

A World That Failed . . .

The morning I discovered my true identity started with a very weird message from the multiverse. It entered my mind as a thought and lay splashed in front of my eyes. *Nobody is flawless, ideal, and absolute.* It could have just been my anxiety, but I thought that some greater power was telling me my truth. A truth I did not need to hear today.

Nobody was perfect. And that was precisely why I needed to *not* be a nobody today. As I stepped out of my transport, I couldn't help but wonder about which obstacles they had prepared for me during the Trials. Even though I had been preparing for this day for more than half of my life, I still felt a shiver of uncertainty. The odds were in no one's favor: 50/50, balanced just as our world would soon be.

For thousands of years, all beings had lived harmoniously with their doppelgängers from the Second Dimension. However, eight years ago, scientists discovered entropy consuming the Second Dimension. Entropy was the enemy of life, disorienting particles in all matter until they became a distorted version of themselves. It traveled around, from universe to universe, consuming them each like a plague. In order to prevent entropy from completely destroying the Second Dimension, and possibly finding an entrance to the First, the leaders of both worlds decided to merge their universes while closing off all portals to the outside multiverse. The only problem was that there was not enough space in the First Dimension to house everyone from both worlds. Thus began the Trials. Each doppelgänger had to compete with the other for a place in the merged universe. Those that lost would be ported away to detainment centers. It was decided that once all Trials were complete, the two worlds would merge forever. The Final Dimension, as they called it, would be the dawn of a new era.

I turned away from my transport to gaze at the Metropolis ahead of me. With a layer of clouds beneath it, the Metropolis was a magnificent collection of skyscrapers meant to be the city that connected both worlds. Once scientists had figured out a way to make larger objects levitate, it was only a matter of time before some of the grandest cities took to the skies. Looming just ahead of me was the Tower of Trials, the place where I would meet my fate. It was the tallest building in the Metropolis. I took a deep breath as I steadied myself into calmness. I turned around and pressed a button on my transport, signaling it to fly back home.

I walked the short path to the entrance of the Tower, where I was greeted by a small woman in a gray suit.

“What is your full name?” the lady in the suit asked.

“Debelia Honor,” I responded. “I’m here for my Trials.”

The lady pulled out a small tablet that she swiped a couple times with her stylus before saying, “Room 232, down the main hallway. First left, and the room is immediately to your right.”

I proceeded down the path to my room. The inside of the Tower was intricately designed with modern art and aesthetics. I gazed at the large screens plastered on the walls signaling people’s Trial timings and rooms. They somewhat reminded me of an airport. I passed hundreds of rooms with ongoing Trials before I reached Room 232. Taking a deep breath, I opened the door.

The room was stuffy and quite small compared to what I had deduced from the outside. The walls were made of mirrors and the floor was made of complicated marble patterns. In the center was a long table with three Moderators awaiting me with their scrutinizing glances. I tried standing a little straighter and pushed my shoulders back. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the

main door open again as a small figure stepped inside. My eyes took a second to adjust, and I sucked in my breath as I realized what I was looking at. It was as if someone had placed a mirror in front of me. Nearly everything about this girl, from her dark hair to her brown skin, resembled me, save for the fact that she appeared slightly more lean and moved far more gracefully than I ever could. I figured she had to be my doppelgänger from the Second Dimension. I locked eyes with this girl who seemed just as nervous as I was. I started to grow more and more uncertain about my ability to kill this girl who resembled me perfectly from head to toe.

“Welcome,” said the Moderator at the center of the table. His voice boomed across the room, amplified by the mirrors. “I am Raven, and beside me are Ruby and Raquel. We will be your Moderators today.”

We both bowed our heads in acknowledgment.

“Which one of you is Xamere?” Raven asked.

My doppelgänger raised her hand.

“All right, we shall commence the Trials now,” said Raven.

Ruby began, “In Trial 1, you will be tested on your knowledge and wisdom. Each of you will be asked one question in regard to the history of our worlds. The rules are simple. Answer correctly, and you move to the next Trial. Answer incorrectly, and you fail. If both of you answer incorrectly, the Trials will terminate and neither of you will be deemed fit for a place in the Final Dimension. Understood?”

We both nodded our heads and prepared ourselves for our first Trial.

“Question 1 is for Xamere,” Ruby announced. “What is the physical factor threatening our multiverse?”

“Entropy,” said Xamere.

Xamere got an easy question. I started fidgeting with my fingers, hoping that mine wouldn't be too hard. Even though I had studied for this part of the Trials, my anxiety couldn't help but creep in. I wished I was a little more confident.

"Question 2 is for Debelia. How was the multiverse discovered?" Raquel asked.

Phew, that's easy, I thought. I had studied this concept for my exam. I held my head high as I said, "The multiverse was discovered 5,000 years ago by a scientist from the First Dimension through the use of quantum physics."

The Moderators nodded at us before they took some time to discuss their decisions. Once they were finished, Raven said in his thunderous voice, "Both of you have passed your first Trial. Now listen closely as Raquel gives the instructions for Trial 2."

Raven's voice and demeanor were intimidating. Out of all the Moderators, I feared him the most. Relaxing myself, I turned my thoughts back toward my Trials. I knew what to expect from Trial 2. This was the part where I had to prove how strong I was to the Moderators. I took a deep breath in as I steadied myself.

Raquel began to talk. "In Trial 2, which is also your final Trial, you will be tested on your physical fitness and strength. For you two, this display of strength will be achieved through the means of weight lifting. Both of you will receive identical weights, and whichever one of you is able to hold the weight for the longest amount of time will be deemed the victor."

Ruby unzipped a bag from behind her and pulled out a weight. My eyes widened as I noticed how large it was. Judging from the visible strain on Ruby's face as she strode toward me with it, this Trial was not going to be an easy feat. I stole a glance in Xamere's direction, and she appeared equally as horrified as me, if not more. I stretched my arms out in anticipation.

The second Ruby released her hands on the weight, I felt as if I was carrying the weight of the world. I had practiced weight lifting as a part of my training for the Trials, but compared to this one, those weights were feathers. Raven started the timer and instructed me to pull the weight up above my head and hold it for as long as I was able to.

In this moment, I felt a lot like Atlas, a Greek Titan who carried the weight of the heavens on his shoulders as a punishment for leading the Titans into battle with the Gods. Except in this situation, I didn't know what I was being punished for. Instead of competing with Xamere, I felt more at odds with the Moderators. The issue of entropy was understandable, but wasn't there a better way to solve this problem? Maybe our leaders could figure out a way to use resources more efficiently or create another level of cities in the sky, or they could figure out a way to stop the entropy or . . . they could just do anything else instead of these horrible Trials. I didn't know what was going to happen to those of us that lost the Trials. What were the detainment centers going to be like? Where would the detainees go once the time came to merge the two worlds? Our leaders had been obscure on purpose. They knew that riots would happen if they spoke of the entire truth. So instead they painted a picture of a magnificent Final Dimension where only the best of all beings would reside. With such high expectations, no one even considered failing. No one even worried about what would happen *if* they didn't make it.

The burden was starting to become unbearable. My arms were getting numb from the pain. After what seemed like an eternity, Raven finally yelled that sixty seconds had passed. I stole a glance in Xamere's direction. One of the first skills I was taught while training was to always assess my opponent. Judging from her frail build, she was probably not going to be able to last as long as me. I despised myself for judging someone in this way, but there was nothing else I could have done.

Confident that I had endured this Trial for a sufficient amount of time, I brought my arms down with a considerable amount of effort. I nearly threw the weight away, not being able to tolerate even one more second of this Trial.

“Your time is seventy seconds,” said Raven.

I bowed to the Moderators in acknowledgment. Now, it was Xamere’s turn. I could see her face scribbled with worry as Ruby placed the weight in her feeble hands. Xamere was clearly struggling from the instant Ruby released her hands from the weight.

Xamere lifted the weight above her head. Her arms were already faltering, unable to handle the burden. When my gaze drifted down to her eyes, I found her looking straight at me with a compelling expression. It was almost as if she was communicating a silent request for help.

I quickly turned away. Both of us knew there was nothing I could do to help her. If I intervened before the seventy second mark, then I would only be helping Xamere win. But then why did I feel so guilty? The reasonable voice inside my head told me to hope for her failure, but my thoughts wouldn’t clear.

Xamere was still struggling to maintain herself, when her foot slipped on the marble floor, and she toppled on her back. Her hands came down over her face, where she was fighting to hold off the weight from crushing her.

Without nearly any hesitation, I rushed over to help her. I helped her lift the weight away and threw it aside. She stood up, taking my hand.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

She nodded.

I turned around to look at the Moderators who were staring at me with interest. Ruby and Raquel pulled out their tablets and began swiping with their styluses, but Raven continued glaring at me intently.

“Xamere,” Ruby said, “your time was only fifty-five seconds. Unfortunately, you have failed this Trial.”

Ruby’s voice was unfeeling, but what she did next was heartless. She reached into her bag and pulled out a pair of handcuffs. In an instant, Xamere’s hands were behind her as Ruby mercilessly cuffed them. I turned my head away as I heard Xamere continuously plead for a second chance. Ruby unresponsively dragged her outside, and the sound of Xamere’s pleas faded away with the click of the door. In that moment, I felt as if I was carrying a weight much heavier than that of the Trial.

“On another note,” said Raquel, “congratulations to Debelia for proving herself worthy of the Final Dimension.”

I bowed my head to show my respect and gratitude, and forced myself to smile. On the inside, however, I felt uneasy and disturbed. I wondered what was going to happen to Xamere. Would I ever see her again?

“Please remain in this room. I will go out to bring you your certificate and finish some documentation,” Raquel added.

As she left the room, I turned back around to the Moderators’ table to find Raven’s eyes fixed on me.

“Is everything alright?” I asked.

“Do you know what happens in the detainment centers to those that lose the Trials?” Raven asked.

I shook my head.

“We perform multiple experiments on them to discover what exactly it was that made them unworthy of a place among the Final Dimension,” he said.

“What kind of experiments?”

Raven chuckled but didn’t answer my question.

“Disgusted, aren’t you?” j e asked instead. He stepped out of his chair and walked toward me. “You know, some would consider what you did for Xamere as an act of weakness.”

“I . . . I was worried she would get hurt,” I stammered.

Raven drew his brows together. “And you weren’t worried about jeopardizing your own chances of receiving a place in the Final Dimension?”

I couldn’t answer. Because the truth was that at that moment, I did not care. I saw someone who desperately needed my help and knew that I had to offer it. But I shouldn’t have done that. I should have only focused on myself. After all, self-preservation was what had been taught to me my whole life. But still, I wondered why cutting other people down was the only way to succeed.

Before I could even notice, Raven pulled out another pair of handcuffs and placed them on me. He said I was unworthy, as he pulled me out the door. Perhaps I should have struggled or screamed like Xamere did. Perhaps I should have thought about what kind of a future lay ahead of me. Instead, I solemnly wondered if there was another universe out there, not consumed by entropy, where love, rather than hate, was preached.

I heard the multiverse once again in my mind. *Nobody is flawless, ideal, and absolute.* Maybe that was true. Maybe what made us flawed was how we were raised. As long as we cared too much about our own selves, our society would never be able to be good, much less perfect.

Raven told me that I had failed this world. But on the inside, I knew that this world had failed me.