

“FUCK!”

Leather chair. Chronos. Morag. Hills. Void. Two bodies.

I died again.

“I’m going to be very rude,” I inform reality.

“Coffee?” the time god offers.

“Fuck you.”

My insult slides off them like a splattered bee off a sports car’s windshield. They wait.

“I assume you guys must be the patient kind,” I say with as much anger as I can muster, which is not a whole lot. The weird space is making everything distant again. Can a man not be upset about his own demise? The humanity.

Phantom pain flashes in my chest, quickly fading. Cold head. I look at the second corpse. This time, whatever killed me got me right between the eyes. Interestingly, there is no blood.

“I’ll have that coffee, thanks,” I tell Chronos.

Once again, Morag uses the bundle of fuck sticks she has at the end of her mitts to serve me what appears to be the perfect espresso directly from an Italian pot. The scent is exquisite. I wait a bit not to get burnt.

“It’s already at the perfect temperature,” Chronos offers.

And it is. And also, it’s sublime. The best blend I’ve ever tasted.

“I assume this is all happening in my head?” I ask.

“No.”

Huh.

“But you don’t need to do anything to serve the coffee. You could just appear it in my mouth?”

“We act, not because it is necessary, but because it carries meaning,” Chronos replies with that same kind patience that won’t translate into action I noticed before.

“Okay. If this is a gesture of apology, it’s pretty nice but I have to say, I’m not sure where we even stand. I mean, I’m pretty sure you just ruined my life in some way.”

For a moment, I feel a blinding outrage but it is immediately smothered. I turn to Morag. The eldritch butler woman maintains the same expression.

“In a way, yes,” the time god allows, “in another way, you have been granted an incredible prize. I can nevertheless appreciate that the situation appears bleak for you, at this stage.”

He turns towards his assistant. He places a hand on the thing that must be her arm since it exists between her shoulder and the spike mop. The look she returns is one of utter devotion and abject gratitude. The show was for me. It leaves me embarrassed.

“Forgive Morag. She does not possess the ability to sympathize with your plight.”

I drink more of the coffee. It’s really good.

“We have some time, right? For a conversation?” I ask.

“We have all the time in the world.”

“Look, it would really help if you didn’t wait exactly the same amount of time before replying every time you talk. Vary a bit. Please.”

Chronos nods, Morag standing by his side.

“I will, from now, on according to your perception of now.”

I glance at my second corpse again. I need to address this but I don’t think I’m ready. I mean, I’m pretty sure this place doesn’t exist in a way that matters so there is no rush. I got time.

“Ok, next question if you don’t mind. You implied I perceive time differently compared to you?”

“Indeed. You are experiencing reality as a succession of linear experiences. We are not,” the Time God patiently explains.

“So... how does that work? How do you experience it?”

The god leans over the table. He places an apple upon it, red, lustrous, the perfect fruit. A simple knife appears in his hand.

“I find it easier to use metaphors when conferring with my champions. You, as a human, exist in four dimensions, but you only perceive three.”

This doesn’t sound right, so I frown.

“I am aware of time passing,” I object without much confidence.

I think time works weirdly in here anyway, but I can’t tell from experience alone.

“This is an object that exists in three dimensions but only perceives two,” the god continues.

Chronos slices the edge of the fruit. Slice after slice — so thin they are transparent — join the previous ones on the table.

Must be some sharp knife.

“The object experiences itself as successive slices having different widths and heights. Never can it see itself as a three dimensional object.”

The metaphor is working. As the slices start small before growing and then becoming smaller again, I can't miss the uncomfortable imagery of what a human life is.

“Ok. Ok, I get it. I experience time moment after moment, linearly, but you guys, what, experience everything at the same time?”

Morag leans towards the god, face as cold as ever. Her voice is low and raspy.

“Sire, the apple asks us if we experience everything in the same slice.”

The first time she speaks and I'm getting sassed. Lovely.

“My mind can't process it, got it,” I reply, slightly miffed even though, again, I can't really feel it on an emotional level.

Chronos smiles. Silence returns for all of two seconds before he speaks again. I feel like it's exactly two seconds because I made the request. I mean, I did ask for it but I'm not sure why it's still so damn uncanny. Might be the starless void background.

“By the way, I must apologize for sending you to a quick doom. Unfortunately, I needed you to experience the epiphany that is an awakening before I could explain more of the game.

“Is it related to this qualia point thing I kind of see after I die? Although, after is a bit of a...”

“Achronal perception. Don't worry too much about it,” Chronos says in a pleasant tone.

Morag serves him a cup. She refills mine too. The strange normalcy settles my nerves despite my best efforts.

“Thank you, Morag. Ok. One more question,” I continue.

Chronos nods.

“Why me? Literally you could have picked anyone else in the street or whatever the place I wake up in is and they would be a better candidate.”

“Not so, but first I will explain a little more about the game, which will conveniently lead us to the qualia question floating around your mind.”

He said he wouldn't mess with my mind aaaand I suppose reading it like an open book doesn't count.

"In order for us to compete, we must select a champion. Each god then grants their champion a number of boons. There are god-specific boons and universally available boons. Each of us has, shall we say, a limited amount of resources to invest. I have a significant advantage, but even then the cost increases depending on the champion. In order to provide you with the two perfect boons that would make your success, shall we say, 'inevitable', I could not pick any scion of a great line, or even a street thug. No, I needed... the perfect blank canvas. You are a human from an insignificant planet in a distant, insignificant arm of your galaxy with insignificant energy levels. As such, you match the profile I need to perfection."

"There are billions of us," I reproach. "Shouldn't you have picked, I don't know, a politician?"

The god tilts his head, and his smile grows almost genuine.

"Do you sincerely believe you could talk your way out of your predicament?"

"A special forces genius with three PhDs?" I suggest, again.

"What a strange beast that would be," Chronos muses.

He doesn't reply further. Still, I feel like I'm missing something important.

"If you experience time non linearly, it also means you're experiencing the end."

He smiles, and I dare hope.

"So... do I win?"

"Who knows!"

"But you just sai—"

"Who. Knows?" the god interrupts, laughing. "Not you. What are humans, if not creatures of decisions? And I believe now is not the loop for philosophy. Now, about those qualia points. As I mentioned before, I have a limited amount of resources to make available to you. But you don't."

I frown again.

"What do you mean?"

"You are your own canvas. If you would turn your head to the side?"

He points and I oblige him. We sit in the middle of a flat expanse before the sand begins rolling on all sides. On my right is an arcade cabinet shining with neon, some ancient design in gaudy colors.

Chronos extends an inviting hand. I can't shake the impression that I'm getting trolled. Not to mention that thing clearly wasn't there a moment a — ah who the fuck am I kidding? Time doesn't matter to those people.

I stand up, Chronos mirroring me, then I approach the 80's survivor in all its bling glory. Blocky letters appear alongside a menu. In the queen's actual English of all things.

*Steve Prentiss.*

*Qualia points available: 14*

*Physical awakening: N/A*

*Mage tradition: none*

*Soul awakening: first stage*

*Avatar traits:*

*Perfect loop (time)*

*Perfect soul (time)*

*Avatar language acquisition (neutral)*

Even though I've never encountered the word before, I instinctively know what 'qualia' means. It's... a subjective, conscious experience, like seeing a twilight or feeling the wind on one's skin, or even the wave of pleasure that comes from being loved. I now see how the points would be counted, but I find the measurement odd. Shouldn't being shot in the fucking head count as more than seeing one's first 'alien'? Especially when they're practically human? I'm intellectually annoyed, and then even more annoyed that I can't *feel* annoyed. Bugger.

"Do you like it?" Chronos asked, sounding weirdly proud. "I know humans love games and competition. And stories. You like it, don't you?"

I...

"Yea," I admit. "I like it. It's presented in a way that makes sense, I think?"

"That is how I designed it. You are my first unawakened champion, after all, so I prepared some things to help you."

I can't tell if he is helping me or screwing me over beyond anything anyone has ever experienced. For all I know, it might be both.

"Can you explain more about the awakening things then?" I ask.

“Yes, however you need to understand something: I cannot grant you more boons. But you can acquire them yourself in any way that you see fit.”

“By buying them with qualia points?”

“Precisely! Or not! But you can indeed buy them with points. Like rewards from a game! How exciting.”

He sounds and looks hyped. His fingers approach the screen but he withdraws them after some hesitation. Is he pretending? It's so difficult to tell.

“The game has started. I can grant you no more, but you are allowed to grow by yourself. The champion I picked met all the conditions of the game, but that does not mean the champion who participates has to!”

“Isn't that cheating?” I ask. “Skirting the rules?”

“My dear, we are gods. Of course, we cheat as much as we can get away with. All of us do, and will.”

“Fine.”

This is going to be such a pain.

“So... who are the other avatars?” I ask.

“It is far too 'early' for you to concern yourselves with them. Rather, ask me what you want to know!”

That makes me hesitate again.

“Shouldn't you just tell me? I might miss an important question.”

“Unfortunately, my ability to answer is limited unless you direct your thoughts towards a specific topic.”

“Fine, tell me what I really ought to know,” I say, but the god only chuckles.

“A good attempt, but one that only makes sense on a semantic level. Your thoughts, your knowledge, are what matter. And even though I can answer, I cannot give you more boons. I cannot, for example, grant you access to a mage tradition.”

“What's a mage tradition?” I ask.

“Ah, finally.”

He chuckles like he made a good joke.

“You will see three lines. The place the game starts in has a tremendous amount of latent energy, more than most worlds. By merely existing there, you are able to change, to transcend the limits of your mortal existence. You can do this in a myriad of ways I have arbitrarily separated into three conceptually useful categories. The first is energy internalization, also called physical awakening. It improves everything from reaction speed to stamina. Yes, the strongest people can split mountains with a single blow.”

I was visualizing Superman. I guess I got my answer.

“You should stay out of my mind,” I request.

“Unfortunately, I cannot, but do not be alarmed. I understand that humans must contend with a variety of biological imperatives that turn your consciousness into an easily distracted chaos of competing drives and self-destructive emotions. Know that I look upon you with nothing but patience and kindness.”

“... thanks. So I can do that too? Splitting mountains.”

“If you manage to learn how.”

“So... for example, if I do some serious training, I can return with the same body?”

Chronos winces.

“Unfortunately, no. You will start the loop with the same body and the same possessions every time.”

“What? But...”

“At the moment the loop starts, anyway.”

I frown.

“So... there is... a way to bypass that?”

“Check,” he says, pointing at the machine.

There is a ‘see skill list’ option, so I press that. Lines scroll impossibly fast.

“Oops, let me implement a search function instead,” Chronos chuckles.

“There are a lot of options,” I admit, now facing an empty bar. I use a joystick to painfully enter every letter one by one. After my annoyance rises, a panel slides to reveal a keyboard. This definitely wasn’t there just one second... oh who am I kidding? They don’t care. I find what I want strangely easily, as if the user interface was trying to help me.

'Animasomatic imprint, first stage. [Augmentation] [Tier 1] Cost: 500. Additional requirement:: physical awakening at stage 3.

Augmentations change you on a fundamental level, regardless of when.

This skill makes you start every loop having achieved the first level of physical awakening.'

Well I cannot take it for now. I decide to ignore the 'augmentation' aspect of the skill to continue my previous line of questioning. One thing at a time.

"But there are other ways, right?" I ask. "To get the skills."

Chronos seems pleased.

"There are many ways to achieve many things. The traits are shortcuts. Which shortcuts are worth the investment? That is for you to decide."

I'm playing cards with a blindfold in here.

"Ok, explain mage traditions next please," I ask.

"Mage traditions are all the ways energy users have to express or expel the energy I mentioned. The paths are as numerous as stars in the galaxy."

"So like, err, mana?"

"Mana. Qi. Ki. Chakra. Breath. Vitae. Essence. Pneuma. It has many names, just I have many names. None are wrong. They are sounds you associate with a concept, and that concept is the energy that will exist around you, in the 'real' world. It calls out potential. It makes the fabric of existence... malleable, and it gave birth to us."

"The gods?" I ask.

Chronos smiles.

"So, how do I learn?" I ask.

"You can buy them. You can find them. You can steal them. You can make your own. You can make several of your own, and erase them, and none will ever know except for us."

He shrugs.

"But I don't know shit about anything," I protest.

"So learn."

"What if I don't want to learn? What if I want to go back?" I protest, weakly.

I can feel I'm trapped. I am so over my head that I know I don't have the power to protect my own feelings. They are not my own down here in this weird void asshole into the universe.

"Which nicely leads us to soul awakening, and time traits," Chronos smoothly continues. "As you might recall, your soul awakening is 1."

"Oh yeah, the energy I used to open the door."

Morag sighs, an expression of pity that seems to come from a much larger chest than she shows. And by that I mean she sounds like she has plane hangar-sized lungs.

"Precisely. Soul awakening is extremely difficult to achieve for everyone. It is by far the most difficult aspect of the self to comprehend for all mortal races. Except for you."

"Because of the perfect soul trait?" I ask.

"Because of the perfect soul trait. The first level allows you to feel the strong emotions, and perceive the existence of thinking beings around. You will find that the range is fairly short. People might also think at you and you will hear it, but you cannot yet reply. It will take some time for you to familiarize yourself with those abilities. That is, however, the least of the trait's benefits."

"Ok, I'll bite. What's the rest?"

"Your soul cannot be permanently harmed. It cannot be dominated by any others. It cannot be, under any circumstances, destroyed. And it will grow more quickly than that of anybody else's through experience and epiphanies, as your understanding of the world progresses. As of this moment, you have this plane's strongest soul potential, and no one, not even me, can destroy it. Or permanently disable you."

"But... the soul can change? Wouldn't some change be harmful? How is it even decided?"

"It is entirely subjective, and don't forget, I said 'permanent' harm. You will suffer, and for this I am sorry."

I glare at the god. I feel cheated.

"I still don't want to play the game."

"Then don't. Explore. Travel. Kill. Die. It doesn't matter. You cannot be destroyed. Which nicely leads me to your other trait."

"Perfect loop."

"Correct!" Chronos congratulates like I did something of import.

He sounds like an adult who can't tell if a toddler is doing something impressive or not because he has no frame of reference for what constitutes 'smart' at that age. Except it's for me. Like he doesn't know exactly how stupid I'm supposed to be.

It's a little vexing. If I could, I would be terribly vexed right now.

"The perfect loop lasts from the beginning of the game to the time a victor is announced, a period of around 431 Earth days in duration. Should you not be named the victor, the loop will repeat. If you die, the loop repeats. In both cases, you will return to your room with an intact soul, an intact body, and all the improvements you decide to carry with you."

"I, uh."

*Oh shit.*

"Wait. I can't be destroyed and I can't not win?"

"Precisely! That is why you are the perfect candidate."

His silver eyes bore into mine.

"You, Steve, *cannot lose.*"

But that doesn't mean I can win.

"You told me you couldn't say if I'd win eventually."

"Correct!"

I glare again, which doesn't achieve shit but at least I get to do that.

"I don't get it," I tell him.

"That is perfectly fine! There is much you cannot get! It doesn't matter."

I hesitate before I ask the next question. I don't know. It feels relevant.

"Am I hallucinating all of this? Am I having a full psychotic break?"

"Nothing I say will convince you otherwise," Chronos pointedly replies. "Everything you experience is a subjective response to an external stimulus. I cannot possibly prove that I am not a figment of your imagination."

I think I'd be extremely annoyed at myself if I were to wake up now, abused by my subconscious to such a degree.

"This is... very disturbing. What about soul experience?" I ask.

I feel something pressure this new sense I have, just a light touch. It's extremely uncomfortable. I would probably shiver if I could.

"Do you sincerely believe soul perception cannot be cheated?" Chronos mocks.

I shrug.

"I have no idea."

"If it is any comfort, time will bring you the certainty you crave. After all, one wakes up from their dreams. You have been violently uprooted in a way you could not possibly have foreseen. Only time can dull that shock. Speaking of, would you like to leave again?"

"What if I say no?" I reply, a bit defiant though I don't really believe it will lead to anything.

It does though. Morag bristles, briefly. Like an enormous tree seen from very far. I really don't like how this works in my mind.

"Take all the time you need," Chronos replies without malice. "It doesn't matter."

"I... want to check a few more options. In the arcade cabinet."

"Of course!"

I grumble and turn. The screen waits, flickering lightly like it's not some sort of made up box in the middle of nothingness.

"Where are we again?" I ask.

"Didn't I tell you? Ah yes, I did!"

Chronos chuckles. Peculiar sense of humor on that one.

"We are in my domain," he says.

"So, what's a god's domain?"

"You do not possess the knowledge required to understand my explanation. Think of it as, hmmm, a lobby. Before you start again. One where you may take your time. Think. Prepare."

"Can I take notes or something?"

"Of course!"

I turn again and, yep, there is now a desk on the other side of my leather chair.

"We'll make it a fully furnished flat in no time," I mock.

“Perhaps!”

He’s one peppy asshole. And just as the thought pops in my head, Morag bristles again. Better watch my mouth here. Or not. What is he going to do about it?

Chronos doesn’t seem bothered. He’s still smiling.

No *permanent* damage. I shouldn’t push my luck.

“Check the list!” he invites.

Said list is immensely, impossibly long. I don’t understand half of the expressions written there despite them being in English. What even is ‘Izimun School of Thunderous Prowess’? And there is an ‘Advanced sphincter control’ manual? Goodness. I click on one at random.

‘Flesh golem maintenance operation. [Knowledge] [Second Tier]. Cost: 300. Requirements: understanding of flesh golem anatomy, advanced flesh crafting, basic Enderlithian engineering

Knowledge skills are granted as freely consultable book spells.

Flesh golem maintenance allows for the repair and healing of the Enderlithian’s flesh golems. Minor injuries, damage, and imbalances may be treated but major repairs will require more practice.’

Wow so there was... flesh crafting. Ominous. I skim through a few other skills to realize that none of the descriptions elaborate much or even indicate if the skill is gruesome or normal by local standards. Maybe some of them are forbidden knowledge? Flesh crafting sounds like it might be. After looking through a few more, however, I note some important differences.

Skills come in 5 ‘tiers’. Higher tiers require more points to purchase, though there is also a tier 0 with variable cost. Most of the higher tier skills have prerequisites which means I can’t just die on repeat and unlock the Perfect form of the Drunk Skunk or whatever would allow me to waltz out of my current predicament.

There are also two types of skills. Those that are ‘knowledge’ come as ‘books’ although I don’t know if they just pop atop my head or I have to download them as epub’s or something. Those are relatively cheaper, ranging from 100 for tier 1, to 2500 for stuff like ‘Sublime Fist of the Dawn’. The other category is incredibly promising with the matching price tag. I check one of them.

‘Faint Close Quarter Predisposition [Augmentation] [Second Tier]: Cost: 1000 Requirements: none.

Augmentations change you on a fundamental level, regardless of when.

Faint Close Quarter Predisposition subtly rearranges and optimizes your neural network to improve your inborn talent and natural understanding of close quarter combat.'

Oh that sounds gorgeous. I could be more talented at something? Just like that? Very promising. But those prices all mean that I won't be buying those any time soon.

Out of curiosity, I classify the skills by cost to check what I can afford right now. All of them belong to the 'knowledge' group, and they seem absolutely terrible. There are 'cultivation manuals' for techniques that will cripple my body, failed mage traditions, knowledge of language (Sallurian, toddler) and crustacean peeling methods. There is also elementary squid kissing and macrame knotting.

Those don't feel like intelligent uses of my points.

"Is there a limit to the number of qualia points I can get?"

"Is there a limit to experience?" the god challenges. "And yet, one can only die in the same way so many times before it grows stale. Unless one has learned a new way to appreciate the same thing. Who can say? Qualias are *subjective*, are they not?"

I'll take this as a no but it takes increased effort. Ok. My last check is the neutral trait he gave me. It allows me to absorb language at a very fast rate by sheer exposure 'based on soul awakening'. The screen explains that it works for *any* language used 'for the sake of communication between sapient beings'. So maybe not programming. Or ciphers. Still, it feels insanely useful. The fact it 'scales' on the soul means it was pretty smart to grant it to me. I check the point cost, just in case.

3000.

"Ah."

So, ok, I don't even want to think about the cost of a perfect soul. One that can just recover from trauma.

I look at my second cadaver again. Two brown eyes, staring at nothing. Tears, again. It's... the second time I've seen my own eyes with my own eyes, without a mirror or a camera. Both times here. Same with my back.

I... I need to address the mangled corpse in the room.

"I'm going to die again, am I not?"

"I find this very likely, yes," Chronos replies.

There is a sort of deep sympathy in his eyes I find unsettling. Since he's the one who put me in this fucking predicament to begin with.

"Take your time," he says.

“Haha. Ok.”

I take a deep breath.

“I’m ready.”

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