

## Oracle 631

### Chapter 631 - 100 Gerulfs

Their attention and obedience obtained through fear, Jake assigned them their respective missions and tasks without further ado.

'I could try to play it fair and win the game, but that would be a waste of time and effort on my part.'  
Jake laughed sinisterly as he watched the bunch of Kintharians digging as if their lives depended on it.

If he wanted to train his multitasking skills, his mind or his telekinesis, Jake would never have opted for this despicable tactic. He would have patiently and decisively ordered and controlled as many Kintharians as possible to build a city, and then a functioning country.

Eventually, as time went on, the Kintharians would have reproduced among themselves, rapidly increasing their numbers until the two enemy tribes naturally came into contact. A war would then break out, continuing until there was a winner.

If Jake opted for this honest strategy, it would become a direct competition between their psychic abilities. How many troops he could control at the same time, how many orders he could give, who had the upper hand in controlling the climate, etc. Beyond this aspect, there was also his tactical sense to consider.

Having never led armies of such magnitude against an Eltarian with the experience of a supreme general, there was no need to be a genius to know the outcome. Even if he became ten times more arrogant, he was not so cocky as to believe that he could win against the best living Eltarian at this game.

Sure, it would be a great training method, and yes, it would sharpen his mind and give him more understanding and experience. But it would only reduce his chances of winning.

The only way to win, Xi had unconsciously put her finger on it earlier. All he had to do was attack right away.

But not too soon either.

Individually and at the start of the game, the Kintharians were indeed much more ferocious fighters than these frail Eltarians. If he exploited Ruda and the tribe's strongest warriors properly, it wasn't impossible to put everything at stake in a single lightning raid.

Jake hadn't invented the concept. Even in the RTS games of Earth, Rush Tactics existed in many forms and had always been hated and reviled by the gaming communities.

The principle basically consisted of going all out at the beginning of the game to produce a few troops instead of developing your economy and civilization and immediately attacking the enemy before they could build their defenses. This was an effective and formidable strategy, especially against overconfident beginners.

Of course, this tablet was different from a simple game. Here, merely building a barracks was not enough to mass produce Kintharian warriors. Of course, he could force them to fornicate like rabbits, but besides the immorality of such an act, it would still take several decades to get tangible results.

It might seem horribly long and futile, but as time went on each of their divine decrees and deeds would eventually have repercussions in terms of years on the map. The time when their nations would number in the thousands, even millions, would come soon enough.

Since Jake couldn't build "barracks" or rapidly increase their population, Rush Tactic here meant attacking with his 100 Kintharian nomads.

However, just because the Kintharians were more robust and ferocious did not mean that victory was guaranteed. After all, Asfrid also had 100 Eltarians under her control and she should be more than familiar with their strengths and weaknesses.

Jake didn't pretend to be clairvoyant, but from the terrible foreboding that gripped him as he considered attacking, he could be sure that defeat was also assured if he attacked Asfrid's village at once.

After all, even a Rush Tactic required some preparation. Attacking now was like attacking a fortified village with a bunch of rag-tag villagers. It was bound to fail.

So what was the Rush Tactic he intended to implement? It could be summed up by a simple question: Who cultivates the fastest?

Jake was going to turn this bunch of idle slackers into terrifying war machines before Asfrid's Village had time to increase its population and establish itself.

His first thought had been to look for a volcano, but the random map generated by the tablet contained none.

Digging? No, it wasn't to go digging for magma in the depths either. Even if these Kintharians did end up reaching it, they would get little benefit from it except for Ruda and a couple of other warriors with fairly pure bloodlines.

Jake just wanted to keep them busy. Well, that was half a lie. With their Earth Control ability, those gifted enough would soon throw away their shovels and picks to rely on their magic. Once those with the Earth Control Skill were identified, he planned to give them another task: digging a tunnel.

A tunnel leading straight under the Eltarian Village.

Yet even with this tunnel, victory would not be guaranteed if these Kintharians remained as they were. Digging might strengthen their bodies and develop their fortitude and perseverance, but it would not be enough to change the game.

While the Kintharians were digging like there was no tomorrow, most with their claws because they were too stupid to think of making shovels, Jake summoned his telekinesis to disperse the clouds above them.

In this simulation, it was currently autumn, while the fauna, flora and climate corresponded to that of a temperate zone. It wasn't cold, but it would be hard to get a tan with this weak sun.

The recipe for making a Super Kintharian had never been that complicated. A sprinkling of mineral-rich soil, heat and radiation. Everything else was superfluous.

The physical training would serve to exercise their muscles. The mind was the Kintharians' weakest asset, but there was nothing set in stone in life. There was another proven method to build the will of a slacker: pain.

Pain and pleasure. Sacrifice and reward.

Too busy digging, the 100 Kintharians didn't notice the clouds dispersing overhead, but they did appreciate the sun's caress. Their cells always became a little more energetic as the sun rose, but these indolent nomads never realized it.

It was time to open their eyes.

Focusing every shred of mental power under his control, Jake began to distort the air several kilometers above them. This created a lot of turbulence and violent gusts of wind started to blow across the map.

'What is he doing?' Asfrid grew doubtful as she caught sight of him scattering the clouds.

When the residual winds began to blow over her village under construction, sweeping away a nearly finished barn, even more confusion formed ripples on her soul. With a thought, she seized the wind and sent it back to the perpetrator.

The hurricane charged forward like a galloping army of horsemen upon the 100 Kintharian nomads, but there was no village to destroy. The Kintharians who were happily digging a gigantic pit just found the breeze refreshing.

If Asfrid wasn't in a Spirit Body state right now, she would have been gnashing her teeth in frustration.

She kept watching his shenanigans for a few moments, but eventually she had to face reality. She had no idea what he was trying to do. Several months had passed in the game, and his side had not yet built the semblance of a hut.

As she checked her walled village, the granary and water tank full as well as the Eltar temple under construction, her mind settled down, returning to a steady and confident state. Her victory was certain.

Not caring what the priestess thought, Jake continued to tinker and twist the air above the Kintharians, intent on achieving his goal. He feared that Asfrid would interfere, but since she had chosen to sit on the fence, his last worries were gone.

'You can keep watching all you want... When you figure it out, you're going to regret it so much I wish I could have seen your face then.' Jake chuckled sadistically as he fiddled with the air further.

Suddenly, kilometers below, one of the few Kintharians holding a pickaxe looked up with a surprised look on his face.

"Hmm? Is it me or is the sun beating down harder than before? It feels like summer again."

If an ordinary Kintharian could notice the change, then so could Ruda, their sage. She glanced sharply at the sky, squinting to peer directly at the sun. Gradually the other Kintharians stopped digging and became aware of the phenomenon.

"Is it me or does the sun look bigger than before?" A child exclaimed innocently.

The veteran tribesmen became solemn, but also somewhat excited.

"It's not just a feeling. It's getting hotter too." The tribe's eldest noted as she wiped a trickle of sweat from her forehead with surprise.

As they began to wonder if they should migrate and dig their pit elsewhere, the irrepressible voice of their "god" again echoed in their minds.

"Keep digging. If you are exhausted, use the excavated earth to coat yourself with it. You can thank me later."

The ordinary Kintharians, who had an overly diluted bloodline, were stunned and puzzled, but Ruda and the other warriors understood his intentions and prostrated themselves on the ground to thank him.

"Praise be to our god Jake."

When Asfrid saw all the Kintharians chanting his name with an expression of sincere adulation, she realized for good that something was wrong.

But it was already too late. The "giant magnifying glass" was already ready for use.

100 Gerulfs were now in the making.

### **Chapter 632 - Too Late**

The sun shone and the Kintharians dug. The pit became deeper and deeper and the temperature continued to rise as the days passed.

At sunset, the 100 nomads stopped digging by mutual agreement and used the excavated soil and rock to bury themselves in the same pit they had been digging all day long. This earth and rock, still warm from absorbing the concentrated sunlight, became the perfect vessel to invigorate and nourish their exhausted bodies.

Without realizing it, day after day these Kintharians began to dig faster and faster. They took fewer breaks, slept less, ate and drank less. At the same time, they were not aware of it, but the temperature had already exceeded what their former bodies could bear.

After about a month in the simulation, the lush jungle had withered around the pit, dehydration and an unexpected fire having taken its toll on its unquenchable vitality. About 30% of the Kintharians finally showed their limit, failing to keep up with their peers.

Jake had long since identified the potential and abilities of each, so he split his mind to create a second, less convergent giant magnifying glass and instructed these less talented Kintharians to begin digging the gallery system that would lead them to victory.

The second magnifying glass would accompany them, strengthening and invigorating their bodies at a bearable pace. The first group of diggers carried on digging deeper and deeper into the same pit, which had already reached a depth of several hundred meters.

Some of these Kintharians were almost as talented as Gerulf. The closer they got to the bowels of the earth, the more their bloodline showed signs of awakening. It wouldn't be long before their bloodline advanced to the next level.

One morning, Ruda rose from the ground after sleeping 500 meters below the surface. The familiar lava veins that Jake had grown to cherish burned brightly, forming a fiery network of captivating beauty running beneath her skin. The soil that had served as her sleeping place instantly liquefied, turning back into magma, but the tribal sage didn't seem to notice.

Awe and reverence spread among the other Kintharians, but the veterans of the same generation found themselves galvanized. They too could sense that their evolution was imminent.

Three months into the simulation, most of the Kintharians digging into the pit had seen their bloodlines advance at least once. Another divide of potential had already arisen in the last few days, forcing him to create a third magnifying glass.

The initial pit where the elites like Ruda and a dozen veteran warriors stayed had already reached a depth of 6 kilometers. The stronger their bloodlines and bodies became, the faster they dug. The temperature conditions at the bottom of the pit had already surpassed those artificially created by the giant magnifying glass at the beginning of the game.

The underground tunnel project leading secretly under the Eltarians' city was also well underway. Because this tunnel was drilled several dozen meters below the surface, neither Asfrid nor the Eltarians had noticed anything.

Still, this did not mean that Asfrid was unaware of anything. Her foreboding had only grown in the last few minutes. Her Village had become a City, the palisades had become high stone walls, and yet she felt more and more nervous.

Why was she nervous? She couldn't figure out the reason and it was driving her crazy. In the last few weeks (or minutes for Jake and Asfrid), she had tried to scan the enemy camp with her mental sense, but she had run into the impenetrable mental barrier erected by Jake.

Aware that he could not hide his schemes indefinitely, let alone the movements of his troops from Asfrid's senses, he had chosen a frontal confrontation, extending his consciousness to the whole territory he wanted to monopolize, forming a kind of Spirit Domain.

On B842, this would have been extremely dangerous. Stretching the Spirit Body too far would have diluted its power, like an army of 10,000 men dispatched to every corner of the Earth to keep an eye on everything. But here, it was the right way to go. This game had always been a clash of minds, whether it was head-on or roundabout.

Asfrid scowled at first as her senses were obstructed, but then she snorted dismissively and her Spirit Body shrank into a sort of drill. An overwhelming spiritual pressure rained down on Jake's Spirit Domain, but he braced himself and also fused his mental power into the clashing area to fend off the invasion.

The dense, almost solid Spirit Domain began to crack under the sheer brute force of the Spirit Drill, and Asfrid regretted that it had come to this. Spirit Body, Consciousness and Soul were by default intertwined. These fractures would cause lasting damage to Jake's Soul and mind.

'He must learn the hard way that there are stronger people than him. If he'd done this on a real battlefield, he'd already be senile.' Asfrid justified herself inwardly, trying to suppress her guilt.

However, despite the fractures, the Spirit Domain did not retreat or weaken one bit. As soon as the priestess stopped her breakthrough, a stream of mental power flowed out from within and mended the cracks. Jake remained silent, and she heard neither a cry of pain nor a lament.

'Is he just stubborn or does he really not feel anything?' Asfrid began to doubt herself.

She had far more lethal mental attacks in her arsenal, but she was afraid of turning him into a vegetable if she went all out. The point of this game was to test him, not kill him.

Of course, Jake wasn't as relaxed as he wanted her to believe on the other side. Xion Zolvhur's Soul Stone contained many ingenious and ready-to-use Soul Skills and tricks. As he digested its energy, what he once found impossible became as natural as breathing.

Uncoupling his consciousness from his Spirit Body had been possible since the day he created his first lasting Aether Spell, namely his Aether Sun Core. She could shatter his Spirit Body, as long as he took precautions and kept his Soul safe, he would be fine.

But the destruction of his Spirit Body came at a cost. It wasn't as easy to regenerate as a physical injury and the symptoms were mostly in the form of mental fatigue and headaches. The longer the confrontation went on, the closer he would come to defeat.

Jake was well aware of Asfrid's reluctance. His silence was his way of stalling for time. At this stage of the game, even a few minutes was equivalent to one to two weeks for his army.

Come on, faster, faster...! Jake anxiously pressed the tunnel builders.

For good measure, he dispatched several veteran Kintharians from the main pit as reinforcements. The work tripled in speed as the tunnel quickly neared completion.

BOOM!

A searing pain suddenly wracked his mind. Jake stifled a gasp of suffering and as he focused his attention on the Spirit Domain, he saw that a huge Soul Spear had split it in half, almost touching his consciousness in the back.

Asfrid had not bought his bluff. Jake's killing intent erupted forth and he abandoned his plan to play the pig to eat the tiger. His Spirit Body quickly changed shape, its spiritual energy forming a swirling maelstrom of elusive power. He shifted his consciousness within, becoming untraceable and dividing his attention he manipulated the winds to create the beginnings of a storm unprecedented on the map.

If she persisted in trying to breach his defenses to peek at his base, her own city would be wiped out by an unprecedented cataclysm.

"Don't you dare!" She roared with anger, her patience and benevolence entirely worn away by his earlier deceit.

The true soul battle had finally shifted into high gear.

Their focus on their own side became tenuous, as most of their attention was focused on their psychic duel. Jake's mental power was weaker and his versatility was nowhere near Asfrid's, but his hunger for victory was as blazing as ever.

Soul Spears, Drills and Arrows met Soul Shields, Walls and Fogs. Illusions and mirages clashed again and again, making their mental battle more and more chaotic and unreadable.

Jake was like a shipwrecked man who had fallen overboard and was tossed by the waves of a stormy ocean, but he held on. The mental battles he lost, he won by winning those of the weather. Asfrid not having the same modern knowledge as him, she was unable to create such intricate and unpredictable climatic catastrophes as his.

Their mental showdown dragged on and Jake's mind became weaker and weaker. It wasn't just because Asfrid had more mental power and experience than he did. In the midst of their clash, he began to feel his consciousness waver, as if something or someone was actively draining his soul energy.

"Do you like my Soul Steal?" Asfrid taunted him, her voice echoing in his mind from everywhere at once having lost all its nobility and kindness.

"Soul Steal?" Jake had never heard of this technique, but it had to be an Eltarian Bloodline Skill.

He wondered how the Eltarians could compete with the Myrmidians and Kintharians. Now he had his answer. A purebred Eltarian without any morals could become an unstoppable calamity. Their mental power would grow with each consumed victim, snowballing until they were invincible.

Minutes, became hours and several years had already passed beneath them. Jake's Spirit Body was now a tiny wisp of vapor, his consciousness nowhere to hide.

"Give up!" Asfrid said coldly, her aura devoid of any hint of mercy.

Jake, who was at the end of his rope, on the verge of fainting, suddenly burst into a loud hearty laugh. Asfrid, who was finally free to browse his base became livid.

"Too late.. Victory is mine."

### **Chapter 633 - Victory**

This morning was a morning like any other. A perpetual storm was raging, thunder was rumbling, the hurricane was raging and the heavy rain was pouring down like a waterfall on Spirith City, the soon-to-be capital of the Eltarian people.

From the top of Eltar's temple, an emaciated priest with a sharp hawk-like gaze and a templar woman with an equally icy aura were conversing mysteriously as they stood watching the sky. Their wrinkled foreheads and dark circles betrayed just how burdened with worry these two important figures were.

"The gods are angry." The female templar sighed for the umpteenth time in the past few months.

The high priest nodded absentmindedly without taking his eyes off the dark rolling clouds.

"You wanted to see me, Lodi?" The man in the toga finally asked after many minutes.

The templar woman snapped to attention, placing her right fist over her heart briskly, causing her bronze armor to rattle.

"Several temple servants have given me a strange testimony. They say they sometimes hear noise coming from under the ground."

"Hmm? Why am I only being told about this now?" The priest frowned in annoyance.

"Because due to the racket brought on by the storm, it was almost impossible to ascertain. I also investigated in person, but I couldn't find anything. It was only this morning that the noise became louder, becoming impossible to mistake.

The priest could have ignored these disturbances, but he had not reached his position out of carelessness. He immediately took the threat seriously and extended his mental sense to encompass half the city in his surveillance zone. When he found the source of the ruckus, his face fell.

"K-Kintharians!" He stammered, his hair standing on end involuntarily. How on earth had they gotten so close?

As soon as his mental power swept past the huge, vaguely feminine-looking Kintharian supervising the work, she yelled something and the tunnel more than fifty meters underground suddenly enlarged until it encompassed the entire temple. At the same time, hundreds of other tunnels and fissures shot out in all directions like cobras springing to attack.

BOOOM!

The marble floor suddenly caved in beneath the priest and the Templar woman, triggering the instantaneous collapse of the temple. Cracks as terrifying as the lightning bolts thundering above them split the earth, spreading like a virus to the immaculate buildings and then to the compound protecting the city.

Whether it was the residents' villas or the civil, religious or military infrastructures, they were destroyed in a matter of seconds when the earthen base that served as their anchor and foundation melted away. The earthquake that followed shortly thereafter finished off the few buildings still standing.

Screams of panic erupted throughout the city. The city was large, but there were only 100 inhabitants. The Templars, made up of Eltarian veterans, numbered only a dozen, not enough to cover the city.

In any case, even if they wanted to, they would not be able to help. The three Kintharians who had just burst out of the ground had petrified the templars and temple priests on the spot. Lodi and the high priest who survived the destruction of the temple were no exception.

At least these templars and priests of Eltar were not a disgrace to their status. Although the temple had been completely leveled, there had been no casualties among them. The same could not be said for the rest of the ruined city.

Right now, these templars and priests were levitating calmly in the sky, their togas and capes battered by the wind and the torrential rain. They erected telekinetic spheres around themselves and their clothes and hair went still again.

"Who are you?! Why are you attacking us?" The old priest shouted in fury.



The only answer he received was a smoldering, magma-like stare as indomitable as a volcanic eruption. Ruda, or rather a giant dark-skinned woman over five meters tall and weighing the weight of several elephants, calmly stamped her foot and a seismic wave instantly spread throughout the city.

"Kill!"

Everywhere the wave spread, gravel, earth and rock liquefied. The two Kintharians next to her, even more muscular and massive than she was, stamped their feet to assist her, and new doomsday tremors were emitted from their position as the epicenter.

A lake of magma replaced the once grand city of the Eltarians in a matter of seconds.

"H-How is this possible?!" The Templars shuddered in horror as they watched helplessly as their city was destroyed.

They had known for a long time from Asfrid that a group of Kintharians had settled somewhere in the jungle and that they would one day be their enemies. But they never imagined that this war would come so prematurely.

The high priest and the templar woman Lodi had other considerations. The Kintharians were normally like those big, dumb herbivores who end up as beasts of burden. They had physical strength, but their temperament made them harmless and unable to accomplish anything.

This absolute power... They had never seen it, not even in the archives recording the history of their race. The only Kintharian capable of such destruction... was Kinthar himself!

But these three individuals were not Kinthar, or they would have been dead long ago. Either way, they were far beyond what a few poor templars and priests like them could handle. Perhaps with a Supreme Templar they would have stood a chance, but their new nation was still in its infancy. It would take them decades, maybe even centuries to see such a warrior emerge.

"What do we do high priest?" A terrified young priestess whispered, shaking like a leaf. She was so afraid that she could hardly maintain her levitation. If she lost control, she would fall to her death.

Subconsciously sensing that a crucial decision was about to be made, the volcanic gleam in Ruda's eyes redoubled in intensity and a stupendous gravitational pressure pressed all the Eltarian priests and templars to the ground, the weaker ones fainting and suffering multiple fractures and injuries on the spot.

Lodi gritted her teeth, resisting with all her might with her telekinesis, and letting out a high-pitched scream, her Spirit Body swelled out of her body, transforming into a sinister jaw within which a sort of vortex swirled. Spirit vines also shot out in all directions, piercing the foreheads of all the other templars and priests except the high priest.

The spiritual pressure radiating from the young woman increased exponentially and the intangible jaw became even more terrifying and solid, a monstrous roar threatening to pull their traumatized souls out of their bodies.

"AARRGH! Die, abomination!" Lodi let out a resolute war cry and the huge jaw condensed from her Spirit Body stretched wide open before snapping shut on Ruda and the other two Kintharians, not having budged an inch.

The jaw closed and a Soul Steal dozens of times more terrifying than the one cast by Asfrid on Jake began to devour the souls of Ruda and her two champions.

For a brief second, the high priest and the other templars and priests who had just been drained of all their mental energy regained hope, but alas, it was short-lived. A blinding flash of light shot out from the calm, apathetic figures of the three Kintharian warriors and the spiritual jaws trying to devour them "shattered its teeth".

Three titans of light and heat energy slowly rose up, Ruda and her two guardians still standing in the same position inside their respective Spirit Giant.

"T-The Kintharian Soul!" The high priest was no fool. Their records mentioned that the souls of true Kintharians were akin to a combined Light, Earth, Metal and Fire Elemental Spirits.

If he wasn't daydreaming, Lodi had already lost. And indeed, reality verified his fears.

Ruda's Spirit Body grabbed the devouring spirit aggregate by the scruff of the neck as if it were a disobedient kitten, and just the mere touch set off a spray of sparks and rays that instantly consumed the spirit construct. The Soul Steal had been dispelled.

"AAAAAARRRRGH!"

A nightmarish shriek of agony that had nothing to do with the previous battle cry pierced the silence. Her soul had literally combusted like dry wood in a forest fire. Even if she survived this torture, she would have the IQ of a chickpea after this.

As he witnessed the fate of his chief templar, the high priest broke out in a cold sweat. Thinking of the decision he had to make, he desperately looked up to the sky, but only the endless storm responded.

'Even our goddess has abandoned us...'

"I surrender. Lay down your weapons."

"Good decision." Ruda smiled, her fierceness gone.

The magma lake that submerged the city froze with a thought, becoming solid again, and the wind-battered Eltarians were able to set foot back on land. The war that had not even been declared was already over.

Asfrid and Jake, who were watching the result of Ruda's blitzkrieg, showed different reactions. Jake was obviously happy. It was his plan and it had worked beyond his expectations. In fact, he had even learned a thing or two. If he had to fight the current Ruda personally, he would have fled without hesitation.

After all, he had forced them to endure drastic training for several years while he himself had only been able to train in the manner of a Kintharian for a little over a month. Even if Ruda had a less pure bloodline than him, the difference in talent was not enough to be compensated in such a short time.

As for Asfrid, this game had also broadened her horizons. She would never see those silly Kintharians in the same way again. 'I should be more respectful to them while they still respect me.'

"I surrender." Asfrid sincerely acknowledged his victory.

When she admitted defeat, a flood of energy from the tablet surged through Jake's wavering, withered soul, restoring his original power and beyond. His Myrtharian Bloodline was also greatly stimulated by this splendidly won victory and his lvl 22 Spirit Body jumped two levels at once, going straight to level 24. His Intelligence, Perception and ESP Aether stats had also increased significantly.

The world below them suddenly vanished like a TV being turned off and Jake's Floating Island and hundreds of bystanders curious about the outcome reappeared in their field of vision.

The first test was over. One more to go!

### **Chapter 634 - Ulfar's Way Of Fighting**

Jake first met Lucia's worried gaze staring alternately at them, while she stood with her hands clasped as if praying to the heavens for a miracle. He didn't know if she was fretting over him or Asfrid, though.

"W-who won?" Lucia urged them nervously.

Gerulf ruffled her hair, which soothed her markedly.

"Look at their eyes. The winner is obvious." The former gladiator grunted matter-of-factly.

Ulfar, patiently waiting his turn, had lost his condescension. He hadn't taken his eyes off Jake and Asfrid since the end of their game. As the King of Beskyr, he knew what this tablet was capable of. He himself had no pretensions of being able to defeat this uptight priestess on her favorite playground. As he feared, Asfrid admitted defeat a few seconds later.

"I lost. You passed my test, or rather I failed yours." She confessed publicly without showing the slightest emotion.

If Jake hadn't seen her lashing out at him like a raving lunatic in that tablet, he might have fallen for it. Asfrid obviously knew what was going through her opponent's mind and she hastened to proclaim, more humbly this time,

"If you still agree, the Eltarians will join the Myrtharian Nerds."

Jake may have been resentful, but he had benefited greatly from this "test" in this tablet. Whether it was Lucia or Will, convincing the Eltarians to join them had always been their intention. Lucia treated this priestess as a sort of aunt, so he couldn't be too adamant.

"Request accepted. Welcome aboard." He smiled amiably.

When Asfrid saw his gaze lingering on the black tablet, she guessed his intentions and took the initiative to offer it to him. Putting it firmly in his hands, she said with a flat tone,

"Take it."

Jake was eager to study the black tablet and verify whether or not it was an Aether Artifact, but he had to keep up appearances first.

"You don't have to. This tablet is probably extremely valuable to your people." He put on a pained countenance as he pretended to refuse to accept such a gift.

His acting was as fake as it gets, but few in the audience were able to notice the rare flaws in his micro expressions. Of course, this did not include Asfrid and Ulfar.

"I never take back a gift that has already been given." Asfrid played along with a twitching face. "Besides, this tablet is not the only one in my possession. I have another one left."

She did not inform him, however, that the remaining tablets owned by her people were much more ordinary. It was possible to game with them, but the simulated map size, the AI of the NPCs inside, and the time flow were much more limited.

This black tablet also had other much more important functions. She hadn't lied when she said it was just a duplicate of the original, but what she hadn't said was that their ancestor Eltar had made this tablet himself.

At her heartbroken reaction, Jake didn't insist and stowed away the tablet. He would have plenty of time to study it later. He wasn't a selfish monster either.

"Let's just say I'm borrowing it for now. If any of you need it, you are free to come to me. I'll place it in the Faction Vault. Asfrid, make me a list of people allowed access when you can.

The priestess visibly relaxed after hearing his proposal. This tablet was really important to her and the other Eltarians.

"I hope to get my revenge on you one of these days. She joked in a much better mood. "That game, to say the least, was enlightening..."

"Sure." Jake accepted the challenge. "But it'll have to wait for a while."

At that moment, his cold eyes focused on Ulfar, who hadn't spoken a word since Asfrid's official defeat.

"So, how does the King of Beskyr plan to test me? A game? I'm not sure that's your style. If it's a gambling game, I refuse."

Ulfar spread his arms casually and chuckled valiantly.

"I'm not like those intellectual Eltarians. It's a mistake to think that because we are lucky we indulge in gambling and wagering. We love to bet, it's true, but we especially love to win. Luck is only a means to guarantee the fulfillment of our ambitions.

"So, how do we go about it?" Jake frowned.

"Let's fight." Ulfar spat out icily. "You born warriors are making another mistake. You think we depend too much on our luck and are unable to fight brutes like you head on. Let me show you how wrong you are."

Jake's frown deepened. Tim could indeed curse to death a Player far superior to him, but that feat had come at the expense of his life. Ulfar was the elite of the elite of his people, but could his luck affect reality that much?

There was only one way to find out.

"I accept the challenge." Jake declared slowly. "Where will the fight take place?"

"The arena isn't over, so let's fight here in front of everyone, okay?" Ulfar suggested neutrally, but Jake smelled a trick. Nevertheless, he accepted the proposal anyway.

"Fine, no killing allowed." Jake clarified the rules. "The winner pays for the loser's medical treatment. The fight stops as soon as one of us gives up or passes out."

The idea about paying for the loser's care was a stroke of genius he'd just had. If Ulfar was evil enough to leave him with just a spark of life in him, the astronomical healing cost would make him regret it.

Ulfar couldn't refuse these rules anyway. They were on Jake's island and the energy shield covered the entire island. This space was treated as an Oracle City, with Jake as the Oracle. He could set the rules here as he pleased.

The King of Beskyr had never intended to kill or cripple him for life, so he accepted the rules straight away. Gerulf clapped his hands and the audience backed away, while a group of Kintharians and Eltarrians erected a temporary elevated arena with the materials at hand.

The process took only a few minutes and a circular rock base about 25 meters in diameter and raised about 2 meters appeared in the center of the crowd. They then proceeded to build some makeshift bleachers for the spectators. For a brief moment, the past glory of their world's coliseum seemed to come back to life.

Jake set up his island to isolate the arena behind another layer of energy shielding and jumped in. Ulfar silently followed him inside. By unspoken agreement, they each walked to the edge of the arena and equipped themselves for battle.

Ulfar was already wearing his skin-tight armor of leather, chain mail and dark armor plate, but this time he donned a golden-winged helmet that clashed with his long ashen gray hair and dark, drab armor. Only his deep orange eyes matched perfectly.

An unadorned longsword was planted in the rock beside him, while the white longbow he wore on his back was firmly clutched in his right fist. Several vials emitting dubious colored vapors when uncorked were then materialized in turn, their contents sliding down the Beskyrian's gullet as he chugged them.

Having no qualms, Jake scanned the empty vials and more than a few uncanny descriptions popped up in his mind.

[Wight Decoction: Makes you temporarily immortal and immune to pain. Drastically increases physical strength. Side effects : High probability of ending up infected and becoming undead, if an antidote is not consumed in time. Long term intoxication if consumed too frequently.]

[Leshen Decoction: Low probability that the damage suffered is reflected back to the attacker. Long term intoxication if consumed too frequently.]

[Greywraith Decoction: Low probability of being immune to the Knockdown, Hypnosis, Stun and Blindness effects. Long term intoxication if consumed too frequently.]

The dozens of potions Ulfar ingested next were in the same vein, conferring abilities more broken than the last, but conditioned to a low probability. Any of these beverages would have been treated as a lethal poison to be used as a last resort, but the King of Beskyr downed them as if they were fruit juice.

The problem was that the notion of probability meant nothing to a Beskyrian. His luck was probably so high that a low likelihood of benefit meant a 100% chance of success, while a high likelihood of side effects meant none.

Jake had never underestimated Ulfar, but as the drastic effects of these potions began to compound, he began to sweat profusely. Some boosted his reflexes, others his vitality, strength, or speed. Others made him invulnerable to the elements, heck there was even one that made him even luckier. Some of these samples were even mutagens comparable to the essence of a potent bloodline.

Ulfar's appearance showed marked signs of intoxication and his skin had taken on the rocky texture of a golem, while his orange irises had turned red like those of a vampire. His body had doubled in size, but his armor had followed the growth spurt, proving that this was no normal artifact. His hands had doubled in size and were covered in blue fur, while his fingernails had become long eagle-like talons. An aura of pure evil gushed forth from his being, threatening to engulf his consciousness should his luck run out.

"Let's have a good fight, Jake." Ulfar chuckled evilly.

### **Chapter 635 - Luck Is Just A Matter Of Perspective**

Jake never had a chance to return the favor. At a speed virtually impossible to track with the naked eye, the mutant twenty-five meters away drew his bow at him, pulled the string tight and released it with a swoosh-like sound.

There were no arrows notched. Truth be told, Ulfar carried a bow, but no quiver.

An inexplicable sense of danger ran up his spine and without thinking, he ducked as fast as he could. His head had barely bent down a few inches when his sense of danger suddenly increased tenfold. Quickly shifting his eyes to what he thought was the arrow, he saw nothing but Ulfar's bow aimed in the direction he was dodging.

"Shit!"

A telekinetic barrier appeared in front of Jake's face, violently intercepting his dodge. His face slammed violently into the force field and he used the counterforce to catapult himself in the opposite direction. Throughout the action, Ulfar remained in the same stance, his fingers slightly bent after firing his invisible arrow.

Jake left a small crater in the arena as he landed and used his telekinesis again to steady himself. A rivulet of blood trickled down his nose, but he chose to ignore it to keep his focus on his opponent. Half a second later, his nosebleed stopped on its own.

"Good. Sharp Instincts." The king of Beskyr congratulated him with not a single shred of mockery. "I don't know if you're just lucky or well trained, but you did well to dodge that arrow. Let's see, if it was a lucky shot or not."

Ulfar stretched the bowstring again, but this time the fingers and arm pulling the string began to vibrate at high frequency. Bursts of invisible arrows were fired at a rate surpassing that of a modern machine gun.

This time, Jake didn't foolishly try to dodge. He thrust his right palm forward and the rocky floor of the arena liquefied to form a great wave several meters high surging toward the Beskyrian. A telekinetic force field then caught up with the wave from behind to further reinforce it.

Yet the sense of danger did not diminish. Even after he gave up his attack, and solidified the wave into a solid stone wall, he still had chills. Second after second, Jake felt the imminence of his defeat approaching as he remained hesitant in the same position.

'No! I must dodge!'

His eyes shot wide open and he flicked away from his position after wisely choosing to teleport. Whatever those invisible projectiles were, he was sure his rock wall and telekinetic barrier were useless in stopping them.

With perfect timing, he resurfaced from behind Ulfar's back with his Bone Crushing Snowworm's Fang in his grip just millimeters short of the enemy's throat. His throat... Not his nape. The bow was aiming at his chest as if he had been waiting for it all along.

'What the fuck-'

"Too late." Ulfar smirked with a falsely apologetic look.

With a cold sweat, Jake abandoned any thought of conserving his energy and teleported away again, but when he reappeared a dozen meters away, a pang of foreboding a thousand times more distinct than the previous ones struck his mind.

Ulfar was still pointing his bow at his old location, clearly not having anticipated his action, but Jake knew in his bones and guts that one of those arrows had found its target.

"Damn it!"

Sweating profusely, he calmly examined his body but detected no injury.

[Your Aether Status.] Xi coughed with concern.

Fearing the worst, Jake skimmed through it and found a "tiny" anomaly.

[Luck Aether: -1000 (Reverse Fate Curse.)]

His 1000 points of luck had turned into 1000 points of bad luck!

With the Aether density set at 65, he was normally over 15 times luckier than a normal human. He had just become fifteen times more unlucky instead.

Jake remembered Ostrexora's unfortunate end, but he wasn't like that resentful fucking ghost. An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.

Without qualms, he plunged his brand new Furnace Gauntlets into the ground up to his elbows and released the two Heat Spells he'd been charging inside for the past few days in one go.

These were not wimpy spells restricted by his Aether Core, but full blown disaster spells patiently charged by storing an astronomical amount of heat energy with the help of his Aether Sun Core.

Within a split second, the arena floor melted and then vaporized, changing from magma to pure plasma. There was no way Ulfar could survive this. Even Jake was mentally prepared to roast alive.

Clap, clap, clap!

Wrapped in blinding white plasma, Ulfar calmly put away his bow while gazing at it with pity. Whether it was his armor or his skin, the searing heat had no effect on him.

"Good thing I remembered to drink this Firelich Decoction. Heat Invulnerability sure is a good thing." Ulfar commented nonchalantly as if he were talking about the weather. "More seriously. Did you really think I wouldn't have planned anything against your powers when I've been fighting along with Kintharians for the past two years? You disappoint me."

Jake remained silent, his fighting spirit intact, but inwardly he was cogitating wildly in search of a solution.

'He knows practically everything about my abilities, but I don't know much about him. If he has completed 3 Ordeals in three days, with his incredible luck, his winnings must not be less than mine.'

[But with his character, Ulfar doesn't have the profile of a reckless daredevil either.] Xi reminded him gravely. [His luck is a comfortable cocoon that makes everything possible, but it is also his prison. I doubt he has the courage to do anything when luck alone is not enough. An Ordeal is always difficult. His luck may give him a head start and ease, but he will pay for it with a more punishing Ordeal Rating and more dangerous missions.]

'That Ulfar doesn't look like the fearful type to me.' Jake shook his head with a wry smile. Tim's first Ordeal was kinda like the agoge of the ancient Spartans. If Beskyrians were cowards, why would they uphold such traditions?'

[Don't lose your focus!] Xi rebuked him sternly. [Don't let a slip of your mind bring your downfall.]

As this milisecond-long telepathic exchange proceeded, Jake remained resolutely centered on the sensations in his body, his mind, and his surroundings. This was not normal mindfulness, but an inhuman level of concentration channeling all his Soul Energy, making his mind as stable and unyielding as a Spirit Turtle.

In this state, Jake couldn't do much, but he noticed that the glowing ionized gas seemed to avoid Ulfar despite its chaotic nature of spontaneously trying to occupy all available space.

If the King of Beskyr were completely invulnerable to heat, he would have attacked him by now. Instead, Ulfar kept staring at him arrogantly as if he was waiting for something. He had stowed away his bow long ago and equipped his unadorned sword once stabbed into the ground.



Jake obviously tried to engage from a distance, whether with his Wind Bullets or with real projectiles such as steel needles, throwing knives and even a warhead, but the explosives did not explode, while most of the projectiles missed their target. Those that did manage to hit the bull's-eye were dodged or blocked effortlessly by his opponent.

Jake briefly considered hurling an unstoppable projectile, like a mini asteroid, but in addition to damaging his island, it might kill him. With his bad luck, it could also backfire.

He had already realized that without going all out, winning would be nearly impossible. On the other hand, Ulfar had become passive after shooting him with his arrow.

When a minute passed without any significant developments, Ulfar frowned. The plasma had begun to cool and the light was not as blinding as before. However, because of a decoction he had presumably ingested, the brightness had no effect on him. He wasn't even blinking.

"You are more enduring than I thought. It would seem that bad luck alone is not enough to elicit victory." Ulfar sighed as he clutched the hilt of his sword tightly. "Unfortunately, I can't afford to wait. These decoctions have a limited duration of effect and I have already reached the limit of intoxication my luck can handle."

"Are you using your luck to resist the poison?" Jake took advantage of his inclination to chat to scrape together some information. Any tidbit of information was good to take if it could get him the win.

"Luck is just a matter of perspective. During a thunderstorm, a tree only has a definite probability of being struck by lightning, but for those who understand the science of clouds, everything is absolutely predictable. The tree will be struck by lightning, or it won't. The first thing a Beskyrian learns is to perceive the world in terms of probabilities, whether that logic is right or wrong."

A flash of understanding smote Jake's face as he listened to this explanation. Even on Earth, there were dozens, hundreds of studies every year defining a given eventuality or risk by a probability. This was true for global warming, health risks, or the risk of a piece of toast falling on the wrong side.

He remembered an interesting medical study on supercentenarians, which concluded that the risk of dying within the next year stabilized at 50% after age 108. This was obviously based on statistics resulting from the follow-up of a small sample of supercentenarians, but if the results were taken literally it could be interpreted as follows:

Immortality was just a matter of luck.

### **Chapter 636 - Ordinary Sword**

"Let's get this over with." Ulfar let out a deep sigh. "I'm sorry for what's coming next. I wish you had given up sooner. I have no control over this weapon. If I may give you some advice, don't let that blade cut you."

Jake remained unfazed, but his wary gaze lingered for a fleeting moment on the ordinary sword wielded by Ulfar. He had seen what his bow was capable of. If he was advising him not to get hurt by his sword, then he wouldn't.

Ulfar was clearly not as bad a guy as he wanted to make out. During the whole fight, he had been relatively friendly and courteous. This was in perfect contrast to his hostile and conceited attitude before the fight.

"I am going to attack." The King of Beskyr warned him solemnly as he raised his sword in an attack stance.

"Come." Jake beckoned him in cool fashion.

The plasma had cooled enough for two outstanding Third-Ordeal Evolvers like them to move normally. The oxygen, though, had been entirely depleted, or nearly so, inside the arena. The rest of their duel would be fought in apnea.

Ulfar had clearly anticipated this scenario, as one of his concoctions allowed him to dispense with air. For Jake, all that vaporized rock was far more revitalizing than any breath of oxygen. In this environment, he was completely at his advantage.

Having long since given up on the idea of saving himself, Jake activated the Myrtharian Warrior and Spiritual Trance at full throttle in addition to his Myrtharian Eyes and Bloodline Ignition. His aura didn't change all that much, but his eyes became like two stars and his fighting sense reached its peak.

Jake usually used these abilities subconsciously, but only during decisive moments. These techniques were great, but they took his toll on his mind and body. They were also very dependent on his mindset at the time. In a fight, it rarely lasted more than a few seconds at a stretch.

Ulfar didn't make him repeat it twice. He sprang forward, the clatter of the next six steps sounding like they were overlapping. The king of Beskyr then lunged forward toward Jake, jabbing his blade straight at his heart. Jake swung his torso slightly and deflected the piercing blow to his own right, pushing gently but firmly with his left palm protected by his Furnace Gauntlet.

A strange feeling of bad omen gripped his heart as he touched the ordinary blade, but he ignored it momentarily.

Simultaneously, as he deflected the sword strike, he sidestepped briskly and swung his own saber upward in an ascending slash aimed directly at the enemy's stomach. He too did not want to kill his opponent.

The imminence of his victory caused a rush of exhilaration in him, but when Jake should have felt his serrated blade shredding his opponent's intestines, it only hit empty space and he toppled forward despite his cautious posture.

He tried to balance himself with his reflexes, but his foot slipped on the only part of the arena where the lava had not yet cooled down. This would not have been a concern, if Ulfar had not taken the opportunity to wave his free hand at his face in a strange mudra with his fingers.

"Stay still." Ulfar shouted while slashing at him again with his other hand while holding his sword with a reverse grip.

Jake, whose concentration had been impeccable up to this point, found himself briefly distracted, feeling inclined to let the blade slice his throat. The dizziness lasted mere fractions of a second, but it was enough to cause his demise.

A Persuasion Spell that had a remote chance of working had worked wonders on him.

[Jake!]

Xi's cry of alarm, whose consciousness was tightly entwined with his own, snapped him out of his daze, and biting his tongue, he urgently parried with his saber. The impact generated a flurry of sparks, but his Snowworm's Fang withstood the brunt of the impact. The strange sensation of foreboding did not manifest itself either.

'I must not touch this sword.' Jake repeated to himself like a mantra as he continued to fend off and fight back.

The next few seconds were particularly intense. Ulfar was an outstanding swordsman guided by his unparalleled luck, but his physical abilities were still inferior to Jake's, even after drinking all those potions. Still, he had mastered a strange one-handed sign magic and his sword fighting style incorporated all of his skills and attributes, including luck.

Jake, on the other hand, had to deal with a series of "unfortunate accidents" that threatened to cost him his life at any moment. When he wasn't slipping on ridiculously smooth and polished cooled lava, he would screw up his parry or dodge in the direction of his opponent's attack every time he tried to take an initiative. It was as if his instincts, built on his abundant experience, had become completely dysfunctional.

Rarely, however, did Jake have such an opportunity to fight against a swordsman of his level. His proficiency with weapons was limited to his brief experience as a gladiator, when he was just an ordinary human. The rest he had inferred with his intelligence and guts.

At that time, Lu Yan, who only had a few more Intelligence and Perception points than he did, had shown off her prodigious talents by quickly assimilating the technique of their instructor Khazus, yet second only to Gerulf as a ludus champion.

If the Lu Yan of that time was a true genius, the Jake of today was a heresy overshadowing the greatest prodigies of humanity.

With each passing second, Jake became engrossed in Ulfar's technique like a bottomless sinkhole hungry for knowledge. He had long since buried calculation and strategy in the recesses of his head, letting his reflexes and quick decision-making take over.

Luck conferred a kind of foreknowledge to his opponent, guiding his every move, but Ulfar was no less influenced by his own personality, background and education. There were many moves he was more fond of than others. Deconstructing his old patterns and reflexes established over a lifetime would take much more than a few days.

First, Jake copied his technique. He mimicked his stances, his moves of slashing, chopping, jabbing, slicing, upward, downward, sideways, oblique, feints, parries and dodges like a fine mirror. Every detail of his movements was reproduced with sickening accuracy.

At first, Jake still made a lot of unnecessary moves, but as he refined his battle technique, he gradually began to reconcile with his poor luck. He entered a true Warrior Trance for the first time, becoming virtually unflinching.

Luck needed a medium, a window of opportunity to express itself. At least at Ulfar's level. When Jake became as unwavering as a rock, his legs deeply rooted in the ground, even his bad luck lost its grip on him.

You want to make me slip on lava? Fine, I'll take control of all the molten lava around here.

You want my heart to stop beating "accidentally". No problem, I just have to use my telekinesis to restart it.

Do my attacks always miss? If I only use area-destruction attacks, I'm wondering if I'll still be so inaccurate.

Are you anticipating my moves? Too bad, then I won't move. Let's see how you screw me after that.

Ulfar tried to destabilize him with more probing magic handsigns combined with aggressive sword strokes, but Jake had already wrapped himself in a thick, half fluid, half solid magma armor.

With each blow, a portion of the armor was chipped away, but the shattered rock was immediately replaced by an endless stream of lava pouring from underground. It would take more than a blast of wind and a timid electrocution to break his guard. In fact, even if Jake let Ulfar sink his sword to the hilt into his armor, he would still be a meter short of his belly button.

But when Jake decided to counterattack, that bulky lava armor would become the best thruster, the ground beneath his feet becoming as bouncy as a trampoline. Ulfar soon found himself in a bad position.

Their duel dragged on for several more minutes, until blisters began to appear along Ulfar's skin. His previously inhumanly fast movements slowed down to a crawl, while his face became cyanotic from hypoxia.

The effect of his decoctions was coming to an end and he was slowly becoming an ordinary mutant again. Grimacing with pain and having difficulty concentrating because of the asphyxiation, Ulfar brought out a small tank connected to an oxygen mask and pressed it against his nose before taking a deep breath.

"You even planned this." Jake said with admiration.

"When luck isn't enough, I have to be prepared. Ulfar replied with his eyes closed because of the risk of blindness from the burns. "Lucky people, are people who prepare for all eventualities. Often a disaster is just a matter of perspective. It can also become an opportunity."

"Shall we continue the fight?" Jake shrugged with indifference.

The atmosphere enveloping Ulfar became grim and taciturn, but he did not answer immediately.

"You are much stronger than I imagined. If this wasn't a friendly fight, you might have killed me already."The king of Beskyr admitted honorably.

Jake wasn't the type to rub salt in the wound of a foe humbling himself either. Yes, humbling. Ulfar didn't want to kill him either. What his adversary said next confirmed his doubts.

"You have passed my test and I accept to join the Myrtharian Nerds. But I don't admit defeat. I didn't use my Bloodline Skills, nor my Pandora Box for very obvious reasons, but if I use them the consequences will be absolutely unpredictable. I prefer to save them for my true enemies."

His creepy tone spoke volumes about the dangerousness of these moves. The term Pandora Box didn't bode well either.

"What was the danger I felt when I got too close to that sword?" Jake asked suddenly. Now that he had the opportunity to satisfy his curiosity, he intended to take advantage of it.

Ulfar lovingly stroked the plain iron blade with his fingertips and whispered,

"Death Embrace. That's the name of this sword. If it cuts you, it has a very small chance of causing instant death."

A shiver of cold sweat drenched Jake's forehead. 'And you would use a weapon like that against me? I thought you didn't want to kill me?'

### **Chapter 637 - Reverse Fate Bow**

Ulfar burst into a hearty laugh when he met Jake's outraged gaze. It was good for morale to see the big guy come down to earth.

"I was confident that it wouldn't be enough to kill you." He explained anyway to avoid any misunderstanding. "I've already tested it on Gerulf. It kills well, but on weeds like you, unless you disintegrate completely, you will just pop back to life every time."

"Yeah... I'm still of the opinion that I'd be better off keeping my distance from that weapon." Jake grinned unconvincingly. "And the same with this bow..."

The King of Beskyr followed his gaze to his white bow and laughed again. A wicked, not to say sadistic expression graced his face.

"This bow is called the Reverse Fate Bow. Unlike this sword, the bow has always belonged to my people. It is a legacy of Beskyr himself."

Jake saw this weapon in a new light, but that didn't justify the evil grin stretching to his ears. Reversing someone's luck was certainly terrifying, but you still had to have some.

"I know what you're thinking, but don't base your judgment on our battle." Ulfar admonished him kindly. Unbuckling his bow before storing it away with deferential strokes, he added, "This bow is both our ban and our most precious holy weapon. For a Beskyrian blessed with supreme luck, this weapon is a nightmare. Because this was a friendly fight, I did not make full use of its abilities."

"Meaning?" Jake sensed he wasn't going to like the answer.

And he wasn't disappointed.

"Normal arrows that can be fired without limit temporarily reverse the luck of the target hit. It's harmless to ordinary people, who don't have any." Ulfar clarified before dimming, "But this bow wouldn't be called Reverse Fate if that was all it did. There are two other types of arrows that can be shot and they require more preparation. The bow slowly builds up energy over the years to condense these special arrows, but it needs our Luck Aether to bring them to life.

"The second type of arrow eternally reverses the luck of the individual hit. Even if you use plenty of Luck Aether to correct the problem, you will only increase your bad luck instead. If you think you're a smart ass and manage to somehow acquire some Aether of Misfortune by some miracle, it's still bad luck. It is an extremely powerful curse that can only be broken by powerful anti-magic or by destroying the bow. None of its victims have succeeded in doing so, but it is definitely possible in the Mirror Universe."

Jake was glum. He also believed that lifting such a curse was possible, but someone capable of this feat was not likely to be found on the streets. Maybe Cekt, his master, would have a solution.

If the second arrow was so ghastly, he could only dread the last one. Ulfar did hesitate for a moment before telling him the truth. It was because they were in the arena and the energy barrier was insulating the sound that he dared to confide.

"The third type of arrow is what gives this bow its nickname. This is the true Reverse Fate Arrow. It expends an astronomical amount of energy, usually a decade's worth when fired at an ordinary human, but its effect is worth the sacrifice. The bow recharges faster, however, since we are on B842. The effect of this arrow does not affect luck as such, but the fate itself of the individual, no matter how obscure and impalpable the concept may seem. If the victim was rich, he or she will become poor. If they were married, they will be divorced or widowed in the coming days or weeks. If they had loving children, it is more unpredictable. Either they die or they start to hate the victim and want him dead. If the victim was powerful, and healthy, he or she will become frail and easily sick. Even the individual's temperament is affected. If they used to be courageous and enterprising, they will become cowardly and indecisive. Basically their whole life is turned upside down."

"What a... treacherous weapon." Jake was tongue-tied. He didn't have the words to describe such wickedness.

Ulfar nodded heavily as he brought out his bow once more. Abruptly lowering his voice, he concluded in a chilling tone,

"This third arrow is forbidden by our laws. The problem with this arrow is that it affects not only the victim, but everyone with whom he or she has ever bonded in life. The shooter himself is not immune to being affected. Our legends have it that Myrmid, Kinthar, Throsgen, Eltar, and Beskyr came to our world fleeing from something, but Beskyr was the only one filled with regret. I don't know if it's true, but I wouldn't be surprised if that bow had a hand in their misadventures.

"I couldn't have given an opinion before, but since the disastrous events on our planet and what I've learned since during these Three Ordeals, I have a theory."

Jake's eyes widened at these last words. He had met Myrmid in person. And his fellow deserters hadn't helped him...

"My theory is that in order to survive the threat to himself, his world, and his companions, Beskyr fired one of those arrows at one of his comrades, possibly himself, but I'd bet a coin on Myrmid. The primordial Myrmidian does not desert, does not give up. It goes against all his instincts and morals. And yet, they fled. Their home world fell soon after. Deserting a doomed world is not a crime! Or we'd be deserters too. I have not seen any rules in the Oracle System database on this subject. My Oracle AI has no recollection of it either. They deserted, it's true, but I believe there is only one criminal among them and that is our ancestor Beskyr."

Jake crossed his arms with an unfathomable look on his face. It was a weighty accusation. A secret that all ears were not fit to hear. There was only one crime that justified such exile to the point of eternally hiding from the Oracle: If they were personally responsible for the downfall of their System A16.

Ulfar's theory was not that far-fetched. If System A16 was supposed to resist the Digestor invasion in exchange for the sacrifice of some people dear to Beskyr's heart, it wasn't silly to imagine that he could have shot them with that bow. If these people were supposed to die, their escape would have allowed them to live, but the System A16 they were supposed to be defending would have naturally fallen after this reversal.

If that was indeed the truth, though, then this Reverse Fate Bow and Beskyr were far more terrifying than he imagined. More importantly, this plan had gone awry. Myrmid had still been screwed up by the Digestors and if he had indeed been the target of that arrow, then he had lost his fighting spirit and much of his strength.

No wonder those Brain Eaters were able to reduce him to this pathetic state.

"Don't tell anyone about this." Jake ordered sternly. If any bad people found out they had such a bow, they would be in serious trouble.

What he didn't mention was that the Oracle had probably known all along. If it didn't, the Oracle System had been aware of everything since they received their Oracle Device. For some reason, the Oracle had not been looking for that bow. Perhaps the truth was more complex.

"Of course. Only the King of Beskyr and a few select elders know the history of this bow." Ulfar promptly reassured him. "The only reason I'm telling you is because Lucia and Gerulf trust you and you are our new leader. Asfrid and Rogen also know."

Rogen was the leader of the Throsgenians. He was a good buddy of Gerulf's with a similar build, but while Gerulf was famously calm, this warrior had an explosive temper. Quite a feat for a being wielding cold and ice.

"Can I take a look at that bow?" Jake asked politely.

"Sure, but only a being with immense luck can wield it without risk." Ulfar warned him, as he handed the weapon over to him.

Jake calmly inspected the slightly rough surface of the white bow. It looked like ordinary painted wood, rigid and cheap. Nothing like the apocalyptic weapon described by the King of Beskyr. Nevertheless, the scan report told a different story.

[Reverse Fate Bow (Oracle Aether Artifact): A bow of mysterious origins capable of changing the fate of individuals and the world.]

Jake didn't even know what this Oracle grade meant.

[All Aether Artifacts unclassifiable above Diamond Rank] Xi enlightened him succinctly.

The functions described by Ulfar were also listed, but it was a little light on information for a legendary bow. His Oracle Rank was clearly insufficient. To be honest, Jake was even surprised that the censorship wasn't total.

"Take care of that bow, but from now on you better use it only as a last resort." Jake said as he handed his weapon back to the man.

As nuts as that bow was, it wasn't in his character to betray the trust of his subordinates. He had already received the tablet from Asfrid. It wasn't appropriate to act overly greedy.

Ulfar put his bow away for good and the energy shield isolating the arena was dissipated. The news of the King of Beskyr's surrender shocked the assembly, but all were relieved to see that none of them were seriously injured.

The event ended and the crowd dispersed with little ceremony.. As of now, the Myrtharian Nerds had 2724 members.

### **Chapter 638 - Contribution Point System**

The first to welcome the news was Will, who had never doubted him. Although most of them asked to stay on Jake's island, the businessman still went on to recruit the services of a few veteran Beskyrians and Eltarrians a few days later. The former for their incredible luck and the latter for their telepathy and psychic foresight.

It became blatantly obvious when highlighted, but even the purest bloodline of these new members, be it from Gerulf or Lucia, did not exceed 50% purity.

The reason was simple as pie: It took two to conceive a child.

Even if these godly deserters had fornicated all over the place, their spouses were basically regular humans. With each passing generation of descendants, these 50% had been diluted to the point where most of the inhabitants of their world were ordinary.

Individuals like Gerulf and Lucia were rare and often the result of inbreeding. As a result, it was theoretically possible to meet Myrmidians, Kintharians and Eltarrians with different skills than his own, as he had already experienced.

Asfrid's Soul Steal was one example, but according to Ulfar, the Luck Steal Skill also existed. What Will was after in hiring these Eltarrians was their foresight and ability to perceive the intentions of others. It was indeed extremely difficult to lie or fake in front of certain Eltarrians.

A middle-aged Beskyrian woman named Wyne, whom Will had gotten hold of, even had an exclusive ability that Ulfar envied. That is, the ability to harness, channel and control the luck of others. Among the 42 Beskyrians, only 3 others boasted this ability and they were all from noble clans.



"I'm warning you shady merchant... If anything happens to Wyne, you're dead." Jake surreptitiously heard Ulfar threaten Will in a low voice as they were about to go to Thelma on business.

Noticing Jake strolling by, Ulfar released the businessman's collar and sheepishly patted his cheek with a scowl before whistling away.

"What a pesky king..." Will complained as he put his tie back together. "Ah, Jake, what are you doing here? Are you coming with us?"

"Not this time. Now that the Kintharians' dedicated area has been completed, I can finally resume my training."

"Haha, I hear you." Will chuckled as he remembered those hundreds of brutes all crammed together in a narrow lava pool. He was about to use the Yellow Cube when he remembered something,

"Ah, now that I think of it, speaking of training, I've written up the rules for the contribution point and reward system I was thinking of implementing. I just need your approval, after tweaking a few things."

The businessman fiddled with his wristband interface and Jake received a notification for a file transfer, which he accepted.

He was puzzled at first, but became increasingly impressed by the meticulousness of his comrade, who had thought of absolutely everything. Contribution points could be earned by contributing in many different ways to the Myrtharian Nerds.

It could be by recruiting, offering loot, defending and fighting for the faction, or simply by keeping it running smoothly. Not everyone would ultimately be destined to fight.

The easiest way to earn those contribution points was to donate Aether. Exactly what the faction needed to keep thriving.

But in order to motivate members to work hard for these contribution points, they had to have real value over the Aether they already had.

Jake of course had many ideas inspired by New Earth, but Will had completed this tedious task for him.

In summary, those who had special or higher grade Aether Encodings like Will and Tim with their Grade 2 Charisma and Luck Aether Encodings, would offer their services at an unbeatable rate.

Although their prices per unit depended on their rarity and the supply and demand of the market, buying Grade 2 Aether Crystals generally cost 100 to 1000 times more than their Grade 1 counterpart. This logic remained true until Grade 3, after which it became increasingly difficult to obtain the higher grades without resorting to the Oracle Store.

The Oracle Store was a no-no for anyone with a functioning brain. The prices were just outrageous and it was even more so for those who had completed their first four Ordeals, and therefore no longer had the beginner's discount.

In order not to be unfair to Will, Tim and other members with these Aether Encodings, they would still be compensated generously by their customers either in Aether or Contribution points at the actual cost of conversion.

For example, in the case of Grade 2 Strength Aether, where one point cost 100 regular Aether points, the customer would pay double the amount, thus ensuring that 100 points would also go into the supplier's pocket.

It may seem like robbery, but it pales in comparison to the prices charged by other major factions like New Earth or the Oracle Store. Freelance Aetherists like Cekt were even scarcer and were far too busy to be converting some low grade Aether.

Taking a cue from the market and what he had observed on Thelma, transactions would be done with Aether Crystals as well as bracelets.

With the exception of Aether Encodings holders who could sell Grade 2 Aether at will, other members could only buy Grade 2 Aether from them at a reduced price if they needed to max out their Aether stats. In the case of Grade 2, this maximum was 1000 points.

This was to prevent the trafficking of Grade 2 Aether to other factions. Indeed, by buying Grade 2 Aether at low price, it was very easy to get rich unfairly by reselling it at its proper price outside.

The contribution points would also be the only currency accepted in the Myrtharian Scavenger's first shopping mall, which was still under construction. The building with a half Roman, half modern architecture looked like a mix between a palace and a skyscraper and would occupy a good part of Will's island territory.

It was the first step towards the realization of Will's dream of a multiversal trading company. He planned to sell other rare products, which their faction could not necessarily produce, at a lower price than the competition. The faction might be slightly in the red in some cases, but that would only make the contribution point system more appealing.

One contribution point would be equivalent to 1000 Aether points. But these points did have an added benefit: They would allow people to move up the ranks in the faction.

This was Will's grand plan.

Those who contributed enough would move up the ranks, from recruits to official members, then non-commissioned officers, officers and senior officers. These rank names were not very inspiring, but each position would confer invaluable benefits.

In addition to authority, the right to issue missions, and first dibs on certain weapons and materials, they would be able to activate the Faction and Sub-faction Skills by drawing directly from the Faction Aether Storage under certain conditions.

This was not very attractive at the moment, but that would soon change as the Faction obtained Active Faction Skills that were more offensive in nature and required an astronomical amount of Aether for their use.

Of course, to be promoted, contribution points alone were not enough. The leader or one of the vice-leaders had to validate the promotion. For now, that came down to Jake and Will. The other trusted comrades were only senior officers.

Jake pointed out that it might create tension in the long run and he didn't want to offend his friends, but Will assured him that he had talked about it with everyone else before and no one had complained.

"So be it..." Jake grumbled unconvinced.

As he reached the bottom of the report, Jake finally understood why Will wanted to work out some details with him. One of the suggested rewards costing 1M contribution points would be to enter the Purgatory Dream to train and receive a Soul Glyph.

Jake had already told him about the workings of his Bronze Artifact and the businessman knew that the number of Glyphs waiting to be earned were non-renewable. A limited edition Glyph for 1M contribution points might sound expensive, but maybe it wasn't expensive enough.

"Let me think about it." Jake promised nothing.

He did, however, agree to all other requests. This included all the missions and requests paid in contribution points to expand and strengthen the faction. Among these requests, Grade 3 and 4 Aether Encodings were at the top of the list along with high grade Bloodline samples.

Jake said his goodbyes to Will, chatted briefly with Lucia and Gerulf, played with the felines, and then returned to the island's center to begin a long and ruthless training session.

For privacy, the Kintharians had built walls around the force field because of the exasperated complaints of other members who were tired of seeing them walking around with their wienies dangling free. Now that they had their own place, Jake became the sole beneficiary of their efforts.

Jake then set the temperature and gravity of the room, then stepped through the energy barrier to find himself directly exposed to a temperature of several thousand degrees. His legs sank into the lava under his increased weight and he let himself sink without struggling.

The rustling of Melkree' tree foliage might have accompanied him in his seclusion, but that sound also faded with everything else as he called forth the Purgatory Dream.. Not wanting to affect the other inhabitants of the island, he would go there with only his mind.

### **Chapter 639 - Four Months**

As Jake went into seclusion for an indefinite period of time, the other Myrtharian Nerds also began to prepare for their next Ordeal.

On another Floating Island much larger than Jake's and all his comrades combined, two sisters with long silky pink hair stood nervously in the lobby of a huge mage tower in front of a handsome middle-aged man with flame-red hair who was none other than their beloved father.

"Err... That bastard still doesn't want to meet me?" Phirune aggressively tapped the armrest of his throne, jetting out scarlet flames from his nostrils with each exhale. "I want you to leave his faction, that's an order. I will not trust the lives of my daughters to an irresponsible man."

"Father!" Esya shouted red with anger. "That's enough! He'll come to you when you stop nagging him and he's certain you won't try to kill him on sight."

"Or rather when he's certain that even if you try you won't succeed..." Enya sneered just after without hiding any of her utter disdain.

"Oh? So that's the kind of guy you admire?" Surprisingly, Phirune stopped snapping at him and flashed an excited toothy smile. "In that case, I'll wait for him to come visit me in person."

"Perfect." Enya rolled her eyes. "Now, if you don't mind, we're going to do what Jake did and go into seclusion for training. Although we depend on him, we don't want to become dead weight either."

Esya nodded vigorously in assent. The Fire Archmage looked alternately at his two daughters with a crestfallen expression, then suddenly burst into a spray of flames and reappeared behind them.

Neither Esya nor Enya was able to to keep track of his movement.

"In that case, I will personally supervise your training." Their father grinned ominously. "If you still hold him in such high esteem after that, then perhaps I will give him a chance."

Enya rolled her eyes again while Esya smirked.

"Sure."

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Like the two sisters, no one wanted to be a burden to Jake, but there was one among them whose sense of incompetence and guilt was far more overwhelming: Kevin.

The Corruption that had caused his cannibalistic acts and loss of control in the previous Ordeal had unknowingly turned him into an enemy of his faction, and he intended to make sure it never happened again.

Surrounded by a dozen refugees who had accepted his bite, he had finally met the minimum requirements to become an Alpha Werebear. To maintain control, he had set up his island to simulate the amplified radiation of a full moon like the one on his First Ordeal's world. He had also purchased an artifact that could charm, hypnotize and manipulate the emotions of his targets to expose himself to this state of mental alienation and learn to resist it.

Will had also given him the promise to drop by from time to time to familiarize him with the powerful influence of his Charisma-based Aether Skills.

Seeing his cousin Kevin training so seriously, Vincent, who had been relatively quiet for the past few days, also decided to go into seclusion.

Tim, who was waiting for Jake's answer about their bloodline exchange, knew that his sample was in Cekt's hands. So he willingly moved to Jake's island to learn how to better use his bloodline from Ulfar and the other veteran Beskyrians.

Daniel and his daughter temporarily joined the Heroes of Velsyos faction led by Mihangyl, the Wood Archmage, so that Lily could become a true Light Healer as she desired. There were several Egeaens among them capable of healing with magic.

The new members, both refugees and veteran warriors, also began to participate in their own first Ordeals and for a time Jake and Will's Floating Island became quiet.

The only one who never went into seclusion was Will, who was too busy running the Myrtharian Nerds and his own sub-faction to do any training. Anyway, bargaining and networking gave him plenty of opportunity to practice his eloquence-based abilities.

With the help of hired Beskyrians and Eltarians, as well as the occasional participation of Fumdalf, and the new Contribution Point System, it wasn't long before the Myrtharian Nerds' savings were replenished and they were out of the woods for good.

Three months went by without any significant changes. One by one, the new members completed their first three Ordeals, and they too went into seclusion to prepare for their fourth and final tutorial.

Noting that the majority of the Myrtharian Nerds were wisely training at home, Will decided to use a portion of the profits generated over the past few months to activate the United We Stand skill for 8 hours a day.

The boost in Aether stats, including vitality, constitution, intelligence and perception, would allow them to train harder and drastically improve their ability to understand. Will, himself, was tempted to train on Jake's island, but without his efforts it would be impossible to afford such an expensive skill faction.

Aether density gradually rose to 210 points, but neither Jake nor any of his comrades paid attention. What they didn't know, however, was that there were others who had never stopped watching them.

Somewhere in a New Earth military base, a voluptuous secretary with curves threatening to spill out of her black suit walked in heels to a certain general's office and dropped off a report and a steaming cup of tea.

The general, a stern man in his fifties whose suit was plastered with medals, took the cup in both hands and sipped before slumping back into his chair with a tired sigh.

"Thanks, Janet. Anything new?" The man asked without much hope.

"Alas, no, General Eric." The secretary named Janed shook her head apologetically. "Colonel Hale has decided to synchronize Team Prodigies 127's Fourth Ordeal with that of the Myrtharian Nerds and nothing will change her mind.

"Damn it! Stupid ungrateful woman!" Eric smashed his desk with both fists in an excess of fury.

"Delaying the progress of several exceptional talents just to recruit and closely monitor one individual. It's really not worth it!"

"That's what many have told her, but she insists."

"Then let her keep waiting!" The general snorted once he had calmed down. "When even our new recruits have surpassed these geniuses, I can't wait to see if she still dares to sneer at me."

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A month later, Jake received a notification from his master Cekt that prematurely ended his training. The result of the analysis was finally in. He would have to go with Tim to his lab in Thelma to discuss the upcoming transgenic operation.

The first thing that shocked him was the exponential increase in Aether density. In just four months, it had surpassed 290 points. Even for a spineless loser, the First Ordeal would now be a breeze.

Of course, the difficulty of the missions and the rewards would be adjusted, but it was still enviable. Ironically, because prices had only gone up to keep up with the increase in Aether density, those refugees residing in the Oracle Shelter slums still couldn't afford the Aether fee required to access the Cubes in the inner Shelter.

Eager to return and win the other Soul Glyphs in the Purgatory, Jake teleported out of the lava pool and materialized clothes from his Space Storage before trying to put them on. His face crumbled as he realized he didn't fit into them.

"Fuck!" He cursed loudly.

A fleeting glance at his Oracle Status confirmed his fears.

[Height : 3.31 meters]

[Weight : 1241 kg]

Although he hadn't actively trained his body, those four months in the lava had profoundly revamped his cells. His Aether Stats had also improved, but his Body Stats, especially his Strength and Constitution had nearly doubled.

Dejected, Jake used the lava from the pool to condense an obsidian armor around his body, then when he was satisfied, he crossed the force field. The armor was nothing like the ones he once fashioned in a hurry with his Earth and Heat Control. Despite the fact that he used ordinary lava, this armor was as solid and dense as hardened steel.

[Blacksmith Soul Glyph(Silver): Increases the attributes of any tool, weapon or armor forged by the holder of this Glyph by 100%.]

This was just one of the seven Glyphs he had gained during his seclusion.

The joyful rustling of Melkree leaves greeted his return and after a nod, he headed for the Beskyrian district.

He didn't even need his Shadow Guide to know that Tim was there. A quick Oracle Scan of the island had automatically disclosed his presence. He teleported back and reappeared a split second later in front of King Ulfar's now completed palace.

He walked through the patio as if it were his own backyard and spotted Tim and Ulfar practicing their axe skills amidst a group of shirtless Beskyrian warriors.

"Hey Jake! How are... Holy shit! Man, what do you eat for breakfast to grow so big? A little more and you'll outgrow the Melkree tree. I like your new style, though."

Ulfar's sarcastic taunts quickly got to him, but he was in a great mood.

" I just came to borrow Tim for a few hours." He replied calmly.

Ulfar and the other warriors frowned, but when they saw Tim's eager and expectant expression, they shut up and let him take the teenager.

A few minutes later, Jake and Tim stood atop a Transportation Tower in Thelma, ready to meet the little Aetherist.

### **Chapter 640 - Oracle Capital**

Jake feared that finding Cekt's lair on Thelma would be a real headache, but it turned out to be a breeze. When the Wendok was willing to be found, the Shadow Guide had no trouble pointing them in the right direction.

Unlike Will, this was Jake's first trip to Thelma itself. He had been to this huge Floating Island several times before, but he had only visited the Outer City equivalent.

Once to visit the New Earth embassy in order to establish his faction and Floating Island, and then the other times for brief stopovers, such as when he came to pick up Ulfar and his consorts in one of the neutral districts.

Interestingly, the King of Beskyr's overflowing luck did not enable him to pop up directly in the Oracle Capital. This inner energy shield was no joke.

The Outer City accounted for most of the available land, but as with the refugee-ridden slums of the Oracle Shelters, this unregulated space was cluttered with the embassies and encampments of tens of thousands of races. They were not, however, desperate refugees, and these embassies generally reflected the technological pinnacle of each civilization.

But the underlying mindset was the same. Everyone wanted to settle in the Oracle Capital. In addition to the reassuring protection of its energy shield, the Oracle Guardians legion and the Oracle Overseer, it was also an unparalleled symbol of prestige.

Real estate prices in the Oracle Capital were unfortunately sky high and rising at such a staggering rate that even nation factions with the resources of an entire civilization could not always keep up. The supply was also very limited due to the fact that Thelma had a fixed surface.

The last but not least concern was that it was not easy to get in. In addition to the Aether fee amounting to millions of points, one had to wait for an authorization before getting in.

Factually, unless one was ill-intentioned, the request was in most cases accepted, but many who wanted to visit the Oracle Overseer's headquarters with the improper intention of seeking an audience with him had been denied entry. Those who came with the best of intentions but without the financial means to do so were usually turned away as well.

Rumor has it that the man at the head of the New Earth faction (as opposed to the island or New Earth government) had a private residence in the suburbs that he did not share with the rest of the government.

The government was actively trying to buy a piece of land in the capital, but faced stiff competition. The few estates that remained vacant were simply not for sale and could only be attained as rewards for great feats of arms.

The neutral district, built around the capital where Jake had retrieved Ulfar, was an ambitious and cosmopolitan attempt by multiple factions and species to create a less elitist capital open to all.

Commerce, hotels, casinos, and restaurants flourished here, with the culinary and technological specialties of every race able to settle here patiently awaiting its buyer. Most of the time, this unofficial capital was much more crowded and vibrant than the official Oracle Capital.

Despite its willingness to overshadow the capital, nothing could compare to its prestige. That's why, when a giant of more than 3 meters and a 12 year old child crossed the inner energy shield without pausing, many passers-by and influential Evolvers were stunned.

The man had decent strength, but it was nothing compared to the many Fifth and Sixth-Ordeal Evolvers swarming around. Low-ranked Evolvers visiting the capital was a rare occurrence. Many factions had eyes and ears everywhere, including New Earth, and Jake's presence on Thelma was soon reported to Colonel Hale and General Eric, who were drinking coffee together.

"What the hell is he doing here? He doesn't need to go to Thelma to participate in his Fourth Ordeal." The general grumped as he smoothed his mustache.

"For the record, he is also the disciple of Cekt Mogusar, a Rank 3 Aetherist." A wrinkleless woman bearing a striking resemblance to Ruby except for her ordinary brown hair and eyes, corrected him nonchalantly while sipping her coffee.

"What a lucky brat... If he doesn't start his Fourth Ordeal immediately upon his return, what will you do, Phoebe?" He abruptly changed the subject. "You'll keep waiting for him, even if it means penalizing your niece Ruby and the rest of her team? You've been putting it off for four months already. Aether density is climbing so fast they'll soon lose all their advantages."

Colonel Phoebe Hale stared him straight in the eye and said in an unyielding tone,

"It is precisely for Ruby's sake that I am willing to wait. Her personality is deteriorating too quickly despite the intensive psychological training we're putting her through. This Jake is, according to the Oracle System, her Soulmate, and I intend to see him fulfill his role. Everyone on Team 127 cares about Ruby. If it's for her sake, they'll wait. Although her performance in her third Ordeal is controversial-"

"That's an understatement!" The general cut her off with a shout. "She killed everyone! Her allies, civilians, enemies, monsters, everything! It's a miracle that half of her team managed to come back alive by cooperating with her. The other half refuses to talk to her and has been asking to switch teams."

Phoebe glared at him and he fell silent with a stumped face as if he had just choked on a fly.

"I know what happened better than anyone. I don't excuse her, but it's not her fault. I know that deep down she's loyal to us and that's the most important thing. Despite her methods, thanks to Ruby and her team we have a ticket to Quanoth. As soon as you heard the news, you transferred them to the main faction so that as many soldiers as possible could go with them. So, please, don't play the sanctimonious hypocrite with me."



While the general and his colonel continued to bicker about Jake's importance and Phoebe's favoritism toward Ruby, the Jake in question had finally reached his destination.

In a narrow alley, between two buildings that looked like a stack of metal boxes with no doors or windows, a locked "80cm" high door blocked their path.

"Uh, are you sure this is the place?" Tim asked nervously, not daring to accuse Jake of going the wrong way.

Jake's face twitched but his irritated reply was devoid of the slightest hesitation,

"This is the place. Only that pipsqueak Wendok would play such a joke on us." He spat out resentfully. "Let's go home. It's not urgent anyway..."

He could have teleported forcibly inside or destroyed the entrance, but something told him that wouldn't work as planned. Going back empty-handed would save them from wasting any more of their time, and it would spoil the little alien's sadistic enjoyment.

"Not fun!" An angry voice croaked from the other side of the door.

In an instant, the wall and the miniature door vanished and a paved garden path was revealed to them. Cekt Mogusar stood before them with fists on hips and a regretful expression.

"I have chosen my disciple very poorly! Your fellow students Syrbarun and Siri fell for it and crawled on the floor like dumbasses to get through a tiny door that didn't exist mwahahaha!

"Very funny." Jake commented deadpan, before saying, "You know why I'm here."

"Hmmp... You've come a long way in the last few months, but you still can't instant cast any Aether Spells. I really don't know why I took you under my wing... But fine, follow me."

Just like when they first met, Cekt conjured up a strange Cube out of nowhere and as he rested his hand on it he simply disappeared inside. Familiar with this trick, Jake put his hand over it and Tim did the same.

Cekt's portable laboratory had not changed since his last visit and he quickly found his way around. The little alien hadn't waited for them and after revisiting the lab entirely they found him in the same room where Jake had received his own bloodline.

" So! Who do I start with?" The Aetherist huffed with an attitude that was at long last professional.

Tim swiftly raised his hand with enthusiasm.

"Very Well." Cekt nodded. "In order to avoid any misunderstanding, I must first tell you that I have done my best. Since Tim's Beskyrian bloodline is of low purity, the addition of your Myrtharian Bloodline will give him excellent benefits. If all goes well, he will get most of your abilities, including Self-Aether Encoding and Accelerated Growth.

"That's not the case with you, Jake. You haven't met the requirements for me to teach you directly yet, but you should know that your body and soul can't accumulate too much Aether Code or it will conflict.

This is different from a genetic disease such as Down's Syndrome, which is caused by an excess of chromosomes, but alas, much more complicated to solve.

"To make sure you understand the situation, I'm going to give you your first lesson in Aetherism. Tim, you are not my disciple, but you can listen if you want. Trust me, it will be handy in the future.

Jake expected that it wouldn't be so easy to merge various bloodlines, but his thirst for knowledge was awakened when he heard his master's speech.

Seeing that he had the attention of both humans, the little alien grinned contentedly, before asking them a question, which stumped them:

"First of all, do you know how the Oracle System determines the Grade of a bloodline?"