

Science of Essence

Twenty Years Ago

There was always more to learn, always more to discover, to experiment with, to understand. Sometimes, she wondered if it was she who was an aberration, she who was so different from everyone else. She had thought that she would find a home with the Seekers of Knowledge, but even with them, the people who were world renown for striving to find the secrets behind their world, she felt... an outcast.

Her questions were often met with rolling of eyes, with dark looks even. And she didn't understand why? Why didn't they want to know everything? Parts of it was that they looked for knowledge that could make them more powerful, that could give them an advantage. That taught them how to navigate the Framework, not how to understand it. It saddened her.

She turned her attention back to her work. She switched the small box-container beneath the microscope and took a look. The arrays in the item activated and increased the magnification, but also allowed her to see what she was looking for in the first place. To path to understanding Essence was a difficult one, most never even give it a second thought. The Framework enables everything, so there is no reason to try and learn the secrets. But here, surrounded by the recorded knowledge of the worlds that no longer existed, their histories, their science, their beliefs, Valthua looked for what was beyond it all. The knowledge was not exactly relevant, the Infinite Realm was too different. But, there was much to be learned from the mistakes of their ancestors, from what they believed in, from the philosophies that they had developed over periods that dwarfed the history of the Infinite Realm. Even the sciences were important, she knew that the **Exalted Empire** used much of their races previous knowledge, finding ways to adapt the Framework to achieve what they had lost.

But she also had records of interesting cultures in the Infinite Realm, knowledge that she used only for research, but others disregarded as just

monster cultures, brought here to the Framework to fuel their growth. But there were secrets even there, just waiting to be discovered.

As she looked through the device, she saw the Essence inside the container. Actually seeing Essence was one of the biggest obstacles in their study. Ordinary, even improved, sight was unable to detect the true form of Essence. To them it all just looked... well, how the world was perceived by sight. It was as if there were two worlds, existing at the same time in the same place, but how they were perceived was different. A small rock would always look the same in the Real Realm, a clump of matter, the color and texture might change slightly depending on the actual composition of Essence, but everyone would be able to recognize a rock. And in the other realm, the real realm of Essence, it was... tiny particles, arranged in different patterns.

The piece of stone inside the container she had placed beneath her device was recovered from the Island of Dungeons. A rock-type Essence that was naturally in a mist state of Essence. It was strange, and exactly what she loved about her research. She had done extensive tests with the samples she had delivered. It seemed like the stone was in the mist state naturally, but if anything tried to go through with sufficiently high speed and mass it hardened into a crystal-solid state.

Essences that could change state weren't that rare, but most people just accepted them as if it wasn't anything fascinating. Valthua wanted to know... everything. Each Essence had a natural state, all Essence could be observed in its natural state, as tiny particles that together created an effect.

Essence was a tiny particle, a grain, that changed based on various factors. Each Essence had different particles, but most of them followed the same rules. They had two parts, the outer shell which changed, and the inner core which she believed to be the *meaning* of Essence, and remained constant unless transformed by a very strict rules which changed it into another type of Essence. Fire interacting with wood created ash, and so on.

The shell and core together were what Valthua called Essence Particles, the base building pieces of their reality.

The shell was different based on the natural state of the Essence. A solid Essence had particles with a shell shaped like a cube, each particle tightly pressed against another, strong. A liquid Essence's shell had many sides, shaped like a many sided die, an icosahedron—she had to dig deep in the old world books to learn that one—still tough, but the particles rolled over each other, had more give to them. A mist Essence, or aerosol as the people on old worlds used to call it, was in between, the shells were spheres, and there wasn't much strength in them and they moved out of the way of any intrusion. Unless, of course, some conditions were met.

She had learned from the old books that the other universes had four states of matter, or rather six if her Cthul ancestors were to be believed. She had tried to apply some of that old knowledge to her research, but it didn't fit everything. Fire was a perfect example, it was definitely a mist not what the old ones considered plasma—she hadn't even seen anything in the Infinite Realm that matched what they described plasma to be. Oh, there were things that appeared like it, but taking a real look at the particles always proved that they fell into one of the three states that she knew about. Most were liquid or mist that was extremely dense, or hybrid Essences.

When the shells of different Essences touched, they interacted based on their *meaning*. Which Valthua considered the hard laws of the Framework. Fire burned most other Essence it touched, it needed Air Essence to exist, constantly consuming it. The density of Fire Essence and the tier dictated what it could actually burn. Water attempted to fill any holes, to take shape, and it obeyed Gravity, while some mist state Essences like Air were barely affected by it. Heat came into being from Fire, from Sunlight, and a hundred other different things, transferring and touching other Essences, bonding with them unless there was enough of it to melt.

Water turned solid naturally if the temperature reduced, or rather if there was no Heat.

And all of that is just concerning what she called Material Essences, or Elemental—though that too provided difficulties. There were no great schools or science institutes in the world. Those who were interested in learning did things on their own, and so each had their own classifications and naming schemes. While the regular people adopted their own naming schemes, muddling the waters further.

And that didn't even include what most people called Laws and Concepts. It was... all so muddy, and she wished that someone would try to gather all the research and make something orderly of it. In a way, that was what she was doing.

The Essence that she was looking at now, was in its mist state. It was inside a specially made container that excluded all other Essence, or rather most, which allowed her to look and see it without air or light Essence interfering. It wasn't really seeing, when she put her head on the device, the arrays used her eyes as conduits to paint a picture inside of her mind. She sadly didn't have an ability to see Essence, it was a very rare thing, only a handful of instances were even recorded.

As she looked at the Essence she turned a knob which changed what she was seeing slightly. The container filled with spherical gray particles with tiny pearls of black in the middle were suddenly not the only thing inside. Tiny white threads were connecting each shell of the mist form Essence particles with each other. These particles were the Bond Essence, the thing that kept everything together. Depending on the particle shell, its influence increased or decreased. So, a solid Essence would have stronger Bond Essence tying it together, liquid moderate, and mist the weakest. It was... everywhere, existing on a layer below the Material Essence. There were several different layers, and as such different tiers of Essences themselves.

Though again, it all depended on so many different things. Tiers, density, type of Essence. Combinations were endless.

People had different names for these Essences, Laws, and beyond them Concepts. Laws were... unique, in that they weren't uniform. Bond was in her opinion a law, perhaps slightly a concept? She had no real way of testing it properly to figure it out. Its appearance and rules were different than those of other Laws. Gravity was a constant wave pushing down on everything, even what was inside the container. Just like Time and Space. It was extremely hard to isolate Law type Essences from... well, anything.

Her theory was that those Essences exist on several planes at once, and so they were that much harder to remove compared to just those which exist only in the Real Realm.

Still, there were many Essences that were combinations of two or more Essences, or even two categories. And that made them hard to study. Rules weren't uniform, they were different based on the situation, on what Essences were present and interacting with one another.

Then, there were Concepts. They were the most difficult things to quantify and categorize. Life was present nearly everywhere around them, and it was for the most part invisible, even barely perceivable. Unless you had its opposite to compare, Death. The particles of Concepts were... they were the only Essences that had no shell, that were just *meaning*. Some could barely even be seen at all, even with the best equipment available. She had only ever been able to actually see Life and Death Essences, which was why she knew that they had no shells. Their core, the meaning, influenced a wide area beyond its confines. A tree might have one core, one particle of Life *meaning*, but the Life Essence would affect an area beyond the tree. The impact that the concepts had on the world changed, it varied depending on too many factors.

And she could only infer the existence of other concepts, mostly from the few examples that she had observed. Time, for example, often acted

like a concept. It was invisible to all, but everyone could feel it. She had never seen a particle of Time, but she knew that it was always present. That made her think that Time was a hybrid Essence, Concept and Law. Because in her experience Laws were usually present everywhere and inhabited several *layers* of reality. While concepts were usually tied to a single layer, or realm.

The other source of her information were the few reports of Cultivators that she managed to get her hands on. She wished that she lived closer to the Sect lands, or that she could even stay at a sect. The fact that Cultivators could sense and interact with the Essence was fascinating. Classers didn't care for the most part, Framework enabled their power. And Skill users were mostly hardheaded individuals who didn't care to understand what they were doing, instead focused only on their *will*.

Cultivators though... she wished that she could study Qi. That she could see what it was. The reports she had access to said that Qi was processed Essence. And that somehow this process of... cultivating Essence into Qi, allowed the Cultivators a greater control over the Essence or Qi. Allowing them to force it to change state.

She pulled away from her device, not really learning anything interesting. The Bond Essence was tighter around the particles of this Essence, but... It was the *meaning*, the core, that governed how it reacted to outside influence. And that was something that she couldn't really study any way other than with experiments, a lot of experiments.

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Ten Years Ago

They came for the library. Valthua had known that they would the moment the city gates had been breached. It was one of the most defensible places in the Dal'dvor city, and the Seekers of Knowledge had

allowed the people to hide inside their halls. The library was falling, she could hear the Seeker Warriors fighting and dying outside. She still couldn't believe it. It still wasn't real to her. The taken, people turned into followers of a monster. It was so hard to believe, it went against everything that she thought was real. And now, she was left with a decision, a final decision she had to make. Her standing in the Seekers had been shaken, they didn't approve of all the things she was willing to do to reach the answers. She felt like she wouldn't remain in the organization for much longer. And yet... she still was part of them, and so she had a responsibility, as the last living Seeker in the library.

She looked around, saw the people hiding behind the rows of bookshelves, and knew that there was no escape for them. She had a single array, purchased so long ago that she often forgot about it. An array that would get her to safety, but it could only take one. If she let them know... someone would take it from her, to save themselves or a loved one, it didn't matter.

The city had fallen, and those that weren't killed were being turned into these... abominations. She was not going to be one of them.

The doors leading to the inner chamber shook as something smashed against them. Everyone tensed, and then they burst open and warriors spilled inside. The first line were people with all black eyes, and many black lines spreading over their skins. Mad roars and empty intelligence, they crashed into the tables and the obstacles they had put in the way. Attacks came from the people inside, cutting them down. Then another stepped in, a tall minotaur with wet and dark fur. She was surprised at what she saw though. He wore robes that were clearly those of a cultivator, and the fact that his fur and even horns were... it was a true body of some kind that she had no reference to identify. His eyes were those of someone who could reason, but he had to be taken for he was standing next to the others, yet she saw no obvious signs of it. He raised a hand and a wall of wet brown earth crashed into the defenders, it moved

and curled around everyone hardening as it went. She saw the ethereal glow around the mud and immediately recognized the Essence, or rather Qi. It was Soulmud, one of the most dangerous Aspects in the Infinite Realm. It fell on top the people inside, weighing them down, crushing them and draining their souls with the contact.

She couldn't let her be touched by it. Standing behind it all, in the center of the library, she made one last look at the people around her, struggling to survive. She closed her eyes and asked for forgiveness as she activated the library's self-destruct array and then used her personal one to teleport out. She fell on the ground, hundreds of kilometers away from the city and the fighting. Knowing that the library was gone, destroyed in fire that consumed all the accumulated knowledge, along with all the people inside, taken or not.

Quickly, she turned and started walking South, then West, toward safety, and the Sect territories.