps began to distort the wall as if it were being jackhammered by a woodpecker.

"Wait for me here." The Fluid Grandmaster growled at Jake as he rolled up his sleeves. With a front kick second only to his friend's, he knocked the black cat's head out of the door and stomped off in an angry mood.

BANG, BAM, BANG!

"Damn it! How dare you ruin my beautiful plumage!" A shrill voice with a "turkey accent" began to squeak snottily from outside the workshop.

"You should have thought of that before you rammed my workshop with your goddamn beak!" Hade barked on the verge of a nervous breakdown.

BAM! BANG! BIM!

Jake, who had stayed inside, blinked stupidly, listening to the commotion with a bag of popcorn, erm, Adamantium marbles in his hand. How relaxing it was to not be the one losing his shit. He couldn't imagine what the two weirdos had done to get the old Fluid Grandmaster in such a state...

He didn't want to know.

The insults and cocky protests of the orange turkey dragged on for a few more minutes, always followed by a proper beating from Hade. At one point, Jake thought he heard some pained yowling during their tussle.

Soon, silence returned and an inarticulate groan croaked out,

"Pleaff stofp... I'm fworry..."

"I didn't hear you. What did you say?" Hade kept strangling him with a neck lock.

"I'm FWORRY!"

BANG!

"I'm sure you are!" His tormentor lashed out with a final kick that shook the camp.

Jake, who had stayed inside, put away his pack of treats when he saw Hade return, who was elegantly wiping his blood-covered hands with a white handkerchief.

"Cough, sorry for this embarrassing conduct. They've destroyed my workshop six times since they arrived and they steal the Fluid Artifacts I make when my back is turned. Oh, not to mention your cat Crunch, who loves to claw at Immyr's scales. That's part of the reason my dragon volunteered to escort Craig out of camp..." The young man apologized with a contrived smile. "I got a little carried away."

"No, no, I completely understand." Jake chuckled as he patted him on the shoulder. "Anyway, I better go check on my cat."

As he exited the portable fortress, he found red and orange feathers as well as tufts of black hair everywhere plus numerous impact craters. Lord Phenix was still lying on his back, his talons pointing skyward and flailing pitifully. Crunch had curled up in a ball on top of a nearby hill and obviously a terrific blow had sent him flying there.

Seeing his master approaching, Crunch timidly poked his head out of his furry bulges and after making sure the other lunatic wasn't there he immediately regained his smug countenance.

"Master, I was looking for you!" Visit Libread.com for a better_user experience.

"Yeah, yeah, I know. You already told me that. Tell me what you have to say."

Jake obviously knew why the cat was looking for him, but upon looking at his arrogant face he couldn't bring himself to congratulate him so easily. Crunch's wiggling ears flattened in disappointment as he received his master's rather cold reception.

Clearing his throat, or rather vomiting a hairball, Crunch reached into his fur with his pink pads and pulled out a peculiar object resembling a 20-sided translucent die. A grid of multicolored light ran across the surface and inside the object, producing psychedelic patterns several hundred times a minute that never recurred.

"What's that?" Jake inquired, his curiosity overriding his desire to belittle his cat's overinflated pride.

"The Codex of Aerae, meow." Crunch revealed smugly. "Me and Lord Phenix were hunting Players for their liquid alloy and Aether like you ordered us to and we had a blast. But for the last one, the Oracle

Path led us to a recently excavated underground cavern and we finally found signs of our target's passage. Since we were too big, we had to widen the entrance, but we ended up in old ruins lined with traps. Luckily for us, most of them had been set off by our target. We ended up finding our target AND the treasure room. Our target was a much tougher Manticore than we thought and if Lord Phenix hadn't bitten his balls from behind, ahem I mean distracted his attention, I wouldn't have been able to deliver the fatal blow... We found the Codex of Aerae on his corpse. With the treasure room empty when we arrived it was probably the Artifact that these ruins guarded."

Jake cringed as he imagined the scene and he couldn't help but feel sorry for that poor Manticore, even though he was the one who gave them the order to hunt down and dismember Players from other factions for their liquid alloy. Dying like this in front of these two bastards, the Manticore must have felt a deep sense of injustice and anger.

At that moment, he began to wonder if by giving this order he was not creating for himself a considerable number of enemies. But he would not change his decision. This was the only way to achieve his ambitions.

Jake took the Aerae Codex from his cat's paw and immediately ran an Oracle Scan on it.

[Gold Aether Artifact: Codex of Aerae. An artifact created by Aerae, the System Designer himself. Whoever holds it can synchronize the Artifact with the World, Domain or private Dimension of their choice and thus gain the power to change the rules and laws that govern that World within the limits of the Codex of Aerae. The item also works with Artifacts with their own dimensions, but also Domains resulting from Aether Spells or other similar individual faculties. The Codex of Aerae can only be synchronized with one World or Domain at a time and the larger the space you are trying to synchronize and the higher its Aether Density the longer it takes.

Planet currently synchronized 1/1: Quanoth]

Jake's eyes widened as he read the last line. This coincidence was far too incredible to be true, right? He immersed his consciousness in the Codex and immediately understood how it worked.

"Truly worthy of a Gold Aether Artifact." Jake sighed with emotion.

He was so euphoric that he didn't realize his cat had snuggled up to him and that he was mindlessly petting its head. It was only when he was disturbed by the cat's thunderous purring that he became aware of what he was doing.

But even as he realized it he couldn't help but exclaim with a big smile,

"Good job Crunch."

"Hey I contributed too!" Lord Phenix's whiny voice chirped from down the hill.

The former turkey had finally finished growing back all his feathers and was flying heavily towards them, flapping his wings in a clumsy fashion.

"Thanks to you too, Lord Phenix." Jake praised him in high spirits as well. He could let the turkey believe he was a phoenix for a day.

With this artifact he was even more confident that he could accomplish his plan and exact his revenge. In fact, he could even start now.

While checking the Codex features he soon realized that changing the settings of Quanoth was not free. Each change cost a lot of Aether. However, the payoff was worth the investment.

He could at any time undo the Digitalization of natives and Players, remove the Aether limiter that affected all Players and natives except for those rare Aetherists like himself, but also change the spawn rate of all sorts of creatures.

Having hardly explored the Wilderness, he had never considered the question, but Quanoth being less than a thousand years old, it was impossible to populate such a planet in such a short time. The divine hand of Aerae had necessarily intervened and he now knew that this Codex could reproduce its abilities identically but on a smaller scale.

He could also replace the Mana prevalent on Quanoth with Aether or any other energy of his choice if he wanted to and a genius idea began to form in his mind. What if he replaced all the Mana and Aether on the planet with Reiga?

Wouldn't that disable almost all the natives and players on the continent? The Mana Superstorm would become a Reiga Superstorm and from that moment on all dreams were allowed.

"We have another little problem, boss." Lord Phenix said suddenly, remembering the stele they had found in those ruins.

"What is it?" Jake asked unsuspectingly.

"Apparently this isn't the only artifact Aerae left on this planet..."

"Fuck!"

Chapter 810 I Am

An hour later, Jake, Lucia and the other Myrtharian Nerds officers completed their remote war council via a private Faction chat room. He and his friends' consensus was unanimous.

If a dumb cat and turkey, admittedly quite lucky, could acquire such an overpowered artifact, so could other natives and Evolvers. Knowing neither the number nor the features of these Artifacts scattered over the surface of Quanoth, they simply decided to adjust their plans according to the worst case scenario.

The most powerful Myrtharian Nerds like Mufasa, Shere Khan, Gerulf, ect... momentarily stopped hunting Players from other factions to fully dedicate themselves to finding all the Aerae Artifacts that their Oracle Paths could locate.

It didn't work out as planned. Less than a day later, Jake received reports from his companions informing him of their failure. All the Oracle Paths that had yielded a result pointed to the Celestial City or the Divine Academy interior, which was off limits for the time being.

The most worrying thing was that Hephais had gotten a lead by investigating with his own methods, but when he arrived on the scene he had only found the bleeding corpse of a factionless Player.

"So the worst case scenario has already happened." Jake sighed as he stared at the dark clouds thundering relentlessly over the camp. " So let's move on to plan B."

Plan B was simply to find out the functions of these Aerae Artifacts and determine which factions had them in their possession.

It was okay if the functions of these artifacts were different, but if all of these artifacts were Codexes like his own, then using them would prove to be a huge waste of Aether. Unfortunately, if he didn't use it, he would be giving the initiative to his enemies.

In the end, it came down to the original stake of who has the most Aether points. As a result, their plan to hunt down Players from other factions for their Aether and liquid alloy became a top priority, with all of their goals depending on the same prerequisite: Accumulate as many resources as possible in as little time as possible.

And if Jake and his comrades could come to this conclusion, so could the other factions. The next morning, the first bad news began to roll in.

That morning, Jake and Hade were working together on the engine of their future spaceship when they saw a grubby Drastan lumbering into the camp carrying the blood-soaked body of an armless, legless woman in his arms. The few remaining Myrtharian Nerds in the camp noticed that in a few days his Troll army had been cut in half.

Jake stopped handling the Adamantium Essence floating in front of him and walked carefully towards the Troll hunter. When he recognized the colorful feather tiara adorning the unconscious woman's forehead, his expression darkened abruptly,

"Kewanee? What happened to her?" He asked, already having some inkling of the answer.

In response, Drastan grimaced stiffly,

"It seems that your plan was not all that brilliant. Kewanee suffered precisely the same fate as all those players we've been chasing for the past few weeks. I was also ambushed. If I hadn't shown up in time, she would have been kicked out of the Ordeal. But all the Aether and liquid alloy she had stolen since the mission began was stolen by the enemy."

Hade also put down the strange screwdriver in his hand when he heard the giant's words. Joining their conversation, he questioned,

"Were you able to identify them?"

Drastan shook his head sourly. Jake exchanged a worried look with Hade, then made a general announcement in the Faction chat,

"Kewanee and Drastan have just been ambushed by enemy players with the same intentions as us. Assume that their Oracle Ranks are higher than yours and that they can track you as easily as you track your own targets. The mission stands, but from now on I want you to operate by area, with every remaining Myrtharian Nerds within range of an officer."

It would impact the rate at which they amassed Aether and liquid alloy, but the safety of his subordinates came first. The other officers like Enya, Aisling, Kenway, etc. took the order very seriously and marked their location in the chat room as a rallying point.

It turned out that Jake had made the right decision, but he had still acted a little too late. When he realized several days later that some of the Myrtharian Nerds hadn't been seen in a week, he assumed they wouldn't see them again until the Ordeal was over.

A total of 48 Myrmidians, 28 Kintharians and 16 Throsgenians had lost their lives. All of the ordinary Players had been wiped out by Shamash's last psychic blast and each current loss significantly impacted their fighting strength.

Despite his immediate countermeasure, his subordinates continued to be decimated one after another, but at a slower rate. Gerulf and the others also returned fire and rivers of blood were shed.

Ten days later, the giant Kintharian, who had not been seen for several days, appeared on the outskirts of Laudarkvik. On seeing him, Jake dropped what he was doing and leapt to his feet.

His friend was unharmed, but by his expression he knew at once that something was terribly wrong. The giant grunted faintly and flopped feebly to the ground.

"What happened?" Jake frowned. Such a powerful Kintharian should not have been so weak no matter how badly he was hurt.

"I lost all my alloy and all my Aether." He confessed shamefully through clenched teeth.

Jake's eyes widened in surprise. There was only one explanation for this, he had been dismembered and bled by the enemy until he was drained of his last drop of liquid alloy. What kind of enemy could do that to a warrior as formidable as Gerulf?

"Who was it?" He asked coldly.

"They call him the Nullyfier." Gerulf grunted as he closed his eyes with a frazzled look. After resting for a few seconds he clarified, "He's a god."

"Lost Divinities!" Jake spat bitterly. It's them again! Forcing himself to stay calm he then followed up by asking, "Your subordinates?"

"All dead."

Jake's face became ugly. In the Kintharian's area of operation were 38 Myrmidians, 28 Kintharians, but also the Water Elf army and his cousin Vincent. Thinking that his friend was worried about the latter, Gerulf revealed,

"Your cousin died a hero. He fell to the enemy, but he managed to save his two wives and their people."

All the tension of the scene was immediately defused and Jake remembered that his cousin was not actually dead. He must have been tortured atrociously by Lost Divinities before being culled out of the Ordeal. Then Jake thought of something else.

"What about you, Gerulf? If they managed to capture you and strip you of all your liquid alloy how did you escape?"

"I didn't." The giant confessed shamefully, shaking with anger. "They... obliterated me. Body and soul, but just before I perished my loyal warriors activated the Vitality Link to transfer my injuries to theirs. With the one they call the Nullifyer already gone, I was able to escape easily..."

Jake's expression immediately changed upon hearing these last words.

BOOOMM!

At that moment, a cataclysmic explosion sounded at the other end of the camp and as Jake turned around, he saw Hade's underground workshop and the spaceship they had built together explode into millions of pieces. The Myrtharian Nerds too close to the epicenter were instantly atomized and the earth sank six or seven meters in a three-kilometer radius.

"Hade!"

Just as he was about to teleport to his friend, Jake froze, an overwhelming spiritual pressure bearing down on him. Instead of panicking, he slowly turned to the newcomer and growled impassively,

"And I was wondering how a Player with a higher Oracle Rank than Gerulf could accidentally leave him alive. It would seem that it wasn't a mistake."

About fifteen steps away from him, a hooded figure under a jet black robe glared at him as if he were already dead. His face was hidden in shadow, but his exposed chin was a pale blue, covered with stripes of a darker blue.

"Are you the Nullyfier?" Jake looked at him as he deactivated his Miniaturization spell.

Stoically watching him grow, the mysterious individual said softly,

"I am."

A wave of shock hit Jake and he then asked more gravely,

"Are you the leader of Lost Divinities for this Ordeal?"

"I am."

At that moment, Jake's anger left his body and a cold rationality took over. He activated Promotion and Oracle Cloaking, but his Shadow Guide stood still as he tried to include the man in front of him in his predictions.

"Your Oracle Rank is higher than mine." Jake commented calmly.

"It is."

"Then it was all a setup." He finally understood. Lost Divinities had never taken them seriously. "You didn't need Gerulf to find our camp. To you, we're just entertainment, aren't we?"

"...Maybe?"

